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What Do You Meme? An Exploration of Internet Communication Through Memes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies

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Vassar College Media Studies Department

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Abstract

The topic of memes and the ethnographies they create are discussed. Memes that have been created and adopted by alt-right communities, specifically incels, illustrate their ideologies while simultaneously validating their views and recruiting insecure, vulnerable populations. Memes from times past evolve to be viewed as cringeworthy as they fail the test of time and cultural expectations for humor. Content that exists out of the confines of normality in an embarrassing way also becomes constituted as cringe, and can become a meme in this way. New social media platforms allow for novel meme formats to emerge. Furthermore, the concept of new meme formats are explained through TikTok case studies, highlighting the platform's unique and novel features. Finally, the ethnography that surrounds mental health memes is explored through content analyses of memes discussing mental illnesses like Bipolar Disorder, as well as memes depicting mindful practices. The possibility for trends arising from memes to romanticize negative attributes of mental illness illustrates the potential for negative consequences, like triggering a relapse in self-harm. Memes and their real-world consequences must be discussed as social media pervades daily life.

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Introduction

When asking friends what they associated with social media, their answers included: using social media like Instagram or TikTok, people, and insecurity and comparison resulting from social media use, among other things. However, the first thing that comes to mind when I think about social media is internet memes. It seems that every time I open the Instagram application on my phone, the first post I see is from a meme account that I am following.[1] As with many others, memes encompass the forefront of many social media users' digital experiences. Memes serve as a modern form of communication that must be analyzed and prioritized within media studies, since memes are so omnipresent within our online and offline cultures. Memes have been defined as:

> "emerging multimodal constructions relying as much on image as on text, and apportioning roles to images much like constructional slots...The popularity of memes, forming series and cycles of iterations and remixes, and their role in establishing and maintaining discourse communities seems to be driven by a need to express and reconstrue viewpoints, often starting from ideas, affects or stereotypes assumed to be intersubjectively shared with viewers, whose responses they solicit" (Dancygier et al., 2017).

Although memes can be thought about in many different ways and looked at through various lenses, internet memes deviate from the traditional conceptions of memes highlighted in Dancygier's excerpt in their purpose for remixing and replication. Internet memes can exist as artistic expressions of their creators. Memes allow for content creators to share their artistic graphic design skills. They can convey many viewpoints through an accessible guise of humor

[1] This might be saying more about me than social media itself.

on free social media platforms. They also allow for creators to distribute political information through humor and graphic design in a way that is visually appealing and easily circuitable.

The introduction of internet memes into popular culture and online social media usage has proven to be points of both connection and contention. The development of niche memes has allowed for communities to form surrounding these newfound niches. These newly-formed communities form ethnographies through their meme creation and distribution, archiving the specific values or characterizations of their group online. Some communities exist through memes that mock other outside groups, deeming the content other groups produce as cringeworthy. For example, the Instagram user @facebookshirts and their 103,000 followers all come together to poke fun at horribly specific shirts that validate some aspects of peoples' identities. These identities include professions, being wives/husbands, being born within a specific birth month, and other things that might not really need any validation from a shirt at all. Their post from March 11th, 2021 includes a photo of a hooded sweatshirt, which states “JULY GIRL. I am who I am. I have ***Tattoos***, PRETTY ***eyes*** <3, THICK THIGHS, and cuss too much. I am living my best life. Your approval isn’t needed” (Appendix A). Communities are, thus, able to form over their shared senses of humor and collective second-hand embarrassment from, in this example, cringey shirts that point someone out to be needing extra validation over something not even special about them.

Other communities have formed around memes that bring commentary about mental health to spaces within social media, reducing the long-lived stigma surrounding various mental illnesses. I consider myself a part of this community, as most of the admins of the meme accounts I follow are severely mentally ill with disorders like Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and are not afraid to make it

known through their content. For some memes, it is difficult to distinguish between commentary on mental illness and personal public processing through trauma that others may be able relate to. One of my favorite Instagram meme accounts that blurs the lines between destigmatizing the ugly, traumatic parts of life and mental illness is @ghosted1996. Haley Byam, the admin and creative soul behind this meme account, recounts their personal experiences surrounding their mental health. Byam creates meme masterpieces that are both thought-provoking and wildly funny. One of my favorite memes of theirs includes a pink gradient background with an overlay of text: "can ur girl go from thinking she is god and destroying everything she loves ...to feeling feeling like she has dementia and being completely empty inside over and over again until she dies" in an effort to depict living through the episodes of depression and mania of a Bipolar Disorder diagnosis (Appendix B). Byam turns the ugly realities of Bipolar Disorder into a relatable and humorous, visually-engaging post without glorifying or romanticizing the mental illness simultaneously. It is through this meme format that Byam adds to an existing community of memers sharing their unique perspectives and experiences throughout their mental health journeys. Memers like Byam create a new space for the creation, distribution and archiving of memes discussing mental health, which results in an ethnographical community of mental health memes that creators and consumers can both become a part of.

The purpose of this thesis is to highlight the interactions between humanity, young people in particular, and the digital sphere in which memes fall. In Chapter One, the topic of memes serving as propaganda for impressionable populations becoming indoctrinated into alt-right ideologies through certain ethnographies will be analyzed. Messages conveyed through media and memes that specifically serve as incel propaganda are examined through content analyses of Disney's 1991 film *Beauty and the Beast* and Arthur Jones's 2020 film *Feels Good Man.* Meme

samples from incel forums are also analyzed in an effort to familiarize incels' ideologies, ways of thinking, and existing schemas that are projected onto the general population. It is important to analyze how memes and other forms of media can serve as mind-molding propaganda in demographics who have not yet formed a strong sense-of-self or identity or may be insecure in their existing identities, like heterosexual, cisgender, white men, and how harmful ideologies can easily be circulated and facilitated through media portrayal of them.

Chapter Two will cover the phenomenon of cringeworthy content. This phenomenon rises out of collective embarrassment surrounding the resurfacing of content from days past, or from content created that exists outside of the bounds of what is considered normative in an embarrassing and/or awkward way. Gatekeepers and deciders of cringe content will be examined alongside factors that enable content to be read and constituted as cringe material. Specific meme formats will be analyzed in the curation of cringey videos by aforementioned gatekeepers in an effort to illustrate how the archiving of meme templates plus time and associations with different generations contribute to a meme being viewed as cringe.

The Third Chapter will discuss the transposition of memes relative to the formats in which they are conceived and shared to. A case study on TikTok will explain and contextualize the app's vital duet function and how its video format allows for new types of meme trends to emerge that may not have developed otherwise on other social media platforms. TikTok's unique feature of sound repurposing through giving content creators the ability to use other creators' original sounds also allows for the remix and reimagining of content, providing an avenue for a new meme format to appear on new social media platforms. The discussion will provide insight on the ways in which people engage with new forms of social media and make memes out of their unique functions.

Chapter Four analyzes the ethnography that has formed surrounding niche memes discussing mental health. Content analyses of memes by creators Haley Byam and Gabi Abrão are analyzed, specifically surrounding memes that discuss mental health disorders like Bipolar Disorder, and other mental illnesses, alongside memes that promote mindful lifestyles and ways of thinking. Using humor as a coping mechanism through creating and engaging with internet memes surrounding mental illness and traumas is discussed, with the possibilities for both positive and negative consequences from utilizing different types of humor as coping behavior. Lastly, the potential for negative side effects from discussing mental illness in schematic meme formats is analyzed to shed light on the toxic trend that surfaced on Tumblr regarding pro-ana content and self-harm imagery.

This thesis is not only constructive in better understanding these interactions and relationships, but necessary and important to uncover the ways in which the media we engage with on a daily basis potentially affects us. In a negative light, memes that promote ideologies and, thus, serve as propaganda for indoctrination into these ideologies, such as memes created by alt-right groups like incels, pose a dangerous threat to impressionable young people that can fall victim to the mind-molding tactics of indoctrination. Memes also have the capacity to pull people together through their collective shared traits and experiences, creating communities and digital ethnographies over the digital sphere. Since we are social creatures, the ways in which we can connect online adds a kind of enrichment to existing social scenes, especially now during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online communications through memes highlight important aspects of the human experience and are vital to understand with their increasing prevalence in the context of reality.

Chapter One:

Media and Propaganda: Exploration of Incel Induction

Young men who spend their days cooped up in their rooms in the dark typing away on their computers scrolling through Reddit and playing something like League of Legends on a dual monitor system could be described, in their own words, as “virgin gamers” or involuntary celibates (incels). These usually heterosexual men do not attract women because of their views that women owe them sex and love, which feeds the vicious and dangerous cycle of involuntary celibacy when women do not give them the love and sex they may think they “deserve.” Incels form such dangerous views surrounding women that if they do not get, what they believe is deserved, attention from women, they will go as far as to murder innocent women, seen in the Elliot Rodger murder case, who has now proliferated as a venerated figure within incel circles. If we believe in media and memes as pedagogical forces that influence thoughts and beliefs due to their prevalence in daily life, the ways in which incel rhetoric is portrayed in media focused toward those still developing could serve as indoctrination, especially to those who see themselves within these narratives.

Upon starting my research, I immediately looked to Reddit in order to gather information on incel communities and memes. I visited reddit.com/r/incel, and to my surprise, the subreddit had been banned due to violating Reddit’s content policy, specifically due to violations regarding violent content. In order to view incel content on platforms like Reddit, one must be somewhat familiar with the colloquial language invented within the community. Incels reference the 1999 film *The Matrix* (dir. Wachowski & Wachowski) within their colloquial dialogue. They take the film’s proposition of pills which allow the protagonist to escape the Matrix and universe in

which he lived. In the film, the red pill represented facing an uncomfortable truth, while the blue pill represented remaining in a blissful ignorant state. The incels poached this language and adapted the choices between two pills to their community and ideology. Within the incel community, the red pill represents men understanding that women hold higher privileges within society due to their ability to choose who to have sex with. This of course is rooted in the misogynistic stereotype of female promiscuity, and ironically gives women negative "inherent" qualities as they are unrealistically seen as having more privileges than men in the current patriarchal society. Incels who partake within the red pill ideology would view men who are not "awake" to the supposed realities that women are selfish, shallow, and hold higher status than men, as "blue pillers," referencing *The Matrix's* plot point. In order to view one of the available incel subreddits, /r/TheRedPill, the consumer must consent to viewing their "shocking or highly offensive" content (Appendix 1).

The incel mission is to convey men's oppression through villainous "misandry," yet their ideology exists in misogyny through their believed entitlement to sex from women. It is valid for men to feel upset with the patriarchal foundations that uphold unreachable expectations for all men to meet (i.e. the bone structure and other biological/genetic aspects incels site as the being lesser than other men and, thus, causing women to ignore them[2]). As Rajvi Desai (2019) states it:

> "Incels may blame their own physical appearance for not being able to attract women, but they also blame women for not being able to see past their physical appearance and for rejecting them. The root cause changes depends on who's doing the hating, but more often than not, incels believe it's the women — as a general population — whose shortsightedness makes incels the way they are."

[2] See "Incels" by ContraPoints on YouTube, 6:15.

However, the qualms these men may have with ultimately patriarchal structures do not warrant the hatred and violence they perpetrate toward women through their noxious ideology. This behavior, as other hatred, must be learned and passed on through validating conditioning. Upon investigating the spaces in which incels exist online, it is apparent that these spaces recruit members and maintain members within their community through propagandic measures. Out of many propaganda tactics, one of the most common is the use of memes and in-group/out-group influence.

In order to understand incel memes, one must be familiar with their colloquialisms and ideologies. In the incel's perception of the world, there exists a binary for men and a binary for women in which both groups exist. The male binary for men includes the Virgin and the Chad. The Virgins are all aligned with incels self-perception of themselves: the awkward, biologically lesser-thans of the world. Take the meme of the "The Virgin Walk" versus "The Chad Stride," for example (Appendix 2). This meme demonstrates the self-hatred incels harbor of themselves, and both the loathing and jealousy they feel of "successful" men that The Chad embodies. The Virgin walks with his head hung low, his gaze looking downward. His back is slouched, his body too rigid and too awkward to be seen as natural, cool, and collected. The Chad, from the perspective of The Virgin, is satirically perfect -- he has the power to divert oncoming traffic to forge his own path onwards, everyone around him has already been "brutalized into submission," and "his hands are always prepared to grab nearby fertile pussy," in true entitled alpha male fashion, every power the incel wishes he had. The captions and their extreme satire in this meme illustrate just how insecure The Virgin is, since he cannot "grab fertile pussy" or even attract it naturally. He cannot divert oncoming traffic; The Virgin is hit by the very cars that The Chad sends off-course.

The Virgin Walk versus The Chad Stride meme illustrates the in-group versus out-group ideology that incels have created amongst themselves. If young people not yet indoctrinated into the incel ideology browse incel sites like /r/TheRedPill or threads on 4chan, they may see memes such as The Virgin Walk versus The Chad Stride and see their insecurities personified into a character within this group. Basic social psychology principles have established that we tend to like others who resemble ourselves (Montoya et al., 2008). Studies of in-group favoritism have also been prolific within psychological research. Aboud (2003) studied children and the development and formation of their in-group and out-group biases. Findings concluded that children did not demonstrate in-group favoritism until around the age of five years old, indicating that cognitive prejudices had been internalized from their social environments (Aboud, 2003). By five, the children's in-group favoritism was strongly developed, reaching statistically significant levels. These findings suggest that through social conditioning, children will learn to favor those who look and act like them, since they are seen as the in-group. These trends found within psychological research may be able to be applied to the incel community and media that primes children to internalize their ideology. If a young child who has insecurities views himself existing within The Virgin archetype, he may begin to socially condition himself within the incel ideology, feeling a sense of belonging in the available archetype. Because he views himself within a creation both stemming from incel modes of thought and in which incels identify with, he may begin to view himself belonging to this in-group. By believing he has a place in this community based on his validation from memes and other content validating the incel ideology, this young person could develop in-group favoritism and only be influenced by an echo chamber going forward. With these possibilities in mind, memes and other forms of media can act as

mediums of ideological propaganda, converting impressionable and insecure youths into dangerous radical groups.

Other types of media also display incel rhetoric and ideology. Visual media like film and television have the power and ability to influence those who engage with them as well (Anderson et al., 2010). Seeing media that encourages sexual entitlement may lead to violence (Palma, 2019). Palma (2019) discusses the narrative of the 1991 Disney film *Beauty and Beast*, arguing that:

> "incels use fairy-tale logic to tell the story of their problem within the context of a gendered unhappiness script, drawing on evolutionary psychology and thereby constructing a world of innocent young lads oppressed by monstrous women. There are natural princes—the alpha males—and there are beta males who use manipulation or the lure of wealth to get women into bed. And then there are the incels, men whose physiognomy precludes alpha-male status and relegates them to the status of beasts without the hope of a Beauty" (Palma, 2019, p. 323).

If men cannot exist as the Prince Charmings of the world, they end up selfish, bitter, and mean, like the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast,* where the role of woman transforms from an object of desire to a moral life teacher and rescuer. When men are unable to save the passive woman from their measly existence, Disney media victimize men, seen in the Beast's character. They imply that "there is something fundamentally wrong with the victims--their hormones, psychological makeup, family environment…that accounts for their plight and their failure to" rise to the standards of Disney hypermasculinity (Mantsios, 2006, p. 513). By victimizing men who are selfish and narcissistic, media creators tell young boys watching the films that these character qualities are not fundamentally stemming from the individual and their disposition, but rather

upon circumstance and bitterness. Further, if characteristics are based rather on individual dispositions, *Beauty and the Beast* teaches young men that women will save them from themselves when they have been "betrayed, victimized, burdened by the society that surrounds it" or maybe even cursed by a witch, in the Beast's case. Belle, like many other Disney princesses, serves as a passive entity for the Beast to make his stride within the film (Jeffords, 1995, p. 165). She "saves him from the curse, for she will teach him all he needs to know in order to return to--or perhaps enter for the first time--humanity" (Jeffords, 1995, p. 168). This sends the message to men who are insecure and selfish with engrained entitlement that if the right woman comes along, she will fix everything for him and finally allow him to live a normal life with the woman, sex, and love that he "deserves." This is a dangerous message of entitlement and incel rhetoric that consumers can observe within popular mainstream media.

Gaston within *Beauty and the Beast* also furthers the incel narrative, acting as The Chad within the film that garners female attention and heightens the toxic masculinity complex. Gaston "serves both as the comic relief and plot motivator, he functions as well to contrast to the Beast" (Jeffords, 1995, p. 170). Gaston's over-the-top masculinity alludes to the idealized, sexualized male; everything that the Beast is not. The Bimbette[3] characters who represent the idealized version of physical beauty fawn over Gaston to illustrate the desirability of his form, whereas the Beast is made out to be ugly, undesirable, and perceived negatively by society. To young men who watch *Beauty and the Beast* and identify with the Beast, this sends the message that they are undesirable in society's view until they find women who will love them and change their ways. The dichotomous binary that Disney perpetuates with Gaston and the Beast teaches men watching that if they are not uber masculine and attracting women, they must rely on a

[3] I use this character title since none of the three characters are given a personal name or identity aside from being pretty and fawning over Gaston.

"special" woman who is different from the sex-driven Bimbettes, like Belle, to help them out of their selfishness and insecurity. Thus, the characters portrayed in *Beauty and the Beast* further the narrative that a broken, unmasculine man can be saved by a woman who is "not like other girls," putting this responsibility onto women rather than the men with problems themselves.

Despite the Bimbettes' unparalleled beauty, Gaston does not want them, since Gaston only has eyes for Belle throughout the film. The Bimbettes are the personification of the incel's Stacy, a hyperfeminine, attractive, and unattainable woman that only dates Chads (Jennings, 2018). Even these characters' title is offensive, alluding to the Bimbo stereotype of a woman who is obtuse, but makes up for this in her looks and the ways she puts out sexually. The fact that Gaston, the most attractive and sought-after man in the French village, does not give attention to the Bimbettes sends the message that Chads are the true alphas of society, which directly opposes the incel's claims that women supersede men in social status. Stacys are supposed to rhetorically be able to sleep with or date any guy, since the incel ideology views women as the party of agency, dictating whether or not a man can receive the love and sex he believes he is entitled to. Thus, the Chad ignoring the Bimbettes perpetuates the misogyny within the incel ideology on screen. The characters are presented as the peak of femininity, yet no one shows interest in them, not even Gaston who is theoretically in their "league." Even when women are at their most desirable, according to incel logic, there always exists room to disqualify their attributes. In a Stacy's case, she is too slutty and not respectable enough to be taken seriously. The Bimbettes fall into this category; they're too easy for Gaston. These types of character portrayals in media may condition viewers to engrain these harmful tropes within their own lines of thinking. While damaging for those socialized as women to see the dichotomy between the Bimbettes and Belle,

the real danger lies within the projection of these stereotypes upon those with privilege in patriarchal society: men.

When those who wield the most power in society internalize the toxic messages found within media and memes, the potential for inspiration, anger, and violence fester through the validation of insecurities and feelings of inferiority. Palma (2019) cites important literature for groups like the incels including F. Roger Devlin's essay "Sexual Utopia in Power." Within this essay, pseudoscientific explanations of women's statuses in society are discussed, in which their status resides above men's, since women utilize more discretion when choosing mates and tend to choose the alpha males, or those who supersede them. As Palma (2019) notes, Devlin writes of the building anger within lesser-ranking men which inevitably will surmount to a terrible display of violence and rage in which women should live in fear of (p. 329). This rage has indeed resulted in acts of violence, like the shooting at University of California Santa Barbara, executed by incel Elliot Rodger.

The real-life violence that ensues as a direct consequence of incel rhetoric also proliferates in digital spaces where incels can more easily hide behind anonymity. This violence is also perpetuated online, both within and outside of incel digital spaces. In response to the #MeToo movement of women coming forward about their experiences with sexual abuse, incels of course had their derogatory commentary to share. Rather than sympathize with the women coming forward and already facing criticism and hatred from others outlets, the incels categorized which women were 'rapeable' and 'unrapeable' based on their physical attractiveness, and of course personal opinion (Andreasen, 2020). Andreasen (2020) further unpacks these horrific statements, illuminating how even when women are coming forward sharing their own personal, painful stories, men still find ways to diminish survivors' plight and

blame them for men's violence inflicted upon them. The online forums in which this type of discourse takes place hosts both incels and other like-minded individuals with "dark" or "edgy" senses of humor, meaning humor that makes most people uncomfortable, like racist jokes or rape jokes. Rather than proudly own their bigotry and hateful opinions, people who can stomach making jokes about race, gender, sexuality, rape, etc. all hide behind the guise of dark humor. When called out by others for their hurtful and insensitive jokes, dark-humored individuals cowardly brush off accountability and then criticize others for not being able to receive the joke due to lack of sense of humor. Misogyny within incel spaces has also prompted further research on the humor utilized within incel circles. Results have shown that online humor spaces tend to rebrand sexism and harassment as acceptable due to their comedic conveyals, with the potential for the exclusion of women from these comedic spaces (Drackett et al., 2018). Thus, the online spaces in which this kind of humor is created also further isolates incels from others that may be sympathetic to their message, and depicts those who belong to out-groups as significantly divided and separate from their in-group.

Those who both consume and create edgy humor online transform their bigoted beliefs into memes online. Some psychological studies have been conducted in order to better understand the influence of these offensive types of memes. Duchscherer & Dovidio (2016) devised a study where white participants looked at derogatory memes depicting Asian people either in a context meant to come off as humorous or a serious context that did not hide the implicit bigotry against Asian people. Participants were also exposed to either one neutral comment or one comment which objected to the Asian stereotype portrayed in the meme. The objecter was either an Asian identifying commenter, or an unstated-race commenter. Results indicated that participants objected to the stereotypic memes more often when they were exposed

to an objection made by an unstated-race commenter, but not when an Asian commenter objected, suggesting the presence of advocates for marginalized groups is important in online social spaces (Duchscherer & Dovidio, 2016). Participants who did not see stereotyping as a negative quality did not object to the derogatory memes as much as participants who did not condone stereotyping. The participants who did not negatively view stereotyping were especially accepting when the derogatory meme possessed humorous qualities. Therefore, the outcome of a noncritical mindset toward dark and edgy humor may be prefaced by preexisting support of stereotyping (Duchscherer & Dovidio, 2016). These findings illustrate that offensive meme production and reception could be part of a circular feedback loop, where those who have preexisting stereotypes create memes, teach others to be accepting of these harmful stereotypes through the humorous and lighthearted context of memes, and then repeat the cycle over and over again. The results also indicate that these types of memes are not universally well-received, especially by those who do not exist within the in-group of alt-right groups like incels. Further research has illustrated that for people of color who have experienced racism through real life experiences, memes about race are more likely to relay feelings of racism and microaggressions (Williams et al., 2016). Thus, incel and other affiliated group memes do possess the ability to cause harm and violence upon the targets of their bigotry disguised as humor, and further divide them from out-groups.

Memes in alt-right men's spaces not only hold the capacity to elicit violence and microaggressions, but have also politically organized to vote the physical embodiment of violence and oppression into political office. To understand the implication that memes helped Donald Trump win the 2016 Presidential Election, it is vital to understand textual poaching. Henry Jenkins builds upon Michel de Certeau's idea of textual poaching: an "impertinent raid on

the literary preserve that takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 26). The concept of literary poaching can be applied to memes as well as to books and other media. Consumers of memes take only what is pleasurable or recognizable to the established audience and add upon it to cater more towards their own demographic. One of the most notorious memes to have ever been created is Pepe the Frog. Pepe began as an innocent depiction of stupid humor. The documentary *Feels Good Man* (dir. Jones, 2020) discusses the transition from the original source and intention of the Pepe the Frog meme to Pepe becoming a symbol of the alt-right manosphere in which incels fall under and claim space within. Pepe started out as a comic, created by Matt Furie, as an embodiment of the post-college kid, not really knowing what they're doing, just drinking and having fun. As internet memes began to surge in popularity following block text memes and rage comics, cartoon comics including Troll Face, Me Gusta, and Forever Alone that proliferated the Internet around 2010-2012, Pepe the Frog soon became somewhat of a mascot for the budding internet social sphere, and then later became poached by alt-right groups.

Within *Feels Good Man,* memetist and psychologist Dr. Susan Blackmore traces the origin of the term "meme" to the 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, written by Richard Dawkins. Blackmore summarizes how Dawkins theorizes biology being driven by a collection of genes while culture is driven by clusters of memes, information which is copied and imitated from person to person. The documentary ventures deep into the use of 4chan, a website created by a normal guy living in his mom's basement where users anonymously post status updates. The site's algorithm makes it so that the more interactions a post has, the higher up and more visible it is. Yes, there is some irony that exists with incels and other ideologically similar groups choosing 4chan as their main social media platform since the platform relies on interaction and

likes from groups who believe they are unlikeable. Frequent users of 4chan describe the communal environment as mutually suffering, and feeling like everyone is alone together, alienated from society in the same ways. Everyone who used the platform could relate to Pepe the Frog, an unemployed embodiment of failure, insecurity, and stagnancy. This ability to identify so strongly with a character who was already taking the internet by storm allowed the incels and other groups on 4chan to claim Pepe as their own. With this informal proclamation, differing renditions of Pepe were replicated and remixed in order to fit in with the incel ideology. When others continued using Pepe for other meme contexts, 4chan users became angry and began creating Pepe depicted with rage. The "others" mentioned above are what incels would call normies, those who have sex, are well socially adjusted, neurotypical, or a woman (Jones, 2020*).* This novel incarnation of Pepe exceptionally fit the incel ideology supported by Devlin's writings, in which beta male rage can be seen and felt building up until displays of terror and violence are the only outlet both acceptable and possible.

Incels and other 4chan users blur the lines between humor and violence in their meme productions and posts. The Elliot Rodger murder spree clearly demonstrates the terrible display of underlying brewing rage within incel communities. After Elliot Rodger completed suicide, 4chan memorialized him as a martyr for their cause. Memes including Rodger and Pepe were beginning to be produced, further integrating Pepe into the incel ideology, since Rodger became the new figurehead for inceldom. Rodger carried out the violence that so many incels wish they could. Rodger's murders and then suicide positioned him as a martyr for incels, dying to further their cause. Following the full integration of Pepe becoming the symbol of the incels and the 4chan forum, memes including Pepe started to become much more violent and bigoted, encompassing the ideologies of the groups who had claimed him. Pepe soon became pictured as

a Nazi, a Confederate, and pictured with various guns, among other bigoted tropes and stereotypes (Appendices 4-7). When these images of Pepe received well-deserved backlash, incels on 4chan could always play off the images as jokes coded in irony. With accountability for the insensitivity depicted in these new Pepe portrayals out of the question, incels could not see how the images and alignment of Pepe with their group incited violence, and then embodied violence within the novel images of Pepe enforcing violence created through the memes. But it's just a drawing of a frog, right? So who really cares?[4]

When Donald Trump announced his presidential campaign for the 2016 Presidential Election, 4chan users saw parallels between his rhetoric and their own ideology including white nationalism, racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, etc (Jones, 2020). For those who were not previously knowledgeable about political issues, posting memes about Trump and the very popular Pepe on 4chan allowed a direct line to appear in which 4chan users were directed into voting for Trump and adopting his ideology, if they had not held similar beliefs before already. It is here where we see Pepe the Frog both operating as a meme and as a method of propaganda. By becoming associated with Trump and his presidential campaign, Pepe the Frog was able to convert those who identified with Pepe into voting for Trump due to validation through rhetoric and identity. Trump clearly understood that these types of people on 4chan covered by *Feels Good Man* make up an important percentage of his fan base and supporters; his statement for the Proud Boys, another alt-right group, to stand by during one of the Presidential Debates in the 2020 election year illustrates his acknowledgment of this demographic. For groups like the incels to be seen and heard by someone in a position of authority, the external validation from such powerful forces must have certainly been powerful, since groups such as these form over their insecurities and feelings of insufficiency. This validation may have also included more potency

[4] Well I do, clearly!

due to possible back-lash from normies belonging to out-groups. Pepe the Frog and Trump displayed a future for incels in which their voices were heard, and the normies in the disdained out-groups' voices were silenced. Pepe the Frog and Donald Trump merged into one character, where Donald Trump even ended up tweeting himself depicted as Pepe (Appendix 8). The meme magic we witnessed within the recent history of Trump being elected can be boiled down to the simple use of propaganda in online forums. Trump's election and his ties to Pepe the Frog and, thus, alt-right groups illustrate the real-life consequences that the creation and distribution of memes can cause.

The polarization seen within the in-group of incels vs. the outgroup of so-called normies can also support the claim that Pepe and the alt-right groups that claimed ownership of him helped further divide the United States politically. Because Pepe was at first benign, his adaptation to alt-right groups was a huge step from a position of somewhat moral neutrality to a side of existing extreme ideology. Incel ideology itself is extremely polarizing as well; it seems as though incels view the world through a clear binary with little gray area, even using biological justification for said binaries. By using such justifications, it forces those who identify with the incel ideology to procure a state of learned helplessness, in which they become stuck in their resentment and lamentation. As Natalie Wynn, known as ContraPoints on YouTube, discusses in her video essay on incels, she illuminates the ways in which incels attribute their failures and shortcomings to differences in metaphysicalities like bone structure. She sums up the incel ideology with her analogy of blaming the inadequacies of an incel's life on the skull, and unmalleable and always present object similar in method to how bigots project forceful unchallengeable stereotypes upon marginalized groups (Wynn, 2018, 6:00). Thus, once the polarization of the Pepe the Frog meme occurred, there was little to no way to come back from it.

The associations that have been made due to Pepe being morphed into a Nazi and (arguably the anti-christ) as Donald Trump have made Pepe untouchable by any other group, since no one outside of these alt-right groups wante to be associated with them. Incels not only close themselves off from any reform or help, but they also make it seem impossible for content stemming from their ideology to ever be accepted by out-groups again. However, the Anti-Defamation League has launched a campaign, #SavePepe, with the original creator of Pepe, Matt Furie, in order to reclaim him as a meme of innocence more in line with the comic's original intent (ADL, 2016). Furie intends to create more comics with Pepe in the original light he was meant to exist within, although it seems the stains that the alt-right have left upon Pepe are deeper than surface-level.

With their ridiculous colloquialisms and antiquated ideology, it is no surprise that incels have gained the attention of many critics and researchers. However ridiculous they may be, with the dangers of their ideology that have already manifested in murder and other crimes, it is imperative to investigate incels and other like-minded groups and their potential effects. Content produced by incels has the potential to influence young minds, seen in ideologically similar children's media like Disney's *Beauty and the Beast.* Films and other media that teach male children that their insecurities are valiant causes to do others emotional and/or physical harm may prime them to be more accepting of other similar ideologies when encountered, like on 4chan, for example. This may be especially true if the media consumer shares many personal similarities and sentiments with incel ideology. Power also lies within a strong in-group bias and favoritism, power strong enough to convert the meaning of the benign, neutral Pepe the Frog into an alt-right symbol of hatred and bigotry. Through textual meme poaching, Pepe transformed from a lovable comic character to a hated symbol of bigotry that incels could initially see

themselves validated within. Through the poaching and polarization of Pepe, incels and other alt-right groups used the popularization of memes on the internet to align themselves with authoritative figure heads like Trump, pulling others into politics who had not previously been involved or interested in them due to shared ideologies and validation of the self. It is in this way that memes and other media serve as forces of propaganda, furthering the agenda of extremist groups who previously and insidiously hid amongst the shadows, their monstrous rage and hatred brewing within.

Chapter Two:

"That's Cringe:" Meme Formation from Collective Secondhand Embarrassment

The rise of internet stardom through various social media platforms has allowed many content creators and comedians to cultivate their own fan bases and careers through internet posting. Among these comedians are Cody Kolodziejzyk (Cody Ko) and Noel Miller, making their initial fame through the short-lived but pop-culturally iconic app Vine. Their Vines primarily featured humorous quips and commentary on viral trends on the app. When the app shut down in 2016, famous creators on the app looked for other social media platforms to transfer their content creation to. Some Vine content creators became Instagram influencers, famous musicians, like Shawn Mendes, and others took to Vine's older, more successful cousin YouTube. Cody and Noel were among the creators who switched their base to YouTube, continuing their funny, light-hearted videos. Cody Ko and Noel Miller exist independently, creating unique solo videos for their own channels. However, the two YouTubers jointly created a popular series for their fans who followed them over to YouTube from Vine, titled "That's Cringe." The pair come together occasionally for humorous commentary on videos that inspire a unique phenomenon among viewers: collective embarrassment, or cringe, named after the feeling of physically cringing from secondhand embarrassment. The videos reviewed are usually from the past where the behaviors and dialogue may have been funny or acceptable at one point in time, but have aged poorly where trends have died out or become associated with an embarrassing time period in the collective generation. Cringe content reviewed by Cody and Noel could also be from the current time period in which it is reviewed, but the producers of the original content are not socially competent or fitting the same humor that Cody and Noel inspire, which then renders the content as cringeworthy.

Cody and Noel's series "That's Cringe" features many of their most popular videos, including their video reviewing various YouTube videos from another channel titled Girl Defined Ministries (GDM). GDM is a YouTube channel featuring "two sisters striving to be God-defined girls in a culture-defined world," according to their "About" page. These sisters, Bethany and Kristen, make videos about navigating life as a "Godly" woman, including advice on Christian dating, sexual sin, modesty, etc. The "That's Cringe" video which covers GDM has garnered over twenty-five million views, and for good reason, too. Cody and Noel's commentary about GDM is not only funny and thought-provoking, since GDM's videos bring up controversial topics regarding sexual repression and shame surrounding sexual expression, slut-shaming those who have sex outside of marriage in a similar vain to incels slut-shaming for not sleeping with them. What GDM and incels have in common is shaming and shunning men and women who act against their ideas of hegemony. Their ideas of hegemony are very different, but the same result ensues from their close-mindedness: ostracising certain groups of people into set schemas based on hegemonies. As I have discussed in Chapter One, incels group certain men and women into Chads/Virgins and Beckys/Stacys. GDM similarly categorizes "undatable" men into categories with condescending titles: Mr. Struggle, as in struggling with pornography and punctality; Mr. Pressure, a man who suggests doing things outside of prescribed new-age Christian ideology, and Mr. Obsessed who cares about his significant other more than he cares about God. While non-men criticizing men for "character flaws" is something I, too, take part in, I view these labels as derogatory, especially Mr. Struggle, since his problems are likely out of his control. These typologies box men into harmful stereotypes, while creating an idealized standard that many men cannot achieve.

The categories of men used by GDM become a meme format within themselves, similar to the schemas that incels form with men and women. With the formation of these typologies, memes of the subject matter are able to emerge. With incels, people have created memes taking Chads, Stacys, etc. into their own hands, mocking incels and their ideologies. Within Cody and Noel's "That's Cringe" review video discussing GDM, they take the schemas GDM have created as a result of their evangelical Christian faith and make not only a spectacle out of them, but also a meme out of them as well. Mr. Struggle and the other labels mentioned by GDM are taken apart analytically by both Cody and Noel, and ridiculed for their ridiculousness and callousness. However, we must also address how Cody and Noel's fanbase and viewers would likely not align with the Christian extremism put forth by GDM. Cody and Noel's videos may not even be recommended to the audiences who watch GDM videos in earnest due to YouTube's algorithm and its resulting video recommendations. The ideologies presented by GDM are so offbeat to Cody and Noel's viewers, or others that the YouTube algorithm thinks would like their content, that the points GDM try to make in their videos are framed as cringeworthy. This "That's Cringe" video includes an example of cringe content that exists within the era it is being reviewed in and becomes cringeworthy due to its association with a group of people who are not necessarily "with the times." This newfound meme format allows for certain communities to come together to critique content from other ethnographies of people.

The analysis of cringeworthy content, whether created in the current context or older content that did not age well, begs the question of what makes something cringeworthy and what stands the test of time? Also, who are the gatekeepers of cringe content? Who decides when and what memes are regarded as the best and worst of the worst? I believe the gatekeepers of memes are Gen Z interacting with social media, with social media algorithms allowing for trends to die

out quickly. I have found through my own personal use of Twitter that trends and meme formats often emerge on Twitter in the current context of the 2020s. This of course is subject to change throughout the upcoming years, especially with the rise of TikTok and new social media platforms. Algorithms on Twitter that promote posts with the most engagement are likely to hasten the pace of meme trends and formats, as one format becomes less popular and another becomes increasingly popular in creation and engagement with Twitter users. Because of the fast-paced nature of most trends and meme formats, the younger age groups are more likely to stay on top of trends since they may be more familiar with how social media operate. While older trends fade into the background of social media, younger generations are on top of the new and improved humor emerging, while older humor becomes associated with cringeworthy content and formats.

The idea of cringeworthy content seems to heavily impact those of different generations, relating to internet memes and their development from first being present online. For those who are not as internet-savvy as younger generations, it may be more difficult to stay on top of the varying trends that come and go on each social media platform. The Baby Boomer age group, consisting of those born between 1945-1965, falls under the category of internet ineptitude, mostly utilizing Facebook above any other forms of social media. Boomer memes remain around the 2012 era of memes which include large block text and rely on somewhat mundane, overdone humor concepts. Memes have obviously moved past this format, embodying new formats and concepts that can relate to the time periods in which they are created. However, since Boomers are not necessarily as technologically proficient as younger generations that are constantly online, some continue to produce content that has been outgrown, overdone, and antiquated with

constantly evolving online trends. These kinds of memes are now seen as cringeworthy content for many reasons.

Firstly, the sheer format of these types of memes relates back to a time where many of the members in younger generations were in their own cringe phases of life. Middle schoolers, not really knowing who they are or how to be themselves, make many choices their later selves are not proud of (myself included). It is easy to look back on your most embarrassing memories when you were not sure of yourself or who you wanted to be and associate that entire period of your life as "cringe." Thus, anything occurring or that you liked when you were in this phase of your life may become guilty of being cringe simply due to association with the cringe period of your own life. For my generation, this included block text memes that boomers still regularly create and use. The inherent nature of social media also enables the archiving of content that may have been sensible in one time period, but falls short of cultural sensitivity throughout the tests of time. The resurfacing of content in later cultural contexts where greater sensitivities to political correctness is valued and expected further emphasizes the cringeworthy aspects of archived content when it resurfaces in a time period that renders it out of touch with the current trends and realities, relating to the concept of cringe content being out of touch with cultural norms of the general populous.

Secondly, Boomer block text memes have now become associated with the older generation. Because Boomers generally cannot use technology as well as younger generations who have grown up in the midst of bustling technological innovation, their use of technology and social media may be regarded as cringeworthy by younger people. Because Boomers seem to only have this conception of what a meme is or should be, they perpetuate these types of memes' association with themselves, rendering the content cringe and out of touch with technological

realities. This concept can also relate to social media platforms used. When comparing the demographics of different social media platforms, age becomes an important factor. According to the London School of Economics, 90% of Instagram users are under 35 years of age, and 17% of teenagers consider Instagram to be the most important social media platform ("Social Media Platforms and Demographics"). In comparison to Instagram usage, the highest percentage of Facebook users fall between the ages of 30 to 49 ("Social Media Fact Sheet"). The differences in age demographics that utilize each social media platform affects the content which gets posted and shared on each platform. Thus, the more one age group uses one social media platform, the more content that suits that demographic will prevail on that platform. Due to this phenomenon, Facebook has been somewhat unsuccessful amongst younger generations in its later years, as older demographics have taken over the social media platform and produced content that reflects their tastes and interests. This concept also relates to demographics outside of age, particularly through political ideology and other shared beliefs. For example, those who use 4chan likely align with those who share similar ideologies to alt-right groups encompassing the incels. Content that does not align within their beliefs may be viewed as cringe since it is out of touch with the primary belief systems in place.

Third, the format of the block text memes alone renders them dated in the new-age, Gen Z sense of humor. Things that were truly funny in 2012 need not be rewritten or reposted in 2021. Many things change in a decade, and humorous concepts are no exception. For example, the emergence of internet memes around 2012 that utilized block text formats alongside Rage Comics created a standard for memes to fall within during that time of internet content creation. Rage Comics were already documented to be dying a slow death in 2013, meaning that in 2021, their usage may be viewed as cringe since they have been considered a dead meme format for so

long (Morris, 2013). Thus, Boomer block text memes and other old meme formats like Rage Comics can be considered cringeworthy from many angles, mainly due to associations and general changes in tastes and what is considered to be humorous during relative time.

Deeming certain humor tropes and meme formats as cringe is not necessarily a bad thing. If anything, it has allowed for newer content to emerge in the name of irony, and creates a new point of humor where communities share collective secondhand embarrassment and get to laugh about older generations not being as technologically savvy as them. Post-modern, surreal meme accounts are some of my favorites that exist today on social media, not only for their insightful commentary through humor, but also because of the often simple formats of these memes. One of the most prolific, and now no longer existing, Instagram meme accounts that creates this style of meme was titled The Bottom Text, who eventually had a comedic podcast on Adult Swim. The show featured self-proclaimed meme artists that must complete memes in a live-setting in order to escape foreboding malevolent forces that will wreak havoc on them, should they fail to make memes during their show. The mere title of their show evokes the cringe of the block text Boomer meme format, since these memes typically exist with a top textual element and a bottom textual element with an image that wraps it all together. The name of this podcast pokes fun at the structure of these original memes which are now viewed as cringe, unless you are The Bottom Text making your own modern block text memes. Their memes build upon the rendering of this meme format as cringe; The Bottom Text elevated the format of this, in terms of internet trends, ancient meme and created a renewed interest in block text memes through irony and the humor that accompanies it. Some memes, for example, feature no cohesive joke or punchline. The punchline of ironic block text memes often rests within the actual format of the meme. Within meme-making apps or templates that include block text, there will be a “Top Text” and

"Bottom Text" box in which the meme creator would write in their original content. Within reformed block textual memes, creators often leave the preemptive text in on purpose where "Bottom Text" serves as part of the punchline. These types of memes operate especially well when they are poking fun at older generations, since boomers and less-technologically savvy people may accidentally leave in "Bottom Text" rather than overwriting it or deleting it altogether. Thus, ironic block text memes bring in generational separations within humor, simulated through an ironic meme format within itself.

There are many avenues that internet memes can take within their online presence to eventually be seen as cringe. It is important to consider the many ways in which memes can become cringe, and who is involved in gatekeeping the criteria for content to be considered as cringeworthy. Content can be seen as cringeworthy when it is off-beat from the general populace in ideology and/or spewing problematic, harmful information, like GDM's advice in their videos or incel groups and their beliefs. Content can also become cringe when it is examined out of its original context and time period in which it was made. As humor tropes change and cultural sensitivities transform with what is culturally relevant and what behaviors are accepted, memes and other content can become cringe by default as they are archived in the past as the world changes around them. Different demographics also influence memes and their relativity, due to circulation and associations with each group. The cringe phenomenon also allows for new content to be created as creators utilize irony and sarcasm to integrate new jokes out of old, cringey formats. Overall, there is much more to be done in researching how content becomes cringe, who decides what is cringe, and when something becomes cringe.

Chapter Three:

Meme Transposition Between Platforms

Memes exist as a form of media made to be repurposed and redesigned in order to fit each individual cause, group, or message. They exist as visual or textual templates to be remixed into novel formats that address the particular intellectual or humorous rhetoric of the new poster's community. In a way, memes having one or more of their original qualities being remixed remedy them into a transpositional form of media within themselves. Once altered from their original content, meme creators form novel simulations of original memes that cater more directly to their individual or in-group preferences. Memes inherently embody a simulative media format through their design. Meme poaching from community to community qualifies as one example of meme transposition from an original form to a simulated, catered form of interactive media. Memes also exist in a transpositional, simulative form when they shift from platform to platform. Rather than solely changing in content, memes also change in format when switching between social media platforms to better fit the features of the social media platform they are created within.

The idea that memes are altered depending on which platform they are posted on is not a novel concept or thought. In fact, it is rather intuitive that a meme's format would become dependent on whether it was posted on a textually-based social media platform or an image-based social media platform. The first types of memes that I can remember within my own social media use were the visually-based Rage Comics featuring different comic characters like the Forever Alone character, the Me Gusta character, and the Troll Face character. These comics fit the social media platforms that were available at the time, like iFunny which was

image-based. However, it is important to look at memes and understand them as conceptual content that can span across formats and platforms.

I have analyzed how memes utilizing the same formats can be transposed between age groups and internet usage familiarity, but memes can also be transposed to better fit the social media platform they are to be posted on, or shared on. Many of the memes I have seen posted on Instagram are screenshots of text-posts that originated on Tumblr, which have been screenshotted and put on Facebook, where the Instagram meme account screenshotted the screenshot of the original Tumblr text-post. This serves as an example of meme transposition between social media platforms. Tumblr, a blogging website, hosts multiple pathways for posting content on its platform, including text-posts. Facebook, another social media platform that hosts many avenues for internet content posting, allows for text-posts as well; however, some meme accounts may just screengrab whatever they come across and post with accreditation to the original creator rather than replicate the format and idea for themselves. It is acceptable to repost screengrabs of memes that other accounts have taken, so long as credit to the original creator is granted either with a watermark signature on the meme, a username or social media handle included with the post, or a mention of the creator within the new post(s)' caption.

To build upon this idea of meme transposition between social media platforms, the idea of meme transposition can be viewed in two ways. The first way includes the reposting of posts through different simulations of the original post (i.e. posting a screenshot from Tumblr onto Facebook). The meme is reconverted from its original format, whatever that may be, and then replicated through a series of simulative windows that are then shared onto different social media platforms. The second way that includes how each social media platform encourages the production of memes based on their foundational premises in a directional relationship.

Image-based social media platforms encourage image-based memes, text-based platforms encourage text-based memes, etc. With newer social media platforms emerging, it is important to note how these new developments have affected how memes are created and shared.

Examining TikTok is necessary in order to grasp how meme transposition and transformation occurs within newer social media platforms that envelop unique features. TikTok is one of the newest social media platforms to have gained overwhelming popularity and world-wide usage. The premise of this app is to share videos that are up to a minute long. The app also features various filters and interactive features that content creators can utilize in their TikToks. One of the most prominent and novel features unique to TikTok is the inclusion of communal sounds. Before TikTok was TikTok, the app started out under the name of Musical.ly, where the premise of the social media platform was to lip sync to popular songs. It was popular among teenage heartthrob types who did not have to be too creative in their content to garner views, sponsorships, etc. When Musical.ly later was rebranded as TikTok, some vital components of its previous form were still embodied in its structure. Popular videos on TikTok can now include videos where users repurpose another video's original sound and alter the visual context, paying homage to Musical.ly's premise of lip syncing unoriginal sound.

Additionally, another vital function of TikTok that sets them apart from other social media platforms is their duet feature. Content creators can duet another's video in a side-by-side panel visual. One of the most popular TikTok video types to circulate have been Point-of-View videos (POVs). POVs have been a common form of making TikToks amongst teenagers, especially those who are considered to be conventionally attractive. Teenage boys' POVS are the most common that I have seen, although I'm sure people of other gender identities and age demographics create POVs as well. The most important aspect of the POVs that should be

addressed is that most are created in earnest. The creator within the POV is aware of their conventional attractiveness and utilizes it in order to gain followers and internet fame. The interactive nature of POVs might pull in more viewers as media consumers are transported into the narrative of the video, or that young media consumers feel they are entering a parasocial relationship with the creator (Stever, 2011). This may especially be true of POVS where the creator is acting as a romantic partner.[5] These types of videos are important to analyze not only for their potential for media transportation and parasocial relationships, but also for their potential to become memes among those who do not form parasocial relationships with the creator or get transported into the proposed narrative.

Some TikTok users may come across these types of POVS and view them as cringe content. The people that may find this content cringe are likely of the same age-group of the original POV creator or older, those of sexualities that would not be attracted to the straight cis-male energy exuded from the romantic partner POV, and others who would view the uunderlying arrogance of the creator to make this type of video as cringe. While the latter-most point may ring especially true amongst those who engage with or prefer self-deprecating humor, the point is that many demographics could, and do, find POVs of this sort cringeworthy. Many have taken these feelings of cringe about these POVs and turned them into ironic humor through TikTok's duet function. These creators duet original POVs by adding contexts to the original videos that render them totally inappropriate and/or absurd. Through this action, a new meme format unique to TikTok has been created.

For example, one of my favorite TikToks of all time includes this formatting of creating an absurdity out of an original POV meant in earnest. The original creator, Devin Caherly, has

[5] More research investigating social media influencers and parasocial relationships must be conducted, especially with the rise in TikTok usage.

set the scene of a wedding, with him acting as the groom. The video begins with the groom looking off camera, presumably toward his groomsmen. A close-captioned quote from the presumed groomsmen off camera brings the groom's attention to the bride who is now starting to walk down the aisle. The groom's eyes well up with tears as he mouths "oh my god...she's beautiful" staring directly into the camera and the video watchers' eyes. Rather than duet this video acting as Devin Caherly's bride, the TikTok user @ceciliaaward decided to take a different route in their duet. Ceciliaaward's video appears on the left-hand side of Devin Caherly's so that both videos are visible at the same time. They both utilize the same sound as well, which is Christina Perry's love song "A Thousand Years." As soon as the groomsmen tell the groom that the bride has started her walk down the aisle, he turns his head to see ceciliaaward step out from behind a wall. This user is not dressed in something borrowed or something blue with a white train trailing behind them. Rather, we see legs wearing wedge heels step out, which we shortly later come to realize belong to a large, long white-bearded wizard, complete with his celestial pointed hat (Ceciliaaward, 2020). The user slowly and formally walks toward the camera not carrying a bouquet of flowers, but a bunch of bananas. Ceciliaaward's TikTok duet with Devin Caherly both indulges the original idea set forth by Caherly and mocks it simultaneously. In this way, TikToks enabled with the duet function offer a novel meme format where other creators can remix original content and shift its original meaning to better cater to their interests and audience. Seen in this case study, the POV's meaning changes from a man acting out a wedding and being awe-struck by his wife-to-be to an absurd portrayal of a man crying over the beauty of his wizard-to-be.

Other ways that TikTok enables novel meme formats include its function of sound. Within TikTok, original sounds can be saved and repurposed by other creators. Certain sounds

have become the sources of popular trends on TikTok as many creators have used them in their original forms, but remixed the video content to create an entirely different piece of media to consume. Oftentimes, trends encompass both sounds and filters creators can utilize in their videos. One of the more recent trends include a TikTok sound that recreates the “Hamsterdance Song" into a somewhat electronic and robotic version (KOCHRECORDS, 2009; Angi_randxm.xD, 2021). When the new cyber TikTok version of “Hamsterdance Song,” created or initially used by @angi_randxm.xD, is clicked on, the page that appears lists every public video that has been created utilizing the sound.

Scrolling through the multitude of videos, a clear pattern emerges, indicative of an existing trend utilizing a filter in tandem with this sound. The filter used depicts a psychedelic inspired clown overlay that covers the person in the video’s face, making them look as though they are wearing the paint on their face. As the video plays, the filter ripples through colors creating the psychedelic, trippy image. The clown imagery and filter is integral to the trend that accompanies this TikTok sound. The trend includes TikTok creators reminiscing over times in their lives where they felt embarrassed, stupid, or like they had been ousted for a behavior that makes them look badly, hence the fool energy referenced by the clown filter. For example, one of the most popular videos under this sound participating in this trend includes a small dog with the clown filter on its face and the close-captioned phrase, “when you instinctively bite a stranger’s kid at the park and the next day you’re at the vet,” implying the dog would be getting euthanized for biting the child (Ipanemma, 2021). Even famous musicians have caught wind of this trend. Charli XCX posted a TikTok using this sound and the psychedelic clown filter, including text that states, “Me at a meet and greet in 2018 thinking my fans wouldn’t make me sign a douche,” both referencing her largely queer fanbase and her feeling like a fool for thinking her fans would

never ask her to autograph a douche (Charlixcx, 2021). Thus, TikTok's feature that allows sounds to be repurposed creates opportunities for new trends to emerge that introduce a novel meme format within TikTok that may not have otherwise existed on other social media platforms. TikTok sounds allow for remixing and repurposing, involving individual input to create totally new pieces of content within a trend. In this way, TikTok sounds and filter combinations offer countless opportunities to create trends and form novel meme templates unique to the platform through these opportunities.

The transposition of memes spanning over social media platforms offers a unique opportunity for new media to formulate and circulate. Depending on the type of social media platform and which forms of media it emphasizes, memes and other content will be reflexive of that platform's media capabilities. TikTok, a relatively new social media platform has allowed for the transformation of memes due to its unique structure and features. The duet feature on videos has allowed for ironic responses to Point of View videos. Creators can add unique perspectives or create a mockery out of the original videos they are duetting, setting the precedent for a new meme template through the duet function. TikTok's feature that allows for sounds to be saved and repurposed in new videos also permits the localization of online trends involving the sound. Facial filters in tandem with specific sounds have created new trends that individuals can add their personal experiences and perspectives in order to remix and reimagine each trend. Through this remixing and reimagining, new meme formats are created that are exclusive to TikTok due to its unique features. Overall, meme formats can be specific to social media platforms, and new social media platforms have provided the opportunity for new meme formats to emerge.

Chapter Four:

Mental Health and Memes: Communal Bonding Over Shared Experience

The blossoming of varying genres of memes has also bred the creation of communities around these specific, niche genres. As earlier discussed, incel communities surrounding memes alongside communities forming surrounding cringe content and off-beat humor demonstrate examples of the ethnographies that have formed from meme creation and distribution. Another important ethnography to discuss within the birth and creation of meme communities lies within those who discuss mental health through internet memes. Some of the most popular meme accounts on Instagram are those whose admins discuss their own mental health problems in which social media consumers can relate to. It is important to analyze these types of memes since mental health has been stigmatized for so long in our contemporary history, and this meme typology can be viewed as a reclamation of mind, body, and self for mentally ill people. Memes that discuss mental health problems that are posted onto social media platforms destigmatize associations with mental health disorders and may help media consumers feel less alone in their own personal struggles. It is also important to recognize the potential for using humor as a coping mechanism, both for the creator of the meme and for the meme consumers.

One of the most influential meme accounts that discusses mental health is @ghosted1996 on Instagram, run by the administrator Haley Byam. Byam is very open about their mental health and the traumas they have endured throughout their life which translates into the content that they create. Alongside humor poking fun at men and their sexual inadequacies and capabilities to traumatize due to power imbalances, Byam also creates content about their specific mental illness diagnoses. One of my favorite memes of theirs includes a pink gradient background with an overlay of text: “can ur girl go from thinking she is god and destroying everything she loves

...to feeling feeling like she has dementia and being completely empty inside over and over again until she dies" in an effort to depict living through the episodes of depression and mania of Byam's Bipolar diagnosis (Appendix 2). Byam turns the ugly realities of Bipolar Disorder into a relatable and humorous, visually-engaging meme without glorifying or romanticizing the mental illness simultaneously. This balance can be quite intricate, and it is important to note where memes discussing mental health may romanticize certain aspects of mental illness that should not be fantasized about.

While ghosted1996 is a very prominent meme account that discusses mental health, Byam's meme account is most definitely not the *only* Instagram meme account that discusses mental health. Byam and their meme account is a part of a growing community of meme accounts that discuss mental health and personal struggles that others can relate to. Using a different strategy to catalogue what it is like to live as a human with fears and emotions on Earth, @sighswoon on Instagram, run by Gabi Abrão, got its start by posting mindful memes to encourage a more mindful approach to life and mental health. Mindfulness has been studied psychologically and has yielded many positive results on wellbeing and mental health. Meta analyses investigating the potential effects of mindfulness implementation have found links between mindfulness and increases in prosocial behavior (Donald et al., 2019). Another meta analysis concluded that mindfulness can improve affect insensitivity, meaning sensitivity to changes in emotional state and acute well-being (Kraemer et al., 2020). Mindfulness-based interventions to depressive episodes have also been shown to reduce episode severity (Franca, 2015). Investigating mindfulness in non-clinical settings, which is especially relevant when considering mindful memes that are most likely, to be if not solely, consumed in a non-clinical setting, another meta analysis concluded that mindfulness-based stress reduction has the potential

to facilitate a more positive psychological well-being (Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012). Through meta analyses, thus, mindfulness has been attributed with many positive correlational behaviors and effects. With these results in mind and applying them to mindful memes like those of Gabi Abrão, memes that create a positive and mindful experience for consumers may help them through their depressive episodes or may help them elevate their overall well-being. Creators of mindful memes may also get these benefits through entering a mindful headspace in order to produce such memes.

For example, Abrão's memes entail living with intention and being more present in the daily happenings of life, embracing all of what life has to offer and understanding the fluidity that must entail. One of Abrão's coined phrases featured on her merch is "I am constantly shapeshifting, adapting, and evolving." On November 20, 2020, Abrão posted on @sighswoon a meme depicting the dead brain to galaxy brain pipeline, with the dead brain image paralleling text which is meant to come across as less elevated and less intelligent than the text paralleling the galaxy brain image which illustrates a sense of euphoria and enlightenment of life's truths. Abrão's meme shows "wow i've been spending so much time inside and isolated. I must be an introvert. Or maybe i don't relate to others?" next to the dead brain image. The next tier of the meme illustrates the in-between stage before reaching this enlightenment of thought, with the text: "wait woah i've been so social lately and actually enjoying it. Maybe i'm not an isolating introvert type like i thought? Maybe i really enjoy company? I should take a personality quiz." Which leads to the text paralleling the galaxy brain image of enlightenment: "I'm a non-fixed, ever-changing being full of varying conditions that come out at different times in my life, or even within a day. I am constantly adapting, shapeshifting, and evolving" (Appendix 9). In this meme, Abrão illustrates the mindful journey of emotional introspection and self-reflection which

eventually leads to the mindful realization and acknowledgement of the fluidity of the self. Through the creation of memes such as this mindful expression of a deeper understanding of the self, creators and consumers of memes like this may be able to reap the benefits of mindfulness practices.

While possible positive repercussions of mental health memes are apparent, the creation of memes discussing mental health may have negative consequences as well, as trends become popularized and others wish to become part of the trend by romanticizing the negative aspects that are displayed in these memes. Although internet memes discussing mental health can have the positive effect by forming communities and allowing processing and coping of traumas through humor, dark sides of memes regarding romanticization of mental health have also plagued the internet. An example of this mental illness romanticization can be seen in the use of Tumblr between 2012-2016. Around this time, bloggers who utilized Tumblr attempted to reduce the stigma associated with mental health disorders which in turn resulted in increased discussion surrounding mental health struggles. In a content analysis that investigated the kinds of visual content that surfaced and circulated on Tumblr, it was established that visual representations of self-harm and self-injury were prolific on the social media base (Seko & Lewis, 2018). Seko & Lewis (2018) also found in their content analysis that as time shifted in using Tumblr and that viewing depictions of self-harm became more stigmatized within itself, meme motifs surrounding mental health transitioned to conversations of feelings of hopelessness and other non-visual depictions. Within this example of the schematic non-humorous mental health meme conception, negative consequences of trends and memes regarding pathological mental health are revealed. While the trend recorded illustrates moving past visual depictions of self-harm, discussing emotional feelings of hopelessness and suicidal ideation may also be considered

self-harm for the posters, depending on their unique circumstances. Further, discussion of feelings of hopelessness may trigger others in the similar way that photographs of self-injury and self-harm have the ability to trigger those with self-harm coping mechanisms. The trend of this type of meme format on Tumblr may have been created by a community with positive intentions of recovery, but it may have manifested into romanticization of dangerous aspects of mental illness through the de-stigmatization process.

This phenomenon can be understood in a similar way to how incel discourse operates, in the circular direction of the ideology and philosophy that holds members down in a toxic place rather than help each other out through real support. With incel rhetoric, vulnerable members may join 4chan or incel subreddits looking for support through their feelings of loneliness and insecurity, but are met with insults that further validate these insecurities that keep them within the incel validation cycle of thought. With mental health memes and trends that appear on social media platforms, they may work similarly in this way. The trends may trigger visceral reactions in people who are trying to move past their traumas or recover from self injurious coping behaviors. Being triggered by thoughts and images such as the ones shared over Tumblr may hold people back in their personal progress if they are constantly bombarded with similar, triggering content that holds them back from moving on to a healthier mindset or healthier coping mechanisms.

Understanding internet memes as conceptions of humor posted online, it is important to analyze the general humorous aspect of memes in tandem with their subject matter. With memes that discuss mental health, the aspect of humor becomes integral to not only their delivery, but also to their comprehension. Intuitively, memes depicting struggles and experiences with mental health can be understood through utilizing humor as a coping mechanism through troubling

experiences and traumatic life events. In a study investigating the use of humor as a coping mechanism, it was found that “people's use of humor as a means of coping with stress is positively related to how enjoyable their social lives are and to how confident they feel when interacting with others” (Nezlek & Derks, 2001, p. 406). However, in the same study, there was no relationship found between using humor as a coping device and intimacy felt between people (Nezlek & Derks, 2001). Thus, using humor as a coping mechanism can be beneficial for those that employ it through their healing processes, but it may not help with feeling close to others through its usage. Although utilizing humor as a coping mechanism may not aid in intimacy, “people who use humor to cope may make light of their own problems, easing the burden experienced by others, and they may provide others with more palatable (more humorous and less serious) forms of support” (Nezlek & Derks, 2001, p. 406). This note emphasizes how those who use humor as a coping device for their own problems may provide others with forms of support. This may translate especially well over social media where there may be an existing lack of intimacy anyways since social interaction is greatly altered when online. For those that post memes guising their struggles and experiences that are deeply painful as humorous, this may help them through these problems, and also help support others who are struggling with the same problems.

However, the type of humor utilized as the coping mechanism for life stressors also affects the impact of its potential side effects and other relationships. Many psychological studies have investigated the potential effects that humor can have on psychological well-being, and most studies yield positive results. However, it is important to differentiate between the types of humor being used in order to cope with daily happenings and traumatic transpirations. Investigating self-enhancing and self-defeating humor, a psychological study revealed interesting

results about adaptive and maladaptive humorous coping strategies. The results of this study concluded that adaptive sense of humor utilization facilitated greater association with greater self-esteem, lower depression and anxiety levels, and more positive self-competency judgments (Kuiper et al., 2004). However, maladaptive components of humor were self-deprecating or self-defeating illustrated higher association with negative effects, such as lower senses of self-esteem, greater depression and anxiety, and reduced judgments of self-competence (Kuiper et al., 2004). This study presents empirical data on how different senses of humor affect using humor as a coping strategy. If one's sense of humor consists of mostly maladaptive employment, those who utilize humor as a coping mechanism may just be making their struggles through life worse.

Overall, it is important to understand how internet memes discussing mental health create an ethnography and support network of using humor as a coping mechanism, and how this translates into the digital sphere of life. Memes discussing mental illness have the ability for creators to share their experiences surrounding their mental health problems, like Haley Byam of ghosted1996 does with their memes discussing bipolar disorder. Using humor as a coping mechanism through memes may allow meme creators' struggles to be taken more lightly as they are more palatable, and allow for relatability among their audience(s). Making mindful memes like those of Gabi Abrão may also be a positive outlet for mental health struggles, since many meta analyses have found positive relationships between mindfulness and overall well-being. However, it is important to pay attention to the type of humor used within the coping behavior employed, since a self-deprecating sense of humor may just make things worse. Thus, it is important to further study the effects of making and consuming humorous internet memes relative to mental health, both for the creators and consumers of these memes.

Conclusion

Due to the prevalence of social media and the digital sphere infiltrating our daily lives, it is not only valuable, but imperative, to investigate the ways in which our engagement with online media affects quotidian life. There is a strong association, from my personal observations and immediate friends' observations, alongside existing scholastic literature on emergent internet memes, with using social media and engaging with internet meme content. With so much of life becoming encompassed by social media, engagement with said media is bound to have an affect on how people view the world and their beliefs. This can be seen in the creation of ethnographies surrounding different niches of internet memes.

Out of the earliest forms of internet memes spawned the creation of Pepe the Frog with the wide circulation of his comic and remixing through different internet communities. Pepe the Frog originated as a benign comic symbol of post college graduation unemployment slump but later was corrupted by the alt-right and turned into a Neo-Nazi figure. Many factors led to this transition, highlighted in the 2020 documentary *Feels Good Man* (dir. Arthur Jones). This documentary highlights the ways in which rejected men in society found solace within Pepe's character as the kid who still lives in his mom's basement scrolling through 4chan forums. Through this identification, Pepe began being rebranded and remediated as a symbol more in line with alt-right beliefs and ideology which many of these men also identified with. Further, the involuntary celibates (incels), a subgroup of alt-right ideology, also spread their dangerous rhetoric through their memes which young men with insecurities may relate to, becoming indoctrinated into this alt-right ideology. In this way, certain ethnographies form around the circulation of niche memes that validate aspects of identity in which people may not get validation from others normally.

Understanding the circulation of niche memes and their reception from outside groups provides insight into cultural norms developing in the digital sphere. When Pepe transitioned from the benign comic he started out as to a symbol of Neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideology, the use and circulation of Pepe became associated with these groups and, thus, became politically-incorrect and cringeworthy to use going forward. Content that is produced in one circle may not be well-received by other groups. Other groups that come across content generated by a group with different norms may deem this kind of content as cringeworthy content. Forms of content may be considered cringe if they exist outside of general societal expectations and norms and induce feelings of second-hand embarrassment because of this. For example, Cody Ko and Noel Miller's YouTube series "That's Cringe" highlights content that exists beyond the scope of social normalities which often incites a sense of secondhand embarrassment, or cringe. Cody and Noel both cover some of Girl Defined Ministries' videos where they spew conservative Evangelical rhetoric and shame women for having sexual attraction, needs, and pleasure. The content of their videos represents their niche interests and values but fares poorly outside of their circle which is then seen as cringeworthy. Differences in generations and internet familiarity may also affect how certain content is received. Content created by older generations like the Baby Boomers may be viewed as cringe by younger generations who are more up-to-date on internet culture and trends, included in meme format and meme content. Thus, the circulation of memes that do not fit in with the general contemporary consensus of normality become cringeworthy and mocked by people in out-groups.

The development of new social media platforms like TikTok also breeds innovation in new ways to create memes, conducive to the specific features of these new social media platforms. Memes and their formats are relative to the platforms they are being posted on.

Visually-based social media breed visually-based memes, text-based social media sites suggest text-based memes, etc., such as Instagram generating more visually-based memes while Tumblr hosts textual memes among its various posting formats. The semi-recent emergence and proliferation of TikTok has seen the remediation and remixing of memes in context with the video-based platform. Certain unique features of TikTok allow for the creation and wide distribution of novel meme formats, like the ability to reuse and repurpose sounds in conjunction with facial filters. The duet function of TikTok also allows for the repurposing of cringe content to bring forth its embarrassment-inducing qualities while simultaneously subduing them through absurdity. Thus, the creation of new social media platforms and their unique offerings and features allow for creativity in forming novel meme formats and meme content.

An important ethnography has formulated surrounding the creation of niche memes discussing mental health on Instagram. These memes entail the experiences of those suffering from mental illnesses like Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. These memes are important for providing support to those suffering from these mental illnesses and in finding community with others that may be able to relate to their experiences. Creating memes about personal mental illnesses allows content creators to utilize humor as a coping mechanism for these illnesses. However, it is also important to understand the types of humor employed within these memes and their potential effects on utilizing humor as a coping mechanism, since self-deprecating humor can actually have negative effects as a coping behavior. Some content creators on Instagram also create mindful memes which focus on being more present in everyday life. These memes may have the potential for positive effects according to many meta-analyses. Memes discussing mental health have the potential to perpetrate negative trends, like the toxic culture that emerged from Tumblr

potentially encouraging practices of self-harm. The implications of memes discussing mental health should be studied further, especially with the emergence of new forms of social media platforms like TikTok which are visually based and have the potential to circulate harmful content including self-injury or pro-ana motifs.

The reality of the present age entailing social media being increasingly more and more integrated into daily life alludes to younger demographics associating social media usage and being online with internet memes. Whether memes have positive or negative effects on us, their prevalence in the digital sphere online can manifest into real-world consequences like the violent insurrection of 2020 perpetuated by alt-right internet memes and self-harm from potentially triggering internet memes, which demand our attention. The newly formed ethnographies and communities that surround niche memes present an interesting effect that online communications through memes can provide. Because memes are so prevalent and available to us, it is imperative that we begin to try to understand how they have the potential to impact us and study these effects further.

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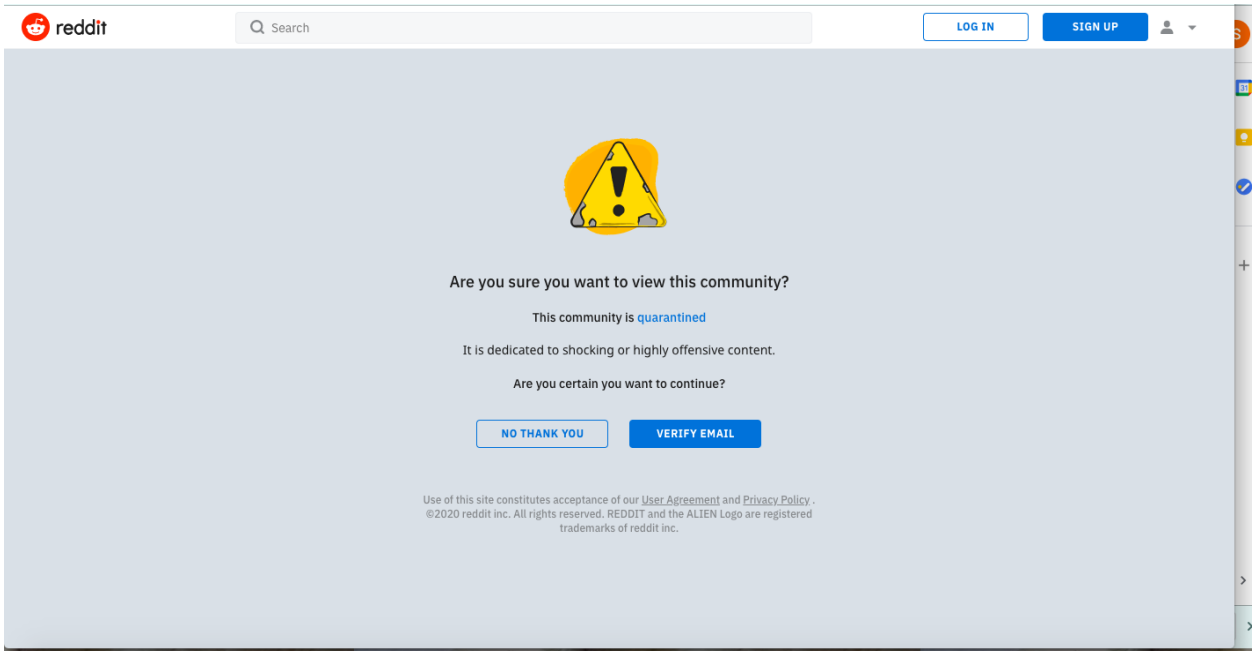
APPENDIX

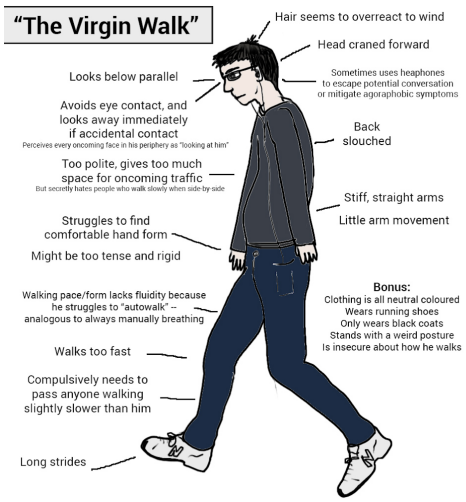
A) Facebookshirts post

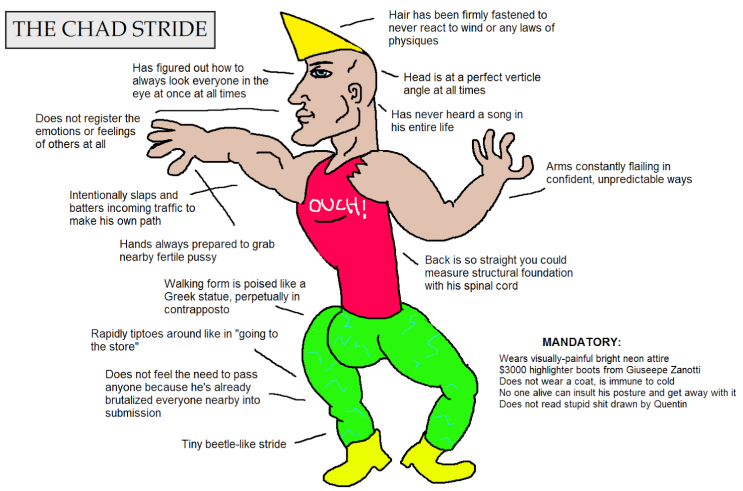
B) Ghosted1996 meme

1. /r/TheRedPill

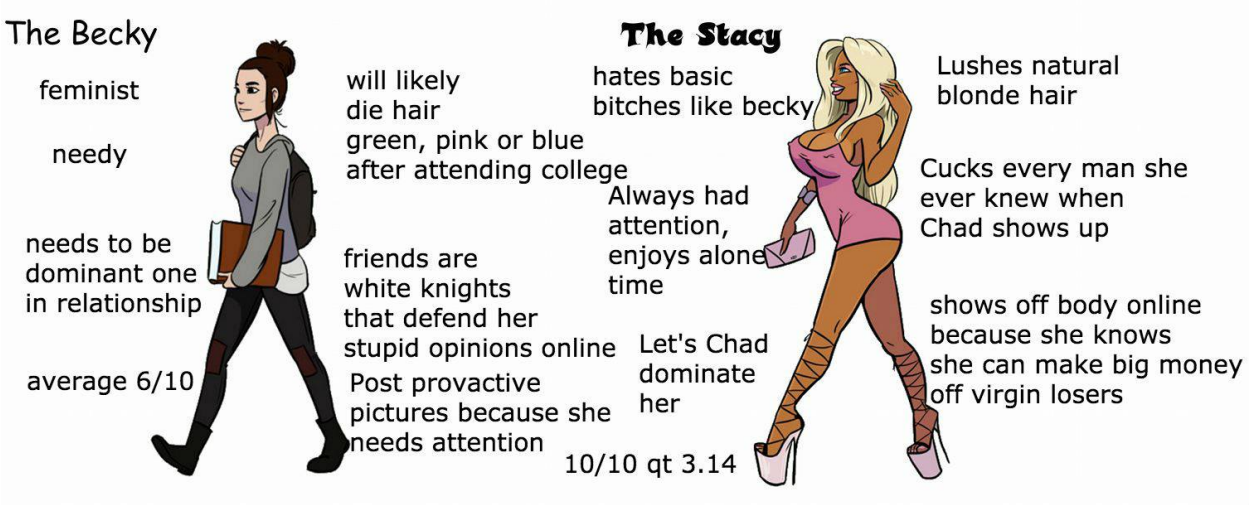


2. Virgin vs. Chad





3. Becky vs. Stacy



4. Nazi Pepe via Google Images.

5. Confederate Pepe

6. An example of a violent Pepe

7. Bigoted Versions of Pepe

8. Pepe Trump Hybrid

9. @sighswoon meme

SIGHSWOON
Posts
sighswoon
wow i've been spending so much time inside and isolated, i must be an introvert. or maybe i don't relate to others?
@sighswoon
wait woah i've been so social lately and actually enjoying it. maybe i'm not an isolating introvert type like i thought? maybe I really enjoy company? i should take a personality quiz.
i'm a non-fixed, ever-changing being full of varying conditions that come out at different times in my life, or even within a day. i am constantly adapting, shapeshifting, and evolving
Liked by and 12,974 others
sighswoon The first time that I internalized this mantra, I was attempting to define "what kind of woman I am". I was dating someone new, and found myself caught between intense... more
View all 84 comments
November 20, 2020