Internet Memes and Desensitization

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Abstract: Internet memes (IMs) have been used as a visual form of online rhetoric since the early 2000s. With hundreds of thousands now in circulation, IMs have become a prominent method of communication across the Internet. In this essay, I analyze the characteristics that have made IMs a mainstay in online communication. Understanding the definitions and structures of IMs aid in explaining their online success, especially on social platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. I use these understandings as a basis from which to theorize how both the creative process in making IMs and the prominence of IMs that utilize images of originally violent or sensitive contexts may relate to existing research correlating violent media and desensitization. The use of these images often involves a disconnection from their original contexts in order to create a new and distinct— in many cases irrelevant— message and meaning. These IMs, in turn, exemplify the belittlement of distress depicted in such images—often for the sake of humor. This essay's main goal is to propose a new theoretical lens from which to analyze the social and cultural influences on IMs.

The greater purpose of this essay is not to devalue Internet memes nor to define them in narrow terms nor to claim there is any causal relationship between Internet memes and societal desensitization. Rather, I am proposing a new lens through which to further study Internet memes' social effects on online users' conceptions of violence and/or sensitive topics.

For one, this research is an analytical observation of the social intricacies of Internet memes and how these cultural units hold a significant role in online activity and communication. The main purpose is to propose a way in which to analyze the social influence of Internet memes—in their creation, recreation, and diffusion. This lens through which to examine memes can contribute to theoretical work on Internet memes as language, to theoretical work on the relations between violent media, and overall, proposed a new manner in which to study the social influence of Internet memes. As this form of online communication continues to be a popular mode of online discourse, understanding the effects of Internet memes on online users will further the understanding of cultural online behaviors' effects on users social conceptions on- and off-line.

Throughout the beginning of my analysis, I define memes, assess their distinct qualities, and establish specific types of Internet memes I focus on in my analysis. I do so to develop an understanding of how Internet memes are used as a form of communication which is a foundation of my central point— I discuss how they relate to societal desensitization. I do so by examining existing theoretical research on media's relationship to social desensitization to draw a connection between the theory and Interne meme usage. Particularly, the creation and popularity of memes in which sensitive or violent media are used and modified in a manner that removes the context of these images—often for the sake of humor.

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Methodology

I perform a secondary analysis on both research that analyzes Internet memes—which focus on what they are and how they are used in online discourse—and theoretical research that discusses the relation between exposure to violent media and desensitization. I use findings from this research to formulate how Internet memes, particularly the types I focus on later in this essay, fir into research on the link between media and desensitization and propose how this new perspective can further the literature.

I use the Internet meme database "Know Your Meme" as the main source for examples throughout my paper. This is a database in which Internet memes are submitted by online users to be researched and verified by a team of professional editorial and research staff that run the site. Other examples, due to their recent occurrence, I obtain from reputable news outlets to relate to the Internet memes I exemplify.

The category of memes I focus on are memes of "use", "reaction" memes, and "relatable post" memes, as the characteristics of these memes are essential to my analysis for which ill further expand on in this essay.

Understanding Internet Memes

The term *meme* was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, in which he posed that unlike genes, memes are any non-genetically based idea and behaviors –such as cultural ideas or social practices—that are spread within a culture (Davison 2012). Memes are learned and constructed by social forces—such as culture, religion, and education— and greatly determine much of human behavior (Davison 2012). Memes are distinct from genes because memes are learned and subject to interpretation, while genes biologically-based and are transferred through an identical chemical "code" or DNA (Davison 2012). Dawkins framed memes as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Shifman, 2014, Defining memes). However, Dawkins's early classification of memes is arguably too vague of a definition for Internet memes— they do not account for some of the more specific communication aims that have surfaced in online platforms. As Patrick Davison notes, Internet memes are "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" (Davison 2012). For Davison, memes are comprised of three components: *manifestation* (the observable

phenomena or the media), *behavior* (the action made to create the meme), and *ideal* (the idea expressed). Davison's components illuminate how Internet memes are distinct from; this theme will be a basis of my study. Dawkins also explained that there are three key characteristics necessary for memes to be successful: *longevity*, *copy fidelity*, and *fecundity* (Shifman, 2014, When Memes Go Viral). *Longevity* refers to the duration a meme lasts, *copy fidelity* is the accuracy in which a unit can be copied, and *fecundity* is how many units of memes can be created in a certain unite of time (Shifman, 2014, "When Memes Go Viral"). These characteristics are greatly magnified when applied to the internet, because the internet allows information to be stored, to be replicated without loss of information, and to be quickly transferred and diffused across the internet (Shifman, 2014, "When Memes Go Viral"). The way in which the internet strengthens the characteristics needed for memes to be successful is precisely why Internet memes have become a social phenomenon as seen by their consistent virality online.

Davison (2012) explains that there are two basic genres of Internet memes, memes for "view" and memes for "use". Memes for "view" gained popularity through being shared in their original form (Davison 2012). Memes for "use" a are created through the replication and modification of original memes; the "malleability" of these memes encourage the recreation of original memes by other individuals and are a quality important to their popularity (Davison 2012). To clarify the distinction between the two, memes that are for "use" are used by many more people through the recreation of a singular meme by thousands of online users. On the other hand, memes for "view" are generally spread in their original form in order to be seen in their original context. A meme for "view" would be the 2009 video created by Forrest Whiley for "The Duck Song" by Bryant Oden which became so famous that the original video now has over 300 million views since its creation (Know Your Meme, The Duck Song, 2012). The viewing and sharing of the original video are what made it popular rather than its ability to be recreated—as evident by its very minimal recreations (Know Your Meme). On the other hand, the "Squinting Woman" (Figure 1 & 2) meme would be considered a meme for "use". This meme came from a set of photos originally posted by Twitter user "@Solo_Kalin". However, it became popular as an Internet meme not only through the original tweet gaining views, but especially through the several online users who reused and edited the original image in order to create their own memes such as the ones in Figure 3-6 on the next page.

Figures 1 & 2. Original posts by @Solo_Kalin

Figures 3-6. "Squinting Woman" memes created by other, random, Twitter users

Internet memes, specifically memes for "use", are also successful due to their *intertextuality*, as the interconnection of cultural contexts within Internet memes add on to their efficiency as a form of visual rhetoric. These cultural references allow numerous ideas, from jokes to political messages, to be conveyed to and understood by online audiences (Huntington 2013). When an Internet meme's message is then generally understood by and generally appealing to the online public, it is vastly shared and/or remade which makes itself known as an Internet meme.

My analysis focuses on Internet memes for "use" as they best define what I am referring to, and what is generally referred to, as an "Internet meme", in contrast to Internet memes for "view" which are more closely related to what are now called "viral" images or videos. I also focus on this genre of memes because the methods in which these memes are created and the messages they express are central to my argument. Although viral videos can correlate to issues of desensitization through media, the cultural behavior in creating and the intertextuality of "use" type Internet memes are what allow them to be used in discourse—which are unique

characteristics is important to my analysis. In sum, "Internet memes" specifically refer to those of "use" in the following section.

Internet memes as a Form of Discourse

Internet memes have undoubtedly become a social phenomenon, as evident by the thousands of Internet memes that have been created, "liked", shared, and recreated. This success can be accredited to the three qualities Dawkin's identified being strengthened through their application on the Internet. These magnified characteristics are what allow the several "mutations" involved in successful Internet meme culture, these mutations in turn further strengthen the "fecundity" of Internet memes because they entice online users to continue the cycle of contributing their own memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Other important elements that contribute to Internet memes' fecundity are humor and intertextuality (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). The ways in which humor and intertextuality play a key role in Internet meme's fecundity, and in turn their online relevance, show that the general users' understanding of an Internet meme's message is essential to its popularity. This necessary understanding exemplifies how they serve as a method of online discourse, in which users are exposed to an Internet meme, understand the message(s) being expressed in the meme, and show their response through likes, shares, comments, and recreations of the meme.

The continued discourse of an Internet meme or several Internet memes is what continues their growth in popularity and their online relevance, in turn the degree of popularity these memes attain can show ideas to which other people relate to. For example, "Reaction memes" memes that use images or videos in order the express a specific feeling during a specific situation, encompass a sub-genre known as "Relatable posts" memes. "Relatable posts" memes, which start with the phrase "When you…" followed by a certain situation and a photo to represent the creator's sentiments during that situation use images which would be unrelated otherwise (Figures 7-10). These types of Internet memes became popular because users that are exposed to them both relate to the message of the meme (as evident in likes and shares) and may even create their own version. Internet memes not only convey messages, but their popularity evince ways in which they build community as they show patterns of collectively accepted ideas through the amount of views, likes, and shares gathered. This normalized behavior of using photos or videos—regardless of their original context— as a form of expression—whether they be done for humor, social commentary, or otherwise—a focus important to my analysis of societal desensitization through Internet meme exposure.

Figures 7-9: Examples of: Relatable posts" memes.

Internet memes and Desensitization

There are existing studies that theorize exposure to general forms of media that display sensitive matters, especially those that are violent, correlate to increases in violent occurrences and increases in societal desensitization when confronted with these sorts of situations in real life. Craig A. Anderson has found "unequivocal evidence" linking media violence to the increased likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both short- and long-term instances (Carnagey et al., 2007). Some researchers have focused on the effects of violent media on physiological arousal, since arousal itself has been linked to human aggression (Carnagey et al., 2007). Such as in the case of "excitation transfer theory" which states that arousal caused by external sources (like violent video games) can be misattributed as anger in scenarios involving provocation and in turn increases the chances of the situation resulting in aggressive behavior (Carnagey et al., 2007). In relation to this research, other research has linked violent media to physiological desensitization—which refers to a reduction in physiological reactivity after exposure to violence (Carnagey et al., 2007). Normally, individuals have an "automatic aversive emotional response" to situations of violence—such as changes in heart rate and "skin conductance"—however, past research has exhibited that after exposure to violent media, participants showed reduction in skin conductance and heart when encountering succeeding depictions of real violence (Carnagey et al., 2007). One model explains that exposure to "initially fearful stimuli" in a positive context can lead to extinction of anxiety or fearful (desensitized) reactions to violence (Bushman et al., 2009). This desensitization can display cognitive effects—such as decreased perception of injury severity, decreased attention to violent events, decreased sympathy for violence victims, increased belief that violence is normative, and decreased negative towards violence—and even behavioral outcomes—such as decreased helping and increased aggression (Bushman et al., 2009). So how does the desensitization relate to Internet memes?

Internet memes reliance on intertextuality and their malleable quality make it easy for users to manipulate images to create a range of messages—often jokes. If this is so, then the same can be said about images in which the context is sensitive or violent. One common example is the popular genre of Adolf Hitler and Holocaust Internet memes, such as in figures 10-12. In many cases, Internet memes referencing Adolf Hitler or the Holocaust are for the sake of humor, although they may hold satirical elements, they make light of this violent historical event. An example related to current issues would be Internet memes on the contemporary crises of school shootings, in which they are also used in a satiric and humorous manner (Figures 12 & 13).

Figure 10 & 11: These memes are related to the popular Internet meme phrase "Hitler did nothing wrong" in which the phrase was used for mostly satirical purposes. The first image is directly from that trend. The second had influence from the phrase but is using the popular meme trope "I Wish I Could Talk to Ponies".
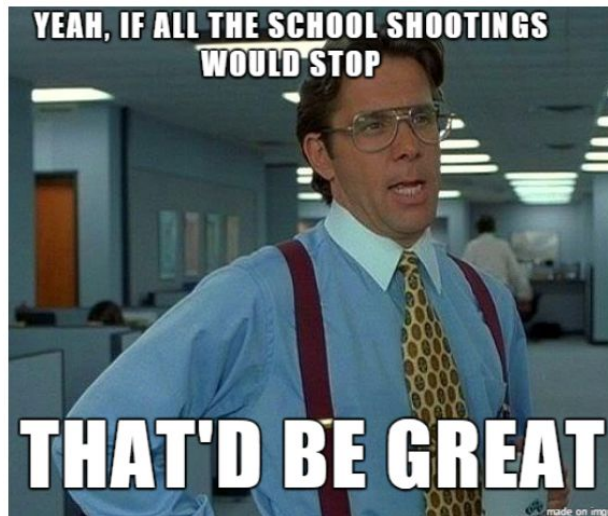
Figures 12 & 13: The first figure references an older meme "Bad Luck Brian" in which the Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza is joke of as meeting him, thus completing the joke of him having bad luck. The second image is of the "That'd be Great" meme taken from the 1999 film *Office Space*, the character in the film was known as being humorously non-confrontational by always ending order with that phrase; the creator of this image added on to the humorous meme by adding the phrase "Yeah, if all the school shootings would stop…".

One search on Google for any of these Internet meme tropes would lead you to thousands of similar memes that use intertextuality—whether it be building off other meme tropes or referencing current events—and violent or sensitive media to create messages, in most cases for humor. So, if exposure to violence-related media in a positive context leads to desensitization exhibited by the earlier explained model, then it is plausible to say when media

of violent or sensitive context is being used in a humorous manner—a positive context—can also have a correlation to desensitization.

Another issue I propose is how the application of humor to sensitive matters and the viewing of this material can also desensitize natural emotional responses to these situation—such as sympathy or empathy. For example, in 2011, American hip-hop artist Naitia Jessica Kirkland, known by her stage name as "Lil Mama", had an interview on New York radio station Power 105.1 during a "The Breakfast Club" segment (Fuller 2015; YouTube). During this segment she is questioned about her intentions with her music career, to which she brings up the struggle she went through releasing an album at the age of seventeen while her mother was dying of cancer (YouTube). This melancholic moment resurfaced over Twitter and other social media platforms when an image from that interview was made into an Internet meme (Figure 14-17). Although this meme of Lil Mama is of a moment when she was experiencing serious grief, it was made into a comedic reaction meme to signify moments in which one experiences betrayal, which has at the same time made a joke of another individual's sensitive moment. The use of others as memes for the sake of humor is what can cause distress to those portrayed in the meme—specifically when the context is drastically divorced from the original content as in the case of Lil Mama.

Figures 14-17: Internet memes of Lil Mama

The correlations I propose can be especially pertinent to the ongoing studies on the "desensitization hypothesis" since the viewing and creating of Internet memes have become a wide-spread online norm. Therefore, the behavior of minimizing violent or sensitive media through humor is a result of this norm. This can be especially seen as among youth which have essentially "grown up" online, as seen by the average starting age on Social media being as young as 12 years old (Common Sense Census). By this same affect, if minimalizing of violent or sensitive situations—which are the sources for the images used in Internet memes—for humor continues to be commonplace, evident by continuous creation and spread of these memes, does this also increase the chances of violent behaviors as past research has theorized. For example, as I previously stated there has been a recent Internet meme trope that jokes of school shootings, recent data has shown an increase in school shooting threats by 12% and increase in violent incidents by 59% between 2016 and 2017 (Auer). In relevance to the Hitler Internet memes, which have made light of the acts he has orchestrated against millions of people, specifically the Jewish population, could there be some relation to the recent rises in anti-Semitism such as the current incident where unknown individuals spray painted swastikas in the office of Professor Elizabeth Midlarsky at Columbia University (Anthony; 2018).

Conclusion:

I do not claim that this form of "dark" or "minimizing" humor is a new social behavior, but the vehicle in which this type of humor is expressed—Internet memes—is rather new. Since Internet memes have several characteristics that make them abundant and prominent online, then the messages they express, specifically this dark humor, also spread to great lengths online. So much so, it is possible that the dark humor Internet memes express could be seen by society as something normalized. This could especially be true among those who have been exposed to this cultural component of Internet memes at a young age. This seemingly normalized behavior of minimizing serious matters for the sake of humor can be related to desensitization linked to media. If so, it could also be connected to theoretical findings pertaining to the "desensitization hypothesis"–like increases in violent behavior. Thus, my main point is that including Internet memes would benefit future research on societal desensitization as it continues to be used as a commonplace form of language online.

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14-17: Provided by Google Images. Searched phrase " Lil Mama Cry Meme".

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Barbara Caridad Sanchez was born and raised in Hialeah, Florida to Cuban parents. She received her associate degree from Miami-Dade College and a bachelor's degree in Sociology at Florida International University (FIU). Along with her B.A., she completed a second major in Interdisciplinary Studies and a minor in Geography. She graduated both Magna Cum Laude and in honors from FIU's Honors College. Barbara is now a graduate student at the University of Florida, where she has been accepted into a Ph.D. program at the Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law. The main focus in her research is to understand how public engagement in social media and the Internet both play a role in socialization—especially among digital natives. This research will focus on how both online forms of communication and general Internet culture influence users' behaviors and their perceptions of others, themselves, and society. Upon completion of graduate school, she aspires to become a university professor at a research one institute.