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Online sexist meme and its effects on moral and emotional processes in social media

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ABSTRACT

Online sexist aggression is still overlooked in psychosocial literature. The present study aims to investigate moral cognitive and emotional processes associated with different online stances during a heated online discussion prompted by a sexist meme. To this end, adopting a social cognitive framework, we analyzed Twitter comments in response to the public condemnation of a rude sexist meme made about Carola Rackete, the captain of the Sea-Watch. A total of 1249 comments were codified for moral disengagement mechanisms, prosocial reasoning, and moral emotions. The results show the impact of a sexist meme in terms of cognitive and emotional processes. While moral disengagement mechanisms and other-condemning emotions have characterized aggressive stances, prosocial reasoning and other-suffering emotions have characterized prosocial ones. Intermediate stances also emerged during the online discussion, showing a more complex interplay between cognition and emotional moral processes—beyond the mere polarization of two stances. Indeed, some comments defending women image were characterized in active negative emotions (e.g., anger) and prosocial moral reasoning, whereas others "avoiding" comments were characterized by moral disengagement and ironic expressions. The social and theoretical implications of these results are then discussed.

1. Introduction

Online aggression toward women—such as cyber sexism, sexual hate speech, and online sexual harassment—is an increasing and serious phenomenon. Research shows that women are more likely than men to become a target of online violence (Duggan, 2017; Pacilli & Mannarini, 2019; Van Der Wilk, 2018). In a recent report, Amnesty International (2017) highlights how nearly a quarter of the women across eight countries had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once. Even though the pervasiveness of online sexual aggression has become more recognized (especially through social media, such as Twitter; Amnesty International, 2018), the understanding of the psychological processes underpinning it is still limited.

To fill this gap, by adopting a social cognitive framework, the present study explores whether and how proximal emotional and moral cognitive processes elicited by a sexist meme interact and, as a result, promote different online stances. Previous research in the field of social media has been mainly focused on cognitive dimensions (Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003) or general negative emotions (Humprecht et al., 2020; Muddiman & Stroud, 2017) separately, rather than

concurrently. Only a few studies have investigated the interplay between emotional and cognitive processes in online moral discussions (e. g. D'Errico & Paciello, 2018; 2019). Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, no study has focused on sexist online aggression. In this contribution, we investigate the emotional and cognitive patterns associated with different online stances by analyzing a heated online discussion prompted by a sexist meme targeting Carola Rackete, captain of the vessel Sea-Watch, who rescued several immigrants despite the risk to encounter personal legal consequences. The sexist meme concerning the alleged sexual habits of Carola Rackete represents a typical case of sexist online assault. It expresses the intention of intimidating and controlling women in a public context, consistently with the suggested link between misogyny and hate speech (Richardson-Self, 2018). In fact, women who defend human rights are more likely to be the target of online intimidation and harassment (Van Der Wilk, 2018), with the aim of damaging their credibility, diminishing their status, and limiting their impact on public opinion.

The meme about Carola Rackete went viral, and resulted in online aggression and disparaging humor, two elements characterizing sexist online assault (e.g. Ford et al., 2019; Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Greenwood

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& Isbell, 2002). In particular, the meme posted by a female user was retweeted by a popular Italian influencer who commented on the inappropriateness of the hilarity of the reaction, suggesting that the suggested amusement was indeed quite reprehensible. Given the specific characteristics of the meme, it represented not only a negative communication but was also a negative stimulus in an online situation, with the potential of activating affective and cognitive processes generally associated with aggressive phenomena (Anderson & Bushman, 2018). Indeed, the content of the meme was offensive, discriminatory, and akin to what Romero-Sánchez et al. (2019) described as an expression of a comunication designed to threaten women's social identity. Consistent with literature on the affordances of online environments (Fox et al., 2015), it is important to stress that this meme is settled in a hostile and disinhibitory situation. In addition, the re-tweet contains some negative elements (e.g., the content of the meme and disparaging humor) that can potentially reinforce sexist and aggressive online tendencies.

According to a social-cognitive perspective (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Gentile et al., 2009), we argue that the sexist meme is a stimulus that can trigger proximal moral cognitive and emotional processes. The interplay of these processes can be helpful to understand some possible routes to aggressive versus prosocial* online stances toward women (Fig. 1).

To analyze in depth the moral processing, as explained in the next sections, we used Bandura's moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1991, 2016), Darley and Latané's model on helping behavior (Latané & Darley, 1970), and Haidt's model on moral emotions (Haidt, 2003). Based on these theoretical models, originally developed for studying moral functioning, we hypothesized that:

i) aggressive-related cognition and emotion, such as moral disengagement processes and other-judgment emotions, would have characterized aggressive and non-supportive online stances;
ii) prosocial-related processes, such as prosocial reasoning and the other-suffering emotions, would have characterized protective and prosocial reactions toward women.

Indeed, it is plausible that a sexist meme might not only activate negative and aggressive cognition-emotion paths but also positive and prosocial ones. For example, empathic feelings, perceived threats to social identity, and desires to restore a sense of social equity could promote prosocial stances while defending online victims (Leonhard et al., 2018). Hence, two opposite stances, aggressive and prosocial ones, could polarize the online moral struggle—as in the case of other ethical topics (D'Errico & Paciello, 2019).

In addition, consistently with the literature on possible reactions to third-party aggression (Paull et al., 2012; Salmivalli, 1999; Twemlow et al., 2004), we hypothesize that:

iii) moral cognitive and emotional processes would have also helped to understand the intermediate bystanders' responses.

In an online setting, the role of bystanders is often overlooked, even if they can significantly influence the interactions between potential victims and perpetrators, as they do in a real-life context (e.g., Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Indeed, bystanders can play different roles in this kind of situations (e.g., constructive or destructive, and active or passive in the case of adults - Paull et al., 2012; or assistants, reinforcers, outsiders, and defenders in the case of children - Salmivalli et al., 1999). Specifically, in the case of online sexism, intermediate reactions can range from active to passive responses, and be more or less advantageous for the target of the online aggression. We expected that different reactions could result from a particular interplay among the same emotional and cognitive moral process implied in aggressive or prosocial stances.

Overall, the present contribution wants to enrich the existing literature on online sexist aggression as well as on the dynamics of online proximal moral processes within a social cognitive perspective. This study has the following research goals:

1. To identify aggressive, prosocial, and intermediate stances as well as moral (i.e., prosocial and moral disengagement reasoning) and emotional processes (i.e., other-judgment and other-suffering emotions) resulting from a sexist meme;
2. To explore whether and how aggressive, prosocial, and intermediate, and prosocial online stances are connected with moral and emotional processes and how these proximal processes can interact.

1.1. From sexist meme to online aggression

In recent years, internet users have become increasingly active in creating personal content, often producing multimedia products that can go viral. This is the case with memes. Memes are units of information, mental representations, or ideas made concrete through images, videos, jokes, behaviors, and sounds, which spread from person to person and achieve the status of actual social phenomena (Shifman, 2013). Online memes are mainly images portraying popular culture, politics, and everyday life. These depictions of society suffer from adaptation processes—a memetic phenomenon that implies various reconceptualizations and transformations of a singular piece of content (Shifman, 2014).

Humor, generally resulting in laughter and sensations of wellbeing, is the element characterizing memes the most. Meme are "Humorous and often used for comedic purposes, but they are often built on humor based on stereotypes, in which the potential for more damaging fabrications is clear and troubling" (Hofer & Swan, 2005, p. 29). Humor emerge as an integral part of the message that users want to convey, and positively affects the message's ability to go viral (e.g., Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Since online memes are mainly images portraying popular culture and everyday life, sex and gender tend to be the most popular topics on major humor websites (Shifman et al., 2007). In this scenario, it is not unusual that gender stereotypes may be
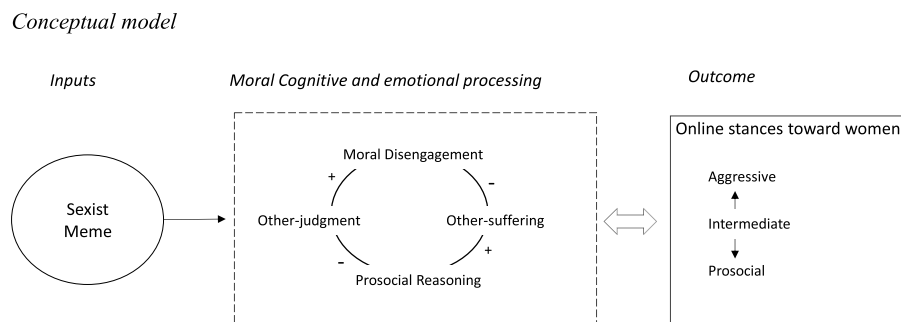
Conceptual model

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

emphasized with the end of making the memes more humorous and generating public discussion (Shifman, 2014). Stereotypes are, indeed, important markers of humor because they facilitate in-group identity construction and define social boundaries (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Holmes & Hay, 1997). Through memes both male and female users can make the other sex appear weaker to emphasize their dominance (Gbadegesin, 2019). This is generally done using an aggressive humor that shows the other sex's characteristics in a negative way. However, it must be noted that women are more likely to become victims of sexist humor (Siddiqi et al., 2018). They are largely stereotyped and portrayed as more irrational, dependent, weak, and unstable compared to men, who, therefore, appear as the more legitimate occupants of the online space (Carniel et al., 2018; Drakett et al., 2018). The media often represents women as objects, and the stereotypical representation of women in memes might indeed help to further spread the "patriarchal ideology of women as enemies" (Hawthorne & Klein, 1999, p.5) and the image of "women who hate each other" (Drakett et al., 2018, p.119) in online settings. Hence, the use of humor to mock women promote a form of hegemonic masculinity. These types of memes are more than simple and spontaneous jokes. These memes essentially encourage or, at the very least, foster a tolerance toward sexism, by making it seem "less harmful, derogatory, or offensive" (Siddiqi et al., 2018, p. 365).

When sexist content is conveyed through humor, it appears less dangerous. Such disparaging humor in media culture (Gill, 2007) supports the dissemination of sexist content, which is then legitimized. Sexist humor can increase sexist attitudes, and it can even be a subtle expression of gender-related biases (Ford et al., 2008). Sexist memes can actually make violence and aggression toward women seem acceptable and natural. Thus, nowadays sexist aggression frequently manifests itself in the jokes and humor found in sexist memes (Worth et al., 2016). Dennett (1998) and Gleick (2011) argued that memes have a great effect because they contain information packets that can produce differential consequences, and because they can spread quickly. As such, memes can have powerful and far-reaching effects. Dennett (1998) suggests that memes, like viruses, can decrease or increase the fitness of their human hosts (manipulated images), or be neutral, not producing having any serious effects. Jokes and humor provide a site for the construction and display of gender identities. These strategies can cause different effects on the cognitive and emotional processes (Thielemann, 2011).

1.2. Moral processing: aggressive-versus prosocial processes

In order to map the moral processes triggered by a sexist meme, we refer to theoretical models used in a previous study on online moral discussion (D'Errico & Paciello, 2019). Specifically, i) Bandura's moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1991, 2016) was adopted to investigate aggressive cognitive processes; ii) Darley and Latané's model of bystander intervention in the case of emergency (Latané & Darley, 1970) was used to study prosocial ones.

For the detection and analysis of emotional processes, we have considered the literature on moral emotions (Haidt, 2003; Mikula et al., 1998). Moral emotions entail moral cognitive processes (e.g., attributional responsibility as well as the attention given to the victim), and promote certain tendencies, such as prosocial and aggressive behavior. No studies, though, have focused on whether and how specific moral emotions might be differently related to prosocial and aggressive cognitive processes during online moral discussions. Using a social cognitive framework (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Gentile et al., 2009), we posited that the interplay of moral emotions and moral cognitions could result in different aggressive and prosocial stances. In particular, we expected to detect (a) condemning emotions (e.g., anger, disgust, and contempt), interacting with moral disengagement mechanisms in the case of aggressive unsupportive stances; (b) other-suffering emotions (e.g., compassion and sadness), interacting with prosocial reasoning in the case of protective and prosocial stances. Moreover, since the meme under investigation aimed to evoke amused reactions, we also expected

to detect positive emotions (e.g. irony and sarcasm), usually associated with disparaging humor (Koszałkowska & Wróbel, 2019).

In the following paragraphs, we explain how the processes under study is expected to theoretically operate, how moral cognitive processes and moral emotions could be related, and how this interrelationship could sustain aggressive and prosocial behavior.

1.2.1. The aggressive and unsupportive path: moral disengagement and other judgement emotions

In the extensive literature on aggressive behavior (Gini et al., 2014; Lo Cricchio et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2014), moral disengagement mechanisms have been recognized as important self-serving strategies that allow "otherwise good" people to engage in both active (e.g., direct aggression; Caprara et al., 2014) and passive unethical conduct (e.g., omission; Paciello et al., 2013). Moral disengagement is one of the key factors promoting the legitimization and normalization of aggressive and unmoral conduct, such as sexual harassment, in different contexts (Page & Pina, 2015; Scarpati & Pina, 2017). More recently, the literature on social networks has shown that moral disengagement mechanisms are related to unethical online conduct, such as online racism (Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016), online deviance (Garbharran & Thatcher, 2011; Lowry et al., 2017), cyberbullying (Paciello et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2016) as well as articulating unsupportive and discriminatory positions during online ethical discussions (D'Errico & Paciello, 2018; 2019).

Moral disengagement has been introduced by Bandura in his moral agency theory (1991) and refers to a set of cognitive processes that selectively deactivate or attenuate the internal moral control, allowing individuals to engage in behavior in contradiction with personal and social norms. These processes allow individuals to preserve their own moral conscience by rationalizing, reframing, or even distorting the meaning of certain actions and their consequences, the sense of personal responsibility, and the victim's representation (Mazar & Ariely, 2006). Specifically, Bandura has identified eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, clustered in the following four loci: behavior, agency, outcomes, and victim. The typical maneuvers of the behavior locus operate at the level of individual conduct and aim at modifying the perception of deleterious conduct. Moral justifications legitimize behavior that would otherwise be considered cruel or harmful by the attainment of noble goals. The euphemistic language models the perception of events by acting on thought patterns. Metaphors, sweetened terms, passive forms, and doublespeak are often used. Finally, it is possible to compare an individual's behavior to much more blatant cruelties in order to constitute an advantageous confrontation (Bandura, 1991). The locus of agency lies between behavior and its outcomes. Here, the primary intent is to dislocate or distribute the blame for what happened and its possible negative consequences. Thus, the individual intends to prove their innocence, being absolved by the damage they caused. By shifting the responsibility, subjects conceal the real amount of their involvement in the events (Bandura et al., 1975; Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 1995). It is also possible to spread responsibility for an episode around by releasing the individual from their own actions and making a broader and less identifiable group of people guilty (e.g., society or a community). Implementing moral disengagement mechanisms concerning the locus of outcomes means minimizing or distorting the results of deplorable conduct. Finally, some mechanisms operate on the victim locus. One of the most common moral disengagement mechanisms is dehumanization. The denial of others' humanity introduces an asymmetry between those who enjoy the typical properties of human beings and those who are considered lacking them. Another means of absolution consists in projecting one's negative conduct onto others. The attribution of blame allows people to justify their behavior because it is viewed as a defensive reaction to external instigations.

All of these eight mechanisms have been mapped in online discussions by analyzing comments in accordance with Bandura's guideline (Bandura, 2006; White et al., 2009) and were found to be differently

related to negative hostile emotions (D'Errico & Paciello, 2018). In particular, the mechanisms focusing on the victims tend to result in more hostile tones, while the mechanisms focusing on behavior and agency tend to result in less ones. However, other important moral emotions, focusing on the judgement of the victims, can be potentially associated with moral disengagement. For instance, "hostile emotions" have distinct features, as posited in the CAD triad model mapping three moral emotion, that are Contempt, Anger, and Disgust, respectively related to violation of codes concerning the preservation of social order (Community), the defense of individual liberty (Autonomy), and the protection of the world from degradation (Divinity) (Rozin et al., 1999). Hence, it could be useful to identify in a general framework what is defined as hostile. For example, angry feelings might be related to the fairness or unfairness of a particular behavior, while contempt feelings to the discrediting victims, and disgust feelings to general distancing and aversive attitudes and behavior. Moreover, as suggested by the literature on aggressive media (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010), it could be possible that enjoyment in virtual contexts is positively associated with moral disengagement when individuals appraise their online behavior as a game. Therefore, considering the case under investigation (i.e., the sexist meme), it is plausible that some other emotions, such irony and sarcasm (Lee & Katz, 1998; D'Errico & Poggi, 2016; Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989), can be related to some specific mechanisms, with different degrees of judgement of the victim. Indeed, irony conveys information about the speaker's attitude, and it is especially appropriate if the speaker wants to indicate a critical attitude toward the recipient (Lee & Katz, 1998). However, as Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) argue, sarcasm conveys bitter ridicule of a specific victim, whereas irony does not, but it can be a form of generalized criticism (Attardo & Popa, 2007; Lee & Katz, 1998). In contrast, moral emotions focused on victim suffering (Haidt, 2003), usually associated with prosocial behavior, such as empathic feelings, sadness, or pity, are negatively related with aggressive stances. In the next paragraph, we argue how these other-suffering moral emotions could, instead, be pivotal for understanding prosocial moral processes.

1.2.2. The protective and prosocial path: prosocial reasoning and the other suffering emotions

The other-oriented cognitive processes have been conceptualized and analyzed in a recent study on online moral struggle (D'Errico & Paciello, 2019), rooted within Darley and Latané's interpersonal model of giving help (1968). According to this theoretical frame, people recognize their own behavior as moral, anticipate the possible costs and benefits of their own choice, assume their own responsibility—perceiving themselves as able to change the course of events—and, finally, recognize the needs and difficulties of others. Thus, as in offline context, online settings also provide the possibility to make prosocial and protective comments during an online argument, which is related to sense of responsibility, anticipation of possible negative consequences of one choice, and a conscious reflection on oneself, others, and the situation. Specifically, other-oriented cognitive processes—antagonist of MD mechanisms—focus on the recipients/victim, behavior, outcomes, or agency (Bandura, 1991; Latané & Darley, 1970).

In particular, the cognitive processes focused on *recipients* allow seeing them as humans in need. The recipient of support is not only a person in need (Latané & Darley, 1969, 1970) but also a person with their own useful resources for the others members of the community. In relation to the *behavior*, cognitive processes can be distinguished into three categories: (1) principle recalling, in which behavior is aligned with one's values; (2) realistic labelling, in which the seriousness of situations is emphasized by using concrete and realistic language; and (3) articulated argumentation, in which the complexity of elements is underlined in the prosocial decision-making, overcoming simplified and contingent reasoning. These processes, which were identified in the majority of prosocial comments, suggest the presence of moral regulation (D'Errico & Paciello, 2019), such as representation and evaluation

based on moral principles and standards as well as an awareness of the circumstances in which help should be given. In relation to the *outcomes*, cognitive processes concern the cost-benefit reasoning, such as the long-term effects of one's choice, the possible positive or negative consequences, and probabilistic and prospective reasoning. Finally, in relation to *agency*, two main agentic processes have been identified in the previous study: the responsibility assumption and the agentic trigger (D'Errico & Paciello, 2019). These processes involve an attempt to internally relocate the locus of power, which individuals and groups can exercise to change current and future social scenarios.

Parallel to these other-oriented cognitive processes, different levels of hostile emotions have been observed during online discussions. Indeed, the high negative hostile emotions are negatively associated with prosocial behavior, while low-arousal emotions are associated with supportive stances (D'Errico & Paciello, 2018). This finding is consistent with the literature attesting that deactivated emotions can drive other-oriented and cost–benefit processes, rather than automatic and more intuitive ones, and that activated, high-arousal emotions are more difficult to regulate (Koenigs & Tranel, 2007). However, anger and outrage can be associated with different types of helping and supportive behavior to restore a sense of justice, as in the case of third-party anger (Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009; Van de Vyver & Abrams, 2015). Thus, it is possible that also in online setting these emotions could be associated not exclusively with self-oriented processes but also with those other-focused ones, configuring a peculiar type of cognitive-emotional pattern.

In the domain of morality and emotion, it is also pivotal to consider classic moral emotions that are usually related to ethical stances. Indeed, the other-suffering emotions, such as compassion, sadness, and shame, can contrast with aggressive online behavior while promoting prosocial ones. In particular, as suggested in other contexts (Batson et al., 2007; Baumeister & Lobbestael, 2011; Lim & DeSteno, 2016), emotions implying the affective resonance with the suffering of the victims, such as pity or empathy, can sustain prosocial and protective attitudes and behavior. Moreover, these kinds of emotions can hinder the activation of moral disengagement and aggressive phenomena in general and in relation to negative online behavior (Menesini et al., 2003; Paciello et al., 2013). Finally, considering the emotions involved in moral regulation, some are directly linked to moral judgment when a certain norm is violated, and help maintaining a sense of community and belonging (Castelfranchi & Poggi, 1990; Lewis, 1992). This is the case of self-conscious emotions, such as shame or "vicarious shame," (Welten et al., 2012, p.836) which "refers to all instances of shame that people experience for the behavior of others, irrespective of how they behaved themselves". It can be based on a social identity (Tajfel et al., 1979), since a sense of group belonging can shape people's self-image as well as the emotions they feel on behalf of the other people belonging to the group (Mackie et al., 2004). These kinds of emotions, indeed, imply a link between the behavior of different people within the same group. Specifically, vicarious shame captures a group-based emotion, since the behavior of other in-group members is judged as shameful and threatening to one's social identity. Self-conscious emotions were disregarded in the literature on social network and should be investigated, since their presence can be related to maintaining civic and respectful exchanges.

2. Method

2.1. Online communicative scenario

At the end of June 2019, the civil rescue vessel Sea-Watch 3, captained by Carola Rackete, entered the port of Lampedusa without permission with 42 migrants on board (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/29/sea-watch-captain-carola-rackete-arrested-italian-blockade). This event sparked a heated debate in social media networks. The online communicative scenario relevant to this study is related to a message posted by Selvaggia Lucarelli, a popular Italian

journalist and TV commentator, on July 2nd, 2019, as part of that debate. The tweet was intended to condemn a cruel and rude sexist meme directed at Carola Rackete. The *sexist meme,* shared on Facebook by another woman, targeted Carola Rackete's sexual morality, explaining her will to save immigrants with her sexual preferences (Fig. 2). Lucarelli's tweet expressed indignation toward the sexist meme and tried to stigmatize it:

"Donne che se la ridono condividendo 'sta roba. Ho esaurito le parole."

"Women who laugh at sharing this stuff. I've run out of words."

The sexist meme was composed of text and an image; the image represented Carola Rackete while she steered the ship, and the text highlighted how Carola decided to land in Lampedusa to cool her sexual desires after her numerous sexual intercourses with 43 "Mao Mao" (pejorative label denoting foreigners, particularly of African origins). The text literally translate as follows: "After 14 days of having sex with 43 Mao Mao [immigrants in dialectical expression] you decide to land at Lampedusa to cool your pussy and sphincter"; "dopo 14 giorni che ti prendi pisellate da 43 Mao Mao decidi di sbarcare a lampedusa per far raffreddare fregna e sfintere").

Fig. 2. Sexist meme.

2.2. Data and procedure

A total of 1249 first level Italian comments made in response to Selvaggia Lucarelli's post from the 2nd to the July 3, 2019 were extracted through Twitter API and were accessed by means of a python library named Tweepy. All of the off-topic comments and garbled ones were manually filtered. Commenter's gender was coded as well as a control variable. Gender was manually identified by means of the name and surname of the commenters, and coded as missing in ambiguous cases.

As for the coding process, a grid was created for each of the three variables under study — i.e. stance, moral process, and type of emotion —based on the relevant theoretical models. Four judges in total, two psychologists and two PhD students in psychology, were involved in the process of creating the coding grids. They initially analyzed a subset of 300 comments to confirm that each of the three variables (stance, moral process, and type of emotions) were internally mutually exclusive, and thus devoid of any kind of overlapping. Subsequently, each pair of judges were involved in the coding process by separately encoding 300 stances (as described in 2.2.1), 300 processes (as described in 2.2.2), and 300 emotions (as described in 2.2.3) in order to check the reliability. On the basis of the second coding we calculated reliability using the Cohen K, which was generally substantial. For "stance," the reliability was almost perfect (K Cohen = 0.96; 95% of agreements), for "processes" and "emotions," it was strong as well (respectively K Cohen = 0.81; 80.90% of agreements; K Cohen = 0.86; 85.5% of agreements). The defined criteria for coding process of each design variable, (1) the stances (2), the moral processes (3), and the emotions, will be explained hereinafter.

2.2.1. Stances toward sexist aggression

First of all, the judges identified the possible types of stance toward the sexist aggression emerging from the data. This analysis led us to identify:

1) *"prosocial stances,"* supporting the sexist reporting made by Selvaggia Lucarelli, who criticized the meme. Generally they resulted in denouncing the aggression as well as the moral effects of the meme, such as "Please don't become as barbaric as the majority of men. Go back to being the best gender."

2) *"aggressive stances"* with commenters explicitly attacking the sexist reporting. Generally, they resulted in insults toward the counterpart, such as "you suck" or shame on you!"

3) *"bystander stances"* not supporting the sexist reporting. Generally, they resulted in unsupportive statements toward the sexist aggression, for example shifting the blame to her for defending "a wealthy German woman" (Carola Rackete) over "fragile Italian families".

4) *"avoidant stances"* complaining about the general situation without specific references to the sexist reporting. Generally, they resulted in generic negative expressions, without any clear argumentation, such as "how disgusting."

2.2.2. Type of moral processes

The stances toward the sexist aggression can be featured by two main underlying moral processes, morally disengaged *vs* prosocial, focusing on *victim, behavior, consequences,* and *agency*, consistently with Bandura's (1986; 1991), and Darley and Latané's models (1968) (see Table 1).

1) Focus on the victim. While morally disengaged arguments dehumanize or blame the victim (e.g., "A woman that wishes another woman to become extinct"), prosocial ones attempt to humanize the sexist users (e.g., "Poor women, enormously unfortunate. Without having understood a bit of life and world. They had no opportunity to study and understand the beauty of life and the strength of ideals and dreams") or another aspect may concern the attribution of personal value (e.g., "These are real women who save lives as the captain").

Table 1
Prosocial and moral disengagement processes.

Loci	Cognitive Processes	
	Prosocial reasoning	Disengaged mechanism
Victim 'woman'	HUMANIZATION *'Poor women, enormously unfortunate. Without having understood a bit of life and world. They had no opportunity to study and understand the beauty of life and the strength of ideals and dreams'*	DEHUMANIZATION *'A woman that wishes this to another woman just needs to go extinct'*
	VALUE ATTRIBUTION *'These are real women who save lives as the captain'*	BLAME ATTRIBUTION *'This poor thing has a lot of envy'*
Behaviour	PRINCIPLE RECALLING *'where is female dignity?'*	MORAL JUSTIFICATION *'Thinking wrong is a sin, but often, not to say always, you get it right!!!'*
	REALISTIC LABELLING *'This has nothing to do with the Sea Swatch experience, it is pure vulgarity'*	EUPHEMISTIC LABELLING *'Envy among women is a terrible thing'*
	STRUCTURED ARGUMENTATION *'Introduce crime of incitement to rape. Born with this habit and this rape culture to "educate" women'.*	ADVANTAGEOUS COMPARISON *'Come on, I don't know what sucks the most between this post and the hypocrisy of the left wing party!'*
Consequences	EXAGERATE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES *'When, in a world where you are only if you show off, giving prominence to a post of such barbaris could lead the barbarians to feel legitimized'*	CONSEQUENCES DISTORTION (of aggression) *'poor women.. obsessed by an unique idea! … for forced abstinence'*
Agency	AGENTIC TRIGGER *'denounce her', 'report her'.*	DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY *'ignorance is everywhere'*
	ASSUMPTION OF RESPONSIBILITY *'I see very little female solidarity. What a bitterness.'*	DISPLACEMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY *'human nature is like this'*

2) Focus on the behavior. Morally disengaged arguments provide moral justifications (e.g., "Thinking wrong is a sin, but often, not to say always, you get right!!!'), use euphemistically labels (e.g., "Envy among women is a terrible thing"), or make an advantageous comparison (e.g. "Come on, I don't know what sucks the most: this post or the hypocrisy of the left-wing party!"). Prosocial arguments, on the contrary, recall basic humanistic principles (e.g., "Where is the respect for women?"), use realistic labels (e.g., "This has nothing to do with the Sea-Swatch experience; it is *pure vulgarity*"), or present structured argumentation (e.g., "Introduce crime of instigation to rape. Born with this habit and this rape culture to 'educate' women").

3) Focus on the consequences. While morally disengaged arguments reframe the sexist aggression or support the commenters' reasons (e. g., "poor women, obsessed by an unique idea! … for forced absti- nence?"), prosocial ones point our extreme negative consequences (e.g. "Giving prominence to such a barbaric post could legitimize the actions of the barbarians."

4) Focus on the agency. While morally disengaged arguments distort responsibilities or diffuse them ("ignorance is everywhere'), proso- cial ones claim an assumption of responsibility — 'I see a little female solidarity. What bitterness' - such as in this case "To be honest, we are asking for the removal of this image" or "denounce her."

2.2.3. Emotions

For the emotional coding, we selected from the corpus "moral emotions," as per Haidt's definition (2003) "those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of

persons other than the judge or agent" (p. 853). In this sense, Haidt distinguishes emotions based on others' 'judgement,' called "the other- condemning emotions," from the ones based on other-suffering (Haidt, 2003). In the first group, Haidt included contempt, anger, and disgust, which are different evaluative responses to moral violations (Shweder et al., 1997; Rozin et al., 1999; D'Errico & Poggi, 2014). In addition to these three negative emotions we also selected moral outrage in our corpus. From a theoretical point of view, this emotion is similar to anger, but it focuses more on the wrongdoing than on the wrongdoer. Thus, it is characterized by a need to condemn and sanction the wrongdoing to restore justice (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2019). When the judgment is self-directed in the presence of a norm violation, the correspondent emotion felt is generally shame (Lewis, 1992). Shame, in particular, is a self-conscious emotion of a 'damaged' self-image, which when expressed, it explicitly signals a violation of a norm (Castelfranchi & Poggi, 1990). Judgment was considered also in its "positive" valence by coding irony and sarcasm, which still express a negative evaluation of the victim but with the aim of provoking laughter (Lee & Katz, 1998).

In the group of moral emotions focusing on other-suffering or praising, in our corpus we identified compassion and sadness on the spectrum of the negative valence, and gratitude on the spectrum of the positive one. Another low-arousal emotion that was included in the other-suffering family is resignation (see Table 2), which is similar to apathy and indifference. It is a negative emotional state, defined by a lack of engagement, a low amount of individual resources mobilized, a limited sense of control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Delle Fave & Bassi, 2000), and also potentially close to sense of impotence (Menesini et al., 2015; Tangney, 1995). Considering this emotion, for example, the lack of reaction toward a sexist aggression can be featured by an absence of feelings toward the suffering of the victims, and, thus, as emotional coldness.

Overall, for the analysis of the emotions, we used eleven levels of coding:

1) anger, when commenters used angered smile, or use of repeated words or punctuation marks or explicit insults toward the oppo- nent like disgusting, imbeciles, shame, rubbish, ignorant, ob- scenity, littleness, crap, junk, or an explicit state of state of disgust, anger, exhausted, tiredness.

2) outrage, when commenters express their profound sense of delusion toward the more general situation (e.g., "This country is so bitter" and "what a pain").

3) disgust, when commenters use words like "throw up" or other expression linked to taste.

4) contempt, when commenters explicitly discredit as opponent through disparaging terms, such as "asshole," "boor," or "pathetic human shit."

5) shame, when users explicitly admit the violation of the norm with sentences like "I am ashamed of being a woman," regarding the feeling of belonging to the female 'in-group' and excluding other forms of shaming, such as "shame on you."

6) irony, when users express a negative message using positive words, like in the case of "Genius!" or "Envy?". This was based on Anolli et al.'s (2002) position of the "semantic inversion between the literal (primary) meaning and the nonliteral (implicated) one."

Table 2
Moral emotions.

	Positive	Negative
Other/self judgment	irony sarcasm	anger disgust contempt outrage (shame)
Other suffering/praising	gratitude	sadness compassion resignation

7) sarcasm, when users express an ironic comment with the aim of discrediting or being offensive (Barbieri et al., 2014; Farías et al., 2015; D'Errico & Poggi, 2012).

8) resignation, when there was a lack of emotional markers showing cold comments, as in the case "dark times," without any other emotional signal.

9) sadness, when a commenter explicitly says, for example, "what sadness."

10) compassion, when the expression of sadness was oriented toward a victim

11) gratitude when commenters explicitly thank someone.

3. Results

3.1. Sexist meme: online outcomes and proximal moral processes

3.1.1. Aggressive, prosocial, and intermediate online stances

From a descriptive point of view, we can report a high majority of aggressive commenters (50.90%), followed by the bystander (19.30%), prosocial (16.00%), and avoidant (15.20%) positions, reported in Table 3. Gender differences are significant at chi square test [$\chi2$ (1075) = 21.18; p < 0.007], with men are significantly more likely to express bystander comments (14.9% versus 23.6%) and women tend to be slightly more aggressive (52.2% versus 49.5%) and more prosocial than men (16% versus 13.4%).

3.1.2. Cognitive and emotional moral processes

The more recurrent moral processes used within the corpus are the ones featured by moral disengagement, and within these the more extreme ones – such as *dehumanization* (25.56%) and *attribution of guilt* (23.14%) resulted prevalent (Table 4). Furthermore, we frequently noticed mechanisms focused on agency, such as *displacement of responsibility* (10.88%).

In terms of prosocial processes, *structured argumentation* and *principles recalling* emerged, even if with very low frequency. These processes are characterized by a complex reasoning based on historical or real data or by a denouncing argument of the sexist meme (recalling to the principle; 'Please don't be as embarrassed as so many men, go back to being the best kind of man'). Also, assuming the responsibility of prosocial commenters that tend to be self-blaming were relatively present in comments like "This shows how much we women are responsible and how unfortunate it is that solidarity among women does not exist."

The most frequent emotions are mainly negative (Table 5), such as contempt (27%), outrage (17%), and anger (14.8%). Among the emotions with a positive valence, we observed irony (7.4%) and sarcasm (5.9%) the most. Gender differences are significant [$\chi2$ (1075) = 73.18; p < 0.000], with women more likely to express more activated negative emotions (like indignation and shame) and less ironic and sarcastic comments than men. Thus, while women tend to feel, in cases of sexist aggression, negative emotions directed toward themselves or toward a generalized other, men tend to express emotions that are directed to make fun of the target, which might operates as social distancing.

3.2. From sexist meme to online stances: aggressive versus prosocial paths

In order to obtain a comprehensive framework of emotional and cognitive processes, a correspondence factor analysis was implemented. Correspondence analysis is a particular type of principal component analysis aiming to provide a description of the underlying features characterising each factor, without presuming a causal relationship between the variables (Benzécri et al., 1976; Greenacre & Vrba, 1984; Lebart, 1984).

3.2.1. Moral cognitive processes and online stances

Two main factors emerged when analyzing the stances (aggressive, bystander, prosocial, and avoidant) and moral cognitive processes. They explained respectively the 71.53% and the 25.51% of the whole inertia (97.04%). As summarized in Table 6, the polarization of prosocial and aggressive stances emerged as the main factor. While the prosocial stances focus on the victim, behavior, consequences (negative consequences), and agency with an assumption of responsibility, aggressive stances are characterized by dehumanization, guilt attribution and moral justification. Otherwise, the second factor showed the opposition of these two orientations with bystanders and only partially avoiders. These ones are featured by disengaged mechanisms focused on evaluation of sexist behavior, on agency, and finally on consequences like distortion of consequences (Fig. 3).

3.2.2. Moral emotions and online stances

From the combination of the stances (aggressive, bystander, prosocial, and avoidant) with emotions, two main factors emerged that explained 77.8% and 13.6% of the whole inertia (91.51%). The first factor is characterized by a strong polarization between prosocial and avoidant stances, which correlated with other-praising emotions, suffering-focused emotions (e.g. gratitude, sadness, and compassion), or self-evaluating emotions (e.g. shame for the "wrongdoings," such as in the case of outrage opposed to an aggressive stance associated with contempt, sarcasm, and irony) (Fig. 4; Table 7). The second factor is characterized by prosocial with deactivated emotions (e.g. sadness, shame and compassion but also gratitude to bystanders, featured by disgust, outrage, or resignation). Bystander stances in this analysis are outliers, maybe because they are not strictly characterised by recurrent emotional states.

3.2.3. Emotions and the interplay of moral cognitions

Finally, in order to position within a factorial space together emotions and cognitive and moral processes, we performed a third multiple correspondences analysis, which shows two emergent main factors that explained respectively an inertia of 32.82% and 19.72% of the total inertia of 52.55%.

Results shows an opposition between more extreme morally disengaged mechanisms (such as dehumanization and attribution of blame) with more harsh negative emotions focused on judging the victim (such as like contempt and sarcasm), with a positive valence, opposed to the rest of the considered mechanisms. The second factor pits the prosocial arguments about the victim (attribution of value and humanization)— accompanied by emotions concerning the suffering of other (such as sadness and compassion) or self-judgment (such as in the case of shame associated with assumption of responsibility). On the other side, we can report the association of ironic or positive emotional expression with moral disengaged mechanisms on behavior, or with distortion of consequences and diffusion of responsibility (Table 8). Moreover, resignation is associated with moral processes focused on consequences, by extremizing the negative consequences of a 'so terrible act', while shame is associated with those mechanisms that attribute the entire responsibility to gender belonginess.

In contrast, when the commenters use anger or outrage, they argue with prosocial reasoning by realistic labelling (this is a violent aggression), by using complex argumentation of the sexist behavior, by

Table 3
Percentages of the four stances.

Stances	Female	%	Male	%	Total N	%
AGGRESSIVE	281	52,2	266	49,5	547	50,9
AVOIDANT	91	16,9	72	13,4	163	15,2
BY-STANDER*	80 [(−)]	14,9	127 [(+)]	23,6	207	19,3
PROSOCIAL	86	16,0	72	13,4	158	16,0

*significant residuals |2|.

Table 4
Percentages of cognitive processes.

	n	%		n	%
DEHUMANIZATION	148	25,56	EUPH_LABELLING	17	2,94
GUILT_ATTRIBUTION	134	23,14	ADVANTAG_COMPARISON	16	2,76
DISPLACEMENT	63	10,88	real_labelling	13	2,25
struct_argumentation	44	7,60	DISTORTION	9	1,55
Assumption	41	7,08	humanization	6	1,04
Recalling	34	5,87	neg_consequences	4	0,69
DIFFUSION	25	4,32	value_attribution	4	0,69
Trigger	19	3,28	JUSTIFICATION	2	0,35

Table 5
Percentages of expressed emotions.

Emotions	Female	%	Male	%	Total N	%
CONTEMPT	157	29,2%	133	24,8%	290	27,0%
ANGER	72	13,4%	87	16,2%	159	14,8%
OUTRAGE*	113[(+)]	21,0%	70[(−)]	13,0%	183	17,0%
SADNESS	89	16,5%	85	15,8%	174	16,2%
IRONY*	15[(−)]	2,8%	65[(+)]	12,1%	80	7,4%
SARCASM*	19[(−)]	3,5%	44[(+)]	8,2%	63	5,9%
RESIGNATION	17	3,2%	25	4,7%	42	3,9%
DISGUST	38	7,1%	22	4,1%	60	5,6%
SHAME*	11	2,0%	0	0,0%	11	1,0%
COMPASSION	6	1,1%	5	0,9%	11	1,0%
GRATITUDE	1	0,2%	1	0,2%	2	0,2%

*significant residuals at |2|.

recalling a principle (where is the respect for women?), or by focusing on agency, such as essentially consists of denouncing the sexist behavior to the postal police (Fig. 5).

4. Discussion

Overall, the present study highlighted that a sexist meme is associated with both aggressive and prosocial stances connoted by different proximal moral and emotional processes. In line with our expectation, moral disengagement mechanisms and other condemning emotions sustain and possibly reinforce online aggressive sexist phenomena. Yet, even if rare, some comments characterized by prosocial reasoning and other suffering emotions sustain prosocial stances toward women. In addition, results also suggest intermediate positions characterized by interesting cognitive and emotions patterns, suggesting a more complex online scenario. Indeed, while angry emotions are associated with "active" prosocial defending comments, irony is associated with moral disengagement mechanisms that could indirectly legitimize online discriminatory practices toward women. In the following paragraphs, we present our results and highlight how sexist memes can trigger aggressive or prosocial stances resulting from different proximal processes.

4.1. Sexist memes and aggressive versus prosocial stances: cognitive moral processes

The present study increases our knowledge on the different reactions arising from online sexist memes. Similar to the literature on bullying (Salmivalli, 2010), discussions in online environments can be seen as a dynamic process in which all users play a precise role by preventing or fueling hate speech. In this specific case, users who commented on Selvaggia Lucarelli's tweet, aimed at condemning the sharing of a sexist meme against Carola Rackete, showed a variety of stances, ranging from aggressive responses to prosocial ones, which is partially consistent with previous studies (D'Errico & Paciello, 2018; 2019).

Specifically, four groups of users interacting online emerged from the data. Lucarelli's post produced mainly aggressive reactions (50.90%), highlighting a wide gap compared to the amount of prosocial comments (16%). The difference between these two percentages is further exacerbated by the presence of cognitive moral processes that are in stark contrast to each other (Bandura, 1986, 1991; Darley & Latané, 1968). Indeed, it is possible to see how the aggressive stance is linked to some mechanisms of moral disengagement, while the prosocial stance is related to prosocial reasoning. Notably, aggressive users focused on the victim, and they resorted to dehumanization and guilt attribution. Less frequently, they used moral justification. In contrast, prosocial commenters relied mainly on processes focused on the victim (e.g., value attribution and humanization) and agency (e.g., the assumption of

Table 6
Coordinates of the CA including stances and cognitive processes.

|	F1	Modalità	F2
Pr.-humanization	**1818**	Pr.-JUSTIFICATION	**0,651**
Pr.-neg_consequences	**1818**	Pr.-neg_consequences	**0,498**
Pr.-value_attribution	**1818**	Pr.-value_attribution	**0,498**
POS-PROSOCIAL	**1509**	Pr.-humanization	**0,498**
Pr.-assumption	**1473**	Pr.-DEHUMANIZATION	**0,485**
Pr.-trigger	**1318**	POS-AGGRESSIVE	**0,322**
Pr.-recalling	**1256**	Pr.-assumption	**0,303**
Pr.-struct_argumentation	**0,982**	POS-PROSOCIAL	**0,247**
Pr.-real_labelling	**0,944**	Pr.-recalling	0,140
POS-AVOIDANT	0,088	Pr.-real_labelling	0,124
POS-BY-STANDER	−0,106	Pr.-GUILT_ATTRIBUTION	0,053
Pr.-ADVANTAG_COMPARISON	−0,167	Pr.-trigger	−0,047
Pr.-DIFFUSION	−0,169	Pr.-struct_argumentation	−0,143
Pr.-DISPLACEMENT	−0,256	Pr.-EUPH_LABELLING	−0,147
Pr.-DISTORTION	−0,306	POS-AVOIDANT	−0,376
Pr.-EUPH_LABELLING	−0,510	Pr.-DISPLACEMENT	−0,609
Pr.-GUILT_ATTRIBUTION	−0,546	Pr.-DISTORTION	−0,856
POS-AGGRESSIVE	−0,614	POS-BY-STANDER	−0,882
Pr.-DEHUMANIZATION	−0,682	Pr.-DIFFUSION	−0,982
Pr.-JUSTIFICATION	−0,740	Pr.-ADVANTAG_COMPARISON	−1627
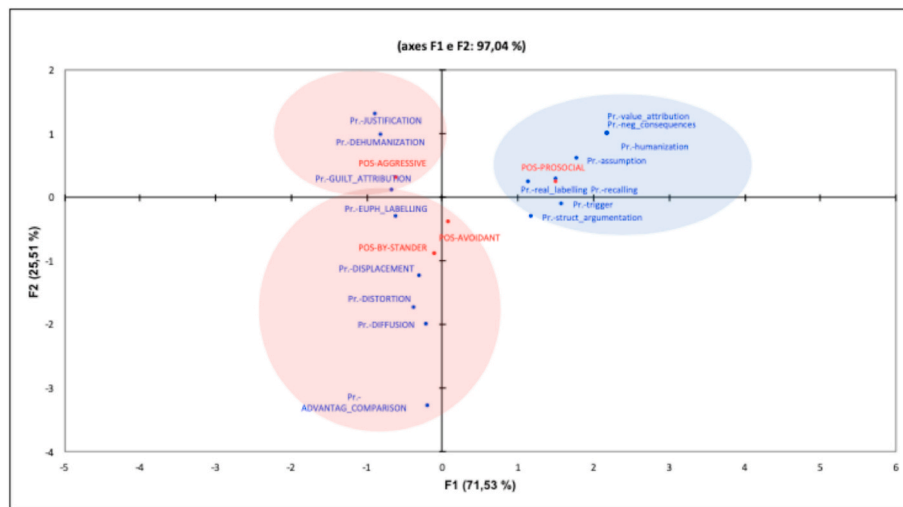
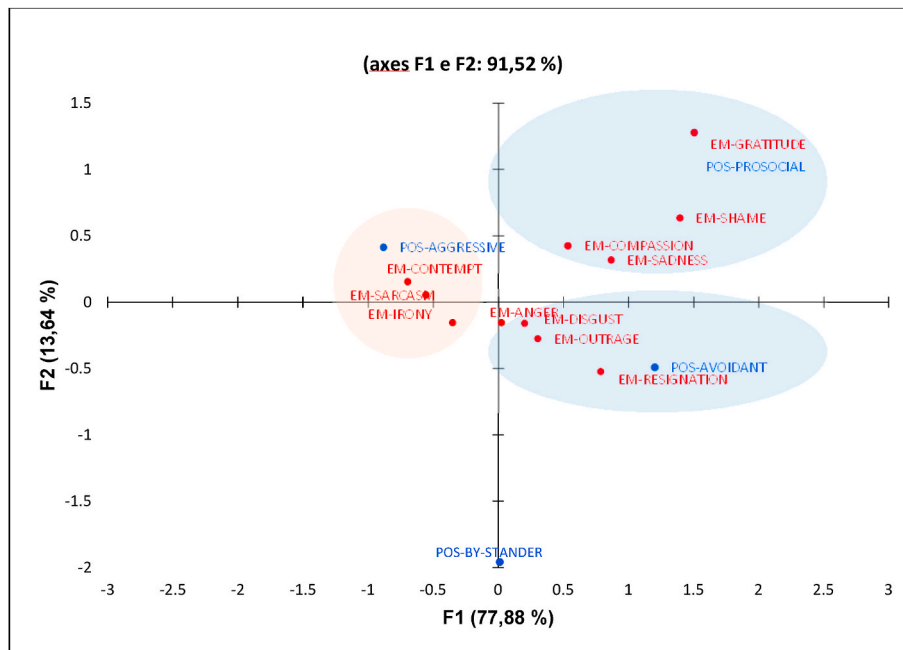**Fig. 3.** Correspondence analysis stances and cognitive processes.

Fig. 4. Correspondence analysis between stances and moral emotions.

Table 7
Coordinates of the CA including emotions and stances.

	F1		F2
EM-GRATITUDE	**1504**	EM-GRATITUDE	**1277**
EM-SHAME	**1394**	EM-SHAME	**0,635**
S-PROSOCIAL	**0,884**	EM-COMPASSION	**0,425**
EM-SADNESS	**0,865**	EM-SADNESS	**0,318**
EM-OUTRAGE	**0,301**	S-PROSOCIAL	**0,314**
S-AVOIDANT	**0,706**	EM-CONTEMPT	0,154
EM-COMPASSION	**0,533**	S-AGGRESSIVE	0,102
EM-RESIGNATION	**0,301**	EM-SARCASM	0,055
EM-DISGUST	0,200	S-AVOIDANT	−0,121
EM-ANGER	0,022	EM-IRONY	−0,153
S-BY-STANDER	0,008	EM-ANGER	−0,154
EM-IRONY	−0,353	EM-DISGUST	−0,159
S-AGGRESSIVE	−0,520	EM-OUTRAGE	−0,275
EM-SARCASM	−0,557	S-BY-STANDER	−0,482
EM-CONTEMPT	−0,699	EM-RESIGNATION	−0,523

responsibility and agentic triggering).

These polarized positions leave room for two intermediate stances identified in the figure of passive spectators, which recalls the literature on non-intervention (Latané & Darley, 1970). Although passive spectators follow moral precepts by avoiding aggression, they do not contribute to an ethical climate, as they fail to intervene to defend the victim. This appears to be consistent with the fact that feeling less responsible (Garcia et al., 2002) means that spectators do not feel guilty towards the victim (Cacioppo et al., 1986). By doing this, they seem to deviate from the topic itself and indirectly legitimize the aggression. Regarding moral cognitive processes related to them, passive users prefer more subtle and less evident mechanisms, which focus mainly on agency, behavior, and outcomes. Among them, we find euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, consequence distortion, diffusion of responsibility, and advantageous comparison. Basically, according to research by Gini et al. (2020) in the field of bullying, passive spectators do not actively intervene in critical situations.

Table 8
Coordinates of the CA including emotional and cognitive processes.

|	F1		F2
EM-COMPASSION	**2010**	EM-SHAME	**2484**
Pr.-humanization	**1756**	Pr.-assumption	**1339**
EM-SHAME	**1748**	EM-SADNESS	**0,730**
Pr.-assumption	**1232**	Pr.-value_attribution	**0,530**
EM-SADNESS	**0,999**	Pr.-humanization	**0,280**
EM-RESIGNATION	**0,939**	Pr.-DIFFUSION	**0,230**
Pr.-neg_consequences	**0,783**	Pr.-DEHUMANIZATION	0,219
Pr.-trigger	**0,759**	EM-CONTEMPT	0,208
Pr.-recalling	**0,737**	EM-COMPASSION	0,194
Pr.-value_attribution	**0,736**	EM-DISGUST	0,162
EM-GRATITUDE	**0,724**	EM-RESIGNATION	0,103
Pr.-JUSTIFICATION	**0,665**	Pr.-neg_consequences	0,100
Pr.-struct_argumentation	**0,511**	EM-GRATITUDE	0,036
Pr.-real_labelling	**0,502**	Pr.-struct_argumentation	0,019
Pr.-DISPLACEMENT	**0,501**	Pr.-GUILT_ATTRIBUTION	−0,055
Pr.-DISTORTION	**0,500**	EM-OUTRAGE	−0,095
EM-IRONY	**0,468**	Pr.-recalling	−0,147
EM-OUTRAGE	**0,439**	Pr.-trigger	−0,208
Pr.-ADVANTAG_COMPARISON	**0,347**	EM-SARCASM	−0,225
Pr.-DIFFUSION	**0,336**	Pr.-real_labelling	−0,227
EM-ANGER	**0,331**	EM-ANGER	**−0,325**
Pr.-EUPH_LABELLING	**0,067**	Pr.-ADVANTAG_COMPARISON	**−0,634**
EM-DISGUST	−0,024	Pr.-DISPLACEMENT	**−0,727**
EM-SARCASM	−0,395	Pr.-DISTORTION	**−0,955**
Pr.-GUILT_ATTRIBUTION	−0,482	Pr.-EUPH_LABELLING	**−1080**
EM-CONTEMPT	**−0,801**	EM-IRONY	**−1206**
Pr.-DEHUMANIZATION	**−0,835**	Pr.-JUSTIFICATION	**−2238**
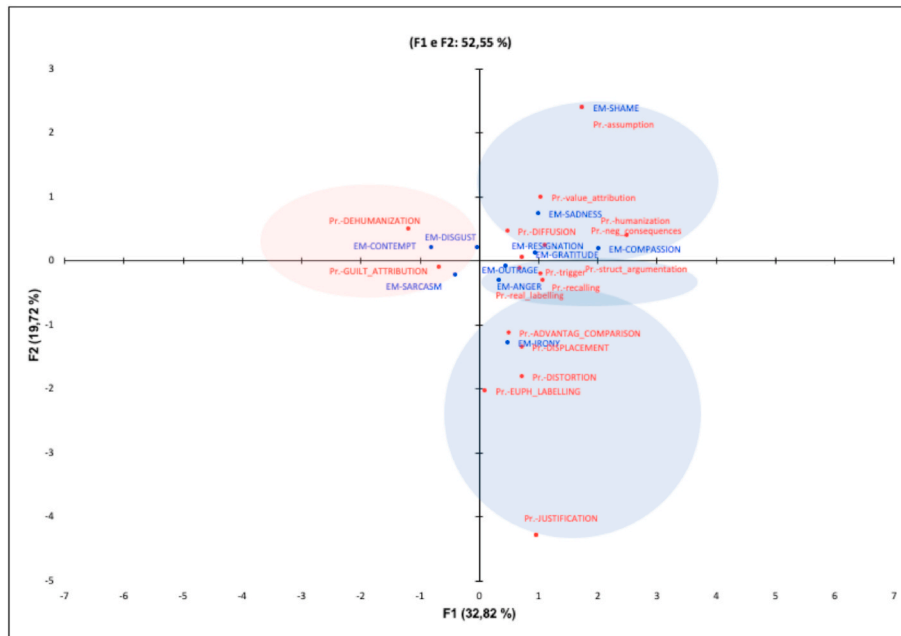
Fig. 5. Correspondence analysis emotional and cognitive processes.

Previous research suggests that the bystander effect can also exist in online communication (Markley, 2000). Furthermore, in this specific case, non-polarized witnesses of online discussions can be categorized as avoiders (15.20%) and bystanders (19.30%). Although these two groups seem similar in moral disengagement mechanisms, they can be distinguished by emotions and the interplay between these emotions and cognitive processes linked to morality.

Moreover, it is notable that women have a more aggressive stance compared to men, who express themselves through bystander positioning (Ramachandiran & Mahmud, 2019); the perpetrators, then, are not just male.

4.2. Sexist meme: online stances and online moral emotions

In the literature on online settings, from emotional point of view, moral struggles are generally featureRamachandiran & Mahmud, 2019d by high or low level of hostile emotions, such as annoyance, anger, or hate. This implies that also when people are driven by "good intentions" in online settings, their emotions can be negative (D'Errico & Paciello, 2018; 2019). The present study sought to overcome a simple dichotomy of positive versus negative emotions by taking into consideration the framework of moral emotions (Haidt, 2003) by showing how emotional processes can be driven by the commenters' focus. Seen from this light, social media users facing an explicit sexist act can focus on the victim

and, thus, feel sadness, compassion, and resignation, or they can focus on the other and self-judgement and, thus, expressing anger, disgust, and a form of vicarious shame— "being woman." The present case study has shown that the prevailing emotions are the ones focused on judgement, such as contempt (27%), anger (14.8%), outrage (17%), and the ones focuses on positively valanced emotions, such as irony (7.4%) and sarcasm (5.9%). In terms of the frequency, the emotions based on the suffering of others, such as sadness and resignation, comprised only 20.1% of the total coding.

In terms of users' positioning toward the sexist aggression, the emotional processes directed toward the judgement of others, such as contempt, but also irony and sarcasm led commenters to assume an *aggressive stance*. In particular, the aggressive stance is performed by using explicit or implicit forms of discrediting directed toward the influencer who defended Carola Rackete (Selvaggia Lucarelli), and even the woman category.

On the other side of the graph (see Fig. 3), users who expressed emotions focusing on the victim, tried to defend the victim from the sexist aggression but also the woman responsible for this act, assuming a *prosocial stance*. This result is in line with the literature on prosociality that shows other-oriented behavior are associated with the other-suffering emotions (Baumeister & Lobbestael, 2011; Lim & DeSteno, 2016). Moreover, social media users tended to be grateful for the denouncing act, but they also felt ashamed to be women—a kind of vicarious shame toward people belonging to the same group (Welten et al., 2012).

Crossing the emotions and the assumed stance toward the sexist aggression highlighted a third group of users who expressed more activated emotions, like anger, disgust, and outrage. These are the *avoidant* users, who do not express their position, but they clearly express their sense of injustice, such as through anger, or they generally complain about how bad the world is without trying to distinguish the offender from the victim and trying to understand the causes behind the sexist behavior. Also, resignation is an emotion that highlights this stance; it is characterized by a sense of impotence toward the general situation (Tangney, 1995).

4.3. Aggressive versus prosocial stances: emotional and cognitive moral patterns

Concerning the study of emotional and cognitive patterns triggered by the sexist meme, the present study highlighted four possible configurations (Fig. 5). First, in line with literature on aggressive behavior in general (Bandura, 2016) and in an online settings specifically (Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016; D'Errico & Paciello, 2018; Paciello et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2016), moral disengagement mechanisms focus on the victim are associated with distancing emotional responses, which are contempt, disgust, and sarcasm. This emotional-cognitive path represents the most hostile and aggressive manifestation, which is characterized by a negative and hostile orientation toward another in response to a sexist meme. This cognitive-emotional pattern, which we call *negatively victim-oriented*, confirms the role of the moral emotion of CAD (except for anger) model; it also confirms dehumanization and victim attribution of blame in sustaining aggressive manifestation as well as their possible interaction in reinforcing an aggressive vicious circle in an online setting.

Another configuration emerges from the interaction between irony and moral disengagement mechanisms, which focus on behavior, agency, and outcomes. This emotional-cognitive path shows how moral disengagement processes could be positively associated not only with negative emotions but also with positive ones. This interplay was never found in the previous literature; however, it is partially in line with the moral disengagement and video game literature (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). This *ironic disengagement pattern* suggests that people could behave as in a game during online discussion. Thus, it is plausible to speculate that minimizing the seriousness of online phenomena and

their effects, downplaying individual accountability, can be a way to make ironic and disparaging comments or actions (e.g., disparaging humor; Gill, 2007). This is another possible vicious moral disengagement-emotion circle, explaining the maintenance of sexist and discriminatory online behavior.

Opposing these two patterns, we found another two emotional-cognitive patterns that represent the two possible prosocial responses to sexist messages. First, in line with the literature (Haidt, 2003), other-suffering moral emotions are associated with prosocial reasoning, which focus on the potential victims—in this case, different kinds of women (e.g., symbolic, the target of the meme, and the commenters). This *victim-oriented pattern* is characterized by a sense of distrust and passive orientation toward the online discussion. A particular sub-configuration was never found in the online setting, which emerges from the interaction between vicarious shame and assuming responsibility. This specific interplay suggests that in an online setting, it is also possible to experience moral distress while observing in-group members' behavior that indirectly damages one's own moral image. Finally, we found a configuration characterized by active negative emotions (i.e., anger and outrage) and prosocial moral reasoning, which we call *active angry prosocial defender*. This emotional-cognitive interplay highlights a possible positive function of anger and outrage during online moral struggles. Anger is usually expected to be related to an aggressive response (Berkowitz, 1990). However, this kind of emotion could also play a different role when facing injustices and in restoring damaged personal values (Van Doorn et al., 2018). In other words, this pattern could capture the emotional and cognitive processes that moved someone to defend the potential victims, such as in the case of third-party aggression.

4.4. Limitations and future research

Despite the novelty of present findings, the results need to be cross-validated within other online ethical discussions and through a larger corpus of data. Indeed, the number of comments in some particular level of analysis is a bit low—such as in the case of gratitude, shame, and moral justification—to confirm the model on a large scale; furthermore, both the meme and its responses are expressed in Italian. It would be useful to verify if it is possible to replicate the present findings in different cultural and linguistic contexts. In addition, the inclusion of social-cultural dimensions together with personal factors (e.g., users' levels of awareness and moral self-regulative capabilities) could provide a more complete framework to allow researchers to identify elements that moderate the online discussions. Indeed, the current study focuses on the immediate reactions and, thus, the proximal routes related (or not) to non-sexist aggression. Moreover, the adoption of experimental and longitudinal design is necessary to confirm the relationship between "online stimuli" and the activation of processes leading to different stances. Examining these phenomena over time and under different experimental communicative conditions may offer also an opportunity to reflect on ethical communication preventing online sexist aggression. For example, memes with different content (racist or fake news based ones) could be selected to understand which stances emerge and if they change over time or if they change the source of the sexist aggression (e.g., a politician) or if the reporting of the sexist meme came from an institutional source. It may be concurrently useful to monitor the number of times users' comments to understand if the injustice perpetrated can be linked to an impulsive form of response.

5. Conclusion

This investigation on psychological processes activated by sexist memes can extend the current knowledge on online sexist aggression—a growing negative phenomenon that is still overlooked in psychosocial literature (Van Der Wilk, 2018). In particular, within a social cognitive framework, the present findings extend the current knowledge on

emotions and cognitive processes implied in online stances assumed to be toward sexist aggression. Overall, based on the present results, we can make the following contributions to the existing literature. First, in line with the literature on bystanders (Gini et al., 2020; Salmivalli, 2010), it is also possible in an online setting to identify intermediate positions, which are distinct from clearly aggressive and prosocial ones. Second, the use of specific moral emotions can be useful to capture different kinds of online moral struggles. Third, the less intuitive cognitive-affect patterns highlight that complex online phenomenon cannot be understood through basic oppositional categories, such as bad versus good comments or positive versus negative emotions.

To conclude, this case study represents a starting point to explore ethical online communication and to open a reflection about the impact of a sexist meme. It is necessary apply these results in educational settings to promote constructive forms of online interaction. If sexist memes are "just a joke" (Drakett et al., 2018; Ford et al., 2008, p. 160, p. 112), it is important to promote the awareness of those psychological processes that can transform a joke into damaging online behavior, which can help spread uncivil and harmful discourses.

* Consistent with social cognitive models (bib_Anderson_and_Bushman_2002Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Gentile et al., 2009), the terms "aggressive" and "prosocial" were used to refer to observed verbal expressions, which can be triggered by a particular cue or stimulus and can be potentially beneficial or damaging.

Credit

Acknowledgments

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