Memes and 4chan and haters, oh my! : rhetoric, identity, and online aggression

Erika M. Sparby

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ABSTRACT

MEMES AND 4CHAN AND HATERS, OH MY!
RHETORIC, IDENTITY, AND ONLINE AGGRESSION

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Northern Illinois University, 2017
Dr. Jessica Reyman, Director

This project takes a rhetorical approach to studying online aggression. Frequently, targets of aggression are told not to “feed the trolls,” or not to respond to aggressive content lest they fuel further aggressive acts. However, this tactic does not work because it blames targets for further aggressive acts—not the aggressor—and it silences discourse. This dissertation examines methods for resisting online aggression without amplifying it while opening pathways to constructive dialog online.

Each chapter studies a different popular locus of online aggression. The second chapter explores image macro memes and how they can perpetuate identity-based stereotypes; it offers counter-meming as a potential method for resisting memetic aggression. The third chapter takes two threads from 4chan’s /b/ board as case studies to show how identity rhetoric can shift discourses around transpeople in hostile spaces. The fourth chapter examines the “mean comments” six female YouTubers receive on their channels and offers the parodic reading mean comments video genre as means of subverting YouTube haters. The final chapter closes by presenting ways to teach methods for resisting online aggression in college and university writing courses and suggesting avenues for further research.
MEMES AND 4CHAN AND HATERS, OH MY!
RHETORIC, IDENTITY, AND ONLINE AGGRESSION

BY

ERIKA M. SPARBY
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
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Jessica Reyman
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DEDICATION

To all the women who have found themselves the targets of online aggression that challenges, marginalizes, or denigrates their identities.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: “DON’T FEED THE TROLLS”

Any quick Google search for key terms like “stories of online harassment,” “stories of trolling,” or “stories of cyberbullying” shows that there is no shortage of aggression on the Internet. Link after link reveals story after story of people dealing with—and sometimes committing suicide because of—online aggression, harassment, and cyberbullying; some sites even collect repositories of user stories (The top six, 2016; West, 2014). In particular, Lindy West’s (2014) Jezebel article elicits stories from users in the comments section. Some are stories of women being stalked online, or of teens being bullied by classmates. Some involve taunts and insults, while others are death and rape threats. No matter what the situation, targets of online abuse who seek help or tell someone else about their aggression often hear the same four words meant to provide them with a solution to their problem: “don’t feed the trolls,” or don’t respond lest you incite further aggression.

“Don’t feed the trolls” has become the go-to adage when confronted with online aggression. However, this tactic does not work. First, it blames targets for further aggressive acts, not the aggressors; second, trolls¹ and other online aggressors have set up a game that is impossible to win because no matter how you respond (or don’t) you are giving them what they want. If you ignore trolls, they have successfully shut down opportunities for productive

¹ In this paragraph, I equate trolling with other forms of harassment; however, I want to acknowledge that such conflation is dangerous and only done here in the service of highlighting the futility of the adage “don’t feed the trolls.” As Phillips (2015) and other scholars of online aggression have pointed out, trolling, which is the act of gaming someone to elicit an emotional response, is not to be confused with online aggression, which can include acts as serious as hate speech and threats.
discourse. If you respond, you give them the reaction they need to escalate the situation. But the alternative to “feeding” the trolls is silence. Rhetoric scholars like Cheryl Glenn (2004) have pointed to the rhetorical power behind silence. She explains that silence is not passive acceptance; instead, it can be a method for subverting and (re)claiming power. However, in situations involving online aggression—where speaking without inflicting further vitriol may not even be an option—silence holds little power. As such, silence is no longer an option. Instead, it seems imperative that we find a way to respond to trolls, harassers, and cyberbullies without “feeding” them. This dissertation examines memes, 4chan, and haters (oh my!) from a rhetorical perspective and posits methods for responding to cyberbullies, trolls, and haters without amplifying their aggression.

Despite efforts to prevent them, cyberbullying, trolling, and other online aggressions remain as prevalent now as ever before. Some research suggests that such hostile interactions may even be increasing. A 2014 McAfee study shows that rates of reporting online aggression rose from 27% in 2013 to 87% the following year (“Cyberbullying Triples,” 2014). Consumer Reports (“That Facebook friend,” 2011) states that around one million users were harassed on Facebook alone in 2011. These statistics could point to a couple of different things. The first is that with the rise of anti-cyberbullying sites and movements—and in the aftermath of mass digital harassment events like Gamergate—more victims of online abuse may be willing to step

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2 Online aggression in this study is used as a broad term that encompasses many kinds of negative digital behaviors, from playful trolling to insidious cyberbullying to outright death threats and sexual harassment. In general, when I use the term I am referring to the more hostile discourses and not to trolling.

3 Gamergate, started in August 2014, purported to be a campaign for video game journalism ethics, but this excuse only served as a thinly-veiled opportunity to harass and threaten top female video game developers and journalists, namely Zoë Quinn (independent developer), Brianna Wu (Giant Spacekat), and Anita Sarkeesian (Feminist Frequency). All three were doxxed (which means their personal information, such as addresses and phone numbers, was revealed in a public forum) and received death and rape threats via social media.
forward and report their harassment. However, such numbers seem to indicate that even if more victims are reporting, more online abusers also seem to be abusing. Another survey in 2014 reported that 28%—over one-quarter—of Americans self-disclose that they have engaged in trolling activities online (Gammon, 2014).

Anonymity and pseudonymity appear to be major factors in online aggression, with a large portion—45%—happening on chat-, message-, and image-boards and internet forums like Reddit and 4chan (Gammon, 2014). Further, although 45% of targets of online aggression knew their aggressors before the abusive incident (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006), 77% of Americans believe anonymity is the problem (Gammon, 2014). When users are allowed to post anonymously, they are more likely to engage in cyberbullying or trolling because such behaviors cannot be linked to their real-world identities; they can say and do as they please while experiencing virtually no repercussions. Joseph M. Reagle (2014) posits that the protection afforded by anonymity results in disinhibition, deindividuation (“a loss of a sense of self and social norms,” p. 94), and depersonalization (“a shift from a sense of self toward a group and its norms,” p. 97) online. The most common way these traits manifest is through online aggression.

Importantly, this dissertation reinforces the notion that online aggression is connected to gender and sexual identity. David Dadurka and Stacey Pigg (2011) remind us that such issues as sexism and racism are recapitulated in certain areas online; women and people of color are still not accepted into online communities the same way white men are. Part of this power dynamic is connected to the nature of Internet communities, many of which are “assumed to be white and male” (Miltner, 2014). Miltner (2014) explains, “white masculinity is the constructed centrality in many participatory collectives.” In other words, unless users are able to create individual profiles that can assert otherwise, members of online participatory collectives—be they
messageboards, chat forums, or other kinds of social media—are assumed to be white, male, and heterosexual. Thus, it is common to find that members of certain digital spaces tend to identify with a culturally dominant ideal of what it means to be a white heterosexual man.

As such, this dissertation builds on a long history of research in rhetoric, writing studies, digital humanities, technical communication, and communication studies that examine gendered hostility online. Each chapter focuses on gender for its main case studies and draws from specific works, but a few key pieces guide the project. As far back as the mid and late-90s, scholars have researched the implications of gendered hostility online. Kramarae and Taylor (1997) show how men are more verbal and open in online communication than women are because gender identity issues from the real world carry over into the virtual one. Peterson (1997) also found that women online are often the objects of sexual harassment and “other rude behaviors” (p. 359). Gurak (1997) devotes a chapter of *Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace* to exploring issues relating to “Gender in Cyberspace,” including dispelling the myth that women are able to participate online as equally as men have. Romano (1999) echoes this argument, noting that women often have difficulty communicating online because “the discursive environment itself” prevents them from feeling comfortable (p. 252). Gail E. Hawisher and Patricia A. Sullivan (1999) note that when women are denied input on visual representations of their bodies online, “old identities like those of the ‘pin-up girl’ or academic talking head are reproduced” (p. 288). Cynthia L. Selfe (1999a) comes to a similar conclusion, stating that although we think of the Internet as an “Un-Gendered Utopia” (p. 305), in reality it tends to rehash the same tired gendered narratives that are reflected in the offline world. This dissertation updates this research by offering more contemporary examples and providing methods for resisting these marginalizing discourses.
More recently, Emma Alice Jane (2014) and Dana Cloud (2009) have shown that online aggression is inextricably linked to gender identity. Women are often the target of sexual and violent online aggression: “issuing graphic rape and death threats [to women] has become a standard discursive move online” (Jane, 2014, p. 558). Because of online aggression’s strong ties to gender identity, this dissertation draws on feminist theories and methodologies. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality” to refer to the ways in which a person’s multifaceted identities can interact to result in marginalization or privilege. In other words, a person is never only a woman; she is always a combination of her many identities, such as woman and white and middle-class and heterosexual. And these identity factors interact to provide her with certain levels of both oppression and privilege. This dissertation recognizes that any identity is multifaceted and that few people are always absolutely privileged. In the study of memes, I acknowledge that, while many harmful memes are focused on women and people of color, even white heterosexual males can be the butt of a memetic joke. Similarly, although 4chan pretends to be underprivileged and downtrodden, their identities indicate that they enjoy certain privileges in the offline world. Identity, privilege, and marginalization are complex, and this dissertation both recognizes and seeks to untangle some of that complexity.

Key to this intersectionality is the notion that not only do social hierarchies tend to put men on top and other identities below, but also that within the category of “male” there are what RW Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005), and Emma Renold (2004) call “hegemonic masculinities” that dictate what kinds of males are highest on the social hierarchy. As such, not only are the gender identities of the women who often find themselves the victims of online abuse complex, but so too are the gender identities of the (mostly) males who perpetrate it. Online aggression seems to hinge on those who have power exercising it over those who do not,
but in reality this dissertation reveals that it is often perpetrated by those who perceive they have little power and feel threatened by the idea of someone else exercising some. This power play is illustrated in all three chapters. The male geeks in Chapter 2 feel they need to protect their subculture from female geeks, the beta males in Chapter 3 want to keep their space male-dominated, and the haters in Chapter 4 seek to silence women who want to speak in public. Each of these men feel their masculinity is threatened, so they turn to online aggression to defend it.

Feminist methodologies for online research also suggest that it is best practice to both alert subjects in online communities to the fact that they are currently under study—and in some cases to ask for consent to do so—and to show them the results of the study so they can verify or reject the claims and conclusions it makes (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 165). However, I have not and will not do that with the work in this dissertation. As this dissertation shows, the world of trolls, haters, and other online aggressors can be unforgiving, particularly when they have a static and named target. Those who stand against them open themselves up for potential cyberattacks, including doxing, online identity theft, and contacting family members, co-workers, or employers with often fabricated “incriminating” evidence. And, as a woman researcher, I would also be vulnerable to the typical rape and death threats women face in general social media spaces. The trolls will eventually discover that I am writing about them, especially once I begin to publish my work, and I may begin to see some retaliation. As such, I intend to maintain

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4 Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out that in the study of hegemonic masculinities, the role women play in shaping masculinity is often left out. Unfortunately, the same is true of this dissertation, which largely focuses on male perpetrators of online aggression, although with good reason. I acknowledge that there are female aggressors; however, they often adopt the anonymous mantle of hegemonic masculinity to carry out their aggression.

5 At 2016’s Conference on College Composition and Communication, I presented findings from the third chapter of this dissertation. An attendee sent out one tweet about the presentation, and it resulted in a response from a troll.
anonymity while working on this project for as long as possible in order protect myself from potential threats and cyberattacks.  

The findings in this dissertation are especially relevant to this cultural moment. While this dissertation was in progress, several digital media outlets—including NPR, Mic, and Popular Science, among others—closed their comments sections, in large part because of the hostile interactions that were happening there (Ellis, 2015; Jenson, 2016). At a time when digital hostility is prevalent, several websites have responded by opting to shut down discursive spaces rather than try to moderate aggressors in an attempt to maintain spaces for open dialog and debate. Simultaneously, the 2016 U.S. presidential election season and rhetoric surrounding President Trump’s campaign and victory (from both him and his supporters) echo that used by online aggressors in places like 4chan and other darker corners of the Internet. Finally, as we enter what many are calling the “post-truth era” or the “age of alternate facts,” it has become increasingly clear that online aggressors do not respond to simple facts or even well-reasoned logic; instead, users must find different methods for subverting and resisting online aggression.

This dissertation attempts to do just that. Chapter 2, “Meming and Counter-Meming: Remixing Digital Media to Challenge Gender Stereotypes,” examines image macro Internet memes, or remixable images that contain text. As this chapter shows, many of these image macro memes tap into existing ideologies to gain popularity and spread across the Internet. For the most

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6 And of course, nothing could happen. If my research remains in the academic world, there is no guarantee that trolls will find it. However, I do not intend to constrain my work to only academia. Instead, I look to Whitney Phillips, and her reactions to trolls on her blog as a paradigm for how to handle the haters.

7 Moderating comments on popular websites can be a huge drain of resources. The more comments an article attracts, the more expensive it is to moderate it; NPR frequently went over-budget when moderating comments.

8 Trump supporters (or those purporting to be so) use several of 4chan’s discursive terms (many of which will be discussed in Chapter 3) online. They have also turned the beloved meme Pepe into a fascist symbol.
part, this results in harmless jokes or activates public political conversations on a large scale. However, these memes can also exploit and normalize harmful identity stereotypes that perpetuate histories of marginalizing women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people. As such, it is important to find ways to subvert these damaging memes. Through a case study of Fake Geek Girl (also known as Idiot Nerd Girl, an image macro popularized in the early 2010s that implies all girls identifying as geeks or nerds are faking their affinity for male attention), this chapter posits counter-meming, or changing the text on existing image macro templates, as a possible method to resist memes that perpetuate harmful stereotypes. This chapter also examines the tangled implications of privacy and Internet memes and offers a rhetorical meme literacy that explains in part how certain memes gain popularity.

Chapter 3, “4chan and Transwomen: Using Identity Rhetoric to Open Trans-Friendly Discourse,” studies 4chan’s /b/ board, which is an imageboard known as a hotbed of marginalizing hostility online. This chapter opens with a detailed explanation of /b/’s technical design, ethos, and collective identity to show that behavior on this board is heavily influenced by all three. A case study of the Tits or GTFO phenomenon shows that hostile behavior on /b/ is more likely a reflection of the board’s technical design, ethos, and perceived collective identity than of its individual users’ identities. A second case study of a transwoman’s self-identification via constitutive rhetoric demonstrates that the collective identity—which purports to be a monolithic whole—breaks down when its own identity rhetoric is used against it. As such, this chapter shows that while we may vilify many online spaces that denigrate marginalized identities, the collective identities that drive them are fragile and can be ruptured; these ruptures have the potential to open constructive discourse in otherwise hostilely polarizing environments.
This chapter also questions the relative success of the transwoman’s rupture by examining how her use of identity rhetoric, while successfully opening a pathway to productive dialog, reinscribes the marginalization of her individual identity.

Chapter 4, “Reading Mean Comments: Using Parody to Subvert YouTube’s Haters,” examines hate speech on YouTube through a study of six popular female YouTube celebrities: JennaMarbles (Jenna Mourey), PsychoSoprano (Colleen Ballinger), MyHarto (Hannah Hart), IISuperwomanII (Lilly Singh), Grace Helbig, and Mamrie Hart. This chapter examines eight videos, quantifying the number and type of mean comment each YouTuber receives, showing that the term “mean comments” belies a hostile reception for female content creators that often focuses on sexualization and violence (sometimes simultaneously). Each YouTuber parodies this online aggression through the reading mean comments genre, which becomes a way for them to subvert mean comments and unify their fans. However, this chapter also acknowledges that the risk behind this kind of parody is that it may serve to normalize online aggression rather than subvert it. As such, those parodic attempts that clearly separate themselves from the original spirit of the mean comments—such as Jenna’s and Hannah’s—have the most potential to mobilize their fan communities against the haters.

The final chapter, “Learning to Feed the Trolls,” goes beyond analysis. This chapter offers pedagogical suggestions for how to incorporate pseudonymous and anonymous digital social media into a variety of college-level writing courses in meaningful ways. It argues that it is not only important to equip our students with the rhetorical tools to prevent and resist online aggression, but that it is also imperative that we—as teachers, scholars, and teacher-scholars—engage in some of these subversive methods as well. The chapter closes by suggesting that it may be our moral and ethical imperative to do so.
CHAPTER 2
MEMING AND COUNTER-MEMING: REMIXING DIGITAL MEDIA TO CHALLENGE GENDER STEREOTYPES

Introduction: What Is an Internet Meme?

Internet memes are a digital phenomenon that has become a locus for online aggression. Richard Dawkins coined “meme” in 1976 to refer to any aspect of human culture or behavior that propagates socially. In particular, the term denotes any cultural entity or thought that replicates itself—as genes do—in the minds of others. He explains, “Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (Dawkins, 1976, p. 192). Cole Stryker (2011) adds, “[R]eligion is a meme. Art is a meme. Every form of human expression is a meme” (p. 18). This early conception of memes leaves space to classify almost anything as a meme. However, with the rise of the Internet over the last two decades, the meaning behind “meme” has mutated to fit a digital context. When most non-experts or non-academics refer to memes, they mean Internet memes, or “piece[s] of content (e.g., a video, story, song, website, prank, trend, etc.) that achieved popularity primarily through word of mouth on the web” (Stryker, 2011, p. 21). This modern conception of memes tends to focus more on images than other kinds of content, but almost anything propagated online can qualify as a meme. This chapter focuses on image macro memes and their potential to shape discourse around marginalized identities.
Image macros are the most popular type of Internet meme. This style of meme was popularized in 2006 after a user on a Super Mario fan-site super-imposed a photo of his golden retriever puppy over a color wheel background and added text that gave facetiously unwise advice to another user on the site, telling him or her to “eat mushrooms / they made Mario grow” (‘Advice Dog,” 2008). The meme problematically asserts that, because mushrooms have a positive effect in a video game, they will have a similar effect in the real world, when in reality there are many kinds of mushroom—some harmless, some psychedelic, some poisonous—and so one should not just “eat mushrooms” unless they know for certain what their effects will be (Figure 1). But users on the site found hilarious the juxtaposition of the text with the puppy’s enthusiastic face and brightly-colored background. The result was Advice Dog, an image macro that achieved popularity after it made its way to 4chan and was remixed into new and different iterations that all shared one thing in common: an adorably excited puppy giving bad advice.

Figure 1. Advice Dog

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1 Super Mario is a series of games from Nintendo wherein one of the actions playable characters perform is finding and eating mushrooms to grow bigger, making the gameplay easier.
Other image macros that rose in Advice Dog’s wake share a couple of key format and stylistic characteristics. Many include an animal’s or person’s head and use a pinwheel background with varying shades of colors, but others include a full photo of a person with no pinwheel background. All image macro memes follow “a set of stylistic rules for adding text” (Davison, 2012, p. 127). The key feature is both the placement and characteristics of this text: there is some sort of introductory text on the top of the image, and then more text—usually the punchline—on the bottom. Philosoraptor is another example of a humorous image macro; this meme includes a drawing of a curious-looking raptor and includes text asking seemingly deep questions that generally rely on wordplay for humorous effect. Figure 2 asks “Wouldn’t it be ironic / to die in the living room?” The joke here relies on the recognition of a pun between “die” and “living room.” This kind of wit—common in image macro memes—points to Knobel and Lankshear’s (2007) meme criteria, two of which are “some element of humor” and “anomalous juxtapositions” (p. 209).

Figure 2. Philosoraptor
However, not all memes are innocently humorous. As Dadurka and Pigg (2011) note, “race, gender, class, sexuality, and power dynamics do not disappear in web spaces” (p. 10). Despite early claims that the Internet was a raceless and genderless—and therefore racism- and sexism-free—utopia, we of course know that identity markers like race, gender, and sexuality continue to exist and that racism, sexism, homophobia and other discriminatory practices continue to happen both in online spaces and in the digital texts created there. Consequently, although several memes center on relatively innocuous humor similar to that displayed in Advice Dog and Philosoraptor, many others hinge on negative stereotypes to gain a cheap laugh and reinforce hegemonic social hierarchies. Further, Milner argues that this kind of memetic antagonism against marginalized identities is part of what is called “the logic of lulz.” Lulz² is laughter had at another’s expense. A key aspect of its logic is that it “often antagonizes the core identity categories of race and gender, essentialising marginalized others” (Milner, 2013a, p. 64). These memes have the power to shape digital discourses around gender, race, ethnicity, and other identity markers.

There are many examples of popular memes that do this. Some memes—such as Successful Black Man and Ordinary Muslim Man—are complex in their negative portrayals. They appear on the surface to dismantle stereotypes surrounding race, ethnicity, and religion, but a closer look reveals that both reassert or even celebrate white privilege and social domination over African-Americans and Muslim-Americans. Both open with a line of text that makes stereotypical assumptions about each’s identity: Successful Black Man (Figure 3) begins with “I beat my wife and kids constantly,” which aligns African-Americans with violence, and Ordinary

² A pluralization and bastardization of the word “lol,” which stands for “laughing out loud.”
Muslim Man (Figure 4) opens with “I will blow up your family,” which taps into the stereotype that all Muslim-Americans are terrorists. However, both seem to reverse their assumptions in the closing lines: Successful Black Man plays board games with his family and is positioned as a member of a heterosexual middle-class family, and Ordinary Muslim Man is adept in Photoshop and willing to offer his expertise and reveals both his education and professional experience. The closing line works to defy the stereotype presented in the opening. Being a “successful” family man contrasts with being a violent domestic abuser, and being an “ordinary” professional contrasts with being a terrorist.

However, although the memes seem to defy stereotypes that characterize African Americans as violent and Muslim Americans as terrorists, they present a narrow scope of success and ordinariness grounded in socially dominant views. “Success” is defined in terms of heterosexual marriage, procreation, and moderate wealth, while “ordinary” is reinforced by education and sophisticated technological expertise. Both terms are framed to value the very
social hierarchy that produces negative stereotypes against African-Americans and Muslim-Americans by excluding other forms of “success” or “ordinariness” that may be valued by those communities. As such, both memes highlight that Successful Black Man and Ordinary Muslim Man require the adjectives “successful” and “ordinary” to be perceived as such. Speaking specifically of Successful Black Man, Milner (2013a) explains, “The name of the macro itself creates a racially-presumptuous association. If a black man is successful, he requires a modifier in front of his name to set him apart from a ‘normal’ black man. He’s novel enough to premise a joke” (p. 71). Just as “the title [of Successful Black Man] makes apparent invisible associations between blackness and a lack of ‘success’ (defined narrowly and materialistically)” (Milner, 2013a, p. 71), so too does Ordinary Muslim Man point out “invisible associations” between Muslim men and ordinariness. As Milner notes, the reader is “likely to see an ‘other’” in these memetic figures (Milner, 2013a, p. 71). The memes use negative stereotypes to further undermine marginalized identities.

Further, viewers laugh at these memes because of the mid-sentence line break that defies expectations. Even if a viewer knows that the black man is supposed to be “successful” or that the Muslim man is meant to be “ordinary,” the sudden shift from stereotype (“I beat my wife and kids constantly”) to defying the stereotype (“in Scrabble”) results in a joke that is funniest if the bottom line comes as a surprise to the viewer. In other words, the viewers who are likely to get the most enjoyment out of these memes are the ones who identify with racist and anti-Muslim sentiment. The racial and ethnic figures in Successful Black Man and Ordinary Muslim Man are not considered to be a social norm. They are reduced to “the exception that proves the rule” (Shifman, 2014b, p. 162). These memes do not defy stereotypes; they reinforce them by making
a joke out of the idea of an African-American or Muslim-American man who fits the socially dominant ideal of what it means to be “successful” or “ordinary.”

But, perhaps more importantly, these memes also shut down any opportunity for constructive discourse. These digital texts rarely exist on their own but within the context of a larger discourse that also reinforces identity marginalization. For example, comments on a Reddit thread titled “I miss Successful Black Man” largely focus on one thing: explaining why the meme is not racist. Every time someone tries to talk about how the meme has racist undertones or could be interpreted as racist, other users chime in to explain why it’s not. One user who self-identifies as a black man even admits that it plays on stereotypes, but asserts that “stereotypes [sic] are funny” (MrRagston, 2015). In a thread about Ordinary Muslim Man, the comments tend to be far more vitriolic. Many commenters express their hatred and bigotry, fueled by the notion that Muslims could share similar values to them—such as having and supporting families, raising children to be good global citizens, and being productive members of society—by reducing them only to their religious beliefs while averring that said beliefs make them less than human. Slizzard_73 (2016) states about Muslims, “I don’t respect people who hold stupid beliefs. Islam is a mother load [sic] of bad ideas and should be criticized.” Rather than dismantle negative stereotypes, Successful Black Man and Ordinary Muslim Man enhance them through downplaying the seriousness of racist stereotypes and inciting more intolerant discourse; they both also preclude any opportunity for constructive dialog.

This chapter builds to a case study of one particular meme—Fake Geek Girl—in order to offer counter-meming as a method for opening pathways to productive discourse. First, I describe how memes achieve widespread success and popularity online; then I examine memetic representations of gender to expose their problematic nature. Then, I explore Fake Geek Girl and
the counter-memes it spawned. Finally, I point toward the problematic identity appropriation behind both memes and counter-memes. The examples in this chapter not only show that memes and counter-memes have the capacity to create, reinforce, or deconstruct stereotypes, but also illustrate that we as digital rhetoric scholars and writing teachers have the responsibility to harness memetic capacity to create social change and open pathways for civil dialog online.

Research Methods and Data Attribution

Methods

Memes spread across the Internet quickly and are always on the move, often disappearing from one place and reappearing in another. Therefore, it is difficult to keep track of where memes originate and spread, what memes are popular at a given moment, and which ones have fallen out of favor. Thus, to determine which image macros to discuss in this chapter, I drew on my own knowledge of popular memes. As an avid Internet browser, I encounter dozens of memes a day. Some of them fall into the innocuous humor category, but a large number rely on stereotypes to get a cheap laugh. Examples of such memes are Successful Black Man, Ordinary Muslim Man, Fake Geek Girl, Scumbag Steve, and Over Attentive Girlfriend, among others I will discuss later.

I acknowledge that simply being aware that these memes exist is not enough to provide a basis for a study. Therefore, I cross-referenced my personal knowledge with Know Your Meme

3 Although it is important to note that my Internet browsing experience is unique to me. Google’s algorithms ensure that the content that shows up matches previous searches, and my networks and communities reflect my own interests and relationships. As such, there are many memes I discuss here that some readers may not be aware of or that belong to niche communities of which they are not part; likewise, there are many memes beyond the ones discussed here with which the reader may be familiar.
and Reddit. *Know Your Meme* is an online database of popular memes. It is a wiki that calls for user-submitted entries, but the administrators have the final say on which memes make it to their site and under which category. Memes are classified as confirmed (are or have been widespread), submitted (has not yet been reviewed), deadpooled (rejected), researching (under review), and popular (confirmed memes with high user interest). Most of the memes I reference in this chapter fall into the “confirmed” category, which means that the research team at *Know Your Meme* found them to have at some point been spread widely enough to be considered “viral,” even if they no longer fit that criteria. Here, I also found widespread memes that I was previously unaware of but that fit this study, such as Cool Chick Carol and Good Girl Gina.

I also checked Reddit to ascertain the memes’ current level of popularity. Most of the memes I discuss appear in r/AdviceAnimals—a general subreddit that posts and discusses image macro memes—and many of the memes that hinge on gender stereotypes are also discussed in r/TwoXChromosomes—a subreddit dedicated to providing a place for women to have meaningful discussions about things that are important to them. Through cross-referencing my personal knowledge of popular memes that rely on negative stereotypes and cultural discourses with *Know Your Meme* and Reddit, I have found a representative sample of image macros to analyze. The threads on Reddit have also provided me with context for the memes and discussions have allowed me to ascertain how the public interprets them.

**Data Attribution**

Memes rarely have a set authorship. In general, they are created anonymously; at most, the meme creator uses a pseudonym, but the alias almost never links directly to a real-world identity. Most memes begin their rise to popularity on 4chan—which supports almost-fully
anonymous messageboards—or Reddit—which only connects users to pseudonyms. Memes become popular when they travel to more accessible places like Imgur, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media spaces as well as offline media like t-shirts and news shows. Finally, once a meme loses its potency, it falls out of circulation and exists only on static webpages like Tumblr or archived Reddit threads.\(^4\) Because some of the memes I discuss below are no longer popular, I obtained illustrative examples of them in one of two ways: I either pulled them from Know Your Meme—which stores popular examples of most image macros—or found them in a Google Image search.

Once a meme becomes widespread, the explosion of remixes and imitations that follow in its wake can further obscure both the original version and its creator. Thus, tracing a meme back to its original author is difficult, to say the least. Even the experts at Know Your Meme have difficulty tracing some memes to their original date of creation or site of propagation. Thus, I will not post any author attribution with the meme images I use. It would be absolutely impractical to trace the origins of every meme I discuss. Some of the images I use display watermarks for sites like Meme Generator or ImgFlip. These labels merely denote which generator the meme creator used to pull the meme template; they do not serve as attribution. My decision to maintain the anonymity of these memes will also hold true to the spirit of image macros, which are meant to be shared and remixed on a global scale with no set owner. They are free, open, and deliberately composed for recomposition.

\(^4\) Warnick and Heineman (2012) cite WhatPort:80 when they describe the life cycle of a meme: from subculture, to related subcultures, to mainstream, to archive.
The Cultural Significance of Image Macro Memes

Clay Shirky (as cited in Stryker, 2011) argues that memes are valuable because they represent the creation of something, even if it is ultimately insignificant: “There’s a spectrum of creativity from mediocre to excellence, but there’s a gulf between doing nothing and doing something. And anyone who’s slapped a few words on a picture of their cat has already crossed that gulf… [E]ven a lolcat, one of the stupidest creative acts, is still a creative act” (p. 31). To Shirky, doing something is better than nothing. Internet memes are mundane texts and often represent the simplest of creative acts, but they are culturally significant for a number of reasons.

Some scholars have found that not all image macro memes rely on innocuous humor. Ryan Milner (2013c) and Stephanie Vie (2014) have pointed to memes’ potential for rhetorical power. Milner’s study on Occupy Wall Street memes looks at how users on all sides of the movement engaged with it through meming and counter-meming—and even what could be called counter-counter-meming. He argues that these memes are “a populist way to engage with public discourse” (Milner, 2013c, p. 2360). They lead to polyvocality in the public sphere because they act as a “common language” with which people can have discussions on a global scale (Milner, 2013b, p. 5). Similarly, Vie’s study of the Human Rights Campaign logo as digital activism, or “slacktivism,” on Facebook shows that memes provide a voice to the public. She studied how the logo was propagated and remixed on Facebook during and after the Marriage Equality event in late March 2013. Vie (2014) argues that the logo became a counter-meme against homosexual marriage bias: it “is an example of how even seemingly insignificant moves such as adopting or remixing a logo and displaying it online can serve to combat micro-aggressions, or the damaging results of everyday bias and discrimination against marginalized
groups.” The event and logo opposing the backlash preventing marriage equality was powerful because it was part of a larger “cultural ecology” of digital activism grounded in mundane, public discourse (Vie). Milner and Vie illustrate that much of the power memes hold stems from their universality: public audiences can consume and remix them uncritically and unreflectively.

Like Milner and Vie, Shifman (2014b) also acknowledges that memes can provide a platform for public expression, but she cautions that they can also continue traditions of silencing marginalized voices. She argues that memes “allow citizens to participate in public, collective actions, while maintaining their sense of individuality” (Shifman, 2014b, p. 129). However, if memes engage in damaging cultural assumptions, Shifman argues that they can be dangerous: “the constant flow of derogatory texts that relate to one specific photo of a group representative forefronts the very idea… of stereotyping as molding perceptions about groups into readymade ‘templates’” (Shifman, 2014a, p. 348). Similarly, Kate Miltner (2014) points out, “memes… have the power to co-opt and silence.” Memes that play with marginalized identities—such as Successful Black Man, Ordinary Muslim Man, and others—reinforce their negative cultural assumptions. Shifman (2014a) also points to the identities of the meme-makers: “Since these memes tend to reflect the socio-demographic background of meme creators (typically white, privileged young men), they commonly replicate well-entrenched hegemonic stereotypes” (p. 348). Jacqueline Vickery (2014) explains that memes have the potential to allow meme creators and viewers to create new kinds of digital discourse, but they often do not: “Participatory and remix culture allow users to challenge forms, transgress boundaries, and appropriate space. However, normative assumptions and hegemonic culture also work to bind the meme” (p. 323). Memes circulate within the public realm, so their memetic success necessarily hinges on their ability to tap into a social hegemony that reasserts normative privilege.
Memetic Production and Spread

Memes are paradoxically simultaneously sophisticated and unsophisticated. They have the potential to carry a substantial amount of social and cultural meaning and require creators to employ a complex meme literacy; however, the actual act of their production is relatively simple and primitive. A user can generate a meme quickly and with little to no training, but for that meme to see widespread success, it must do several key things: 1) it must establish identification with a wide variety of users, 2) it must be kairotic and relevant, 3) it must be able to be remixed, 4) it must establish strong rhetorical velocity, and 5) it must make intertextual inferences.\(^5\) This process is not linear; it is recursive and overlapping. Although the following discussion treats these five elements as distinct, they are intertwined. Their artificial separation in the section below serves only to highlight each one’s importance to achieving widespread popularity.

Memes and Identification

Shifman (2014b) outlines several attributes of memes, and, although she does not address it directly, rhetoric is key to this framework. The first is “a gradual propagation from individuals to society” (Shifman, 2014b, p. 18). In other words, more individuals than only the creator and others in his/her immediate network must notice and appreciate a meme. Therefore, most memes establish some kind of identification with viewers to maximize their appeal and draw the widest possible audience. Warnick and Heineman (2012) explain that identification in digital spaces “works through association: the rhetor attempts to associate some substantive part of himself or herself with the same part in the members of their audience. The result, if effective, is that an

\(^5\) This list builds on the three attributes of memes that Shifman (2014b) details in *Memes in Digital Culture.*
audience begins to ‘feel’ as the rhetor feels or to ‘see the world’ from the perspective of the speaker” (p. 98). Some of the most effective memes tend to link identities across cultures, backgrounds, and universal experiences.

The Rage Faces provide an example of successful identification with an audience. Originating on 4chan in 2008, these images portray an ever-growing series of crudely drawn people reacting to various things (“Rage Comics,” 2011). Although not all Rage Faces express rage, they are all so-named because of Rage Guy, the first one (Figure 5). The key feature of the Rage Faces is the facial expressions, which, while exaggerated, are meant to represent universal human emotion. Figures 5-7 are only three examples of dozens (possibly hundreds) of rage faces that cover nearly every emotion from anger to joy, happiness to despair, and even from feeling smart to feeling stupid. Figure 6, Cuteness Overload, represents someone who is overjoyed at the prospect of seeing something adorable, and Figure 7, one of many Lip Bite Faces (this one is titled “Pfftch”), expresses a failing attempt to hold in laughter. Often, these images are also juxtaposed with others to create a comic and tell a story.

The key feature of these memes’ spreadability and popularity is their capacity to establish identification. The Rage Faces are “interpreted by an audience who ascribes certain connotations to each meme” (du Preez and Lombard, 2014, p. 266): users see their facial expressions illustrated in a cartoonish and humorous manner. Phillips (2010) adds, “[M]emes spread… because something about a given image or phrase or video or whatever lines up with an already-established set of linguistic and cultural norms.” Rage Faces spread because they tap into universal human emotions with which almost everyone can relate. Rather than say how they feel, users can post an image that represents it for them.
Cynthia Lewis (2007) and Lynn Lewis (2012) also link memes and group identities through identification. Lewis (2007) explains, “[M]emes themselves both construct and are constructed by group identities through repeated performances” (p. 232). Certain groups identify with certain kinds of memes, as illustrated by the Dancing Man meme’s transformation from 4chan to Reddit to Twitter to Facebook. In February 2014, someone on 4chan posted an image of Sean O’Brien meant to body-shame and cyberbully him for dancing in public. The original post stated, “Spotted this specimen trying to dance the other week. He stopped when he saw us laughing.” (Figure 8). On 4chan, the Dancing Man meme was malicious. However, as it moved
through other online communicates, it evolved. On Reddit, it became a largely sympathetic meme where users commiserated with O’Brien and wished him well—although a few corners of the website engaged with the meme in a malevolent, 4chan-esque way. On Twitter, Dancing Man turned into a call for action against cyberbullying that resulted in over one-thousand women throwing O’Brien a party to which he was the sole male invitee. Finally, the meme made its way to Facebook as a *Buzzfeed* story that made for easy sharing among other members of a user’s network. As the meme traveled through each new community, Dancing Man mutated to fit its identity, thus revealing the cultural norms that drive each space: 4chan’s often antagonistic behavior, Reddit’s identity plasticity, Twitter’s global reach, and Facebook’s slacktivism. Phillips (2015) explains that memes are not “passive…. [They are] evolving content” (p. 145). Users constantly change memes’ meanings and adapt them to new audiences as they move through the Internet.

![Image](image-1.png)

**Figure 8. Dancing Man**

Lewis (2012) connects this memetic activity to digital identification. She argues that the repeated performance of certain memes results in recognition; the more a meme or style of meme
appears within a group of users, the more they recognize it. Lewis (2012) argues that this “recognition because of repeated performance” leads to group identification. Because memes are generally meant to incite laughter of some sort, they reveal a group’s shared sense of humor. The memes that appeal to a group speak volumes about their values—such as 4chan’s use of Dancing Man as a cruel meme versus Twitter’s use of it to bolster O’Brien and fight against body shaming.

Memes and Kairos

Memes are also kairotic and often react to real-world issues. In their studies of Occupy Wall Street memes and the Human Right Campaign logo on Facebook, Milner (2013c) and Vie (2014) each demonstrate the effectiveness of memes that tap into relevant and timely issues. A more recent example of kairotic memeticism involves the lampooning and defending of Kim Davis’s unlawful refusal to issue same-sex marriage certificates in Rowan County, Kentucky in 2015. Mere hours after the news broke that Davis was refusing to perform her legal and professional obligations, memes began to appear. Within a day, there were enough image macro memes to fill a Google Search page. Most memes ridiculed her: they either pointed to her hypocritical stance on marriage⁶ (Figure 9) or to the fact that regardless of her stance or previous marriages she was legally required to perform her professional duties. A rare few memes defended her⁷ (Figure 10). Today, Davis has fallen out of the limelight and the public has moved

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⁶ Davis cited religious tenets of traditional marriage as the reason she refused to issue the marriage certificates, but many meme creators exposed her own problematic marriage past, revealing that she was divorced and remarried several times and had children with each husband.

⁷ It is perhaps interesting to note that not only did fewer memes defend her, but of those that did an even smaller number conformed to the accepted format and style for image macro memes. Such an occurrence points to the potential for a study involving politics and meme creation.
on from this cultural event. As a result, no one is making new Kim Davis memes. Likewise, there are no new Occupy Wall Street memes and virtually no one still uses the Human Rights Campaign logo as their Facebook profile picture. The kairoticism of these memes has expired; they were only relevant for a brief period of time, so their memes no longer have an interested audience.

Internet Memes and Intertextuality

Shifman (2014b) explains that memes are also intertextual; they “often relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways” (p. 2). Lewis (2012) explains that memes “linger in intertextual traces” (p. 118); she discusses popular shows as examples of this memetic intertextuality, such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* that often reference current events, movies, or—particularly in the case of *Family Guy*, which is heavily inspired by *The Simpsons*—other TV shows. Lewis also points to media artifacts like t-shirts, websites, text messages, and news reports. Almost anything can spawn a meme, but often a viewer must be aware of its
inter textual traces and references to fully understand and appreciate the meme’s meaning: new
memes constantly refer to older ones, and often knowledge of previous ones is required to
understand the newest one.

This intertextuality is an inevitable product of the mainstream Internet’s fast-paced
consumption of popular media. Stryker (2011) explains, “You find that in order to gain a basic
understanding of X, you must first learn about Y and Z. But then, in order to understand Z, you’ll
need to watch a YouTube video, check out a forum thread, and visit someone’s Twitter account”
(p. 218). Internet media on the web is produced fast, and if a user misses some crucial cultural
moment, no matter how small, s/he may be at a disadvantage for understanding future content
that draws on it: “These intertextual threads are strands that elaborate a memetic tapestry. More
strands intertwine and the ‘inside joke’ grows more complex even as it spreads” (Milner, 2013b,
p. 4). Meme intertextuality simultaneously establishes insider knowledge while capitalizing on
references to other popular memes and cultural artifacts.

In February 2015, the Internet saw the viral explosion of a phenomenon known as “The
Dress.” Someone posted a photo of a dress online and a heated debate ensued about whether it
was blue and black or white and gold (Figure 11). Internet users all over the globe made
thousands of memes related to The Dress controversy, including ones that drew on other memes
and cultural artifacts, such as the Willy Wonka Meme. Figure 12’s intertextual traces rely not
only on an awareness of The Dress, but also of the 1971 movie Willy Wonka and The Chocolate
Factory, particularly on its title character’s sharp wit and tendency to act eccentrically
standoffish. Further, meme creators realized that a still of Gene Wilder in a particular scene

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8 As it turns out, The Dress was blue and black, and scientists explained that the misperception was caused by
disparities in color perception and chromatic adaptation (Rogers).
appears to epitomize a combination of sarcasm, pompousness, and apathy. The Willy Wonka meme is an image macro that places text over this movie still. Typically, the top text opens with a brief summary of the issue at hand or of another person’s opinion, and the bottom text closes with an assertion of sardonic indifference toward or mocking disregard for said issue or opinion. This meme was at the height of its popularity in early 2015, so meme creators who could remix it with The Dress found that their memes were some of the most frequently reposted at the time. The intertextuality and kairos of the Willy Wonka/The Dress meme guaranteed its success.

Memes and Remix

Another aspect of meme literacy that Shifman (2014b) names is “diffusion through competition and selection” (p. 18). This aspect of a meme’s development is captured in remix, or “technology-based manipulation” (Shifman, 2014b, p. 22). To be compelling, a meme must remain relevant. As Stryker (2011) has pointed out, memes “live and die by natural selection in the same way that biological entities do. If a meme fails to spread, it’s dead” (p. 19). Therefore,
memes must consist of “the most compelling, ‘sticky’ content to rise to the top” (Stryker, 2011, p. 20). However, because memes rely on a punchline for a quick laugh, yesterday’s “sticky” content may not be as interesting today. They must stay kairotic through remix. Sometimes this remix can be as simple as changing the text on an image macro; this is why there are often hundreds or thousands of versions of each image macro. For instance, Successful Black Man plays on almost every racially motivated cultural assumption of African Americans, such as violence, poverty, drug use, low intelligence, affection for grape soda, watermelon, and fried chicken, and any other stereotype one can think of. However, some remixes are more complex.

Advice Dog (Figure 1) is an example of a meme with a complex remix history. First it was remixed into Courage Wolf, which is meant to be ironically encouraging. However, instead of giving straightforwardly bad advice, as Advice Dog does, it instead gives intense—and often still bad—advice (“Courage Wolf”). Figure 13 opens with the question “Staring at hard times?” and ends with the extreme suggestion that one should “make it blink first,” encouraging the viewer to not give up and instead keep working to overcome some sort of adversity. The result leaves the viewer invigorated and amused if not a bit baffled. Insanity Wolf is a remix of Courage Wolf. However, unlike Courage Wolf’s bizarre but inspiring advice or even Advice Dog’s outright awful advice, Insanity Wolf no longer only gives advice; instead, he offers, as the meme’s title suggests, insanity. He often gives commands that usually involve telling “viewers to rape, kill, and commit other acts of insanity,” or suggests that such acts have already happened (“Insanity Wolf,” 2009). Figure 14’s implication that the memer has killed his family and buried them in a remote location is an example of the meme’s absurdity.
Davison (2012) explains that there are three parts to a meme: 1) the manifestation, or the “observable, external phenomena” of the meme, 2) the behavior, or “the action taken by an individual in service of the meme,” and 3) the ideal, or “the concept or idea conveyed” (pp. 122-3). He explains that as long as one or more of these three parts is reproduced or imitated in a remix, “the meme [itself] is replicating, even if mutating and adapting” (Davison, 2012, p. 123). In the case of Advice Dog, Courage Wolf, and Insanity wolf, the manifestation is the placement of a canine figure in the center with a color pinwheel background and text on the top and the bottom. The behavior is following this format to add new text and create an anomalous juxtaposition that is only funny because it is bizarre. Only the ideal changes as the meme is remixed from one version to the next: Advice Dog gives bad advice, Courage Wolf gives absurd advice, and Insanity Wolf makes insane commands or suggestions. The remixes take the core notion of “advice” and intensify it with each new reiteration.

Because two of Davison’s (2012) meme characteristics—the manifestation and behavior—can be traced through Advice Dog, Courage Wolf, and Insanity Wolf, and because
only the ideal is significantly different among them, all three memes are easily recognized as being connected to each other. This kind of identifiable remix is also necessary for memes’ survival. Vie (2014) and Vickery (2014) agree that as a meme is remixed and changed, it must also remain recognizable as connected to the original: “[M]utation in memes is encouraged, which is variability; a meme must retain enough of its original form or ideas to be recognizable” (Vie, 2014). Although Insanity Wolf does not seem like a direct descendent of Advice Dog on its own, through identifying its immediate predecessor, Courage Wolf, users are able to follow the progression from the original to the current manifestation. And those who may have thought Advice Dog or Courage Wolf were growing stale were likely pleasantly surprised to find Insanity Wolf had raised the bar on offering humorously bad and distasteful advice through its even more bizarre suggestions and implications. Only through remix do memes continue to evolve and increase their chances of becoming and remaining successful. To remain stable is to risk going stale, becoming irrelevant, or—worst of all—being deemed unfunny.

Memes and Rhetorical Velocity

Another of characteristic of meme literacy inspired by Shifman’s (2014b) work is “reproduction via copying and imitation” (p. 18). This aspect is addressed through strategic recomposition, or what Jim Ridolfo and Dânielle Nicole DeVoss (2009) call “rhetorical velocity.” This process is connected to meme remix. Once a meme has achieved some level of popularity, its continued success hinges on other viewers’ ability to step in and become creators as well. Thus, the original creator—as well as anyone else who works with and changes, imitates, or copies the meme—must account for its rhetorical velocity; they must compose “for strategic recomposition” (Ridolfo and DeVoss, 2009). Ridolfo and DeVoss (2009) explain, “The
term rhetorical velocity… means a conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time, pertaining specifically to theorizing instances of strategic appropriation by a third party.”

For a meme to be successful, the original memer must appeal to the broadest audience possible and create a meme that can reach them quickly and remain relevant for a long period of time.

To appeal to this broadest audience, the meme must establish identification with many groups of people. The Rage Faces above present a relatively neutral way to appeal to many individuals because they tap into universal human facial expressions and emotions. However, an even more effective kind of identification for maximizing rhetorical velocity happens when a meme taps into a system of beliefs that already exist. The memes with the most rhetorical velocity are those that make a joke at another’s expense; if a group has a common enemy or enemies, its memes will lampoon them. Of these memes, the ones with even more rhetorical velocity are those that play on negative stereotypes and cultural assumptions, such as Successful Black Man and Ordinary Muslim Man. Both memes have remained popular in the United States for around five years, in large part because their racism is subtle and ironic. Three groups are drawn to these memes. The first is the surprisingly large number of people who are genuinely racist and xenophobic. They read the memes as being openly disparaging of African-American and Muslim men and laugh at the idea that Black men can be “successful” or that Muslim men can be “ordinary.” The second group consists of people who are actively against racism and xenophobia. They read the memes as defying stereotypes and normalizing a traditionally vilified race and ethnicity. The final group comprises individuals who understand all levels of the meme: both its latent racism and its race-normalizing qualities. They use the meme to laugh at both racists and anti-racists without siding with either. Successful Black Man and Ordinary Muslim
Man have identification elements that appeal to several groups of people, which is why both have been able to achieve such quick and long-lasting rhetorical velocity.

Image macro memes are particularly well-suited for longevity and rhetorical velocity. For instance, Dancing Man’s impact has largely dwindled. The dance party turned into an anti-bullying event that drew many celebrities to speak out on O’Brien’s behalf and call for an end to cyberbullying, but since then Dancing Man has more or less disappeared from the public eye.

The meme spread quickly to a broad audience, but it gained popularity in each group or network for different reasons. And since the meme mutated into a cultural event, it did not provide many opportunities for traditional meme remix; Dancing Man spawned few digital texts to effectively alter. Nor did the meme gain enough momentum to sustain itself for a long period of time. However, Successful Black Man and Ordinary Muslim Man, as image macros, are much easier to remix and change; all a remixer needs do is track down the image macro’s template—often conveniently stored at sites like Imgflip, Know Your Meme, Meme Generator, and Quick Meme—and insert text. Of course, Photoshop is also an option. If a memer wants to modify something about the template but keep the rest of the meme the same, s/he may use Photoshop or another image-altering program (Pixlr, Microsoft Paint, Flickr, and many others) to change it.

Memetic Production

Although it seems like memers put a lot of work into their memetic productions—spending hours deliberating over how to craft the perfect meme—rarely is that the case. Shifman (2014b) and Milner (2013b) point out that although “creating and understanding memes requires sophisticated ‘meme literacy’” (Shifman, 2014b, p. 100), they are meant to be generated “with limited resources, and with low levels of digital literacy” (Shifman, 2014b, p. 82). In fact, the
success of these memes hinges on their simplicity: they are more likely to be remixed and shared if it is easy to do so. Every type of meme undergoes a different process, and certain types appeal to specific groups. Because they are also often created by amateurs and constructed of found images and digital materials, these memes often generally seem incomplete and unpolished. The goal is not sophistication; it is to rapidly spread an image and message with little effort.

Witnessing the inception of a popular meme is rare. Most guides on how to make memes focus on how to tap into an existing meme’s popularity by remixing it; few explain how to make new ones from scratch. Further, even Know Your Meme is unable to recount the circumstances that spawn a meme. At best, they explain where and when it originated, but almost never why. As such, the following discussion of meme production stems from my experiences watching users try to create popular memes. As a frequent visitor to sites like 4chan and Reddit, I see a lot of attempts at successful meme production. However, I have never seen the inception of a meme that later became widespread. As such, my explanation is necessarily limited and points to the need for more research into the inception of popular memes.

Many image macro memes are created mid-discussion; their actual production is quick, sometimes sloppy, and often unsophisticated. Simply, there are two popular types of image macros that dominate the meme pool: those that originate from conversations and those that originate from an interesting photo. Both types are often created on the spot. The image macros that originate from a conversation require a user to find an image quickly for the background. As a result, these memes often use stock photos that can be easily found on Google Images. Other image macros are inspired by awkward or funny photos. Because the end results are essentially the same—an image with superimposed text—it is difficult to differentiate between the two. For
instance, it is impossible to determine if Unhelpful High School Teacher (Figure 15) spawned from a discussion about bad teachers, or if the stock image inspired users to add text.

![Image of Unhelpful High School Teacher](image)

**Figure 15. Unhelpful High School Teacher**

As a result, when studying memes, it is imperative that scholars realize that often the background image is not perfectly suited to the meme. Image macros are made quickly with the available materials, and their goal is easy accessibility and reach, not always nuance. Some memes are able to achieve a higher level of sophistication than others, but we can never assume that any intricacies or complexities were intentional. Of course, by the same token, we also can never assume that they weren’t.

**Irony, Gender, and Image Macros**

When an image macro depicts a human instead of an animal, it often serves to ridicule an identity, especially through stereotyping. Any identity can be the subject of image-macro memes, but memetic representations of women are fraught with negative stereotypes. Although many memes depict men negatively, an large number of memes target women; and those that take aim
at men are rarely as offensive or aggressive as the ones aimed at women: “there’s a strong argument that women are saddled with the more sexist and mortifying jokes” (Garsd, 2015). These memes tend to depict traditional views of woman as a sex object whose purpose is to fulfill men’s pleasures. Memes showing women who adhere to this stereotype are regarded favorably, while those which show women dissenting from it are mocked. Other memes hold men—but only certain kinds that enact hegemonic masculinity—at the top of the social hierarchy with all other gender and racial identities falling in line below.

These image macros often appear at first glance to be nothing more than ironic representations that skewer the stereotype they epitomize. Indeed, because these memes set up expectations in the top line only to reverse them in the bottom punchline, they enact irony for humorous effect. However, their ironic representations are more complex than merely serving as cultural commentary. Ryan Milner (2013a) points to the potential of these ironic representations: they could be “‘cultural critic’ or ‘cultural syphon,’ using humor and antagonism to rile angry responses and shift the content and tone of the conversation” (p. 66). He points to Successful Black Man’s punchline, positing that perhaps it “reminds us – in a small way – to not take all stereotypes at face value” (Milner, 2013a, p. 71). On the other hand, Milner also points to Poe’s Law—the belief that legitimate extremism and satirical extremism are often impossible to differentiate online—as a reminder that without intricate knowledge of a meme creator’s “ideological intent” (p. 76), we are unable to accurately decide whether a meme is ironic or antagonistic. He explains, “the line between playful (if antisocial) irony, satire, and parody and ‘earnest’ racism is difficult to differentiate” and, regardless of intention, these memes can be exclusionary (Milner, 2013a, p. 74). In addition, I argue that context is more important than creator intent. When studying gendered memes, it is important to recognize that although they
may be grounded in irony, it is possible—and depending on the place of propagation, even likely—that they are also grounded in genuine sexism. As such, it is necessary to examine these memes in their full context, including not only their place and method of publication, but also the conversations surrounding them.

Men and Memes: Reinforcing Positive Social Values

Few image macro memes have straightforward negative depictions of men, but those that do reinforce a kind of macho masculinity through disparaging men who do not live up to that standard. Milner (2013a) points out that these memes reinforce “alpha” and “beta” structures online⁹; that is, they point to a dominant form of preferred masculinity while belittling any other kind that does not match it. Shifman (2014b) agrees; upon examining several memetic videos, she found that their humor derived in large part from a representation of flawed masculinity. She traces this to the sitcom genre of television, which presents “far-from-perfect men who fail to fulfill basic functions in their personal and professional lives” (Shifman, 2014b, p. 77). Flawed masculinity is a source of humor; we are meant to laugh at underperforming men.

For instance, Scumbag Steve features a young man who has supposedly loose ethics and expresses little concern for his reputation in social situations (Figure 16). However, it is his racially appropriated clothing that earns him the title “scumbag.” He adopts a “gangsta” look by donning a large fur-lined coat and a sideways-tilted flat-billed cap. Comments on several Reddit threads make it clear that these clothes are what triggered the “scumbag” portion of the meme; if it weren’t for this clothing, the jokes about his selfish unreliableness would not have as much of

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⁹ See Chapter 3 for a longer discussion of alphas and betas on 4chan.
an impact. The image macro invites us to laugh at Scumbag Steve because he is acting non-white and therefore performing a culturally inferior masculinity.

Another male-centric image-macro is more explicit in its portrayal of hegemonic masculinity. This meme depicts an overweight man with a ponytail, acne, and glasses and includes text expressing his assumed superiority (“Butthurt Dweller,” 2010). As Milner (2013a) explains, “he is overconfident, deluded about his prowess, and sophomorically arrogant” (p. 83). The meme plays on the term “basement dweller,” which is used in many corners of the Internet to denote an adult who lives at home with his/her parents—presumably in their basement—but does not hold a job or contribute to society. Typically, “butthurt” refers to someone who responds overemotionally to something, but in the case of Butthurt Dweller the term means something more like “smug without the right to be” (Figure 17). But, like Scumbag Steve, part of what makes the humor behind this meme is that it depicts a man who does not represent

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10 According to the stereotype, basement dwellers play video games all day, sometimes while drinking heavily or smoking marijuana (“Basement Dweller,” 2003).
stereotypical ideals of manliness. Instead, his appearance emanates a culturally subpar masculinity, and for that Butthurt Dweller is the butt of a joke (no pun intended). Milner also points out that this meme is self-deprecating; part of the irony here is that it denigrates the “internet culture” male—who is stereotypically seen as someone who is “insufficiently masculine and romantically unsure” (Milner, 2013a, p. 84)—but the meme creators and posters are part of that same culture. Therefore, the joke is on both those who post Butthurt Dweller and those to whom it is directed.

![Butthurt Dweller](image)

Figure 17. Butthurt Dweller

However, a large number of image macros depict men who portray a more mainstream masculinity while also associating with positive social values to youth culture. Shifman (2014b) explains that memes are capable of reinforcing cultural ideals: “Internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends” (p. 15). Memes like Misunderstood D-Bag (sometimes called Misunderstood Mitch), and Ridiculously Photogenic Guy not only depict
socially acceptable forms of masculinity, but they also reinforce popular social values like showing empathy and being photogenic.

Misunderstood D-Bag taps into the cultural value that we should give social transgressors the benefit of the doubt. The meme focuses on an image of a blonde man in his early 20s with a popped collar and a soul patch; he is meant to look like a typical college frat boy. The top line of text usually portrays an inconsiderate action he has taken, but the second line reveals his reason for having done such a careless thing or his reaction to it (Figure 18). An ironic reading could highlight Misunderstood D-Bag’s “douchebaggery” by presenting an exaggerated excuse for his actions; his reason for being careless often seems hyperbolic. However, discussions on Reddit reveal that Misunderstood D-Bag is actually often a stand-in meme for real-life confessions. Redditor skiingineer posted a Misunderstood D-Bag that reads “Cuts in front of you / So person entering freeway can merge at proper speed” then posts explaining how s/he really performed this action for this reason earlier in the day. Similarly, one reading “Has a tribal tattoo / Got it while doing humanitarian work in remote African villages” has garnered comments from commiserating users, such as UrMomsA_ThrowAwayAct (2012): “[sic, all errors].” As such, Misunderstood D-Bag highlights the importance of empathy. The meme suggests that there may be a legitimate reason for Misunderstood D-Bag to perform his inconsiderate actions; we are meant to forgive him for his transgressions.

11 Ubuntu is also the name of a computer operating system.
Ridiculously Photogenic Guy features a photo snapped mid-marathon depicting a man who happened to look up and smile at the right moment. The text always highlights the man’s attractiveness (Figure 19). The ironic reading can be a parody of male hyper-attractiveness; the meme makes fun of the guy for being so good-looking. However, a closer reading reveals that Ridiculously Photogenic Guy aligns with a youth obsessed with being photogenic. Most people use at least one form of social media, and the majority of youth are fixated on representing their identities through photos, videos, and other forms of media. Ridiculously Photogenic Guy represents the perfect profile picture: the image depicts him looking fantastic while doing something exciting and noteworthy. When running a marathon, people generally appear dogged and disgusting—and in other photos Ridiculously Photogenic Guy looks the same—but Ridiculously Photogenic Guy accidentally looked up and smiled at just the perfect moment to be caught in the perfect photo. Many of the comments on Reddit threads betray jealousy at his fortuitous photo, such as “I look a lot like this guy. But shorter and uglier” (hivemind6, 2012) and “That hair... if only I had that hair... life would be so much easier” (wtf_is_an_reddit, 2012). These comments show that despite the ironic reading that lampoons Ridiculously Photogenic
Guy, there is some legitimate envy and desire behind his memetic moment. The humor here derives from both—men are supposed to want to be like him and women are supposed to want him—and manifests in text like “Runs marathon and wins / my heart.”

![Figure 19: Ridiculously Photogenic Guy](image)

**Women and Memes: Reinforcing Male Fantasy**

On the other hand, memes featuring women more often than not reinforce male fantasy. Good Girl Gina and Cool Chick Carol both play into stereotypes of woman as sex object. Good Girl Gina features a stock photo of a young brunette woman who is often willing to perform sexual favors for her partner. However, Good Girl Gina was not always focused on sex. Earlier versions of the meme had Good Girl Gina performing legitimately “good” actions, including the first one to ever make it to the front page of Reddit. *Know Your Meme* quotes the now long-vanished meme: “Wears a t-shirt at the beach / so overweight friend isn’t only one” (“Good Girl Gina,” 2012). Although the meme began as a depiction of a genuinely good person, it quickly devolved into one sexualizing her. *Know Your Meme* describes her as “an altruistic mate”
(“Overly Attached,” 2012), or a girlfriend who is as giving toward her boyfriend as he is to her. However, the text captions that accompany her image set up scenarios and display behavior favorable largely only to the boyfriend. (Figure 20). Far from “altruism,” the actions Good Girl Gina performs almost always benefit the boyfriend. Cool Chick Carol is similar to Good Girl Gina in that she is almost always sexualized (Figure 21). Sometimes Cool Chick Carol hangs out as one of the guys and wins burping contests, plays video games, or watches Star Wars, but usually she offers to perform sex acts for her boyfriend or friend with benefits—often while he plays video games or chats online—thus reducing her to the role of sex object. Good Girl Gina and Cool Chick Carol are epitomes of male sexual fantasy.

These memes could be attempting to skewer the sexual objectification of women by using ironic humor to draw attention to its absurdity. Certainly, the vacant look in Good Girl Gina’s eyes could point to her being ridiculed instead of glorified as a kind of stepford-wife-esque figure who only exists to please her man. However, recall the discussion of meme production above. Memes are generally created quickly and memers need to find their images
instantly, so they often turn to stock photos to fulfill their meming needs; this photo was not taken to be used in the situation in which the meme places it, so it is not a perfect fit for its memetic context. So if Good Girl Gina’s eyes are vacant, it may not be the result of some clever attempt to lampoon the notion of female sexual objectification. It may simply be a memer resorting to an imperfect photo to make an image that gains a cheap laugh through recapitulating tired narratives of women as tokens of male sexual fantasy.

Further, recall Milner’s (2013b) comment that memes like these, regardless of the memers’ intentions, can be exclusionary and perpetuate damaging stereotypes. Indeed, many women who encounter Good Girl Gina and Cool Chick Carol react negatively toward them. Subreddit r/TwoXChromosomes has hosted a few threads over the last five years where women explain their reactions to these two memes. Most of the conversations about Good Girl Gina compare her to her supposed male counterpart, Good Guy Greg. They point out that Greg’s “goodness” is generally gender neutral, whereas Good Girl Gina’s is almost always sexual (Ragnrok, 2012). Picabrix (2012) also explains how Good Girl Gina creates an impossible standard for women to live up to: “To be GGGina, you also need to be promiscuous, give pitty [sic] sexual favours to guys who are unattractive, dislike your own gender unless they do the same, and basically be unattainably attractive but attainable… to anyone.” The conversations about Cool Chick Carol strike a similar chord. A comment from a deleted account explains, “At first I thought it was supposed to be meta-ironic or whatever, but after reading the comments I realized that a lot of the guys on here actually do view women as blowjob factories. I’m not sure we need a meme celebrating that” (“Good Girl Gina,” 2012). These comments and other show that regardless of the intent of the meme creators, the female viewers who encounter Good Girl Gina and Cool Chick Carol take them at face value, or see their ironic potential but also
recognize their grounding in actual sexism and misogyny. Perhaps Good Girl Gina and Cool Chick Carol prefer to satisfy their men—both sexually and otherwise—but the trouble is that they are only “good” and “cool” because they are willing to do so.

On the other hand, many memes depict women as undesirable because they do not fit a male sexual fantasy. Overly Attached Girlfriend is an image macro meme that mocks a woman who, as the name suggests, is overly attached to her boyfriend. She is easily recognizable by her crazed stare (Figure 22), and she often reveals intense jealousy if her boyfriend interacts with other women. Overly Attached Girlfriend emphasizes and reiterates stereotypes that women are clingy and jealous or that they nag their significant others while vying for their attention. She is considered undesirable because her neediness is a threat to male independence. Although Overly Attached Girlfriend represents a negative portrayal of the central female figure, the humor is relatively innocuous. This seems especially true now that she has been paired with Overly Attached Boyfriend, another meme featuring a young man with a manic expression similar to Overly Attached Girlfriend’s. He appears both on his own and Photoshopped next to Overly Attached Girlfriend (Figures 23 and 24). Although Overly Attached Girlfriend has found a counterpart in Overly Attached Boyfriend, it is also worth noting that there are far more iterations of Overly Attached Girlfriend. Overly Attached Boyfriend doesn’t even have his own entry on Know Your Meme; instead he is a sub-entry of “Overly Attached Girlfriend” (2012). This reinforces that the negative stereotypes behind Overly Attached Girlfriend and Overly Attached Boyfriend are largely attributed to women and less so to men.
While Overly Attached Girlfriend supports hegemonic masculinity through her representation of an irrational woman who is defined by her relationship to men, other memes focus on feminism and gender equality—a significant threat to normative masculinity—and are therefore more hostile. Privilege Denying Feminist depicts a woman who represents the stereotype of a feminist who only wants equality when it benefits her. Often the top text makes a request for some kind of equal treatment while the bottom text reveals that she is unwilling to compromise any of her own privilege to get it (Figure 25). Similarly, Liberal Douche Garofalo
features Janeane Garofalo seemingly contradicting herself from the top line to the bottom. The top text in Figure 26 state Garofalo’s belief that more women should be involved in politics, while the bottom text asserts that a particular woman should not. These memes take feminist issues as black-and-white totalities while stripping women of political agency through implications that women lack the ability to think critically. In the case of Liberal Douche Garofalo, the meme depicts her statement as contradictory because it equates “women” with “all women who want to.”

![Figure 25. Privilege Denying Feminist](image1.png)

![Figure 26. Liberal Douche Garofalo](image2.png)

The problem with these two memes is that they perpetuate misperceptions about feminism. The Internet is full of this kind of intentional misunderstanding: Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) are movements that have recently become verbal on their anti-feminist positions. MRAs explain that they are “concerned about problems facing men and boys and focus on bringing attention to the problems in the wider community as well as discussing ways to alleviate and resolve these problems” (Brockway,
Similarly, MGTOW “is a statement of self-ownership, where the modern man preserves and protects his own sovereignty above all else” (“About,” 2016). Both movements purport to be about male empowerment; some MRAs even assert that their movement is about establishing gender equality. However, in practice, both movements serve to belittle women in general and feminists in particular. According to an article on the MRA’s main page, a feminist is defined as “an overweight angry lesbian” (White, 2011). In a Reddit thread discussing MRAs, MissMeggo (2012) asks: “Why is so much of the discussion on r/mensrights about feminism and women and not about men’s rights? I consider myself a person’s rights kind of person, but it’s really hard to take any movement seriously when their pain is solely defined by discounting other groups [sic] pain.” Others responding to her and other comments within the thread ask similar questions. In an Internet where so much focus is on discrediting feminism for the sole purpose of discrediting it, anti-feminist memes that intentionally misconstrue the goals of the movement are dangerous.

Spurred by other MRAs and MGTOW followers, some members of these organizations have used the movements to threaten and even perpetrate violence against women. RooshV—an American pickup artist who has admitted that he is pro-rape—has been identified as an MRA, and the GamerGate movement was initiated by MRA gamers. In addition, I had a not-uncommon exchange with an MGTOW. In a Twitter conversation with a few other scholars, I admitted my ignorance of MGTOW. A user named “Boobaloo,” apparently triggered by Sensitive Alpha Male making fun of MGTOWs, replied, “What do you know?” and posted a link to a YouTube video. Curious, I watched it. One of its main arguments is that not only are humans biologically programmed to be violent, but males have a natural predilection toward raping women. The video encourages men not to suppress their biological drives, even if it means violating social norms and laws (and violating women). MRAs and MGTOWs may not be directly responsible
for producing memes like Privilege Denying Feminist or Liberal Douche Garofalo, but their movements represent loci of the kinds of anti-woman and anti-feminist sentiment of which these damaging memes are symptomatic.

The Call for Counter-Memes: Remixing Fake Geek Girl

Memes like Overly Attached Girlfriend, Good Girl Gina, Cool Chick Carol, Privilege Denying Feminist, and Liberal Douche Garofalo often propagate hegemonic discourses, but what makes them especially potent is the rate at which they spread. Stryker points to the large scale of meme-sharing, but the Dancing Man meme (Figure 8) also provides an example of how quickly memes—even negative ones—can spread: the original was posted to 4chan in mid-February, then Reddit a day later, and Twitter a few hours after that. Once Dancing Man hit Twitter, it spread even faster and it was only a couple of hours before BuzzFeed and other pop news sites picked it up and the articles were shared on Facebook. The Dancing Man meme started negative before turning positive, but even purely negative memes travel quickly, reinforcing and establishing stereotypes. As such, new methods are necessary to slow or prevent the spread of damaging image macros. This section provides a case study of the Fake Geek Girl meme to show how counter-meming is one way to open pathways to civil dialog.

Who Is Fake Geek Girl?

The first instance of the Fake Geek Girl (FGG) meme—often also referred to as Idiot Nerd Girl—was on 4chan in 2010 (“Idiot Nerd Girl,” 2010). Because of the image’s color pinwheel background, Fake Geek Girl can be considered an Advice Animal image macro, even though she never actually gives advice (Figure 27). The woman pictured in the meme became its
figurehead because she wears fashionably thick glasses and, as the original photo reveals, a cardigan (Figure 28), both staples of geek attire. However, with her perfectly styled hair, makeup and traditionally attractive appearance, she represents mainstream “geek chic” more so than authentic geekiness. Notably, she has written “NERD” on her hand, which many geeks consider her greatest transgression; if she were really a nerd, she wouldn’t need or even want to advertise it. The top text makes a general reference to geek or nerd culture, while the bottom text reveals FGG’s ignorance or inexperience while implicitly claiming that the memer is well-versed in this esoteric element. Scarlet Intern (2012) explains that the meme “essentially reduces all nerd women to vain, self-centered poseurs who can never truly ‘belong’ the way a nerd man can.”

Where Did Fake Geek Girl Come From?

The FGG meme stems from the cultural assumption that there is no such thing as a genuine geek girl, or that all women who claim to be geeks are only doing it for male attention.
This stereotype has existed almost as long as geeks and nerds have. Jay Rachel Edidin (2012), a comics and graphic novel editor, explains that “‘Geek’ is a gendered noun. There’s a GeekGirlCon, but no GeekGuyCon: every con is GeekGuyCon, unless it specifies otherwise. You don’t say ‘geek guys’ the way you say ‘geek girls’: once you’ve said ‘geek,’ the ‘guy’ is pretty much taken as read.” The notion of the fake geek girl has gained popularity over the last decade. Edidin (2012) believes that geek guys disparage geek girls because the masculinity of geek and nerd culture is fragile, especially now that women like Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu and feminist gaming blogs like Sam Blackmon’s Not Your Mama’s Gamer have been gaining influence in the geek world: “For the first time, there are visible swathes of geek culture that aren’t only female-majority, but unabashedly girly—in a culture where feminization is directly equated to deprecation of value” (Edidin, 2012). The pushback against female geeks—and the impetus for the Fake Geek Girl meme—is highlighted in two recent cultural events:

Tony Harris’s rant against female cosplayers at conventions and the Gamergate movement.

In October 2012, popular comic book artist Tony Harris posted a now-deleted rant on Facebook that belittled “Quasi-Pretty-NOT-Hot-Girl[s]” who cosplay (Hern, 2012). His grammatically frustrating tirade, abridged below, challenges women who identify as geeks:

Heres the statement I wanna make, based on THE RULE: “Hey! Quasi-Pretty-NOT-Hot-Girl, you are more pathetic than the REAL Nerds, who YOU secretly think are REALLY PATHETIC…. You are willing to become almost completely Naked in public, and yer either skinny( Well, some or most of you, THINK you are ) or you have Big Boobies. Notice I didnt say GREAT Boobies? You are what I refer to as "CON-HOT"…. You have this really awful need for attention, for people to tell you your pretty, or Hot, and the thought of guys pleasuring

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12 A “con” is a convention, or a large gathering centered around a genre of geek culture, such as anime or comics.

13 “Cosplayer” is a term for someone who dresses as a character (from comics/manga, movies, or video games). Generally, these costumes are made from scratch and are often detailed and realistic.
themselves to the memory of you hanging on them with your glossy open lips, promising them the Moon and the Stars of pleasure, just makes your head vibrate. And here it is, THE REASON WHY ALL THAT, sickens us: BECAUSE YOU DONT KNOW SHIT ABOUT COMICS, BEYOND WHATEVER GOOGLE IMAGE SEARCH YOU DID TO GET REF ON THE MOST MAINSTREAM CHARACTER WITH THE MOST REVEALING COSTUME EVER…. Shut up you damned liar, no you would not. Lying, Liar Face. Yer not Comics. Your just the thing that all the Comic Book, AND mainstream press flock to at Cons. [sic, all errors] (As quoted in Hern, 2012)

Harris later posted something resembling an apology that provided little reconciliation and instead attempted to broaden his scope from fake geek girls to all fake geeks. He concedes that “the one mistake [he] made in [his] original post was that [he] excluded Men” (as quoted in Hern, 2012). However, his original post clearly does not include men as its target, in large part because he makes specific and frequent references to women and female anatomy.

Harris’s rant is a blunt and vivid illustration of the kind of misogyny geek girls frequently face. His assumption—mirrored in many other instances of geek girl shaming—is that women want to show power over geek guys by leading them on with sexy costumes that they have no right to wear because they haven’t dedicated as much time to the material as the geek guys have. In particular, one of Harris’s biggest assumptions is that any girl who cosplays at conventions would never actually want to engage in sexual relations with the “pathetic” (in Harris’s own words) guys they are presumably trying to impress. Such sentiments portraying geek girls as teases are reinforced all over the Internet, particularly in comments like Brett Michael’s (2011): “Would any of these girls enter the bone zone with a real life greasy haired, zit-faced, socially inept code-writing obsessed nerd? Of course not. Which is exactly why they should be mocked and ridiculed!”

Harris’s and Michael’s sentiments touch on the crux of the fake geek girl argument: sex. Both reduce the issue to the question of whether geek girls would engage with geek guys
sexually, and both seem to think they would not. This assumption speaks to a larger issue behind the fake geek girl assumption. Traditionally, being a geek or nerd has been looked down upon, especially in American culture, for representing an inadequate form of masculinity. It would be better to be a jock—popular, handsome, and well-liked—than to be a geek. However, with the rise of the tech world and the growing popularity of such shows as Big Bang Theory—which produces a watered-down version of geekiness—superhero movies, and other geeky media, being a geek has become cool. Geeks who grew up being bullied are angry that the people who bullied them are now trying to enter their cultural milieu. Their frustration at their perceived denial of their masculine identities has surfaced.

This frustration hit a breaking point with the inception of Gamergate, a complex event in the gaming community that began in 2014 when game developer Zoë Quinn’s ex-boyfriend posted an online manifesto that accused her of sleeping with video game journalists for positive reviews of her games. Regardless of the truth of this allegation—although it is likely false—the gamers behind Gamergate used the excuse of “journalism ethics” as a thinly veiled cover for what turned into the online harassment and abuse of not only Quinn, but also Brianna Wu (a game developer), Anita Sarkeesian (a cultural critic who runs the Feminist Frequency website), and many other geek women. All three received frequent death and rape threats across various forms of social media for their feminist influence on gaming culture. They were also doxed\(^\text{14}\)—their private information was released publicly online—which made the online threats that much more distressing. Sarkeesian even had to cancel speaking events; she was faced with bomb threats and the promise of a mass shooting at one of her presentations (Valenti, 2015).

\(^{14}\) As were several other female geek icons, including Felicia Day, who is known for playing Codex in The Guild—a show about several players of an MMORPG like World of Warcraft—and for being a video and board game geek.
Sarkeesian summarizes what Gamergate and other incidents of video gaming misogyny reveal about the video game community in particular and geek culture in general: “There’s this toxicity… that drives this misogynist hatred, this reactionary backlash against women who have anything to say, especially those who have critiques or are feminists. There’s this huge drive to silence us, and if they can’t silence us they try to discredit us in an effort to push us out” (as interviewed in Collins, 2014). Gamergate and other attempts to restrict women’s access to geek culture have tried to show women that they have no place in it, but geek women like Sarkeesian refuse to step away from one of their key identity markers. And when these women refuse to submit to the hegemony, hostile geeks go to even greater lengths to shut them down, such as creating and propagating Internet memes based on negative cultural assumptions.

FGG establishes identification with this stereotype and other geeks—both men and women—who believe it. Warnick and Heineman (2012) explain that digital identification establishes a relationship between the creator and viewer. Generally, s/he will do this through producing a text that reflects not only his/her values, but also those of his/her audience. Memes especially reflect this digital identification, particularly FGG. The original FGG creator so strongly identified with the belief that there are no female geeks that he made the first iteration of the FGG meme, which reveals FGG’s ignorance of a highly popular video game (Figure 29). S/he then shared it in a public forum where other like-minded geeks could see it and share in its message, or “facilitate this feeling of mutuality” (Warnick & Heineman, 2012, p. 98). Lewis (2012) explains how audience response is another marker of identification: “Audience interaction with memes is an expected part of the meme experience, marked by the processes of identification…” (p. 117). 4chan users loved the FGG meme and remixed its message over and over again to reinforce it. Remixed iterations of the meme began to appear with a range of geek
references that FGG does not understand. This identification facilitated FGG’s rhetorical velocity; the meme tapped into the geek community’s long-held belief that women are inferior geeks. The meme’s climb to popularity was slow at first. It didn’t start to garner much attention outside of 4chan until about a year later when anti-geek-girl sentiment was beginning to reach an all-time high. Once it broke out of 4chan, it wasn’t long before the meme hit viral status and showed up on image-based websites—such as Imgur and Reddit—and the template was available on several meme generator websites. During this time, it was impossible to avoid the FGG meme in forums related to anything geeky.

Tony Harris had not yet made his infamous Facebook rant, but female geek icons such as Anita Sarkeesian and Felicia Day, as well as everyday geek girls, were already facing pushback from fake geek girl proclaimers. Some had been experiencing it for years, while others were encountering these sentiments for the first time due to the influx of geek girls over the previous decade.

The first meme appeared in May 2010 and a few more popped up within a few months after. However, in January 2011 the meme began to appear outside of 4chan and steadily gained popularity. By summer 2011, there were enough instances of the meme that lists of the “top” Fake Geek Girl memes appeared steadily over the next year (“Idiot Nerd Girl”).

Figure 29. The first Fake Geek Girl meme

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Fake Geek Girl, the Geek Gatekeeper

Together, the fake geek girl stereotype and Fake Geek Girl meme work as a gatekeeper to the geek community; both are tools for keeping women out of geek culture. However, this gatekeeping should not be confused with geek culture’s general exclusionary practices. Geeks are often highly competitive about their geek knowledge, always looking to be the one who knows more about a certain cultural subset than another. They revel in debating the relative merits of Batman and Iron Man and trying to figure out which would win in a fight. Often, these conversations and debates can lead to questioning each other’s geek IQ and mild insults. All of these actions are understood as par for the course in geek culture. But this level of competition is not what women face. Instead, they often have to deal with the complete disavowal of their identities as geeks.

Geek girls constantly have to defend their geek credentials against a barrage of questions and assertions. A girl wearing a Captain America shirt must prove that she is not only interested in him but has also read every comic book issue (of both his series and of The Avengers) and watched every the movies starring him. However, a guy need not defend a similar sartorial choice: by virtue of being a man, his geek credentials are assumed to be true. Andrea Letamendi (2012), writer for the Mary Sue,\(^\text{17}\) reinforces Edidin’s (2012) notion that “geek” is often equated to “guy” when she recounts her experience at an airport security check. Although she was wearing a Batgirl t-shirt and a Star Wars hoodie, the TSA agent “pointed to [her] Kindle, the one

\(^{17}\) The story behind why the blog is named The Mary Sue is marginally relevant to this chapter. In fanfiction, a “Mary Sue” is a female character whom the author writes into the story as an idealized version of him or herself. Typically, people consider the appearance of a Mary Sue to be bad writing. However, the bloggers reappropriated this pejorative term to work against society’s expectations that all women should be Mary Sues—beautiful, smart, funny, likeable, and [insert any number of positive modifiers here]. They use it to laugh at the notion that geek girls in particular should have to surrender any part of themselves to enter the geek community (Polo).
with the Star Wars comics cover, and immediately looked at the [male] stranger standing next to
[her]: ‘Is this your Kindle?’” (Letamendi, 2012). This slight mixup seems innocuous, but it is an
unintentional microaggression that speaks to a larger issue of geek girl authenticity. Because
geek girls must constantly establish their geek credentials in order to be accepted as a member of
the geek community, they must also constantly defend their authenticity against the gatekeeping
practices of those both within and without of the geek community.

Interestingly, not all supporters of FGG are men. Even some female geeks propagate this
damaging stereotype, such as Tara Brown (2012): “Pretentious females who have labeled
themselves as a ‘geek girl’ figured out that guys will pay a lot of attention to them if they
proclaim they are reading comics or playing video games.” Brown’s contention seems to be that
the older generation of geek girls worked hard to establish their geek credibility by putting in
long hours immersing themselves in their fandom or nerdy interests. She argues that modern
geek girls don’t do that. Instead, she thinks these women focus superficially on the appearance of
being geeky or nerdy without learning the substance behind their particular interests. However,
Edidin (2012) explains why this misperception is dangerous:

For those of us [geek girls] who had to mortgage significant parts of our identities
at the door, it’s hard not to see the new generation of geek girls as interlopers,
getting a free ride where we had to laboriously claw our way in. When you’re part
of an underrepresented group, it’s easy to fall prey to a reductive fallacy that
there’s only room for one way to be female… in geek culture, and anyone who
approaches that identity from a different angle threatens your claim to it.

Edidin (2012) explains that when fellow geek girls push back against the new generation of
female nerds, they are also pushing back against the progress they have made toward women’s
inclusion in the geek community. She understands that it can be difficult to see these young
women joining the collective without having to suffer in the same way the older generation of
geeks did, but she reminds all geek girls of the importance of working together dispel the notion of the fake geek girl instead of reinforcing the cycle of geek girl identity oppression.

**Fake Geek Girl: Perpetuating Nerd Entitlement and Female Objectification**

The fake geek girl stereotype and meme go beyond keeping women out of geek and nerd culture. Edidin (as interviewed in Zuckerman, 2012) explains that they also thrive in “the sticky and tenacious subtexts and cultural dogmas that justify and normalize misogyny and harassment and make the geek community so seethingly toxic to female members–and especially female newcomers–that it doesn’t even need a formal gate to keep them out.” FGG is just the tip of an iceberg of systematized oppression against women in geek culture. Edidin (as interviewed in Zuckerman, 2012) explains that it “is the throwaway byproduct of a culture that regularly responds to criticism from women with flurries of rape threats.” The stereotype and meme also continue the tradition of silencing women and telling them that they are not as fully human as men are. Instead, the fake geek girl stereotype and meme reveal that the majority of geeks—or at least the vocal majority—see women as sexual objects whose purpose is to relieve geek and nerd men of their suffering. Failure to do so results in blaming women for their misery and shaming them for not fulfilling their perceived duties.

Brown (2012) and others who buy into the myth of the fake geek girl think that girls pretend to be geeky because it grants them some sort of social status. But that status is often unclear. According to people like Tony Harris (as quoted in Hern, 2012) and Tara Brown (2012), it’s all for male attention. Redditor GuaranaGeek (2012) agrees: Fake Geek Girl is “afraid of other geek girls (who actually know their shit) finding out that she's only doing it for the attention.” But what none of these fake geek girl criers explain is why. Why would these women
fake their geekiness to attract attention from what are supposedly—by their own description—substandard men? The answer to this question seems to lie in what Laurie Penny (2014) refers to as “nerd entitlement,” or the belief that male geeks and nerds are entitled to receive sexual pleasure from women without having to work for it. In other words, they blame women for their lack of sexual encounters in their early years.

Penny (2014) uses the term “nerd entitlement” in direct response to a blog comment by Scott Aaronson, an MIT professor. Aaronson (2014) wrote a lengthy comment about how hard it was to grow up as a nerdy guy. He blamed part of his unhappiness on the fact that no women approached him or took pity on him. He thinks perhaps he would have felt more self-worth as a young nerd if someone had. Penny explains, “to a certain otherwise very intelligent sub-set of nerdy men, the category, ‘woman’ is defined primarily as ‘person who might or might not deny me sex, love and affection’” (2014). Penny continues, “Men, particularly nerdy men, are socialized to blame women… for the trauma and shame they experienced growing up. If only women had given them a chance…. If only they had said yes, or made an approach.” According to Penny (2014), the reason women—particularly traditionally attractive women—are shunned from the geek community is because their sexual inaction is the perceived reason for geek guys’ cultural emasculation when they were younger. And now that many geek and nerd guys have grown up to be successful scientists or software developers, they believe women are trying to join their cultural milieus to leech off their success.

This could, at least in part, explain why geek guys are so concerned with fake geek girls who are apparently trying to get their attention. Perhaps their blaming women for their emasculation has led to a misperception that women are intentionally flaunting their own supposed sexual prowess in front of geek guys with no intention of going beyond that. Some of
this misperception may be explained by Penny’s (2014) brief yet accurate description of patriarchy: “Men get to be whole people at all times. Women get to be objects, or symbols, or alluring aliens whose responses you have to game to ‘get’ what you want.” She elaborates on this claim and addresses Aaronson’s woman-blaming rhetoric by answering his question about where all the geek and nerd girls were while he was young: “And I answer: we were terrified, just like you, and ashamed, just like you, and waiting for someone to take pity on our lonely abject pubescence…. But you did not see us there. We were told repeatedly, we ugly, shy nerdy girls, that we were not even worthy of the category ‘woman’” (Penny, 2014). The systematized oppression of women in geek and nerd culture is a direct result of nerd entitlement. Geek guys see women as less than human, and instead of attempting to remedy this misunderstanding they continue to blame women for devaluing their masculine identities in mainstream culture. In turn, they vent this blame through calling geek girls “fake” and claiming that they are only trying to get their attention so that they can perpetuate the cycle of female enticement and disappointment. The irony is that being geeky or nerdy is now no longer a niche interest and geeks and nerds—both men and women—are able to be more publicly comfortable in their geekiness and nerdiness than ever before, yet this tension remains.

**Counter-Meming Fake Geek Girl**

If a geek girl tries to speak up against her accused-fakeness, she is silenced through ridicule, passively shrugged off, or told she is the exception to the rule. The meme and the stereotype that fuels it precludes any opportunity for productive discourse on gender stereotypes in geek culture. As a result, new methods are necessary to resist memetic stereotypes and open
dialog. Counter-meming may offer one method for resisting negative memetic stereotyping while providing a way to open discourse around key identity topics.

The notion of counter-meming has existed for over two decades, yet few scholars discuss it. In 1994, Mike Godwin explained how he created a counter-meme, Godwin’s Law of Nazi Analogies. He noticed that “as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one” (Godwin, 1994). He argues that when a discussion thread makes these comparisons, it is no longer useful, despite how important or useful it may have been originally. He engineered Godwin’s Law as a meme to counter the meme of making Nazi comparisons in online discussions. After his new meme spread, he noticed the number of comparisons decreased drastically on the discussion boards who knew about his Law, and civil discourse was able to reassert itself in these spaces. Godwin’s Law is the first recorded instance of counter-meming, or “the deliberate generation of a meme that aims at neutralizing or eradicating potentially harmful ideas” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 223).

Once Godwin had realized that it is possible “to generate effective counter-memes,” he asked if we have “any moral imperative to do so.” He argues, and Knobel and Lankshear (2007) seem to agree, that all Internet users have an ethical responsibility “to commit ourselves to memetic engineering—crafting good memes to drive out the bad ones” (Godwin, 1994). Although it is unclear whether or not Jay Rachel Edidin was aware of Godwin’s practice of counter-meming, she appears to have taken up his call by remixing and re-appropriating the Fake Geek Girl meme.

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18 Both memes, the Nazi analogies and Godwin’s Law, are not image macros, like the majority of memes I have discussed so far in this chapter. Instead, they are closer to Dawkinsian memes: behaviors or ways of thinking that people recapitulate in society.
In 2012, Jay Rachel Edidin, former editor for *Dark Horse* comics, recognized that geek girls could no longer sit idly by and watch the FGG meme’s rise in popularity, so she made it her mission to remix and reclaim the FGG meme and ask others to do so as well. Although she wrote long before Internet memes existed, Judith Butler (1990) would support Edidin’s efforts:

The critical task [of feminism] is… to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions [of identities], to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (Butler, 1990, p. 201)

Butler urges feminists and their allies to find instances where marginalized identities are being degraded and use their methods of oppression to reverse the damage. Or in the case of the FGG meme, remix the message on the memetic template so that it bolsters geek girls instead of denigrating them.

When most scholars and memers discuss remixing memes, they mean changing it for survival—the objective is usually for it to last longer in the meme pool. However, the goal of remixing FGG was to kill it through satire. In response to questions about why she remixed the existing meme, Edidin (as quoted in Fenn, 2012) responded, “What other approaches could I take? All I can think of is maybe asking quickmeme to take it down, which I absolutely wouldn't do—there's a critical difference between subverting the content and challenging its right to be there, and that's a line I wouldn't cross.” Other scholars and activists studying and working against derogatory digital texts face the same conundrum: how does one subvert damaging dominant discourses without resorting to censorship? Joel Penney (2015) studies the National Organization for Marriage (NOM)’s anti-gay-marriage video *A Gathering Storm* and its LGBTQ+ parody *A Gaythering Storm*. He argues that satire is more powerful than censorship and would agree with Edidin’s decision to remix instead of remove: “Rather than attempting to
shut down and block out ‘bad’ images, satire resitutes their meaning by embracing them and transforming them through creative cultural processes” (Penney, 2015, p. 229). Referring specifically to the NOM parody, he explains that the “parodists worked to reframe [the original video’s] meaning by embracing the image and playfully drawing public attention to its deplorability” (Penney, 2015, p. 231). So too do the FGG remixes.

Edidin created a few memes herself first, then posted a call for more on Twitter and Tumblr: “within a few hours, [they’d] filled about a dozen pages of quickmeme.com” (Edidin, 2013). For a short time between 2012 and 2014, there were more instances of the FGG remix on Google Images than there were original FGG image macros. Edidin kept the background template, but changed the messages so that they bolster geek girl identities instead of denigrating them. Edidin (as quoted in Zuckerman, 2012) explains, “The new Nerd Girl memes are celebratory. They’re funny, and angry, obscure and prosaic. Some poke fun at recurring themes in the old meme; others speak from personal experience or rehash specific incidents. They’re snarky and sincere, frustrated and frank.” Figures 30-33 represent four different approaches to the feminist rebuttal of FGG. Figure 30 fights fire with fire by accusing geek guys of not possessing all of the knowledge they think geek girls should, thus questioning geek guy authenticity. Figure 31 criticizes the propagators of FGG for being so quick to point out common knowledge gaps for any newcomer. Figure 32 implies that the inclusion of girls into the geek community will not disrupt geek guy masculinity or somehow lessen their geekhood. But one of the most effective versions boldly asks, “Who are you to say she’s not?” (Figure 33). This image defies geek guys who challenge the authenticity of geek girls by reminding them that it’s not their decision what other people like or don’t like.
Further, once the FGG counter-memes spread throughout the Internet, new counter-memes appeared. Although their manifestations (appearance) and behaviors (purpose and process) have changed, the ideal (message) remains the same: there is no such thing as a fake geek girl. The Fake Nerd Guy account on Tumblr collects photos, gifs, and image macros that...
parody the fake geek girl phenomenon.\textsuperscript{19} Some feature men wearing revealing costumes at conventions while saying things like “You can’t just put on a mask and call it cosplay!” (fakenerdguyz, 2014). Others satirize the original FGG meme. Figure 34’s top line opens with a quote from a fake nerd guy that reveals his sexist assumptions about geek culture, while the bottom line exposes his ignorance. Although these memes appear to recapitulate the same methods as the original Fake Geek Girl meme, irony exposes the ridiculous assumptions behind the fake geek girl notion. In one instance, a young man is dressed as a character from the video game *Dragon Age* (Figure 35). The caption reads, “Look at this manslut, baring his arms and wearing skintight leggings to pander to the female gaze. Ugh. I bet his girlfriend played Dragon Age II for him!” (fakenerdguyz, 2014). This statement echoes the kinds of sentiments geek girls hear frequently, but a quick glance at the image to which the caption refers reveals that it is satire. This young man is clearly not “pandering to the female gaze”; he is just trying to recreate his favorite character.

These remixes also illustrate identification on the other side of the fake geek girl issue. Whereas the original FGG meme tapped into identification with the stereotype that all women who purport to be geeks are doing so for attention, these new versions highlight identification with the notion that no one has a right to shun others from geek culture. Edidin (as quoted in Fenn, 2012) has underscored the importance of leaving gatekeeping practices out of the new meme: “I’m not fond of the ones that are really hostile or depend on negative stereotypes of geeks—for me, the point [of the remix] is challenging the cycle of gatekeeping, not just changing its direction.” Many of these satirical remixes expose the latent—and sometimes the painfully

\textsuperscript{19} The account has essentially been dead since 2014. However, during its peak in 2013 and 2014, it collected 10 pages of satirical Fake Nerd Guy images.
obvious—misogyny inherent in geek culture in an attempt to subvert and reverse it. Eris Walsh (2015) summarizes what the FGG counter-meme has shown women who face geek discrimination: “We’re all fans. Period. None of us has any right to judge the legitimacy of anyone else’s level of geek.” Although women continue to receive pushback from within geek culture, the FGG counter-meme marked the first time that geek girls banded together to fight these negative stereotypes on a global digital scale.

**The Effects of the Fake Geek Girl Counter-Meme**

Unfortunately, the FGG counter-meme’s influence was short-lived. Although it dominated Google Images, *Quickmeme*, and *Meme Generator* for the better part of two years between 2012 and 2014, the original FGG meme has re-gained momentum and re-asserted itself on all of these sites. Some of the more recent versions on *Quickmeme* have hundreds of thousands of shares on Facebook and Twitter. The FGG counter-meme changed the course of the meme for only a short time, but its contribution to resisting misogyny in geek culture continues
to have a resounding impact. In fact, it seems as if both the original meme and the counter-meme were necessary to open dialog around the treatment of women in geek culture. The original meme uncovered decades-old prejudices and brought them to mainstream attention, and the counter-meme represented the moment when geek girls had had enough of being marginalized.

Since the inception of both the meme and counter-meme, countless articles, blog posts, vlogs, songs, and other media have been produced to address the “Fake Geek Girl” phenomenon. Some respond directly to the memes, and some simply comment on the idea of the fake geek girl. Some are legitimate attempts to open constructive discourse, and some simply re-hash the tired assumptions behind FGG. But because a Google search for the phrases “idiot nerd girl” and “fake geek girl” returns virtually no results that pre-date the original meme or the counter-meme, it seems possible—probable even—that all this media and the discussions they incite may find their impetus in the memes. The FGG memes and counter-memes may have been relatively invisible in the grand scheme of things, but they have become a vital part of conversations geared at reducing and eventually eliminating geek misogyny. Counter-memes will not change the world instantly, but their influence has the potential to ignite and re-open important discourses around key issues like gender, race, ethnicity, and other identity factors.

The Dark(est) Side to Meming and Counter-Meming: Identity Appropriation

Although counter-meming can offer one way to open the constructive dialog that negative image macros preclude, both meming and counter-meming remain problematic. One aspect of memes that few scholars and popular media writers discuss is identity appropriation. Memes generally appropriate anonymous figures to represent the identity of a large group of people. For instance, Scumbag Steve becomes a stand-in for inconsiderate friends (Figure 16),
Misunderstood D-Bag becomes a way for viewers to commiserate with each other through moments of accidental transgression (Figure 18), and Overly Attached Girlfriend and Overly Attached Boyfriend become representations of clingy significant others (Figures 22, 34 and 23). However, many image macros—even both “found” and stock photos—use their images without knowledge or consent. Jasmine Garsd (2015) explains, “All these Internet celebrities have one thing in common: They didn’t intend to become famous. Their pictures just happened to go viral.” Even FGG’s image was used without her permission or any knowledge of who she is. We don’t even know if she identifies as a “nerd” or wrote the word on her hand ironically, or if she would want to be the face of an FGG meme or counter-meme. However, FGG is fortunate in some regards: many memetic figures’ identities have been discovered, but her real-world identity is yet to be linked to her memetic stardom. Depending on the context of the meme and how widely the meme figure’s real-world identity is known, this unwitting fame can have a huge impact on his/her life. For some, it leads to amusement or further fame, but for others it can lead to intense psychological issues and/or real-life harassment.

**Capitalizing on Memetic Fame**

Some meme-figures attempt to capitalize on their fame. Antoine Dodson, better known as the man behind the “Bedroom Intruder” song, tried to use his memetic stardom to launch a career in entertainment. The meme began when a flustered and frantic Dodson was interviewed by an NBC news affiliate in Alabama the morning after a man had broken into his family’s home and attempted to rape his sister while she slept (Figure 36). In his agitation, Dodson made some exaggerated statements and claims, including his most famous line: “hide yo’ kids, hide yo’ wife, hide yo’ husbands, ‘cuz they rapin’ everybody up in here.” His interview was remixed into a
song and music video and put on YouTube where it became an instant sensation. Dodson was surprised by his sudden fame at first, but he embraced it and used his public recognition to initiate his own career. He created a website, started a YouTube channel, and tried to pilot a reality TV show centered on him and his siblings (“Antoine Dodson,” 2010). Dodson has seen moderate financial success through these endeavors.

Likewise, Laina Morris—the woman behind Overly Attached Girlfriend—has attempted to capitalize on her memetic fame. In 2012, she uploaded a Justin Bieber parody video to YouTube where she changed the lyrics of his song “Boyfriend” so they depict a crazed and jealous girlfriend. Someone screencapped the opening shot of the video and used it as the background of an image macro that features text highlighting stereotypical jealous and clingy girlfriend behaviors (Figure 37). Morris continued to adopt the persona in other YouTube videos, both on her channel and others, in an attempt to maintain her popularity (“Overly Attached,” 2012). In 2012, she even started using her channel to highlight charities and fundraise for them.
For each milestone achieved, she promised to film herself completing a series of quirky tasks in public places and uploading the videos to her channel (Alfonso, 2012). Dodson and Morris are only two examples of meme celebrities who have attempted to harness their Internet popularity for some kind of financial gain, whether for themselves or others.

Figure 37. Overly Attached Girlfriend

Neutral Memetic Celebrity

Still more meme celebrities are amused yet generally neutral about their memetic stardom. For instance, Ermahgerd is a meme featuring “Berks.” While browsing through a friend’s Facebook page, a Reddit user found a photo of an awkward adolescent girl who is incredibly excited about the Goosebumps books she is holding. He didn’t know the girl in the photo, nor does he remember whose photos he was browsing, but he uploaded it to a subreddit on Reddit anyway (King, 2015). Later, another Redditor stumbled across the image and added text that says “ERMAHGERD” on the top line and “GERSBERMS” on the second one, both
slightly slurred versions of “Oh my God” and “Goosebumps.” The distortion is meant to be an exaggeration of how it sounds when someone speaks while wearing a retainer. Other versions of the meme show Berks (Ermahgerd-speak for “books”) holding other various objects with equal excitement and speaking with her signature mispronunciation (Figure 38). Maggie Goldenberger, the figure behind the Ermahgerd meme, expressed that at first she was shocked to see her adolescent photo resurface after so many years. She says seeing her meme is still surreal: “My eyes just get wide and I say, out loud, ‘This is so fucking weird’” (Goldenberger, as quoted in King, 2015). However, although she couldn’t “believe this is [her] 15 minutes of fame,” Goldenberger says that she “never felt unduly embarrassed about her sudden and unexpected celebrity” (Goldenberger, as quoted in King, 2015). In fact, she seemed amused by her photo’s rise to Internet fame.

Figure 38. Ermagerd

However, regardless of the innocuous nature of the Ermagerd meme, it highlights one of the dangers behind a meme figure being identified. As users attempted to find the real “Berks,” Goldenberger’s “real name started getting attached to the pictures, and an anonymous bounty
hunter tracked down and uploaded a photo of her on a beach in Hawaii in a bikini” (King, 2015). Not only was this quest a potentially dangerous invasion of her privacy, but the photo of her in a bikini surfaced online. This time, it wasn’t just a photo of her childhood caricature being ridiculed; it was actually her. Goldenberger managed to keep a sense of humor about the whole ordeal, which she deemed “the only really hurtful episode of the experience,” joking, “if I’m going to have a bikini shot floating around on the Internet, I’d like to be spray tanned and under a waterfall somewhere” (as quoted in King, 2015). Although she laughs off the experience after the fact, it must have been unsettling and even scary to watch her real-life identity be revealed and attached to her photo and then to realize that someone was watching her unwittingly.

Memetic Fame and Psychological Trauma

Beyond revealing real-world identities, some would say that such memetic appropriations are psychologically harmful. For instance, take Ghyslain Raza, or Star Wars Kid. In 2002, Raza used his school’s AV room and equipment to record himself pretending to be a Jedi fighting invisible enemies with a “light saber.” He forgot to take the tape out before he left, and other students found Raza’s recording a few months later and posted it online (“Star Wars Kid,” 2008). Others remixed the footage several times, but the most notable ones replaced Raza’s pole with a double-edged lightsaber and added laser bullets for him to deflect, à la Star Wars (Figure 39). Star Wars Kid was one of the first widespread Internet memes, and is still popular today.20 Viewers find the video humorous; some relate to Raza’s awkward fantasy recreation, others find the idea of an overweight kid staging a fantasy battle hilarious.

20 Popular media still makes references to it, such as Arrested Development, South Park, Family Guy, American Dad, and even The Colbert Report.
However, Raza did not see any humor in the experience. Instead, “he and his parents regarded [the video’s being shared online] as being cruel and invasive” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 223). Garsd (2015) explains that “he was bullied incessantly, to the point that he became depressed and dropped out of school to go to a children’s psychiatric ward.” His parents also sued the classmates who posted the video. Not only was he bullied at school, but he was also cyberbullied online. Raza explains that when he read comments about him online, “What I saw was mean. It was violent. People were telling me to commit suicide” (‘10 Years Later,’” 2013). Some of Raza’s fans felt bad for him and wanted to show their support, so they raised over $4000 to buy him an iPod and put the rest on a gift card (Baio, 2003), but he did not respond to the gift. Others even signed a petition to give him a cameo role in the upcoming Star Wars III movie, but nothing came of it. Even with the positive support from his fans, the whole Star Wars Kid experience was and continues to be traumatic for Raza.

Figure 39. Star Wars Kid

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21 At least, there is no online record of him responding to it.
Public Failure and the Right to Be Forgotten

Although Raza and Goldenberger have similar stories—awkward adolescents caught being awkward adolescents—each reacted differently. Goldenberger was surprised by her sudden memetic fame yet also amused by and accepting of it, while Raza was totally devastated by the spread of his video. Their ages when their memes became widespread and/or the authenticity behind the moment of the meme could account in part for the disparate reactions Raza and Goldenberger had to their memetic celebrity. Raza was a teenager when his video surfaced online; he was still the same age when the video was released online as he was when he filmed it. Understandably, he would have been unnerved and embarrassed that the whole world saw him in what he considered to be a private moment. However, Goldenberger was in her twenties when the photo resurfaced and became a meme. More than a decade had passed since it had been taken, so she was probably able to more easily detach her real-life identity from the image of Berks. Maturity and distance would allow Goldenberger to laugh at her memetic fame, while youth and closeness would make Raza uncomfortable with his.

Furthermore, whereas Raza was performing a kind of play-acting by pretending to be a Jedi, we have no way of knowing how seriously he took that performance. Although he has spoken out against cyberbullying, he has said little about his experience filming his play-acting. On the other hand, we know that the “compelling ‘found’ slice of life” behind Goldenberger’s picture that appears to capture “the real, paroxysmal excitement of a little girl at precisely the right millisecond” is actually just the opposite (King, 2015). It is also play-acting. She and her friends used to dress in costumes or strange amalgamations of clothing and create characters. In the Ermahgerd photo, Goldenberger is in character as “Pervy Dale.” What’s even more
interesting is that she wasn’t even a fan of *Goosebumps*. The books just happened to be nearby and seemed to fit the character at the time. King (2015) points out that “if the photo had been an authentic depiction of an authentic moment—an actual artifact from her awkward tween years—she may have felt different[ly]” about her photo appearing online without her permission.

However, because it was “just a picture of a kooky made-up character” that she was already displaying in front of a group of her friends (King, 2015), she was able to laugh at it. But Raza’s play-acting may have been a more genuine part of his identity, which may contribute to his unease and humiliation at the world having seen it. Children and adolescents engage in similar play-acting to Raza’s, but it is usually meant to remain private.

Moreover, this online stardom can have real-world effects that go beyond the emotional or psychological. One effect, Garsd (2015) argues, is that these memes could act as potentially incriminating evidence against meme celebrities like Goldenberger or Raza in their professional lives: “people’s reputations are involved here. It does very likely impact… people’s ability to find a job” (Garsd, 2015). Especially now that their names—as well as the names of many other meme celebrities—have been connected to their memes, a quick Google search will reveal their connection to memetic celebrity status. Most importantly, Woodrow Hartzog (as quoted in Garsd, 2015) points out, “It’s important for us to fail when we’re young… That’s how we develop our sense of right and wrong. That’s how we develop our sense of empathy. And the ability to move past that, and not have those same things haunt you.” Garsd (2015) also explains, “it's hard to imagine the mortification of having our silliest teenage moments live on forever.” But that’s what has happened to meme celebrities like Goldenberger and Raza. Even though Goldenberger’s awkward adolescence is over, the meme is still a remnant of a less-refined version of herself that she would have rather kept private. Turning people into memes is taking
away their ability to be youthful, particularly when images and videos of young people like Raza are memed while they are still young. The Star Wars Kid meme took away Raza’s ability to “fail,” or do something awkward and immature, and grow in private. Instead, he “failed” and the whole world saw.

It is important to remember that none of these meme celebrities asked for their images and videos to be posted online and turned into memes. In every example explained above their likeness was appropriated without their knowledge or permission. Often, even the most careful of Internet users can find their information and photos in strange corners of the web. It is extremely difficult for Internet users to take total control of their digital presence. The main issue is that most countries do not have any legal precedent or statute to protect people from such unsolicited or unwitting reproduction of their image and videos. There is no way, from a legal standpoint, to reclaim and remove these memes from the Internet. Garsd (2015) explains that the European Union and Argentina have implemented “the right to be forgotten,” which “allows for individuals living in these places to ask search engines like Google to de-index certain pages that are irrelevant, false or not newsworthy.” In other words, citizens of these countries have the ability to reclaim some of the privacy that the Internet in general and meming in particular can take away from them. However, no such protection is available on a global scale, and certainly not in North America where the majority of Internet memes are born. Some argue that “the right to be forgotten” limits free speech, but cases like Goldenberger’s and especially Raza’s call for the need for some kind of protection against appropriation and meming.
Counter-Memimg and Identity Appropriation

Vickery (2014) points out how, because meme creators are also usually anonymous, memes often thrive on negative portrayals: “The anonymity associated with the creation and distribution of memes enables potentially transgressive or empowering modes of communication and participation” (p. 302). Both demeaning and empowering memes exist, although the safety of anonymity tends to fuel the creation of more of the former than the latter. More importantly, this anonymity also allows memers to use whatever photos they like without permission. As a result of the inherent identity appropriation that happens with image macro memes, it is necessary to be careful when crafting counter-memes not to accidentally cause extra harm to the person whose identity has been appropriated.

Conclusion: Beyond Counter-Memimg

Although counter-memes have the potential to cause as much damage as they rectify, they are still a method worth considering to address memetic online aggression. Some even argue that they are an ethical obligation. Knobel and Lankshear (2017), and Godwin (1994) posit that “once a harmful meme has been identified, we may well have a social and moral responsibility to chase it down by releasing a positive counter-meme into the idea stream” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 224). However, this notion raises the question, is counter-memimg enough? Grant Kien (2013) thinks that it is not. He argues, “Counter-memes can be helpful, but are ultimately always reactive, and do not go far enough in correcting viral media mistakes” (Kien, 2013, p. 560). He argues that “perhaps the time has come that audience members learn and follow ethical standards for broadcasting” (Kien, 2013, p. 560). However,
Kien’s sentiments only treat a symptom of the problem behind harmful memes. The kind of censorship at which he hints would only remove the memetic exhibition of negative stereotypes but would not eliminate the beliefs that manifest them.

Instead, I do not see Knobel and Lankshear’s (2007) and Godwin’s (1994) stances as mutually exclusive from Kien’s (2013): counter-meming is important and may well be an ethical obligation, but it is limited. In her article on the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) logo meme on Facebook, Vie (2014) argues that the meme displays how simple actions like using or even altering the HRC logo works against negative cultural assumptions. She posits that this kind of “digital activism… can have significant impacts on off-line behaviors” (Vie, 2014). However, although the HRC meme was considered a moderate victory in the fight for marriage equality in the United States, homophobia—the driving force behind its opposition—continues to appear in micro- and macro-aggressions both online and off. The HRC meme may have countered these negative cultural assumptions, but, because it was a single, one-time rhetorical act, the larger issue remains. The same goes for the FGG counter-meme. Although it briefly overshadowed the original, not only has the original meme regained popularity, but the micro- and macro-aggressions against women in the geek community also continue to occur.

On their own, counter-memes challenge but they do not deconstruct. However, I don’t mean to suggest that counter-memes are ineffective. On the contrary, the growing use of counter-meming to fight against negative cultural assumptions in digital spaces indicates that we may be on the brink of large social and cultural shifts in how discourses about traditionally marginalized identities are shaped. These memes show that the dominant discourses surrounding hegemonic cultural representations may soon lose their potency. However, given the reactionary nature and therefore necessarily limited capacity of counter-memes, it seems that the next step toward
subverting these damaging cultural forces is to create proactive memes that bolster marginalized identities. If a counter-meme like the HRC logo or FGG remix can spur a series of proactive memes that work against hegemonic discourses, they may have the power to combat negative cultural assumptions on a larger scale. Vie (2014) explains, “When memes move from individual identity displays to collective identity movements, they have the power to impact lasting material change in the world” (italics mine). If a reactive counter-meme can momentarily stunt the spread of negative cultural assumptions, then there is potential for a series of proactive memes to shut down those damaging discourses altogether.

The precursors to these memes already exist. There are several body-positive image macros that battle the negative cultural assumptions that women can only be attractive when they match a certain standard of beauty. These memes create positive messages about female body image and empower women of all shapes and sizes (Figure 40). Likewise, there are many memes that bolster women of color and other non-white ethnicities. Figure 41 is an example of a meme that questions negative social and cultural assumptions about black women. Together, these individual memes serve as localized points of resistance that form a collective of positive memes. However, they are still reactionary instead of proactive. Body-positive memes react to the notion of standardized beauty while black woman empowerment memes react to the notion that they belong on a lower rung of the social hierarchy. While these memes are powerful in their bolstering of women, they are not as potent as a proactive meme could be.
To maximize its effectiveness, a truly proactive meme may need to operate within the image macro meme genre, particularly the Advice Animal format that has proven successful and lasting. This formula makes for easy remix and traceability to other memes like it. This proactive meme may also utilize the key elements of meme literacy outlined earlier in this chapter. Doing so makes it more likely that the meme will be named, which is a shared characteristic of most of the image macros presented here; this naming appears to be a mark of a meme’s success. As this chapter has shown, a proactive meme that has these characteristics has a better chance to become widespread and remain relevant. No such meme exists yet, but the proliferation of positive counter-memes seems to suggest that it may not be long before one does.
CHAPTER 3

4CHAN AND TRANSWOMEN: USING IDENTITY RHETORIC TO OPEN TRANS-FRIENDLY DISCOURSE

Introduction: What Is 4chan?

Founded in 2003 by Christopher Poole (who is also known by the pseudonym “moot”) and inspired by Japan’s popular Futaba Channel, 4chan is an online image-based bulletin board—“a simple message board that allows users to post images in addition to text” (Stryker, 2011, p. 39). It contains 65 boards1 that cover a range of common topics like video games (/v/), sports (/sp/), and music (/mu/), as well as not-safe-for-work (NSFW) topics like various pornography and politically incorrect (/pol/) boards. 4chan is known more popularly as “the Internet Hate Machine” (“Internet Hate Machine,” 2014) or “the Rude, Raunchy, Underbelly of the Internet” (“4chan,” 2009), but many others know it as the “Meme Factory.” In particular, 4chan is the home of the Random board, or /b/, whose users depict themselves as outsiders lacking a social conscience. /b/, often characterized as the “hivemind” of 4chan (Stryker, 2011, p. 11), is a fast-paced, anything-goes corner of the Internet with few rules and minimal moderation. It is best known for producing countless memes, as the previous home base for the hacker group Anonymous, and as the largest gathering of Internet trolls.

1 As of August 2015. The number of boards sometimes shifts as new boards are added or old ones discarded.
4chan’s potential value stems from its archaic design that mirrors early Internet sites both in the way it looks and works and how users are able to interact with each other. The site promotes both anonymity and ephemerality through its lack of user database or archive. Cole Stryker (2011) points out that 4chan “stands in contrast to a web that seems to be moving inexorably toward personal responsibility and a constant identity across all platforms that define the browsing experience” (p. 13). Stryker is referring to sites like Facebook that require users to use their legal names and link their real-life identity to their digital one while also archiving posts, thus creating social accountability for the content users share. Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook co-founder and CEO, has stated that “having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (as quoted in Zimmer, 2010). He believes that a person with any more than one stable identity is dishonest. However, Poole (2013, 2014) disagrees with this conception of identity, arguing that anonymity can lead to “honest expression” and a “unique sense of community” (2013). He believes identity is multi-faceted and “prismatic” (2014) and has worked to ensure that 4chan maintains this spirit.

Poole believes that the most significant aspect of 4chan is the freedom that anonymity and ephemerality provide to its users, or “anons” as they prefer to be called. He believes this freedom empowers anons to explore aspects of their identities that they may not otherwise be able to access in spaces that enforce one constant identity. In response to the solidified, monolithic identity most social media spaces engender, Poole argues that, “The cost of failure is really high when you’re contributing as yourself” (as quoted in Stryker, 2011, p. 274). If someone tells a bad joke or makes a deviant comment on 4chan, it disappears in seconds and few remember that it happened; if the same thing happens on Facebook or Twitter, it becomes part of that user’s stable identity on the site. Poole (2010) also explains that “saying whatever you like is
Although he admits he did not understand the implications of his site when he first created it, he has come to realize that the value in providing a place where people can be “wrong,” or intentionally offensive, is that it allows them to explore and experiment with their identities without consequence.

However, anons do not hold individual identities while participating on /b/. Instead, they join a collective identity of users who have a “specific, often strong, sense of themselves as a social unit” (Chakyo, 2008, p. 7). Despite, or perhaps even because of, an absence of individual identities or a tool that allows individuals to connect to or communicate privately, anons on /b/ have developed what appears to be a paradoxically monolithic, stable collective identity that follows certain norms and patterns of behavior. In fact, the collective identity on /b/ is so strong that users do not refer to actions on the board as something performed by individuals. Instead, people—not only anons, but those who discuss /b/ in popular media and even academia—explain that “4chan says” or “/b/ does,” implying a sense of totality that supersedes individual actions: what one user does on /b/ is equated to an action performed by the board itself. Further, any individual action conforms so strongly to the expectations of the collective that it can be indistinguishable from other individual actions, making the task of discerning the number of anons participating in one discussion nearly impossible; the collective identity moves and behaves as one entity.

The key to understanding the nature of this collective identity is rooted in theories of identification and constitutive rhetoric, which help both explain how users join and construct the collective identity as well as uncover the implications of individual behaviors within the constraints of /b/’s design and ethos. These theories also reveal that anons’ behaviors appear to be influenced by the sustained notion that they are expected to perform identity a certain way.
Cynthia Lewis (2012) explains, “individual and group identities... are constructed through repeated performances of self and in anticipation of the expectations, social codes and discourses available within a given context” (p. 231). Anons on /b/ are willing to say anything to maintain the performance of this identity, but their behavior stops just short of real-world action; such actions (or inactions) illustrate that behavior on 4chan may be grounded in carnivalesque performance and play instead of a reflection of real-world principles.

This chapter explores how /b/’s design and ethos govern its collective identity. Because it is also predicated on whiteness, misogyny, and heteronormative discourses, /b/’s collective identity often prevents Poole’s utopic vision of free expression and identity exploration from fully manifesting on 4chan. He argues that /b/ provides freedom on 4chan, but this study shows that /b/’s collective identity instead creates strict regulations that lead to the outing and exclusion of anyone who does not fit. Noncompliance to the collective identity leads to outright exclusion from it. In this chapter, I present two examples that demonstrate how a collective identity concentrated almost solely on subversive performances of normative discourses—and that revels in defying political correctness—limits and marginalizes performances of alternative gender and sexuality identities. I present two examples—one centered on a self-identifying bisexual woman and one on two self-disclosing transgender women—that demonstrate how the nature of /b/’s collective identity enforces identity denigration. As these examples show, although /b/’s behavior is largely based in carnivalesque performance and play, anons often denigrate women and transpeople, thus continuing the tradition of silencing marginalized identities in digital spaces. Further, the latter example highlights an important moment when the collective identity ruptured, pointing to a way to subvert hostile discourses through identity rhetoric.
4chan’s Cultural Significance

Although it receives mostly negative attention in popular media, 4chan is culturally significant for many reasons, most of which have to do with /b/’s impact on mainstream society. First, anon on /b/ are constantly seeking to influence the web outside of their forum. As Stryker (2011) explains, “4chan... influences the way you behave on the web, whether you realize it or not” (p. 12). Phillips (2015) points to the popularity of memes like rickrolling\(^2\) and LOLcats\(^3\) (both of which were created on /b/) and the actions of Anonymous as examples of 4chan invading popular culture. More recent and less frivolous examples include 2014’s Gamergate\(^4\) and sordidly named “Fappening.”\(^5\) During the month I studied /b/, I witnessed several moments where 4chan attempted to infiltrate popular media. Two notable but ultimately unsuccessful examples were anti-feminist and transphobic, respectively. First, several threads circulated a change.org petition for Merriam-Webster to change the word “feminist” to “feminazi.” The now-defunct petition stated

Feminist [sic] do not have a proper standpoint and they are considering the genocide of all men and have committed infanticide just like the Nazis did in WWII. We should combine the names together to show their true colors. (Fresh Prince, 2015)

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\(^2\) Rickrolling is a bait-and-switch meme that lures an unsuspecting target to view a video that purports to be something they may be interested in, but is actually the 80’s-era music video for Rick Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up.”

\(^3\) LOLcats are image macro memes that include funny photos of cats captioned with text in a distinctive form of altered English known as lolspeak. One of the more famous LOLcats is an excited grey cat with the text “I can has a cheezburger?”

\(^4\) See Chapter 2 for a description of Gamergate.

\(^5\) The Fappening is the nickname given to the 2014 leak of hundreds of nude photos of female celebrities (“fap” is a word used on 4chan to denote masturbation).
The petition was widely circulated on /b/ for two days in late July 2015, but it never garnered more than a few hundred signatures. In another attempt, anons proposed starting a “transage” movement, trolling trans people by claiming that if a person of one sex could identify as a different gender, then a person of one age could identify as another. They proposed starting a “transage” hashtag on Twitter to draw attention to the movement, with the goal of discrediting all trans movements. There were multiple threads devoted to this topic in late July, and the idea made it to the 4chan subreddit on Reddit.com, notable because it shows this movement garnered more momentum than the “feminazi” one. However, #transage was never trending on Twitter, and the movement remains more or less dead.

4chan is not always successful in their attempts to influence mainstream culture, but they continue to make efforts to do so. Many of them—such as rickrolling, convincing people to microwave their iPhones, and possibly also the calls for #transage and feminazi movements—are based in trolling, particularly the brand of self-identifying trolling Phillips (2015) studies. She explains that this “subcultural trolling is predicated on the amassment of lulz, an aggressive form of laughter derived from eliciting strong emotional reactions from the chosen target(s)”

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6 In September 2014, Apple released the iOS 8 update, and anons trolled iPhone users by filling Twitter with claims that the new update also included “Wave,” a fake software addition that purported to allow users to charge their iPhones in the microwave. They even created convincing promotional materials to share along with tweets exclaiming how amazing this update was. Several iPhone users took the bait and nuked their phones, resulting in a lot of ruined phones and microwaves and many angry iPhone users.

7 However, /b/’s motives are not always clear. In July, an Alabama high school teacher posted images of himself and a student in bed, presumably to brag about his accomplishment, so /b/ worked collectively to uncover his identity. They turned in their evidence to the Tuscaloosa School District and Sheriff’s Department. Joe Bradley Petrey, Jr. was arrested for “sex acts with a student under 19” in early August 2015 (Townsend, 2015). /b/’s motives for outing Petrey are unclear, but it may also be an act of trolling at its core. 4chan isn’t generally concerned with the immorality behind a teacher having an affair with a student. This was made clear by one thread I observed in which participants discussing a recent court ruling that sent a woman teacher to prison for the same offense as Petrey. They lamented that none of their teachers had attempted to engage in sexual acts with them while simultaneously making fun of the underage student who turned her in.
Phillips, 2012b). Trolling is ubiquitous on 4chan. /b/ did not invent trolling, but it has become home to the largest gathering of trolls. Phillips’ (2015) explanation of why researching trolls is important reinforces 4chan’s cultural significance: “Troll’s behaviors, which are widely condemned as being bad, obscene, and wildly transgressive… allow one to reconstruct what the dominant culture regards as good, appropriate, and normal” (p. 7). She explains that they “amplify the ugly side of mainstream behavior… [and] are born of and fueled by the mainstream world” (Phillips, 2015, p. 168-9). /b/ is a culturally saturated text that reflects and reinforces the mainstream’s hierarchical social norms for identity indicators like race, gender, and sexuality. Its trolling is an influential phenomenon in digital discourse.

The third way in which /b/ is culturally significant is an extension of the second: 4chan’s often damaging, violent, and intolerant discourses, whether they are based in trolling or not, have immediate effects in society. Krista Ratcliffe (2005) points to the danger of discourses like this. She explains how the narrative of the “good mother” influences people who are not mothers, but her explanation also works for the disparaging language on 4chan: “Though all these discourses are external to people’s bodies, they also permeate bodies and become embodied” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 70). They affect how people interact with each other, which in turn impacts those people’s next interactions, all the while “competing[ing] with other socializing discourses” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 70). The behavior displayed on /b/ is not limited to 4chan. Their misogynistic and transphobic discourses infiltrate the larger cultural discourses of society, whether we realize it or not. And 4chan is not the only, nor is it even the first, anonymous digital space that exercises such bigoted behavior. Other messageboards like Something Awful or comments sections on entertainment sites like Ebaumsworld and 9gag are just a few examples of interfaces that play host to collective identities that behave in a similar fashion to anons on /b/. Likewise,
many other anonymous spaces like Gaia Online or even anonymous apps like Yik Yak are known to draw antagonistic trolls. Anonymous and ephemeral spaces and apps tend to devalue the contemporary mainstream tendency toward political correctness. As such, an exploration of how these discourses and trolling behaviors function on 4chan also has implications for other popular digital social media. Digital discourses are powerful and shape digital culture and values.

Methods and Data Presentation

The methods for this chapter consisted primarily of grounded digital participant observation wherein I watched anons on /b/ interact with each other. Buch and Staller (2014) explain this kind of research as an exploration of “the cultures and worlds that exist in cyberspace” in order “to understand social interactions” that happen in these digital places (p. 112, p. 113). This method involves observing research subjects in a community in order to obtain a detailed sampling of their social lives. Charmaz (2006) explains that this kind of grounded method allows researchers to remain “open to the setting and the actions and people in it [in order to] have the opportunity to work from the ground up and to pursue whatever they find to be of the greatest interest” (p. 21). I visited the site multiple times in April 2015 to perform some preliminary research and form hypotheses, and then revisited it daily during the month of July 2015. I recorded screencaps from /b/ on seven days—April 29, and July 7, 11, 15, 22, 23, and 30—and spent the rest observing general behaviors and trends while taking notes. To record key moments, I screencapped the first post in a thread and all following posts. I followed each thread to the end—in some cases, a few seconds; in others, over half an hour. After collecting all of the data, I sifted through it to find instances that revealed 4chan’s collective identity, particularly as it pertains to the treatment of women, transgender people, and other minorities. I encountered
many instances of denigration against various gender, sexuality, racial, ethnic, and religious identities, but chose to focus on gender and sexuality for this study because of my background and personal interests. Next, I selected two representative instances as case studies for analysis: one involving the derogatory “Tits or GTFO” meme\(^8\) that displays how behavior on 4chan follows the norms of the collective identity, and another displaying a transwoman working both in and against the collective identity to open a discourse on a topic that traditionally generates a hostile reaction on 4chan.

When presenting screencaps from the data, I have altered them to maintain the anonymity of 4chan’s users and preserve its spirit of ephemerality to the best of my ability. Although not every scholar has done so when presenting data from 4chan (for instance, Knutila’s 2011 study of anonymity and contingency), most scholars do. In her studies of trolls, Phillips (2015) refrains from including full posts and instead focuses on the images posted. In his study of behavior policing on /sp/, 4chan’s sports-themed board, Trammell (2014) presents altered screencaps that replace post dates, times, and numbers with a series of Xs. He formats a sample post’s identifying information as “Anonymous [flag icon] 0x/xx/13 (Mon) xx:xx No. xxxxxxxx.”\(^9\) I take his method for data presentation one step further and completely obscure identifying information using Microsoft Paint. Figure 42 presents an example of a screencap I have altered. There are a few things to note here. After “Anonymous” is the date and time the thread and

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\(^8\) Here and elsewhere in this chapter I use the word “meme” as coined by Richard Dawkins. He defines memes as cultural artifacts that “propagate themselves… by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (192). These memes are any idea—including religion, fashion, trends, or jokes—that spread from person to person. These memes influence behavior, not only on an individual level but also on a group, or collective, level.

\(^9\) The flag icon only appears with posts on Politically Incorrect (/pol/). The flags represent from which country the anons post from, making them the only design feature on 4chan that forces some form of individual identification.
replies were posted. Because some users and websites maintain personal and public archives of select 4chan posts, I conceal the post date (here, in blue). For the same reason, I also mask the post numbers and direct-responses (here, in gray and black, respectively). I also color-code the original poster’s (OP) post number and direct responses to it so conversations cannot be tracked (here, in orange). Such methods ensure that, like Trammell (2014), I “maintain, and even slightly exceed, the level of anonymity” characteristic of 4chan.

Figure 42. Example of altered screenshots from 4chan

As I write about 4chan and /b/, using pejorative terms and offensive language is unavoidable. Echoing Phillips’ (2015) sentiment that “it would not be possible to write a PG-rated history of trolling” (p. 3), I recognize that it would similarly be impossible to write about 4chan’s design and identity without quoting some of their hostile, often NSFW language. Like Phillips (2015) and Ryan Milner (2013a), I also recognize that such recapitulation of derogatory language, with its racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist leanings, is potentially harmful—even in the service of critical analysis—because it “may continue to normalize their antagonisms and
marginalizations” (Milner, 2013a). Similarly, Judith Butler (1997) discusses how, regardless of the intent of a speaker, hate speech holds power to wound no matter the context; she quotes Toni Morrison: “Oppressive language… does more than represent violence; it is violence” (p. 6). Butler (1997) argues that when we speak hate speech it rarely originates with us but is instead part of a larger citational history of that hate speech: “responsibility is thus linked with speech as repetition” (p. 39). With this in mind, I attempt to limit my replication of such language to only when it is essential to discussions about the construction and performance of collective identity on 4chan and /b/. However, there are some instances when employing this language is unavoidable, regardless of its purpose.

4chan’s Design, Ethos, and Collective Identity

/b/’s collective identity is a product of identification and constitutive rhetoric. Kenneth Burke (1973a, 1973b) argues that identification is how the self “becomes part of the collective texture” (1973b, p. 265) and a method for “placing oneself in groups and movements” (1973a, 227). Stephanie Vie (2014) agrees, explaining, “Through the process of identification, individuals become closer and align in groups with common interests.” Ratcliffe (2005) also explains that identification is informed by how humans interact with “themselves and the world in ways that form their identities” (p. 50) and that “identity is continually informed by, but not totally determined by, each new identification” (p. 57). Through identification, users subsume their individual identities into the collective identity of which they wish to be a part.
However, when Burke (1973a, 1973b), Vie (2014), and Ratcliffe (2005) talk about identification, they are largely referring to humans identifying with humans.\(^1\) In many digital spaces, particularly social media, I have found that users do not identify only with each other when creating a collective identity. Instead they also identify, as a collective, with the interface’s design and ethos. Warnick and Heineman (2012) urge rhetoricians to “consider how users’ identity as social media users is determined in specific ways by the ‘text’—a social-networking technology or Web site—that enables and constrains the ways in which they think of their identity” (p. 104). An interface’s design and ethos, as well as the collective identity it houses, are powerful identifiers. /b/’s interface enforces anonymity and ephemerality and provides little to no moderation, all of which draw certain users and affect how they interact. Likewise, 4chan’s ethos of lawlessness and unaccountability functions as both a product and regulator of interactions on the site. Together, anonymity, ephemerality, and unaccountability reinforce each other and create a collective identity, a recursively constructed product of design and ethos that both controls and is controlled by the threads and posts.

/b’s Interface

Although 4chan’s public notoriety ranges from fun meme factory (Stryker, 2011) to the “Internet Hate Machine” (2014), its actual interface is nothing more glamorous than a simple imageboard. Bernstein et al. (2011) explain that “4chan’s aesthetic is simple, though it can appear confusing and cluttered: Wall Street Journal describes it as ‘archaic […] a quaint throwback to the earliest webpages’” (p. 3). 4chan’s old-school design replicates earlier Internet

\(^{10}\) Largely, but not totally. For instance, Burke has also criticized atomic scientists for refusing identification with the results of the technology they develop.
websites and their values. Its boards are reminiscent of John Barlow’s (1996) claims in “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” a mid-90s document that seeks to explain why cyberspace cannot be governed and needs to remain open and free for all users. In particular, 4chan purports to be “a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity” (Barlow, 1996). It is a pre-Facebook social media site that epitomizes the philosophy behind The New Yorker’s famous “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” cartoon (Figure 43). 4chan presents itself as a lawless, borderless, utopian interface where anything is possible and a user can create a whole new identity whenever s/he wants to.

![Figure 43. “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog”](image)

4chan’s design is, above all else, simplistic. Knutila (2011) explains that “4chan has three possible actions: start a thread by posting an image; respond to a post with text or an image; and, lastly to lurk just by reading text/posts.” Since Poole transferred the original code a dozen years ago, he has performed few updates to it; the interface appears similarly now to how it did when it
was first launched. One reason Poole may have refrained from updating the site’s code is because he’s just not very good at coding: “I don’t count programming as one of my talents” (as quoted in Larson, 2013). He explains that he taught himself how to code when he began working on 4chan and oversaw all aspects of the site’s design, but he does not consider himself a coder. Poole also admits that he was drawn to 4chan’s site design because the “image-based discussion format was just new and interesting to [him]” (as quoted in Larson, 2013).

However, regardless of Poole’s skill or intentions, 4chan’s key design elements—anonymity, ephemerality, and low moderation—help develop /b/’s ethos, and both the design and ethos lead to /b’s collective identity. James J. Brown, Jr. (2015) and Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe (1994) remind us that software, and by extension digital interfaces, are not neutral. Brown (2015) explores how ethical programs, or “a set of steps taken to address an ethical predicament” in the networked world, contribute to how users engage with interfaces. He points to websites like Reddit that use an ethical program to enforce “rules, creating (or preventing) certain kinds of relations between users and systems” (Brown, 2015). These programs dictate how Redditors engage with the interface—through posting, commenting, upvoting or downvoting, or any other action they can perform—while also controlling how Redditors interact with each other through their profiles.

However, programs are not always intentionally developed to account for ethical implications as part of their response to users. Brown (2015) explains that the “steps [taken by an ethical program] are not necessarily arrived at rationally, and they are not always the result of

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11 This may soon change. Poole resigned from his position in January 2015 and handed 4chan to Hiroyuki Nishimura (creator of 2chan, from which Poole adapted 4chan’s original code) in September 2015. Poole has no intention of working with 4chan any longer, and Nishimura has already made a few minor changes, such as adding a new board (/his/, or history and humanities) and reformatting how the “News” segment appears on 4chan.
deliberation.” Humans design interfaces, so the actions users perform there become a reflection of the designer’s values. In the case of 4chan, Poole has designed the interface to prevent or allow certain actions while also triggering new actions based on previous ones. For instance, /b/ prevents anons from creating individual profiles that can connect with others (à la Facebook or Twitter), but it allows anons to start new threads or post comments on existing ones. And when anons create these posts, a dialog box pops up that requires them to click a button before posting that says “I am not a robot” to prevent spam.

Brown’s (2015) research also points to the importance of design in identity construction on digital social media. He explains that “software is both tool and interlocutor”; it not only performs basic functions, but it is also part of a rhetorical dialogue or “argument about the best way to keep the network… secure.” As a tool and an interlocutor, these ethical programs are an aspect of design that both enable and constrain certain actions on the interface, determining what kinds of identities are able to form there. Just as “networks are not free of hierarchies” (Brown, 2015), neither are digital interfaces. In the case of 4chan, the anonymous and ephemeral design coupled with low moderation creates 4chan’s ethos of lawlessness. In turn, the design and ethos offer anons the opportunity to post alienating and often shocking content that reflects a racist, misogynistic, transphobic, and homophobic social hierarchy in which it appears to operate, leading to a collective identity that centers on performances of an anti-politically-correct (anti-PC) white heteronormative masculinity that excludes all other identity markers.

Anonymity, Ephemerality, and Moderation on /b/

Anonymity and ephemerality set 4chan’s interface apart from more widely-known digital social media, such as Facebook or Reddit, that both require at least a pseudonym if not a full
name and archive all of a user’s activity. 4chan does not support user registration, and /b/ requires users to post anonymously. At one point, users could choose pseudonyms for their posts, but, because there is no central registration, they were not guaranteed to own it in the way users own their unique Twitter handles. However, Poole ended this practice in February 2012 (Phillips, 2015, p. 146); every post since then has been credited to “Anonymous.” Bernstein et al. (2011) claim that 4chan is “fully anonymous by default” (p. 1), but this is not technically true: moderators can gain access to a user’s IP address, which has resulted in anons being banned—both for short periods of time and for life (perma-banned)—usually for posting illegal content, although such instances are rare. As Bernstein et al. (2011) point out, “posts on /b/ are disconnected from any identity” (p. 3). Anons have no access to each other’s individual identity, and it is technically against 4chan’s rules for users to reveal this information in a post (“Rules,” 2015). Bernstein et al. (2011) point out the negative and positive ways anonymity manifests on /b/. On the one hand this collectivity can result in “de-individuation and mob behavior” as well as socially offensive actions, but on the other hand conversations may be more “intimate and open” while giving anons a place to fail socially with no consequences (Bernstein et al, 2011, p. 6). Certainly, both are possible on /b/.

Threads are also short-lived. Every board contains 10 pages with a limit of 15 threads on each page, for a maximum of 150 active threads at a time. As a thread gains a new comment, it is bumped to the first spot on the first page; after a thread makes it past the last spot on the tenth

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12 4chan has procedures for users who post illegal content. For example, child pornography sometimes appears on the board. If a moderator is present and able to respond to it, s/he will send the IP address to the authorities and report the instance to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children’s CyberTipline.

13 Depending on the context, throwaway email addresses or usernames to other semi-anonymous social media are acceptable, as is the occasional selfie (in R8 threads, for instance), but such instances are rare.
page, it disappears from the site. Often, users archive threads by screencapping them so they can keep a record of their favorites. It is not uncommon to find these screencaps on file sharing sites like Imgur or other boards like the 4chan subreddit. Some sites like archive.moe\(^\text{14}\) preserve noteworthy threads publicly, but some users prefer to keep their archives private or to only share them on 4chan. Because /b/ is the busiest board on the site, its content turnover is huge and fast: of the over 5 million posts they observed during their two-week study, Bernstein et al. (2011) found that “the median life of a thread is just 3.9 minutes” (p. 4). The longest-lived thread I witnessed while studying /b/ was 85 minutes, barely a blink of an eye when compared with Facebook’s archiving capabilities. Bernstein et al (2011) think this ephemerality results in higher rates of participation on /b/: users must engage with posts they like to keep them active (p. 6).

Because of this anonymity and ephemerality, individual users are unable to form specific, lasting bonds with other individual users, develop a stable individual identity, or access previous content. In particular, these design features create an anarchic culture that produces a wide range of content. Anons can, and do, post offensive or derogatory content—particularly aimed toward women and other marginalized identities. They can get away with this behavior because no one knows who they are in real life and any potentially incriminating content vanishes so quickly. Much of the content posted to /b/ is considered NSFW, and many anons even joke that some of it is NSFL (not-safe-for-life). Indeed, much of the content on 4chan trends towards violence, gore, and/or pornography. Stryker (2011) points out, “there’s a common joke on /b/, where someone will find a photo of a crowd of people with faces contorted in horror, except for one guy who bears a condescending smirk. ‘Spot the 4chan user,’ says the caption” (p. 68). But not everything

\(^{14}\) Although the main site is no longer operating, archive.moe’s more than 10 terabytes of stored 4chan content is has purportedly been moved to https://archive.moe/dump/, although the site does not appear to be live.
on /b/ is so shocking. /b/ offers a hodgepodge of content that ranges from innocent to criminal.

On the whole, this can make /b/ a dizzying experience, often not for the faint of heart. Some common thread topics include

**YLYL** (you laugh you lose): users post their most hilarious content.

**Rolls**: users ask others to “roll,” or post, to try to attain a certain numerical sequence as part of their post number. The OP usually has an objective to reach (such as using the winning post as a text message to a friend).

**R8**: users post pictures—usually of themselves or their genitalia—requesting others to rate them on a scale of 1-10.

**Greentext**: users post stories using a specific feature that turns the text green. These stories typically follow a formulaic structure.

**Cringe**: users post photos of cringeworthy moments, typically showing someone doing something socially awkward.

**Porn**: 4chan loves its pornography, particularly if it involves violence or BDSM.

**Rekt**: users post violence and gore, generally involving someone being beaten and/or killed.

This is a limited list of the kinds of common topics posted to /b/, but it serves to show the wide range of content anons use to begin conversations on 4chan. Much of this content would be considered unacceptable in other digital social media that identifies users and archives their posts because it would have implications for their real-world identity.

Because they contribute to a space “where nearly anything the human mind is capable of conceiving is on display, for better or for worse” (Stryker, 2011, p. 11), not only does /b/’s design enable this wide variety of content, but so too does its lax moderation and rules. On /b/, there are two rules: 1) “ZOMG NONE!!!1 [sic],” and 2) 11 of 4chan’s 17 global rules (“Rules,” 2015). These supposedly enforced global rules explain that users should not post illegal content, personal information (including avatars or signatures), ads or spamming, or topics that explicitly belong on other boards. In addition, anons must be over the age of 18 and they must not abuse the reporting system, evade their bans (doing so will result in a perma-ban), or impersonate moderators. Most anons follow some of these rules, in part because they are so easy to follow;
not much is off-limits to them. For instance, many are on 4chan because of the anonymous and ephemeral design, so they easily refrain from posting personal information.

However, 4chan in general and /b/ in particular also have low moderation so it is easy for anons to get away with posting rule-breaking content. 4chan uses two kinds of human maintenance: moderators (mods) and janitors. Mods perform higher-level maintenance, such as “delet[ing] posts globally, ban[ning] users,” and so on (“FAQ,” 2015). Janitors perform lower-level maintenance; they “are given access to the report system and may delete posts on their assigned board(s), as well as submit ban requests” (“FAQ,” 2015). Importantly, moderators and janitors are instructed to keep their positions hidden; revealing them to other anons on the board can result in immediate termination (Phillips, 2015, p. 52). Not only are both employed on a voluntary basis, but there are only a few of them. This means that a lot of rule-breaking content slips through the cracks, especially on a busy board like /b/. There simply are not enough people to watch every thread at every moment and, given the quick turnaround time for most threads, a lot of rule-breaking content disappears before users have a chance to report it or mods and janitors have a chance to catch it. Nevertheless, despite the general laxity in moderation, most anons self-police and adhere to the rules. Those who do not are often ridiculed or ignored.

4chan’s anonymous and ephemeral design, coupled with its lax moderation, also have the potential to create a space that can display the best and worst of the Internet. Indeed, 4chan is home to both, often simultaneously. Within an hour, I witnessed two popular threads on opposite ends of the 4chan spectrum, one displaying anons as kind and compassionate and the other as bigoted and hateful. The first thread was started by a man who thanked his fellow anons for helping him out of a bad financial situation (Figure 44). The night before, he vented on /b/ that, because he and his girlfriend had recently broken up and she moved out, he was not going to be
able to pay the rent that was due the next day and would likely be evicted from his home. He was considering selling furniture to make his rent payment, but other anons sent him money through Paypal. At the same time, another anon started a rekt thread with a webm\(^\text{15}\) of a large man brutally beating a transwoman. Later in the comments, s/he clarifies that s/he wants to see “some hate crime webms.” Taken together these opposing instances accurately illustrate what a typical visit to /b/ is like. One the one hand, the users can be supportive of and caring toward each other. On the other hand, anons can post truly disturbing content. Sometimes they even manage to do both in the same thread.

![Figure 44. 4chan thread asking for help from fellow anons](https://i.imgur.com/3Q5Q5Q5.png)

/b/’s Ethos of Lawlessness and Unaccountability

Although both extremes of the content spectrum are possible on 4chan, anons often tend toward hostility, much of which stems from the ethos of lawlessness and unaccountability that is built into /b/’s design. In “A Rape in Cyberspace,” an article from the mid-90s that examines the repercussions of an incident in which a MOO\(^\text{16}\) avatar forced other avatars to perform illicit acts

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\(^{15}\) A webm is a video file format that can be embedded easily on sites like 4chan. Starting in 2014, 4chan has enabled webm embedding of video clips up to five minutes long (four megabytes). Only two boards support audio in webms, but neither are /b/.

\(^{16}\) The M in MOO stands for “MUD” (Multi-User Dimension/Domain/Dungeon); the OO stands for “object-oriented.”
against their will, Dibbell (1998) theorizes something similar. He explains that when newcomers joined the MOO as anonymous users without a set identity, they often transgressed social norms. However, those users who decided to become more permanent fixtures in the MOO realized that the room was not a playground and that, just like in the real world, there were social norms that must be followed.

[T]here were few MOOers who had not, upon their first visits as anonymous “guest” characters, mistaken the place for a vast playpen in which they might act out their wildest fantasies without fear of censure. Only with time and the acquisition of a fixed character do players tend to make the critical passage from anonymity to pseudonymity, developing the concern for their character’s reputation that marks the attainment of virtual adulthood. (Dibbell, 1998)

Dibbell’s MOOers matured from virtual children to virtual adults because the ethos of the MOO called for it. Long-time users were able to create and maintain an identity that may or may not reflect their real-life one, but they were also expected to adhere to social constraints similar to those in the real world.

4chan has developed a few social norms and regulations, but its design and ethos do not encourage the same kind of maturity. In fact, /b/ appears to be stuck in the sort of childhood that Dibbell (1998) describes, particularly because /b/ does not provide an option to progress from anonymous to pseudonymous. Poole has also recognized that his site is unique from other social media that forces users to assume responsibility for their actions: “online you have all these social networks that are moving to a state of persistent identity, and in turn, we’re sacrificing the ability to be youthful” (as quoted in Bilton, 2010). This sentiment echoes Jasmine Garsd’s (2015) view that memes immortalize young people’s moments of failure and that their publication makes their failure permanent and unescapable. Poole (2010, 2013, 2014) argues that because sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram archive users’ activities, even ones that show them
“failing”—be it a joke that didn’t land, a selfie that didn’t turn out right, a socially objectionable action, or even an old post resurfacing years later—users are forced into a virtual adulthood where they may be wary of experimenting with the content they post.

However, /b/’s ethos relies on different values than do these social media sites where users are identifiable. Its lawlessness and unaccountability remove the fear of failure. If someone posts something that does not fit the collective identity, other anons may ridicule them briefly, but that post will quickly disappear and be forgotten; moreover, no one will be able to link that failing post to any kind of individual identity. /b/’s anonymity and ephemerality also encourage anons to experiment with content and create new things, mostly memes. Poole sees 4chan’s design and ethos as a kind of deliberate forgetfulness that allows anons to fail without retribution. There is no “virtual adulthood” for /b/ as Dibbell (1998) conceives it. Instead, /b/’s design and ethos create a collective identity that revels in the “vast playpen,” calling for anons to engage in a subversive play that destabilizes the dominant social order.

/b/’s Collective Identity and Bakhtin’s Carnival

Even though 4chan is known for its antagonism and hostility, over one million17 anons call it home each day (moot, 2015). Because /b/ enforces anonymity and ephemerality, users are unable to maintain individual subject positions while participating on the board. Instead, they incorporate their individual behaviors into a larger collective identity that maintains a dauntingly large and varied subject position that, despite its many and almost innumerable facets, remains relatively stable. Gabriella Coleman (2014) explains, “this subsumption of the individual identity

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17 This figure represents the average number of daily visitors to all of 4chan’s boards as of January 26, 2015, not for /b/ specifically.
into collective identity is unusual in Western culture” (p. 46). According to Burke (1950) sees this subsumption as a natural product of identification. However, although he expects identification to lead to some kind of collectivity, Burke could not have imagined it happening on such a large scale as it does on /b/. Because 4chan does not hold a central registration, pinning down a collective identity on any of its boards is difficult; this issue is compounded on /b/ because of its fast pace and loose standards. /b/ rarely explicitly defines itself or its users as a totality. However, its constitutive rhetoric reveals some key identity markers.

Maurice Charland (1987) explains that constitutive rhetoric is “the constitution of the subject, where the subject is precisely he or she who simultaneously speaks and initiates action in discourse… and in the world” (p. 133). As users identify with the design and ethos of /b/, their language and behavior makes up, or constitutes, their social identity. Charland (1987) explains that we must recognize that one’s subject position is rhetorical: it is both a product of rhetorical discourse and able to enact it. The subject position of an anon is both an effect of discourse on the board and a subject that holds the rhetorical power to dictate discourse. The collective identity, formed through millions of users’ posts and threads, dictates what kind of content is accepted and what responses are appropriate in certain situations. Rather than challenge /b/’s norms and risk becoming objects of ridicule and trolling, anons usually opt to acquiesce to them. At the same time that the collective identity appears to strip rhetorical power from individual anons, it paradoxically also relies on them to exercise rhetorical power by enforcing and reinforcing behaviors that fit with the collective identity. Identity formation on 4chan becomes part of a recursive process where the individual identity submits to the collective identity while the collective is informed by the individual actions of its users. Anons ridicule and troll those who stray from /b/’s norms, but even these actions illustrate a subsumption into the collective
identity. An analysis of some of the most frequent kinds of posts reveals that /b/’s collective identity sees itself as an outsider from the mainstream; anons engage in performances of anti-PC white, heteronormative masculinity that paradoxically pervert and subvert what it means to be “white,” “heteronormative,” and “masculine” while also denigrating other outsider identities.

Many anons refer to themselves as “betas” while setting themselves apart from “alphas.” An alpha is a person who fits the stereotype of the most perfect form of masculinity: he is popular, fit, good-looking, and always has a beautiful girlfriend. An alpha gets everything he wants—especially but not always limited to sexual desires—while the betas are left bitter and downtrodden at their failed efforts to draw the attention of women.\(^{18}\) A classic alpha/beta scenario involves an anon who is attracted to a platonic female friend (in some situations he befriends her first then realizes he desires her, in others he befriends her just so he can find a way to prove himself worthy of her; in all situations the beta relies on the female friend to initiate an intimate relationship), but just before he can make his true feelings known he is usurped by an alpha who sweeps her off her feet and leaves the beta in the “friendzone.”\(^{19}\) Such a construction depicts anons as outsiders, or people who fall lower on the social hierarchy than the alphas.\(^{20}\) However, while this identity performance appears to be one of the most widespread on /b/, it is not the only one. Plenty of anons on /b/ refer to themselves as alphas, and in some threads such

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\(^{18}\) Betas often refer to themselves as a male, but not always. Some female anons refer to themselves as betas, but the sentiment behind the term remains the same: a girl who does not fit in with the popular crowd and cannot attract a good-looking man as a mate.

\(^{19}\) In popular culture, the term “friendzone” is usually used when one platonic partner (usually a male) has sexual inclinations for the other (usually a woman), but the other does not share the same affections. The term is problematic because it suggests that the friendzoned person is somehow entitled to a sexual relationship and that his/her position is unjust. In reality, the term unfairly puts the responsibility of one person’s rejection on the other.

\(^{20}\) Sometimes also referred to as Chads (for males) and Stacies (for women).
distinction is unnecessary and other identity factors arise. One thing all of these identity constructions share is some notion that anons are social outcasts. The identifying factors behind this outsider status surface in a number of ways in the most frequent kinds of posts.

First, /b/ often defines itself negatively against other popular digital social media sites, most frequently Tumblr, a blogging interface known for its inclusive community and support for feminist, LGBTQ+, and other social justice issues as well as engagement with popular geek fandoms. /b/ situates itself antithetically to it. In 2012, Tumblr and /b/ took turns raiding each other’s sites—the former with Harry Potter images and other cutesy memes, the latter with gore and pornography. The two communities have been at odds since, with 4chan deliberately speaking out against anything Tumblr favors in a playfully antagonistic manner. For instance, certain Tumblr users are cautious when discussing controversial issues and often give trigger warnings: a user on Tumblr may alert potential readers that his/her post contains triggering content for survivors of trauma. 4chan does not believe in triggers or trigger warnings, so they make fun of this practice by trolling each other with memes making false declarations of having been triggered. If a user posts gore to a thread on /b/, other users will playfully antagonize Tumblr users—regardless if any are there to see it—by posting something like the meme depicted in Figure 45. The woman pictured in this meme is Melody Hensley, who claims that she suffers PTSD from content she read on Tumblr (Malm, 2014). Whether or not her testimony from Daily Mail, a British tabloid, can be trusted, /b/ has appropriated and remixed her photo into an image macro meme. The joke is that the anon who posts the meme has not been “triggered”; s/he is not reliving a past trauma as a result of the gore content. The notions behind these memes is that those dealing with trauma or who are sensitive to others’ trauma are weak and worthy of ridicule. This is only one example of how /b/ takes an issue that some may
consider serious and trivializes it through their playful subversions. Anons reinforce their outsider status by alienating and distancing themselves from other popular social media sites.

![Image](TRIGGERED.png)

Figure 45. Triggered meme

Such practices also reveal some key outsider aspects of /b/’s collective identity: it is based in performances of anti-PC sentiment that manifests as misogynistic, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist behaviors. Such behavior is especially apparent in the derogatory terms anons commonly use. In the span of one thread, pejorative terms like “faggot” or “nigger” can be used as insults, flattery, or self-identification. Anons append the word “fag” to the ends of certain words—for example, a “newfag” is a new anon and an “oldfag” is a seasoned veteran of 4chan—and call anyone “nigger” regardless of race.\(^2\) Phillips (2012a) explains that these terms are “what anons describe themselves as and as what anons distance themselves from.” Anons use these and many other socially objectionable terms liberally and carelessly, engaging in a wordplay that disregards the social norms that distinguish them as reprehensible. The terms can

\(^2\) Another term, “autist,” is used solely to insult another anon, usually for breaking from the collective identity.
come to signify so many possible things in the course of one thread that it can be difficult to keep track of what each means in a single instance. To a seasoned anon, these words are plastic; they mean what they need to mean in the context of the conversation. To a non-anon, such language is shocking, offensive, and potentially confusing. Coleman (2014) speculates that anons intentionally use this kind of language, creating “a discursively constructed border fence meant to keep the uninitiated” out of the discourse community (p. 42). Whether anons do it intentionally or not, they use their offensive language as a tool to build a boundary between themselves and non-anons; they work diligently to perpetuate their outsider status.

Poole defends these bigoted practices on 4chan. He argues that the freedom anonymity and ephemerality provide is rare but important because they create a space where users can be “wrong”; they can engage in a cathartic experience by posting things that are culturally or socially objectionable without it impacting their real lives. Poole explains, “I get a lot of email messages from people who say thanks for giving them a place to vent, an outlet to say what they can’t say in real life with friends and work colleagues—things that they know are wrong but they still want to say” (as quoted in Bilton, 2010). danah boyd’s (2014) study of teenagers’ uses of digital social media supports Poole’s claims: “more often than not, teens talked about wanting to have a space where they weren’t constantly scrutinized by adults and peers” and were able to speak free from consequences (p. 43). Even journalists see the value of this digital anonymity and ephemerality: “the frequency of offensive language and slurs… would seem to suggest users just crave a place to shake off any and all social rules” (Dewey, 2014). From this perspective,

22 Interestingly, although anons liberally call themselves “fags” and “niggers” the tone changes depending on whom they are describing. When they call themselves by these terms, it is rarely offensive; however, when they call others, particularly those who identify outside of the term anon, by these terms it is meant as an insult.
4chan appears to serve as a digital equivalent to Bakhtin’s (2009) carnival, a moment when the line between individual and collective is erased and the collective engages in cathartic play and consequence-free social transgression. Like the carnival, /b/ seems to be an opportunity for free expression. But the behaviors on 4chan are not quite so innocent or simple. In Bakhtin’s (2009) conception of the carnival, lower social orders subvert the dominant. Given /b/’s construction of themselves as outsiders to mainstream society such a distinction appears fitting.

However, /b/’s usership does not appear to denote an oppressed minority. Phillips (2015) determines a “number of basic demographic indicators” of 4chan trolls (p. 53), which comprise a large subset of anons: 1) posts are written in English and engage with American culture; 2) users need free time, money, and access to technology, which indicates some level of economic privilege; and 3) based on “the proliferation of 1980s and early 1990s pop culture references,” users are probably members of Generation Y (Phillips, 2015, p. 53-4). This assessment is backed by 4chan’s own demographic data: their “Advertise” page estimates that around 70% of its users are men, 47% are from the United States, and the largest age range is from 18-34 (“Advertise,” 2015). These demographic indicators show that the average anon is likely a young, middle-class, American man. Further, the term “anon” is steeped in assumptions of whiteness, heteronormativity, and masculinity. “Anon” is the default moniker for anyone on 4chan, but “femanon” demarcates woman-identifying anons. In addition, there is no distinction for other sexualities, genders, races, or ethnicities. Instead, these identity markers are only identified by

23 However, there are two things to note here: these statistics apply to all of 4chan, not just /b/, and it is not clear how recent this information is, nor how 4chan performed these analytics in the absence of a central user database.

24 Although I will later use the term “transanon” to denote an anon who self-identifies as transgender, /b/ does not use this word because they do not consider transpeople as part of their collective identity.
derogatory terms such as “sand-nigger” (Muslims in particular, but anyone from the Middle East generally fits into this category), “chink” (Asians), “Injun” (Native Americans), and “tranny” (transpeople), to name only a very few. Many of these terms are common slang, and some have fallen out of standard practice in mainstream society—occasionally “negro” appears—but /b/ uses them frequently. A broad umbrella term anons use for anyone who identifies as anything other than white, heteronormative, or male is “degenerate”; they call the content these “degenerates” post or the ideas they have “cancer.” The sentiment behind these two terms is that anyone who does not fit some kind of white, heteronormative, masculine norm is an other—sometimes even a “subhuman” (another anon favorite)—and the beliefs they hold are a disease that corrupts and kills.

These constitutive terms and others show that anything other than identification with some kind of anti-PC white masculinity results in exclusion from the term “anon.” Notably, the ideals behind this performance do not reflect current, mainstream ideals of a white heteronormative masculine identity. Instead, they fall somewhere between a kind of retro 1950s ideology and the Nazism of World War II. Some anons make remarks such as “all women belong in the kitchen” or “all black people belong on the back of the bus” that reflect the racism and sexism of mid-twentieth-century America, and some use propagandistic language that often just comes short of calling for the genocide of all non-Aryan races and queer sexualities. Perhaps it goes without saying that, because many of his views align with this version of American masculinity, Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign appears to resonate quite strongly with some anons. Through this language and these terms, anons appear to perform an extreme, toxic form of this anti-PC white heteronormative masculinity.
On the one hand anons talk about themselves as betas who have been cast out by the alphas, and on the other hand, their language and terms purposefully alienate others through a denial of any identity that doesn’t fit an anti-PC white heteronormative masculinity. This contradiction is demonstrated in the above examples of an anon who couldn’t make rent and an anon who requested hate crime webms and gifs. The first displays characteristics that correspond to /b/’s demographic identity—young, white, heteronormative, and male—while also matching the beta mentality—down-on-his-luck and rejected by a woman. As such, other anons were keen to help him. Had he described himself as a marginalized identity (non-white, queer-identifying, or woman), they would have been much less likely to help him. Simultaneously, the second anon asks of others, “Got any similar webms where gays/traps, jews, niggers or any other subhuman scum gets rekt?” This statement positioned him/her as a typical anon while simultaneously asserting his/her distance from so-called “subhumans” who do not fit this criterion. Such seemingly contradictory identities are common on /b/, but they appear to serve a distinct purpose.

Both of these identity constructions are performances that allow them to subvert dominant hierarchies in two ways. First, they shake off their beta-status through an identity performance that situates them above all races, genders, and sexualities. They perform a perverted version of white heteronormative masculinity that allows them to feel as though they have gone from the bottom of the pecking order to the top. Then, once anons reach the top of the social hierarchy, they use their newfound identity prowess to continue subverting mainstream ideologies from a heightened position on the hierarchy. They use their constructed position of authority to disrupt the mainstream and ostracize other outsiders. As a result, with the current mainstream popularity of feminism and queer-positive social movements, 4chan sees those modes as the dominant social order—a kind of authority—that must be toppled. Anons have
taken it upon themselves to subvert and parody these social justice movements in a carnivalesque manner with the goal of stripping them of authoritative power.

However, it is important to stress that all of this subversive power play on /b/ is just that: play. This is illustrated in content like “The Internet is Serious Business” meme25 (“The Internet,” 2010). This meme is a sarcastic comment aimed at people who take too seriously the things they see or read online. It often juxtaposes a seriously dressed business person with the caption declaring the seriousness of the Internet, or, in the case of Figure 46, it includes something humorous to emphasize just how not-serious the Internet is. Such image macro memes appear often in threads on /b/ that attempt to discuss a serious topic, particularly if one anon is or acts offended by a post’s content. This meme is also convenient because if someone accuses /b/ of being sexist, homophobic, or any other –ist or –phobic, they can use their playful nature as a defense, claiming that they were just joking.

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25 Here and in the next paragraph, when I use “meme” I am referring to Internet memes such as image macros.
The sentiments behind “The internet is serious business” carry over into many different aspects of /b/’s behavior. One example of subversive play is anons’ aforementioned proclivity to use memes to discount trigger warnings. Because these trigger warnings are backed by movements and communities against which /b/ defines itself, and because they defy the cultural norms on which /b/ is based, anons actively work to belittle these inclusive efforts. One common way anons do this is by adding the word “muh”—meant to sound as if someone is simultaneously saying “my” and sobbing like a child—before a word or two that represents what they are making fun of. In the case of trigger warnings, it’s “muh triggers.” When added to an image and made into a meme, such phrases become a playful derision meant to denigrate trigger warnings and those who use them while also subverting dominant social norms (Figure 47). Through this meme and other playful subversions like it, anons simultaneously grasp social power by performing a perverted version of the alpha while also using their constructed alpha stance to flip power dynamics. Instead of giving mainstream movements authority, they give power to the anti-PC version of masculinity. Often it seems as though anons undermine movements like the one calling for trigger warnings for no other reason than because they have achieved mainstream popularity and some kind of social authority.

Figure 47. Muh Triggers meme
As a carnivalesque reversal of a dominant social hierarchy, the subversion /b/’s collective identity enacts has the potential for two possible outcomes: either /b/’s collective identity calls attention to and critiques its dominant discourses and values or it reinforces them. Phillips argues the former: she believes that the behaviors on /b/ take anti-PC ideals to a hostile extreme in order to criticize them. However, when considering the effects of these playfully subversive behaviors on /b/, it is important to consider how they are perceived. Many visitors—and likely even some participating anons—do not see the performance aspect. They do not understand the irony behind /b/’s behavior and instead assume that their behavior is a reflection of reality or an extension of these anonymous people’s real-world identities. In light of the free-flowing racist and sexist slurs on /b/ and their tendency to mock anyone who does not fit the retro-1950s/Nazi white heteronormative masculine ideal, /b/’s behavior becomes problematic because anons base their collective identity in often hostilely othering and marginalizing anyone who does not fit into a young, white, heteronormative male identity. As such, rather than subverting the dominant social order through their subversive play, as is the goal of Bakhtin’s (2009) carnival, /b/’s collective identity instead reinforces it.

Gender and /b/’s Collective Identity

Behavior on 4chan also largely appears to be a recapitulation of how other anons have historically behaved; anons copy or mimic what they think is the appropriate way to act on /b/. When journalists or other popular media essayists write and talk about 4chan, they tend to center on its negative qualities. New users who visit the board are generally influenced by stories of 4chan’s destructive language and disruptive meming. Before they even visit /b/ for the first time, most users form an idea of how they are supposed to act based on what they already know about
4chan. This idea is reinforced once they visit the board and witness the collective identity in action. Michael Leff (2003) explains that individuals commonly submit to “tradition” when joining a new community: “Inclusion within a tradition shapes the individual self” (p. 140). Part of why anons behave the way they do is because they are expected to do so, thus subsuming their individual identity into the collective identity. Anons establish new identifications with an unchanging design and ethos and what they think 4chan is supposed to be more so than with each other. Because collective identities “only exist through an ideological discourse that constitutes them” (Charland, 1987, p. 139), and because users maintain 4chan’s ideology through its design, ethos, and collective identity, /b/ has entered an identity stasis. The collective identity is essentially stuck in a feedback loop of its own identity-constructing content; any changes are small and take a long time to manifest. Thus, the same tired narratives appear uncritically over and over again in thread after thread after thread.

I will use two examples to illustrate how /b/’s static collective identity performance excludes and others marginalized identities. In the first example, I look at the demeaning “Tits or GTFO” phenomenon (shorthand for “show your tits or get the fuck out”) and how anons’ responses to a self-identifying woman’s thread reveal the automatic and uncritical nature of their behavior and collective identity. In the second, I examine a moment when a self-identifying transgender woman uses constitutive rhetoric to defend her decision to transition. This discussion ruptures the collective identity and exposes its performative nature. Both instances are noteworthy—because anons are assumed male unless otherwise noted—the femanon and transanon must each assert individual identities that are not part of the collective identity; one decides to follow the standard behavior of the board, and the other chooses to challenge it. These two instances are also significant because they come from threads grounded in sex and
pornography: the femanon who started the Tits or GTFO thread asked for pornography recommendations, and the thread to which the transanon responded was dedicated to a trans pornstar who had recently overdosed. This sexualization of women is not uncommon on /b/. As one might assume given the nature of /b/’s collective identity performance, anons generally treat women as sexual objects over which males (particularly those on /b/) hold power, reinforcing tired social hierarchies that place men above women.

**Tits or GTFO and Memetic Behavior**

In many Internet chat forums, including but not limited to 4chan, oftentimes when a woman self-identifies, users command her to “Tits or GTFO.” *Know Your Meme* has traced this meme’s origins back to 2006. Not only is it Rule 31 of 4chan’s “Rules of the Internet”\(^26\) (2015) but it also stems from the implications of three other rules: Rule 30—the tired assumption that “there are no girls on the Internet”—and Rules 28 and 29—suggestions that anyone claiming to be a woman is lying (“Rules of the Internet,” 2015). Ironically, men first used it as a defense mechanism against male trolls pretending to be women; these trolls were either trying to gain advantages in MMORPGs\(^27\) or seeking to achieve general lulz\(^28\) at the unsuspecting man’s expense. However, it quickly evolved into a form of antagonistic trolling against women in digital spaces, particularly /b/. 4chan has even provided handy images to help women understand how Tits or GTFO works (Figure 48).

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\(^{26}\) The “Rules of the Internet” is an Internet meme. They are not actual rules to which users must adhere on 4chan.

\(^{27}\) MMORPG means Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. IE: *World of Warcraft*, *Runescape*, *Lord of the Rings Online* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic*.

\(^{28}\) Lulz, a bastardized form of “lol” (“laughing out loud”) that denotes a kind of schadenfreude, is “an aggressive form of laughter derived from eliciting strong emotional reactions” (Phillips, “What an…”) from a target of trolling.
In its early days, the meme was used specifically to limit women’s capacity for speech. In the decade since its incarnation, it has become more elastic, often used as a general dismissal (i.e.: “And if you don’t like it, Tits or GTFO,” “Tits or GTFO,” 2012). However, despite its newly acquired meaning as a brush-off phrase, it remains a long-held rite of passage that femanons must accomplish to be able to speak as self-identifying femanons on /b/ and other areas of 4chan.

As Milner explains (2013a), “A female wanting to make her gender identity salient during a discussion must make it physically explicit” (p. 81). This is problematic because it puts the responsibility of proving the accuracy of identity statements onto the woman who wishes to identify as such, something male anons need not do because their maleness is accepted as a given part of the collective identity. An examination of the Tits or GTFO meme on 4chan illustrates the problematic nature of the behavior it engenders.

The original sentiment of Tits or GTFO was often malicious trolling where anons harassed a self-identifying woman until she “left” (by posing as a new poster, remaining silent, or actually leaving) or gave in and posted a photo revealing her breasts. Such actions were simultaneously demeaning to femanons and the source of much virtual high-fiving and
malevolent laughter among other anons. However, nearly a decade later almost no one is laughing anymore. Instead, Tits or GTFO has become almost hollowly performative, a product of 4chan’s design, ethos, and collective identity. Many self-identifying women who post on /b/ have taken to preempting the phrase by showing timestamped images\textsuperscript{29} of themselves shirtless in their first posts. If a woman does not do so, she is met with a flood of “Tits or GTFO” responses, to which she usually replies with a timestamped image. No matter which route she decides to take, once the woman posts the image of herself, the thread generally returns to its primary conversation topic. In the past, anons would often rate a woman’s photo on a scale of 1-10, judge it (usually harshly, no matter what the woman looked like), laugh at it, or compliment it; they would objectify and further silence the woman who wished to speak. Such behavior still exists, but it happens far less frequently and with far less intensity. Most anons do not acknowledge the photo once the woman has posted it.\textsuperscript{30}

During the month I studied /b/, I witnessed the modern Tits or GTFO meme many times. One notable instance was when a pregnant bisexual femanon started a thread in which she posted a fully-clothed picture of herself along with a request for links to lesbian pornography. She was immediately met with a chorus of “TITS OR GTFO!” from close to 30 anons. She resisted at first, claiming that because she’s had children and breastfed them that her breasts are “nothing special” and that no one would want to see them; she didn’t think they would be sexually appealing to the other users. With each new post she included a different, fully-clothed selfie.

\textsuperscript{29} Accusations of Photoshopping or taking images from Google searches are rampant on 4chan, so users add a timestamp to any photos they claim to take themselves. This includes but is not limited to the women who post shirtless photos to fulfill the Tits or GTFO requirement.

\textsuperscript{30} However, we cannot account for lurkers—users who watch threads without participating—or even other anons who may save the images to their hard drives. There is no way to measure how often either happens, but they undoubtedly do.
During this exchange, more anons had stumbled upon the post and were adding to the Tits or GTFO cacophony, but most were explaining that the meme has little to do with sexual appeal. One anon greentexted “>thinking tits or gtfo is about getting us off” (Figure 49) while another posted an image of the “4chan Guide for /b/itches” (Figure 50) with a bored looking femanon, both of which reinforced this explanation. Both posts were thinly veiled admissions that forcing a woman to post her breasts in a public forum has little to do with sex and everything to do with asserting social dominance. Finally, the femanon obliged the anonymous masses and posted a timestamped photo of her breasts. A few anons responded directly to the photo, saying things like “that wasn’t so bad, was it?” and “nice. not too bad,” thus showing that the Tits or GTFO meme still results in some femanon objectification. But notably most anons did not even acknowledge the photo. Instead, they began answering her original question and continued the conversation as if the exchange did not happen. It was only mentioned after the fact when new anons joined the thread and continued to post “TITS OR GTFO!” even after she had done it. In such instances, anons responded by explaining that she had already “paid her dues.”

Figure 49. Tits or GTFO greentext
This instance illustrates the strength of /b/’s established collective identity. When anons see a thread or post with a self-identifying woman, they pounce with the time honored “Tits or GTFO!” The fact that so many fresh instances occurred after the femanon had completed her rite of passage shows how much this behavior has been ingrained in them. Many anons did not read the thread before clicking into it and posting and most of them did not participate in the main conversation; only between five and nine anons out of close to 80 responded to her inquiry. After the initial pornography conversation wrapped up and the main conversers, including the femanon, had ostensibly left, the thread kept itself alive for an extra 10 minutes on new “Tits or GTFO” posts alone. By the time the thread expired there were 86 occasions of the phrase.

Such an instance is remarkable because it shows how users behave the way the collective identity expects them to and that they will act on that expectation almost automatically. Interestingly, because the “Tits or GTFO” proclaimers were so fixated on commanding a woman to show her breasts for the sake of performing the action, they spent virtually no time interacting with each other—except for the occasional “fuck off” when telling others that the femanon had already posted her photo. This shows a strong identification with 4chan’s design and ethos and

Figure 50. 4chan Guide for /b/itches
/b/’s collective identity instead of with each other. But this kind of hostile identification through silencing is dangerous, particularly because it is an act of some form of white heteronormative masculinity silencing a bisexual woman of indiscernible race. Even though Tits or GTFO has lost much of its trolling potency, it still remains a method of asserting social dominance over a marginalized identity. Although few people are laughing and the women are not particularly embarrassed anymore, it remains a roadblock to women exercising their voices in a digital space.

On 4chan, singling out women for this objectifying treatment—even if it is a performance—reinforces a social hierarchy that considers women to be second-rate citizens at best. According to Butler (1997), injurious utterances and hate speech, two categories to which “Tits or GTFO” and its potentially disenfranchising implications belong, have the power to force a user “to reoccupy a subordinate subject position” (p. 18). Thus, when anons use the phrase to demand that a woman show her breasts before speaking in a public forum, they “wield sovereign power, to do what he or she says when it is said” (Butler, 1997, p. 16). They empower themselves on /b/ through their implied maleness while disempowering the woman who wishes to speak. Certainly, the anons who exclaim “Tits or GTFO” every time a woman self-identifies on /b/ act as though their performed masculinity puts them in a position of power unattainable by women. This behavior indicates that such alienating language “does not merely reflect relations of social domination …. [It] enacts domination, becoming the vehicle through which that social structure is reinstated” (Butler, 1997, p. 18). Even if this behavior is a performance, it still results in marginalization. Thus, self-identifying women are simultaneously a part of /b/’s collective identity through playing their role in Tits or GTFO and apart from it because they are stripped of the power to speak as themselves without being silenced. Spivak (1988) would go a step further and argue that women are unable to join the collective identity because such instances afford
them no rhetorical power: “the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female [power]” (p. 78). Regardless, the phrase “reifies the board as a male space” (Milner, 2013a, p. 81). Even though few seem to be laughing or embarrassed, the behavior surrounding this phrase makes it clear that there is no room for women in /b/’s collective identity.

**Transanons and Collective Identity Rupture**

As the Tits or GTFO example shows, once a collective identity is created, like the one on /b/, it exists pre-communication and the user must adhere to it before speaking. Charland (1987) explains that the constitutive rhetoric that drives it “is part of the discursive background of social life…. [It is] the con-text, the pre-rhetoric that is necessary to any successful interpellation” into a social group (p. 147). This “interpellation occurs at the very moment one enters a rhetorical situation […] and participates in the discourse that addresses him [or her]” (Charland, 1987, p. 138). In other words, an anon is interpellated into the collective identity when they participate in a thread according to the rules of the collective identity. The word “interpellation” works to describe initiation into 4chan’s collective identity for a couple of reasons. First, Charland (1987) uses the term in the Althusserian sense, referring to “the process of inscribing subjects into an ideology” (p. 138). To successfully participate on /b/, anons must identify—or at least convincingly perform identification—with the anarchic and antagonistic culture behind the interface’s ethos. Second, “interpellate” denotes a relationship with power. Those who successfully identify with and interpellate to the design and ethos hold power on 4chan, while those who refuse to do not.
Interpellation explains why the collective identity holds so much more power than the individual anons on /b/. As Charland (1987) explains, “the identifications of social identity [that result in interpellation…] are discursive effects that induce human cooperation” (p. 133). According to Charland (1987), there would be no room for dissent in a collective identity. Burke (1950) notes that identification implies the need to overcome a division from other humans. Thus, a collective identity must exist at the level of pure identification and show no dysfunction. Ratcliffe believes that when differences arise in identification, the differing parties “learn to submit” to the power in charge, or to the collective identity (p. 60). On 4chan, this would mean that anyone who conflicts with the collective identity either learns to behave as expected or at least refrains from openly dissenting. Generally, this is true; new anons often seem to go through an assimilation period where they make obvious newbie mistakes\(^3\) and are ridiculed for them. The users then change their behavior to fit with the collective identity; they “learn to submit” to it. This seems to contradict Poole’s (2010, 2013, 2014) assertion for 4chan’s value: he argues that it is a place where users are supposed to be able to assume any identity they want to without consequence. But this is not how identity manifests on /b/. Instead, anons have developed a mob mentality and are subsumed into something that looks like a monolithic whole. Rather than creating a utopic identity-haven where users can fully explore all of the fragments of their identities, anons must instead conform to a single collective identity.

Thus, when an anon self-identifies with something other than an anti-PC white, heteronormative masculinity, /b/’s collective identity chooses from a range of memetic responses to punish them and correct their behavior. For women, this is where anons use the Tits or GTFO

\(^3\) Such as responding to something humorous with “lol” instead of the 4chan variants “lel” or “kek.”
meme to police behavior according to the collective identity’s expectations. However, for transpeople the memetic response is not quite so overtly formulaic. Instead, it is openly hostile and violent and it refuses transanons the ability to eventually speak even in the limited way Tits or GTFO eventually does for women. Transpeople are quite possibly the identity that /b/’s collective identity performance marginalizes the most savagely and intensely. In general, anons disparage and openly mock the idea that people can identify as another gender or sex than what they were biologically born as. They appear to be even more outraged that these individuals are allowed to choose to transform their bodies to more closely fit their identification. This sentiment is seen in more lighthearted posts like “I identify as Bill Gates. I must be given his bank account or I’ll sue” and “I sexually identify as an attack helicopter” (Figure 51).

But such mellow joking is not the norm. It is far more common to see anons performing aggressive antagonism toward transpeople on 4chan (recall also the previously discussed “#transage” movement). If anons hostilely discourage women’s self-identification on /b/, they appear to be even less tolerant of transpeople’s self-identification. Regardless, some transanons are unwilling to fully interpellate to and identify with the collective identity’s disavowal of their subject position. An examination of two instances where transwomen self-identify reveals 4chan’s reaction to trans self-disclosure. In particular, the transwoman in the second example employs constitutive rhetoric to self-disclose within the constraints of the collective identity; as a
result, she exposes the performance behind these memetic responses and shows that, once ruptured, the fabric holding together the collective identity is quite fragile.

During some preliminary research on /b/ in April 2015, I followed a thread that began with a transwoman discussing why she identifies as trans. She explained, “I am not defined by what’s between my legs. I am neither [sic] a boy or a girl, yet I am both. I will not allow you to put a label on me.” She explains that she is a gender fluid transwoman: some days she identifies and presents as a man, but on most she identifies and presents as a woman. On this day, she explained that she was a woman, which is why I refer to her as a transwoman. She accompanied each post with a photo, possibly of herself. Her posts were met with a flurry of vitriol that equate sex with gender, problematically considering them as binaries instead of recognizing that they are separate and exist on their own continua. This discussion illustrated that anons appear to believe there are only men and women with nothing in between. In response to a comment about how she does not let chromosomes dictate her identity, one anon replied, “Actually that’s exactly what it means… unless you’re someone with an xy chromosome and a vagina.. in that case you should probably just kill yourself you mutant freak.” Another responded, “I hope this thing fucking drops dead.” Figure 52 presents another example of this hate speech. These replies are a small sample of 4chan’s memetic responses to trans identities and self-disclosing transpeople.

My knowledge of 4chan’s trolling practices require me to acknowledge that the transwoman original poster (OP) may have been a trolling anon attempting to get a rise out of his/her fellow anons, which would explain not only the lack of timestamped images—all were of the same person, but may not have been of herself—but also his/her persistence in continuing to reply despite the fact that his/her arguments were clearly not making any headway on the issue of trans acceptance. Nonetheless, the vehemence of the anons’ responses, which are by no means an
isolated occurrence, reveals that /b/’s memetic response to transpeople is characterized by hatred, intolerance, threats of violence, and other prejudiced sentiments. /b/’s collective identity has firmly placed transpeople on the outside. Whereas women are allowed to speak after performing a rite of passage, anons deny transpeople the right to their identity no matter what they try to say.

However, another instance where a self-identifying transwoman engaged in a conversation about what it means to be trans constitutes a rupture in these memetic responses and in the collective identity. The thread began with an announcement that a famous transgendered pornstar had recently died from a drug overdose; as with the first trans thread, the OP could have been either a genuine sympathizer or a troll looking to antagonize his/her fellow anons. The first half of the thread was a combination of a few sympathizers who expressed their regret at the untimely death of a young person and the same kinds of intolerant sentiments expressed in the previous trans thread. In particular, the anti-trans anons focused on pronouns, preferring to intentionally mislabel the deceased transwoman as “he/him” or “it” instead of “she/her”; the post beginning the thread also used the incorrect pronoun. About halfway into the thread, a self-disclosing, post-op transwoman joined the conversation. As with the first transanon, her self-identification constitutes a break from the collective identity. Anons are not supposed to identify outside of the collective identity, so identifying as trans is certainly considered an unacceptable breach of the collective. She began by expressing her disdain for
popular transwomen, referring in particular to Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox, who she claimed are only concerned with money and popularity. She accompanied her original post with a photo of herself in a dress; subsequent posts included images of her both wearing a bra (twice because she forgot to timestamp the first one) and topless.

Amazingly, although she openly identified as trans and posted photos to prove it, she garnered little negative attention from the other anons. According to the memetic formula for responding to self-identifying transanons, the other anons should have ridiculed her beliefs and decisions in vehemently aggressive terms. But they didn’t. There were some who called her a hypocrite for disliking popular transwomen because they want attention when that’s exactly what she was doing, and a few others criticized her for the list of admittedly stereotypical feminine activities she claimed to enjoy doing. She was also objectified by a few anons—two asked for nude pictures and one requested she write his name on her chest and post another photo—but surprisingly few, considering the board. Instead, most of the anti-trans comments were directed at the OP and the transwoman who overdosed, not the self-identifying transanon. This example displays a rupture in the collective identity’s memetic behavior: the anons did not behave in the way they were expected to, showing a disavowal for their identification to the interface’s design, ethos, and collective identity.

Part of the disparity between responses to the first transwoman and the second involves how each either identified or refused to identify with /b/’s collective identity. The first made no such attempts. Seasoned anons recognized her rhetoric immediately: to them, she looked and sounded like a typical Tumblr SJW.32 She posted images of her face, although she is looking

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32 An “SJW” is a “social justice warrior,” a term 4chan coined to refer to anyone who speaks up for a social justice cause (ie: feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, issues of race, etc). Anons believe that people who do so are insincere
away from the camera (Figure 53). These, coupled with her non-binary definitions of sex and gender and her beliefs that identity is fluid, immediately set her apart from /b/’s collective identity. Moreover, although she was open to using profanity in her posts, she did not use the same harshly disparaging tone that most anons do. In one comment, she exclaims,

honestly i cant control how much i dislike people who are racist or homophobic or transphobic i used to be polite in my arguments so that whoever i was arguing against would take me seriously but that never got me very far. fuck you for bringing harm to innocent people and then hiding behind “it’s just MY opinion!!” yeah it’s JUST your opinion? well your opinions have death tolls and body counts, shut the fuck up [sic, all errors].

Such a comment was not well-received by the anons, in large part because her outraged tone set herself outside of the collective identity. Although anons often express anger in bitter tones, it is rarely in defense of an SJW issue like arguing against racism, homophobia, and transphobia. This transwoman reveals that she is not part of the collective identity because she operates outside of the discursive barrier the collective identity has constructed.

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keyboard activists who are looking for positive attention from others instead of actual social change (“Social Justice”). On 4chan, calling someone an SJW is meant to be an insult.
On the other hand, the second transgender woman employed constitutive rhetoric that immediately told other anons that, despite her individual identification as a transwoman, she nonetheless considers herself a member of /b/’s collective identity. Her first post took steps toward this by setting herself apart from other transpeople and Tumblr SJWs through maligning famous transwomen American society has recently praised, thus signaling to other anons that she would not take a traditional SJW approach toward the conversation. She also demonstrated extensive knowledge of 4chan’s norms. The photos she posted follow 4chan’s unspoken guidelines for composition: she only included the necessary details and notably, because this was not a R8 thread, she kept her face out of frame and her identity anonymous (Figure 54).

Similarly, although she was defending what an anon would consider to be a classic SJW stance, she did so according to 4chan’s terms. One anon told her, “If you have a Y chromosomes [sic], you are a male. You are one dumb mother fucker if you think otherwise.” She replied by explaining, “I didn’t say I was a real girl though. I said I live my life as one. Are you that autistic to not understand the difference?” She did a couple important things here to show identification
with the collective identity. First, she negated her individual identity by saying that she only “live[s her] life as [a woman].” However, in earlier posts she explained that she has undergone full transition surgery and in later posts she said she takes hormones to increase her estrogen; she does more to maintain her individual identity than her casual dismissal lets on. Second, she employed one of 4chan’s favorite pejorative terms: “autistic,” often used as a more offensive version of the already offensive term “retarded,” usually meaning stupid but sometimes taking on a more hostile connotation.33 /b/ in particular employs this term to insult anons who do not follow the collective identity’s norms, so when the transgender woman uses it to dismiss the anon’s remarks about chromosomes she simultaneously firmly affixes herself within the collective identity while setting the other anon outside of it.

At the same time, the transanon’s display of rhetorical power reveals a rupture in the collective identity. The first trans example aligns with the collective identity’s sentiment toward transpeople: hatred and intentional misunderstanding and mislabeling. However, after the second transwoman uses constitutive rhetoric to self-disclose and assert power, she opens the possibility for rational discourse about transpeople. The first few responses follow the typical memetic formula, such as the one in the previous paragraph and a few others that express similar sentiments. But after the transwoman uses constitutive rhetoric to respond to these attacks, the nature of the responses shifts. First, another trans person speaks up briefly to self-identify and agree that s/he also “hate[s] Bruce Jenner” (Figure 55). Then, the transanon takes questions about her transition (how it worked, what they did with/to her genitalia) and why she has little respect

33 The Encyclopedia Dramatica, a collection of 4chan terminology and expressions, uses the word “autist” to describe someone who is “devoid of empathy, social reasoning, social context, or self-awareness” (“Asperger’s Syndrome,” 2015).
for publicly-visible transpeople. Another anon even states that s/he thinks his/her friend is in “trans-denial” and asks for advice on how to broach the subject with him/her. This type of civil discourse about transpeople and trans identity is practically unheard-of in this corner of 4chan; other boards, like /lgbt/ or /soc/ might be more open to such topics, but /b/’s collective identity has repeatedly illustrated its hostility toward them.

Much of this openness could stem from the fact that the thread began as a commemoration for a recently deceased transwoman; it was a sympathy thread. The collective identity manifested in full force in the beginning of the thread through its characteristic contempt toward transpeople, but one transwoman’s refusal to completely identify with /b/’s collective identity provided a small enough rupture that shaped the discourse around transpeople, even if only for a short time. Other posts on /b/, both at the same time and recently, have reverted to their standard anti-trans sentiments. Although the collective identity’s performance ruptured, it was only temporary. Still, this rupture shows the collective identity’s fragility. In the fifteen or so minutes during which this conversation happened, transanons on this thread were able to simultaneously assert their individuality while remaining part of the collective identity.
The Problem with Constitutive Rhetoric on /b/

The transanon’s constitutive rhetoric was effective in providing a small window of trans acceptance on /b/; however, its social and cultural implications are complex. What follows her explanation is a relatively civil discussion—by 4chan standards—of transgender lifestyle during which the anon concerned with chromosomes admits, “I’m fine with calling you a grill, but not female.” However, to engage in this discussion, the transanon not only denies her individual identity, but also agrees to a term that denigrates all woman identities: “grill.” Anons often use the term “grill” in lieu of “girl.” As Redditor AndySipherBull (2014) explains, this term is a typologism akin to “pwn” that was invented when an anon misspelled “girl” as “gril” while discussing his relationship. He said something akin to “he’d never love again, he would never find another gril like her” (AndySipherBull, 2014). Since then, “grill” has typically been used as “a joke which equates women with cheap, easily replaced, mostly superfluous lawn ornaments” (AndySipherBull, 2014). The connotations of this word, while expressing identification with /b/’s collective identity, become another way to denigrate women and, by extension, transwomen. Although the transanon does not use the term “grill” herself, she acquiesces to being called one. This, coupled with her identification with /b/’s collective identity in a way that demeans her individual identity and engages in their discourse, is problematic.

The transanon’s self-disclosure—and the subsequent rupture in the collective identity—leads to questions about how much power she really holds or gains in this conversation. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Spivak (1988) talks about the colonized subaltern, particularly Indian

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34 “Pwn” is a typologism that occurred when someone meant to type “own” (as in, “my team totally owned [beat] your team”) but hit the “p” instead of the “o.” Pwn is pronounced the same as “own,” but with a “p” as the initial sound.
women who perform ritualistic suicide after their husbands die. However, a more generalized notion of “subaltern” includes any person who is considered to be of a lower social status. Spivak (1988) explains that the identity of a “true subaltern group” is defined through “its difference” from the privileged group, or the collective identity (p. 80). On 4chan, such a description matches the treatment of women, transpeople, and any other minority identity that does not fit the toxic white heteronormative masculinity standard. Spivak (1988) repeatedly stresses that, contrary to what Foucault and Deleuze think, “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can truly speak” (p. 103). She argues that any marginalized identity who wishes to join or disrupt privileged discourse can only do so in the language of their oppressors. The transwoman does this when she uses constitutive rhetoric to assert her position in /b/’s collective identity: she adopts the language, tone, and behavior of a typical anon. To be able to speak in a privileged space like 4chan, the transanon must deny her own trans identity to join the collective identity. However, because she cannot speak from her own subject position, Spivak (1988) would argue that she does not speak at all.

Phillips (2015) make a similar claim when discussing the potential of “deploy[ing] trolling rhetoric against trolls” (p. 167). She is troubled by the notion that the “solution to the problem contains a trace of the problem” (Phillips, 2015, p. 167), thus recapitulating it while simultaneously trying to undo it. Referencing Lorde’s statement that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” Phillips (2015) asserts, “Just as Audre Lorde warned against using patriarchal rhetoric… I too am reluctant to wholeheartedly claim for the feminist cause a rhetorical mode so thoroughly steeped in male domination” (p. 168). Understandably, Phillips is wary that employing the discourse of privilege will help elevate the social status of marginalized identities.
Like Phillips (2015), I am cautious of hailing this instance of a self-disclosing transwoman engaging in relatively open-minded—again, by 4chan’s standards—discourse about trans identity as an unadulterated victory for transpeople on /b/. But I am reminded of a MOO character description Dibbell (1998) discusses in “A Rape in Cyberspace” that also references Lorde: “Even if you can’t tear down the master’s house with the master’s tools… it is a damned good place to start.” I find it remarkable that, although the transanon used the language of the dominant social group, she directly opposed /b/’s usually closed-minded stance on trans acceptance and opened a trans-friendly (or at least trans-tolerant or trans-curious) dialogue that is incredibly rare on /b/. And because she conformed to the collective identity’s discursive norms, she and her ideas were more or less accepted, even if only for a short time. Her rupture even provided a platform for more transanons to self-identify. Moreover, it is also worth noting that the transwoman does not see herself as subaltern or marginalized. She identifies with /b/’s collective identity. When she uses their language, she is also using her own; when she performs /b/’s constitutive rhetoric, she is making a conscious choice to engage in their discourse. Despite the fact that the collective identity actively excludes her individual identity, her refusal to allow herself to be marginalized constitutes an act of power.

Such a refusal also reveals that 4chan’s behavior is a performance, not necessarily a reflection of reality. Anons usually perform a collective identity that identifies with /b/’s anonymous and ephemeral design as well as its ethos of lawlessness and unaccountability. However, when the collective was confronted with an instance where a transwoman member of the collective identity self-disclosed—an act that would typically result in outright exclusion from speaking—while also asserting her belonging to it, the collective broke down for a brief moment. Furthermore, the real-world failure of the feminazi and #transage movements reinforce
the notion that the collective identity is performance: for most anons it only lasts as long as they are on the board. Both movements appeared to gain support from several anons when the threads were active, but very little came of either. As the examples have shown, performances of anti-feminist, anti-woman, and anti-trans sentiments are part of the collective identity, but the “feminazi” and “#transage” movements died quickly when they tried to move beyond 4chan, despite their fervent support on-board. The petition never even got close to 1000 signatures (the necessary amount to move to the next level on Change.org), and the #transage takeover never began even though the anons hatched elaborate plans to move forward.

There are a couple of reasons why anons may be wary of backing the movements anywhere but on /b/, and both stem from the nature of the collective identity. First, signing a Change.org petition or tweeting from a Twitter account requires anons to give up the anonymous and ephemeral privileges they enjoy on 4chan. Both sites require identity representation (usernames, profile pictures, etc), keep records of user accounts, and track their users on the site. Second, it shows that the collective identity is as ephemeral as the threads anons post to /b/.

Anons willingly acquiesce to the collective identity when they are on /b/, but that subsumption only lasts as long as they are on 4chan. Backing these movements off-board would require anons to abandon the collective identity while also surrendering the protection it gives them to speak as freely as they do without the potential for retribution. It is possible—inevitable, even—that for some anons the bigotry exhibited on /b/ is a reflection of their real-world identities, but they appear to be more of a minority than the collective identity behaviors would let on. Thus, like Bakhtin’s (2009) carnival, /b/’s collective identity is an end in and of itself—a performance. However, unlike the carnival, which is based in creating equality for all levels of the social echelons, /b/’s collective identity is a performance that explicitly outs specific identities and
reinforces anti-PC white heteronormative masculinity. This performance happens on many levels. As the examples above show, anons perform the collective identity while on /b/ and do not necessarily adhere to it while offline; they engage in an identity performance based in playful subversion of marginalized identities.

At the same time the examples in this chapter make it clear that more than only young, white males constitute the collective identity: many women, transwomen, and other marginalized identities also choose to visit 4chan and /b/ on a regular enough basis that they have become part of the collective. As such, these marginalized identities also engage in a kind of performance by denying key characteristics of their individual identities—such as their sex and gender identification or even race and ethnicity—and instead donning the identity markers of /b/’s playfully subversive collective identity. This behavior is curious. Rather than fight against or deny a culture steeped in bigotry and exclusion of their identities, they instead embrace and adopt it. It is worthwhile to remember that the anons with these identities are the true betas; they often face hatred and bigotry in the real world and may be looking to release some of that through a cathartic performance. Perhaps such identity performances are empowering. Instead of falling victim to the social order, female, LGBTQ+, and non-white anons instead adopt the dominant characteristics and, like the carnival, turn the social order on its head by acting in a position of social power.

Conclusion: Performance and Collective Identity

Theoretically, anons have more identity freedom on 4chan than they do on other sites. However, in practice this autonomy does not seem to manifest. All of the examples highlight the coerciveness behind /b/’s collective identity. The Tits or GTFO example shows how some
behaviors on 4chan are almost automatic. The transanon examples illustrate that the only way non-male and non-heteronormative anons can successfully express any rhetorical power is if they maintain identification with the collective identity while they do so. Furthermore, the feminazi and #transage movements also indicate that—for most anons—the collective identity only exists within the confines of the site and that users are unwilling to engage with it off-board. These examples demonstrate that the recursively constructed design and ethos control anons’ behavior, but only while they are on /b/. Because of these regulatory practices, /b/ is also paradoxically neither anonymous nor ephemeral.

Stryker (2011) and Knutila (2011) believe that because /b/’s posts are deleted so quickly it has no “memory.” Stryker (2011) explains that other digital social media “focus on… rewarding people with points, badges, and other accolades” (p. 276), all of which accumulate on a profile and reveal aspects of an individual identity. But, he argues, on /b/ it is the opposite: “On 4chan, you’re only as respected as your latest post” (Stryker, 2011, p. 277). Knutila (2011) similarly notes that users cannot accrue cultural capital through their posts. However, despite the fact that no tangible accolades are available to users who post quality content, Trammell has found users still police each other’s behavior in ways similar to other digital social media that offer such lasting praise. Users also reward the best content by repurposing or remixing it, thus showing that /b/ does, in fact, have a memory; it just isn’t archived. Coleman (2014) explains that even though “a person [does not] accrue status or reputation” on /b/ (pp. 43-4), identity markers persist as part of the collective identity’s memory. These identity markers manifest through some of its most popular remixed content and identity memes: not only the Tits or
GTFO phenomenon, but also the “Rare Pepe” meme\(^{35}\) (2015) and the Navy Seal Copypasta\(^{36}\) (2015), to name only a few. To be accepted as insiders, anons must understand references to hundreds (possibly thousands) of these remixed identity markers. This appropriated and repurposed content is part of what creates the collective identity, and it appears everywhere on /b/. Stryker (2011) and Knutila (2011) argue that /b/ doesn’t have a memory, but I have found that the board is constantly saturated in lasting identity markers, most of which are memes.

/b/ is also not anonymous. If being “anonymous” means being without an identity, then /b/ does not fit that description. /b/’s identity has developed through users’ behaviors that mark the interface as an identity-saturated text. The collective identity dictates how anons are expected to behave and has adopted several responses to police any behavior that strays from these norms. Therefore, the collective identity is a performance. Those who demand “Tits or GTFO” and ridicule transgender people may actually be anti-woman and anti-trans, but they may also be only performing these sentiments to identify with the collective identity. Poole thinks that “anonymity is authenticity” (as quoted in Stryker, 2011, p. 275), but because the identity on /b/ is a performance, it cannot be wholly authentic. Some anons may relinquish more identity characteristics than others when they visit the site—as in, some anons may inherently identify more genuinely and strongly with the design, ethos, and collective identity than others—but all anons must surrender some part of themselves to fully identify with the collective.

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\(^{35}\) Rare Pepes are memes of a frog that anons joke are like trading cards. Some even have watermarks (“Rare Pepe”).

\(^{36}\) Copypasta is a bastardization of “copy and paste.” It is used to denote blocks of text (sometimes a short phrase, but usually longer) that an anon decides is worth copying to repost later. When the anon deems it appropriate, s/he will post the text, sometimes altering words to fit the new context but leaving enough of the original so other anons will recognize the copypasta. In the Navy Seal Copypasta the author, ostensibly a Navy Seal, makes exaggerated claims about how he is angered by a particular comment and, because of his training, knows multiple ways of killing the other anons. The hyperbolic paragraph ends with the signature phrase, “You’re fucking dead, kiddo.”
4chan’s brand of anonymity also neglects to grant users the equality it seems to promise. Stryker (2011) argues that anonymity leads to equality for all users because everyone has the same opportunity to participate and have their voices heard. He explains that other social media sites’ users “develop strong hierarchies” (p. 276) because they are nonymous or pseudonymous; he implies that 4chan’s anonymity prevents this from happening. However, this response points to a problematic implication of /b/’s performative identity: as a white heterosexual man, Stryker (2011) identifies on a basic level with the collective identity (whether or not he identifies with the “anti-PC” portion of the identity is unclear), which means that he was able to participate in the performance on /b/ without significantly altering his identity. In turn, his participation appears to be uncritical of the effect of /b/’s collective identity and constitutive rhetoric on marginalized identities. He does not understand the problem behind identity performances that denigrate others. Siegel (2015) points out that “4chan… has long maintained that much of its racism is really just a performance designed to rattle the mainstream.” But it seems as though this performance functions as more than simply an affront to mainstream culture; it is a total reversal of that which the mainstream considers good. This chapter’s examples illustrate that, despite its anonymity, /b/ still develops and enforces dominant social hierarchies that place whiteness, heteronormativity, and masculinity on top and other non-dominant identity markers on the bottom. This makes /b/’s collective identity dangerous because it normalizes denigrating words and actions that continue to oppress women and other minorities.

However, this chapter’s findings also provide some hope for how to resist these negative discourses on spaces like 4chan. The examples reveal that /b/’s collective identity is diverse performing monolithic: it consists of far more identities than the collective’s focus on anti-PC white heteronormative masculinity would let on. We tend to vilify spaces like this and assume
that the users who visit them are awful bigots, but this example shows that 4chan’s memetic behavior is a performance, not necessarily a reflection of reality. When the collective was confronted with an instance where a trans member self-disclosed while also asserting her right to belong, it broke down. Most importantly, to effectively rupture a collective identity centered on negative cultural assumptions, an individual must perform constitutive rhetoric to establish identification with it. Like the case study of Fake Geek Girl in the previous chapter, the transwoman’s collective identity rupture also has implications for how to fight against destructive discourses. Because performative responses like “Tits or GTFO” and demeaning insults directed at transpeople are the result of an influential although ultimately fragile identity performance, they can be countered through identification and constitutive rhetoric.
CHAPTER 4
READING MEAN COMMENTS: USING PARODY TO SUBVERT YOUTUBE’S HATERS

Introduction: What Is YouTube?

Founded in 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, YouTube began as a file storage site where people could easily share videos with friends and family without sophisticated technical skill. Rather than email a video file, users could upload the video to YouTube, which would generate a unique URL they could send to their audience of viewers (usually people they knew personally offline). But shortly after its introduction, users—particularly bloggers—began to recognize the value of YouTube’s easy shareability. YouTube’s rapid evolution from file repository to revolutionary social media is a result of viral videos and YouTube users—usually called YouTubers—sharing content beyond their real-life networks and aiming videos at a larger public audience. Several developments over the last decade, including monetizing the site and getting involved in the 2008 presidential election, resulted in a huge influx of new traffic that is largely responsible for its current popularity.

However, some of YouTube’s biggest growth has resulted from their increasing focus on encouraging its users to produce and share original content. In May 2007, YouTube began to reward these efforts by launching its Partner Program, which allowed YouTubers to receive payment for their viral videos; by 2008, some YouTubers were earning incomes in the six-figure range (Dickey, 2013). In 2011, YouTube began enlisting talent to create content solely for
YouTube, what YouTube called its “original channels”: “Google paid more than $100 million to content creators to make videos exclusively for YouTube” (Dickey, 2013). Most recently, in 2015 Google launched YouTube Red, a paid subscription service that allows users to stream videos without ads, gives access to premium original content that cannot be found anywhere else, and enables offline viewing (Mitroff, 2016).

Now that YouTube has been mainstreamed and monetized, “great strides have been made in legitimizing the kind of content you see on… YouTube” (Bhagat, 2016). As Amy O’Leary (2013) explains, “A few years ago, YouTube stars were one-hit wonders, viral accidents whose fame came and went like a passing storm.” However, now successful YouTubers can build a career on their original content. YouTubers can even win awards; the YouTube Awards and the Streamys are dedicated solely to YouTubers, and other popular award shows like the Teen Choice Awards and the Shorty Award offer at least one category for YouTubers. Now that YouTube and YouTubers are making a concerted effort to encourage and sustain original content creation on the site, YouTube is more popular with young people than television shows. Aaron Elliott (2014) details the results of a survey that shows that 68% of participants watch more content on YouTube than anywhere else. Chris Palermino (2015) highlights another survey that explains why so many more people are turning away from television and toward YouTube: “62 percent of respondents said digital content makes them ‘feel good’ about themselves, as opposed to just 40 percent for TV. More millennials also felt that digital content is more relatable than TV (67 percent for digital content versus 41 percent for TV).” As a result, YouTube content creators’ videos are being seen as valid avenues of creativity.

Native YouTube video productions—that is, videos produced solely for streaming on YouTube—are typically low-tech and intimate, factors which are largely responsible for drawing
so many viewers. Anne Helen Peterson (2015) explains that “The appeal of television stars was rooted in the feeling of immediacy…, intimacy…, and authenticity….” However, she also points out that one of the key differences between TV and YouTube is that YouTube takes these three factors to a new level “and magnifies it” (Peterson, 2015). YouTube videos seem spontaneous and sometimes chaotic. The majority are shot in kitchens, bedrooms, living rooms, home offices, and other areas of a house that make viewers feel less like they are watching a scripted sitcom (because they aren’t) and more like they are Skyping with the YouTuber. This feeling is amplified by the fact that YouTubers generally record with a webcam or another amateur-level digital camera and strategic lighting, and that most YouTubers often write, shoot, direct, and edit videos entirely on their own. Peterson (2015) explains, “Those aesthetics of intimacy contribute to the feeling of authenticity: The more lo-fi the production seems—the less mediated—the easier it is to believe that you are accessing the ‘real’ star.” These videos make it seem as if the YouTuber is a friend instead of a celebrity, even though many YouTubers have reached celebrity status. For some, YouTubers like PewDiePie, Smosh, NigaHiga, and JennaMarbles—a few of the top YouTube channels that produce original content—have become household names.

Because it is so easy to upload videos and participate on the site, YouTube has become practically synonymous with the terms “Web 2.0” and “participatory media.” In many ways, it is the social networking site that has defined how online users communicate with each other (YouTube videos are posted to Facebook and Twitter after all, not the other way around). Burgess and Green (2009) agree, stating that the “shift from the idea of the website as a personal storage facility for video content to a platform for public self-expression matches YouTube to the ideas about a user-led revolution that characterizes rhetoric around ‘Web 2.0’” (p. 4). Each channel serves a unique purpose (even if that purpose is to imitate another channel) and indulges
a variety of interests. People can create content that makes people laugh, cry, or think; they can educate, ridicule, rant, or joke. YouTube seems to be haven of democratic participatory culture for anyone to express themselves online in whatever way they see fit while also housing enough content to appeal to wide audiences.

Haters, Mean Comments, and Why They Must Be Stopped

However, like all things on the Internet, YouTube is not always the perfectly democratic participatory space it purports to be. While there are many YouTubers using the space to voice alternative viewpoints that can’t always find a place in mainstream and traditional media, there are just as many “haters” posting “mean comments” on those videos in attempts to silence both the YouTuber and the conversations they could initiate. Patricia Lange (2016) interviewed several vloggers,¹ one of which defines a “hater” as “someone who posts a negative comment that doesn't offer any [criticism] or any helpful information…. [They] insult you and offer no suggestions on [improvements]” (as quoted in Lange, 2016). “Mean comments,” then, are the comments they post. Lange gives several instances of kinds of mean comments:

Examples of comments are ‘Wow this sucks,’ and may involve metaphors of violence such as ‘You’re a waste of brain matter. Go jump off a cliff’ or ‘This sucks. Go die.’ Interviewees report that often the phrases haters use are repetitive, unimaginative, and similar to those of other haters. They are unable to offer ‘legitimate’ arguments about why they hate something (Lange, 2016).

However, as is apparent from Lange’s examples above, the terms “haters” and “mean” insinuate a certain innocence that rarely characterizes some of these comments. In fact, “mean comments” tend to align more closely with the legal definition of “hate speech”: “It is an incitement to

¹ A vlogger is someone who blogs through video. Video + blog = vlog.
hatred primarily against a group of persons defined in terms of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and the like” (“Hate Speech Law,” 2016). A large portion of mean comments are based in discourses that support socially hegemonic ideals of racism, misogyny, and LGBTQ+ phobias, and they can be as serious as rape or death threats. As Burgess and Green (2009) explain, YouTube is reputed for these comments, which is “exacerbated by anonymity (so that there are few disincentives to behave badly) and scale (so that it becomes difficult to keep up with policing and moderating comments)” (p. 96). All YouTubers receive some level of hate no matter how well they conform to societal expectations, but women and people of color receive disproportionately more.

This chapter will focus on gender and mean comments on YouTube. Joseph M. Reagle (2015) has pointed out that gendered harassment online is so pervasive that “sexually violent comments, especially toward women, are an established genre of comment… characterized by profanity, ad hominem invective, stereotype, and hyperbolic imagery of graphic (and often sexualized) violence that manifests as a threat or wishful thinking” (p. 106). Judith Butler (1997) would add that not only are the comments a threat, but they are a forceful action: “Although the threat is not quite the act that it portends, it is still an act, a speech act, one that not only announces the act to come, but registers a certain force in language, a force that both presages and inaugurates a subsequent force” (p. 9). What’s more, Lindsey Wotanis and Laurie McMillan (2014) explain that these kinds of abusive comments are so prevalent on YouTube that they “are a part of YouTube culture” (p. 914). In her interviews with several vloggers, Lange (2007) sought the opinions of women who had received comments that veered close to cyberstalking:

*Interviewee:* This creep keeps leaving comments on [my blog]. It's been happening since [last year]. Like really, really nasty comments….
Interviewee: Well he isn’t directly threatening, but he says like you should kill yourself. I posted something about getting a [sports car] and he’s like oh, I’d buy that [sports car] for you just to see your face smash into your windshield. I’m like yeah….

Interviewee: It sucks. (Lange, 2007)

Below, I will present a larger analysis of some of the gendered aggression that YouTubers receive in comments on their videos, but Lange’s example illustrates the violence that some female YouTubers face.

What’s more, YouTube and YouTubers are essentially powerless to stop these haters. Danielle Keats Citron (2014) notes that YouTube tries to keep the space abuse-free. She explains that YouTube does “not view free expression as a license to harass, stalk, or threaten. For business and ethical reasons, they are working to prevent abuse from happening and to diminish its impact when it occurs. Through user agreements and software design, these Internet companies are encouraging norms of equality and respect” (Citron, 2014, p. 226). Further, “In its community guidelines, YouTube advises, ‘We want you to use YouTube without fear of being subjected to malicious harassment. In cases where harassment crosses the line into malicious attack it can be reported and will be removed’” (Citron, 2014, p. 230). These efforts seem promising, but with over one billion users—which YouTube contextualizes as “almost one-third of all people on the Internet” (“Statistics,” 2016)—the large scale of YouTube makes it difficult for them to effectively prevent mean comments. Citron (2014) explains, “YouTube’s staff has difficulty keeping up with complaints because over seventy-two hours of videos are uploaded every minute” (p. 233). Understandably, despite all of its promises to stop hate on its site, the overwhelming amount of content—both videos and comments—that is constantly uploaded means that their power is ultimately quite limited.
As a result, it falls on individual YouTubers to moderate their channels and decide how to handle abuse and hate. Two resources YouTube has made available to YouTubers is the Creator Academy (2016) and the Creator Hub (2016), both of which Wotanis & McMillan (2014) refer to collectively as the Creator Playbook. YouTubers may consult either or both of these resources to find “strategies connected with channel success” (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014, p. 915). However, one of their major shortcomings is that “it does not provide suggestions for content creators who are subjected to a hostile or threatening reception through viewer comments” (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014, p. 915). Moreover, as Wotanis and McMillan (2014) point out, the guides also fail to “acknowledge that women or members of other social groups facing offline social injustices may need advice about handling online interactions where such injustices may be mirrored or exacerbated. In other words, the Creator Playbook treats YouTube performers as if they all have equal opportunities for success” (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014, p. 915). YouTubers, especially those potentially most vulnerable to haters and mean comments, must learn to navigate the already difficult subject of online aggression without any help from the website that houses their videos and purports to help them build their brand.

Some think haters and mean comments are part of the culture of YouTube; that is, they think such hostile interactions should be expected as a result of participation in the space. These users believe that even if something could be done to stop them, it shouldn’t be. Lange (2016) explains that some of her interviewees said that “posting on YouTube requires a certain amount of maturity to handle the criticism and feedback that will likely result by publicly posting one’s

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2 Unsurprisingly, the Creator Playbook has undergone some large changes in the two years since Wotanis and McMillan wrote their article, including a complete rebranding and redesign. However, materials dealing with online aggression still appear to be lacking.
work.” She cites one of her interviewees in particular: “As Liam, a boy in his early teens also pointed out, trying to create an environment in which only positive comments are allowed represents an unrealistic need for insulation from critical feedback” (Lange, 2016). She also said that some of her interviewees thought haters should just be ignored or that their comments should be deleted. However, Burgess and Green (2009) report that “Many prominent YouTubers express reluctance to moderate or ban comments because those kinds of controls are counter to the ethos of openness that supposedly distinguishes participatory culture” (p. 96). However, Lange (2016) and Burgess and Green (2009) do not appear to address the kinds of “mean comments” that can be characterized as hate speech and online aggression. It is unclear why they would leave their comments unmoderated. Regardless of the explanation, many YouTubers are against regulating the comments sections. Some are able to deal with negative comments they receive on their videos, but not everyone is able to shake off the haters’ impact so easily.

In fact, research shows that some talented people may be dissuaded from sharing their work with the world (or from producing it in the first place) because they fear the repercussions they may receive in the comments. Wotanis and McMillan (2014) explain how gendered cyber harassment affects some women who want to use the Internet to build careers for themselves: “[It] discourages them from writing and earning a living online…. The harassment causes considerable emotional distress. Some women have committed suicide” (p. 915). For some women who have put themselves publicly online and faced a deluge of negative responses, the repercussions have gone far beyond what can be simply ignored or accepted as part of YouTube culture. Ultimately, because some women are intimidated out of producing content for YouTube, they are silenced. Whatever voice they could give to topics they may choose to present does not get heard, and those who could benefit from hearing their perspectives do not get access to them.
Therefore, it seems imperative to find ways to resist haters and mean comments. However, YouTubers are right to be wary of any method that may limit free speech. As Lange (2016) has pointed out:

Despite the pain that hating causes for many people in the YouTube community, participants are often wary of implementing corrective mechanisms because they may complicate free speech and limit access to desired critical feedback. For many YouTube participants, certain regulatory mechanisms for ensuring cordial video reception and commentary are not perceived as effective or universally desired.

YouTubers are concerned that censoring comments or disallowing certain users to post limits free speech, and many of them join YouTube and post videos precisely because they believe anyone should be able to express themselves in whatever way they see fit. As such, any method for resisting haters and their mean comments must not limit free speech or prohibit the abusive comments. Instead, it must find ways to reduce the power of mean comments and instead bring fans together to work toward creating inclusive communities.

Parody has shown itself to be an effective method for resisting aggressive comments on YouTube by stripping them of their abusive power. Parody is a rhetorical form that, as Simon Dentith (2000) explains, helps us “respond evaluatively to what is said to us” (p. 3). This evaluation is carried out through a satirical re-invention or imitation of a prior text that Joel Penney (2015) explains results in its “active transformation” (p. 226). Penney (2015) gives an example of a parody that demonstrates its transformative power, particularly in relation to offensive material. First, he illustrates that GLAAD’s typical response to offensive anti-LGBTQ+ content is censorship: “To ensure that such content never reaches the audiences, the organization employs a variety of strategies to influence the way that LGBTQ+ persons and stories are portrayed in film and television” (p. 220). However, Penney (2105) explains that this
method is ineffective because it relies on the overly simplistic claim that such media may (not will) cause harm; he shows that “the rhetoric of imminent harm in these campaigns leaves no room for such nuance, making hard and fast claims about the inevitability of widespread deleterious effects without substantiation” (Penney, 2015, p. 225).

Instead, Penney (2015) urges people to engage in parodic transformation. He points to a parody video called *The Gaythering Storm* that was made in response to an anti-LGBTQ+ video by a similar name. It “uses comic exaggeration to not only poke fun at the preposterousness of the NOM ad itself but also to mock the political perspective it promulgates” (Penney, 2015, p. 230). He argues that while censorship risks sending the message that LGBTQ+ people are “passive victims of a bigoted majority” (Penney, 2015, p. 227), parody as an active transformation of the original message is therefore more effective. Rather than shut down opportunities for dialog about LGBTQ+ representation, parody strips offensive or abusive representations of their power while opening avenues for further discussion.

Like the video Penney (2015) analyzes, mean comments on YouTube are generally characterized as offensive texts. Rather than censor these comments, parody could be an effective method for YouTubers to employ against their haters and aggressors. Jimmy Kimmel popularized the fad of reading mean tweets on his show *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, but several YouTubers have also adopted this parodic method for resisting haters. On YouTube, this parody manifests through reading the mean comments aloud and transforming their meaning through a variety of techniques, such as intentional shifts in vocal tone or mocking mannerisms. In particular, parody’s power comes from its capacity to inspire critical analysis. Dentith (2000) explains, “parody can invite the reader to examine, evaluate and re-situate” the original text (p. 16). As such, parody’s power comes not only from the parodist’s ability to actively transform a
text, but also from the readers’, listeners’, or—in the case of YouTube—viewers’ ability to realize the parodic function of the text and re-situate the original text’s meaning. In this regard, parody has the capacity to initiate sophisticated cultural critique against systems of power.

In this chapter, I examine eight videos from six YouTube celebrities who use parody to both strip their aggressors of power and to create an atmosphere that is conducive to an inclusive community. I explore how Jenna Mourey, Grace Helbig, Hannah Hart, Lilly Singh, Colleen Ballinger, and Mamrie Hart have employed this relatively new genre on their channels. What follows is an exploration of my research methods and descriptions of each of the six YouTubers as well as explanations of how they act as role models for young teenage females. Next, I use Wotanis and McMillan’s (2014) study of gender and YouTube as a paradigm for my own content analysis of the mean comments each YouTuber receives on her videos. Finally, I explore reading mean comments as a new genre of parody that may be effective for subverting haters on YouTube. Notably, I explain how parodying haters and mean comments is not aimed at the actual haters; instead, the intended audience of these videos is the YouTubers’ fans. These videos are meant to bring them together as a more cohesive community through a shared adversary. I end with a cautionary note on the negative effects the reading mean comments parody could have, acknowledging the ways it may recapitulate and normalize haters’ comments.

Research Methods and Data Attribution

Research Methods

In November 2016, I selected eight YouTube videos for analysis (Table 1). Four of these videos are typical of the reading mean comments genre. Briefly, these are videos that feature a
YouTuber, usually alone but sometimes with a partner, reading and commenting on mean comments that they have received on their videos. Two more videos are a new take on the genre that features the YouTuber singing her mean comments. Another video is presented in the typical reading mean comments format, but instead of reading actual comments, the YouTuber presents general types of mean comments she receives on her videos. The final video is a deviation from the other seven. This video features a YouTuber during a segment of her live stage show in which she reads and responds to mean comments on both her channel and her two co-stars’ channels. What makes this video stand out from the others is that it was not recorded and uploaded by the YouTuber it features but by another YouTuber with a separate channel. However, I have decided to include it for the additional insight it provides into the kinds of mean comments YouTubers receive on their channels and how YouTubers respond to them.

I chose all female YouTube celebrities\(^3\) because, as I mentioned above, women generally receive not only more aggressive comments on their videos but they also receive different kinds of online aggression, including sexual, violent, and sexually violent comments. Below I will categorize the kinds of comments each female YouTuber typically receives. I selected these six YouTubers for two reasons. First, I have been a fan of their channels for several years, so I am well-versed in their video styles and fan communities. This insider knowledge is important to the study at hand because it precludes the need for extensive participant-observation or ethnographic research (á la the previous chapter on 4chan); I understand how the communities function and the role of the YouTuber in building her fanbase.

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\(^3\) For the purposes of this chapter, a “YouTube celebrity” is a YouTuber who has made a successful career creating content for YouTube. These celebrities do not hold any other jobs, often earn six figures annually, sell merchandise and engage in branding, and often hire publicists or other help to manage their public personas. Some YouTube celebrities also star in, produce, or are otherwise involved in movies and television.
Second, as I will explain below, all six YouTubers are leaders in what is being dubbed the “awkward older sister” movement (Peterson, 2015; Framke, 2015); that is, they are public female presences serving as role models to younger (mostly teenage) girls. In particular, many sources refer to Grace when referencing this movement—in large part because she was the first to dub herself an “awkward older sister”—but as close friends who rose to popularity around the same time and have also dedicated themselves to supporting young women, Hannah, Jenna, Mamrie, Lilly, and Colleen are also considered forerunners. All six women embrace their

<table>
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<tr>
<th>YouTuber</th>
<th>Video Title</th>
<th>Date Posted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hannah Hart (MyHarto)</td>
<td>Reading mean tweets! #MakeItHappy ft. Jenna Marbles, Colleen Ballinger, Lilly Singh, &amp; Mamrie Hart!</td>
<td>29 Jan 2015</td>
<td>Reading mean comments (RMC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenna Mourey (JennaMarbles)</td>
<td>Reading mean comments</td>
<td>15 Jan 2015</td>
<td>RMC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace Helbig (DailyYou)</td>
<td>Pete Holmes compliments the sh*t out of you</td>
<td>22 Oct 2013</td>
<td>RMC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grace Helbig (Grace Helbig)</td>
<td>Reading mean comments w/ James Corden</td>
<td>30 Mar 2015</td>
<td>RMC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleen Ballinger (PsychoSoprano)</td>
<td>Reading mean comments</td>
<td>28 Jul 2015</td>
<td>RMC (sung)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleen Ballinger (PsychoSoprano)</td>
<td>Mean comments - an original song</td>
<td>7 Sep 2016</td>
<td>RMC (sung)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilly Singh (IISuperwomanII)</td>
<td>What YouTube comments really mean</td>
<td>19 Sep 2015</td>
<td>RMC (kinds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyndsay K</td>
<td>Hannah Hart comments on your comments at the #NoFilter show</td>
<td>28 May 2013</td>
<td>RMC live</td>
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weirdness and aim to show their mostly female audiences the importance of being authentic and focusing on their own happiness.

The method of analysis is mostly content analysis. In particular, I focused on two kinds of content: the mean comments that each YouTuber reads and the YouTubers’ responses to the comments. As I explain in depth later in the chapter, the YouTubers I study generally receive mostly positive or neutral feedback, so finding instances of mean comments proved difficult. As such I relied on the comments and kinds of comments each YouTuber chooses to display in her videos. Given my knowledge of the YouTubers and their communities, these comments are an accurate representation of the kinds of mean comments they typically receive.

I transcribed and analyzed key parts of all ten videos; that is, I transcribed only the YouTubers reading the comments and their relevant responses to them. For instance, in Lilly Singh’s video “What YouTube Comments Really Mean,” she starts off her exploration of the typical kinds of comments she sees on her channel with the “first” and “second” phenomenon. This is where someone watches a video shortly after it has been posted, then comments “first” to signify that they are the first to watch and comment, when in reality several others have likely done so during the time they were watching the video. Similarly, often someone will see one comment below the video and comment “second” when actually several people have commented in the short span between the “first” and “second” comments. While this is an annoying aspect of Internet culture, it certainly does not constitute the aggressive nature of haters, so I did not

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4 Although certainly not impossible. The mean comments are there, but they are most likely to appear shortly after a video is posted; the longer a video is up on YouTube, the more fans and other community members will continue to comment, but haters tend to move on and stick to fresher videos. As such, most mean comments are buried so far down in the comments section that it can take a considerable amount of time to reach them. YouTube does not provide an easy way to navigate to older comments.
transcribe those aspects of Lilly’s video. I made similar decisions in other videos as well. For instance, often in the collaborative videos the YouTubers hold tangential conversations for brief periods of time; because these are generally irrelevant to parodying haters, I have not included them in the analysis.

Data Attribution

Throughout this chapter, I will display screenshots from the YouTube videos that contain mean comments. All of the videos display the mean comment on the bottom while the YouTuber reacts to it above, except for Grace who briefly covers almost the entire screen with her mean comment. Typically, while watching a YouTube video the progress bar (the red line that moves from left to right as the video progresses) and timer (which lets the viewer know how much time has passed and how much is left) will disappear, but I have included them in all screencaps for two reasons: 1) I wanted both visible for potential reference and citation purposes, and 2) I had to pause the videos to take screenshots at certain moments, and pausing results in the progress bar and timer appearing. However, a downside to this decision is that the progress bar may occlude some or all of the mean comment displayed at the bottom of the video. As a result, I have included the full, unedited text of each comment in the caption below the image. In addition, some of the YouTubers opted to blur out the profile names or pictures of the haters on the comments, but others did not. I have not altered the images of the mean comments in any way. These videos are available to the public and have been seen by thousands and in some cases millions of viewers, so my attempts to hide any haters’ identities if the YouTuber did not already do so would be fruitless. If the YouTuber hid the name of the hater, it remains hidden; if she did not, it remains visible.
Finally, YouTube’s rewind and fast-forward function is relatively unsophisticated (compared to professional video editing software or even iMovie), so it was difficult to find the right moment for a screenshot that would capture not only the mean comment, but also a comprehensive still shot of the YouTuber’s reaction to it. As a result, some of the images may have caught YouTubers at unflattering or unappealing moments. Any instance where this has happened is unintentional. All images are intended to convey only the sentiment behind the YouTubers’ reaction, which can be difficult when choosing one frame from a moving picture. I also encourage readers to search for the videos on YouTube and use the information from the progress bar and timer to view the clips in their entirety to gain a fuller understanding of the YouTubers’ reaction as they read the mean comments.

The Internet’s Awkward Older Sisters (and Mom)

In this chapter, I examine videos from six YouTubers: Jenna Mourey, Hannah Hart, Mamrie Hart, Grace Helbig, Lilly Singh, and Colleen Ballinger. Each YouTuber typically produces videos alone, which means they have to come up with enough content to entertain fans for an average of five to eight minutes for each video. However, occasionally, they collaborate with each other (all six YouTubers are friends and many have appeared in each other’s videos), other YouTubers (Tyler Oakley and Flula Borg are friends many of them share), and sometimes significant others (Jenna often features her boyfriend Julien, and Hannah featured her ex-girlfriend Ingrid, both of whom are also YouTubers although with smaller fanbases). I selected these six YouTubers because they represent leaders of what has been dubbed the “awkward

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5 Anne Helen Peterson (2015) and Caroline Framke (2015) both discuss Grace Helbig as the leader of the “awkward older sisters,” but they also acknowledge that, as members of what their fandom dubs the “Holy Trinity,” Hannah
older sister” movement—except for Mamrie, who has said that her fans often refer to her as “mom,” likely because she is the oldest YouTuber of the six (Mametown, 2014). In other words, these YouTubers deliberately produce relatable content aimed at building up and authenticating their young—often teenage—female viewers.6

Grace coined the term “awkward older sister” to describe herself and her videos. Grace says she “doesn’t know what she's doing but is trying to help you figure it out while she does too” (as quoted in Framke, 2015). The movement appears to have started with Grace, but as Caroline Framke (2015) notes, it is rapidly spreading outward as other YouTubers, including the ones I analyze here, have also started acting in the awkward older sister role. Framke (2015) explains, “[Grace’s] warmth and inclusiveness are characteristic of a burgeoning movement of online female stars offering advice and mentorship to teens with compassion and honesty.” Peterson specifies that part of what makes Grace so appealing is that she represents the stereotypical “Cool Girl” who is traditionally beautiful and feminine, but is also able to hang out as “one of the guys” through cursing and reveling in bodily functions generally deemed unfeminine. However, “All of her Cool Girl components… are never wielded to turn her into a sex object” (Peterson, 2015). Peterson (2015) points out that this refusal to objectify herself conceptualizes her as “a different type of idol, one whose values and priorities are in stark contrast those proffered by teen idol factories like Disney and Nickelodeon.” Instead, Grace and others in her YouTuber clique send the positive message to young teenagers: “Performing for

and Mamrie are also key leaders in this movement. I add Lilly, Jenna, and Colleen to this list because not only are they friends with the first three, but they also produce similar content aimed at the same audience.

6 Although all six YouTubers are in their late 20s and early 30s, their fanbases consist largely of female teenagers and young adults. They look to these YouTubers as role models who show them the important but often hidden aspects of identity-building: staying true to yourself, making good friends who build you up, and having fun.
boys matters for [sic] less, ultimately, than cultivating your own self” (Peterson, 2015). Similarly, Jenna, Hannah, Mamrie, Lilly, and Colleen embody the “cool girl” persona that has become an ideal for many female teenagers: look pretty, act weird, and cultivate friendships instead of romantic relationships (or, put your sisters before your misters).

Part of this awkward older sister persona also involves accessibility. Peterson (2015) notes, “[Grace] regularly hosts Q&As on her Facebook page; she constantly answers reader questions in her videos…. She talks back on Twitter. She poses for countless selfies with readers, who then make those selfies their Twitter avatars, like hundreds of visual testimonies to her accessibility.” Jenna, Hannah, Mamrie, Lilly, and Colleen do the same. All six YouTubers seem to be constantly on their social media, tweeting, posting to Facebook or Snapchat, and always talking to their fans. Peterson (2015) also notes that the large number of videos Grace has produced further disrupts the boundary between Grace and her fans: “You don’t just feel like you know Grace; through hundreds of hours of footage and text, you know Grace.” It’s the same with the other five YouTubers: the sheer volume of video footage of them taken from their own homes make Grace, Jenna, Hannah, Mamrie, Lilly, and Colleen seem less like “celebrities” in a traditional sense and more like friends that viewers visit once or twice a week.

Jenna Mourey (aka JennaMarbles)

Jenna Mourey has had an active YouTube channel since 2010, and she has uploaded 331 videos to her channel7; she generally uploads at least one every week (see Table 2 for statistics on all six YouTubers). At over 16 million subscribers, Jenna stand as the most popular female

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7 All numbers and statistics provided for all six YouTubers are from December 29, 2016.
and one of the most overall popular YouTube celebrities on the site. VidStatsX\textsuperscript{8} ranks her channel at 24\textsuperscript{th} for most subscribers (“JennaMarbles,” 2016). Jenna’s videos cover a range of topics, from the silly to the serious, such as her How Guys [do X] and How Girls [do X] videos—among others—provide cultural commentary on gender roles. Her most popular video, “How to trick people into thinking you’re good looking” (2010), has over 65 million views (“JennaMarbles,” 2016). Jenna shows her audience that even the most perfectly styled female has flaws and reassures them that there is nothing wrong with that.

Table 2
YouTuber Statistics as of 29 December 2016 (“YouTube Top,” 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YouTuber</th>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Number of Subscribers</th>
<th>Number of Uploads</th>
<th>Date Joined</th>
<th>Unique Genre Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jenna Mourey</td>
<td>JennaMarbles</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16,700,379</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>Feb 2010</td>
<td>Cultural commentary (gender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilly Singh</td>
<td>IISuperwomanII</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>10,638,764</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>Oct 2010</td>
<td>Cultural commentary (race)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleen Ballinger</td>
<td>PsychoSoprano Miranda Sings</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>4,811,403</td>
<td>7,615,571</td>
<td>Jul 2006</td>
<td>Storytelling/songwriting, crude behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>164</td>
<td>7,615,571</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>Jan 2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace Helbig</td>
<td>Grace Helbig</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>3,024,603</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>Oct 2006</td>
<td>Awkwardness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah Hart</td>
<td>MyHarto</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>2,525,358</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>Jun 2009</td>
<td>Cultural commentary, reckless optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamrie Hart</td>
<td>Mamrie Hart Mametown</td>
<td>2469</td>
<td>1,191,591</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>Mar 2011</td>
<td>Raunchy humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7925</td>
<td>458,850</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Apr 2009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{8} VidStatsX ranks YouTube channels by subscribers and numbers of views. It also includes statistics for several other factors, including number of subscribers, number of videos posted, how many subscribers are gained or lost in 24-hour and 7-day periods. It can also show a list of a channel’s top videos (sorted by number of views). VidStatsX appears to update in real time.
Grace Helbig (aka Grace Helbig)

Since 2006, Grace Helbig has been an active presence on YouTube. She has uploaded nearly 650 videos and adds more each week. With over three million subscribers, VidStatsX ranks Grace as the 641st most subscribed-to channel on YouTube (“Grace Helbig,” 2016). Her second most-viewed video, “Grace Helbig on YouTube: Redefine grace” (2015a) has over three million views and highlights her typical video behavior. At one point, she says “[close up] You’re probably like ‘whoa that girl’s cool, I wanna be her friend, and I’m like” [Cut to wide angle. She is awkwardly dancing, then she dance/walks through an open door and closet door falls off its hinges. Cut back to close-up] “I love you, I mean, watch my channel. I get those mixed up all the time” (Grace Helbig, 2015a). Grace’s demeanor is awkward and at times childlike, but overall charming and relatable to her audience of young females.

Hannah Hart (aka MyHarto)

In March 2011, Hannah Hart posted her first video—called “Butter Yo Shit” (MyHarto, 2011), which also became the first in a long-running weekly series called My Drunk Kitchen, or MDK to fans. Since then, she has produced over 550 videos (not including others on YourHarto, her vlog channel) and her channel has over 2.5 million subscribers. VidStatsX ranks her as the 861st most subscribed-to channel on YouTube (“MyHarto,” 2016). In addition to her MDK series, Hannah also uses her channel to promote her charity project Have a Heart Day, which is an initiative that mobilizes Hartosexuals—the name her fanbase has given themselves—to volunteer in the name of spreading love and “reckless optimism.” Hannah often uses the term “reckless optimism” in her videos as a way to characterize “accepting the reality of situations as
they are, but still believing that something good will come of it” (as quoted in Steinbach, 2015). She urges her viewers to “practice reckless optimism,” or to make the most out of bad situations.

**Colleen Ballinger (aka PsychoSoprano)**

Colleen Ballinger, a comedian, actress, and singer/songwriter, is best known for her channel *Miranda Sings*, which features her talentless but narcissistic character by the same name. This channel has over seven million subscribers and ranks 154th (“Miranda Sings,” 2016). As Miranda, Colleen has gained notoriety both on and off of YouTube, making appearances on *The Tonight Show* and Jerry Seinfeld’s *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee.* In 2016, she launched her own Netflix series called *Haters Back Off*, a fictional sitcom that depicts Miranda’s tumultuous but hilarious rise to fame. Despite Miranda’s undeniable popularity, I will instead focus on Colleen’s personal channel, *PsychoSoprano* because this is where she most frequently discusses her personal life and addresses her haters. With 752 videos, Colleen’s *PsychoSoprano* channel has over 4.8 million subscribers and ranks 307th (“PsychoSoprano,” 2016). One characteristic of her videos is that she is not ashamed of her bodily functions; she often belches in her videos, and sometimes proudly tells horrifying stories related to defecation and menstruation. Her videos show her young female audience that men aren’t the only ones who can be gross and crude to gain a laugh; even beautiful women can display these stereotypically masculine attributes.

**Lilly Singh (aka IISuperwomanII)**

Lilly Singh joined YouTube in 2011. With 543 uploads, over 10 million subscribers, and over 1.6 billion views, she ranks as the 68th most subscribed-to YouTuber (“IISuperwomanII, 2016). She is one of an elite group of YouTubers who have received the Diamond Play Button,
an accolade YouTube gives to its creators who reach 10 million subscribers. Lilly has explained that she also draws from her Indian heritage to reach out to teenagers of color—particularly Indian teenagers “who live outside the subcontinent” (Bhagat, 2016)—whose representations are often lacking in other popular media. Many of her videos are based in what Bhagat (2016) calls “her ‘Asian-ness,’” such as ones that playfully parody her Punjabi parents to show that Indian parents are just like everyone else’s: every teenager, no matter his or her cultural background, can relate to a nagging parent who doesn’t understand pop culture. Through these videos and others, Lilly promotes love and understanding of everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or other cultural and identity markers.

Mamrie Hart (aka MamrieHart and Mametown)

Mamrie Hart (no relation to Hannah Hart) has been producing YouTube content since 2011. Although Mamrie ranks quite low compared to others on this list, I include her because she is close friends with Grace and Hannah, often appearing in their videos or featuring them in hers; in the context of this study, she appears in Hannah’s “Reading Mean Tweets!” (MyHarto, 2015) video and in the live performance recording. Ranking at 2469th for most subscribers, Mamrie has uploaded 202 videos and has acquired over one million subscribers (“Mamrie Hart,” 2016) through her Mamrie Hart channel.10 This channel is home to her long-running series You Deserve a Drink—or YDAD to fans. On YDAD, Mamrie invents a punny alcoholic beverage and

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9 The trophy is square-shaped with YouTube signature play button design; Jenna also has one. Other Play Button awards are given at lower and higher levels: Silver for 100,000 subscribers, Gold for 1,000,000 million subscribers, and Ruby for 50,000,000 million subscribers.

10 She also produces content—although far less frequently—on her Mametown channel, which ranks 7403rd and has 71 uploads.
dedicates it to a public figure. For instance, in July 2016, Mamrie asks “who do I think most deserves a drink this week?... Zac Efron, everybody” (Mamrie Hart, 2016). Then she concocts a drink called “Zac Efron Smokin’ Hot Bod” margarita.

Jenna, Grace, Hannah, Colleen, Lilly, and Mamrie as Role Models

Framke (2015) notes that the term “awkward” doesn’t quite fit the awkward older sister movement: “As surrogate older sisters, they aren’t awkward so much as approachable. They talk about their flaws rather than try to cover them up, and embrace their quirks rather than feel ashamed of them. They speak to their younger counterparts from a genuine place of understanding, aiming to inspire rather than intimidate” (Framke, 2015). Whether it’s awkwardness or approachableness, viewers cannot deny the magnetism that Grace, Hannah, Mamrie, Jenna, Colleen, and Lilly embody simply because they are relatable.11 Teenagers and young adults often feel stuck while they are trying to develop their own identities, forge friendships, and develop budding romantic relationships; for some, balancing the intricate and always moving parts of this journey is difficult and can lead to self-destruction. But these YouTubers are showing young girls the value of self-care in identity formation. As Framke (2015) explains, “After years of being derided as silly, teenage girls are not only being taken seriously, but are openly, collectively being looked out for.” These teenagers and young women can see Grace, Hannah, Mamrie, Jenna, Colleen, and Lilly as mentors who show rather than

---

11 Because all six women are college-educated, middle-class females, they also tend to draw fans from similar demographics. Lilly tends to appeal more to women of color, and Hannah tend to appeal more to lesbians and other LGBTQ+ people.
preach how to be happy and survive teenagehood. In particular, it is powerful for these young girls to see how all six stand up to and resist haters on their channels.

Female YouTubers and Mean Comments

As part of Hannah’s “Reading Mean Tweets!” (MyHarto, 2015) video, she asks her guests—Jenna, Colleen, Lilly, and Mamrie—to talk about the kinds of mean comments they receive on their videos. Hannah has obviously edited their responses for time (and Hannah does not chime in with her own thoughts), but all four agree that they receive hateful comments.

Jenna: “I receive an awful lot of negative comments on my videos”
Colleen: “I receive so much hate on my videos!” (MyHarto, 2015)

Lilly gives the most detail about the kinds of mean comments she receives. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of her hateful comments reference not only her gender but also, as a Canadian-born Punjabi Indian, her race and ethnicity:

“I get a lot of racist comments [points to face] I don’t know why”
“I receive a lot of sexist comments [points to breasts] I don’t know why.”
“‘Cut your hair you witch’ [grabs long black hair] I don’t know why.” (MyHarto, 2015)

Jenna, Grace, Mamrie, Hannah, Colleen, and Lilly receive a variety of comments on their videos, ranging from error-laden comments that are barely readable to violent comments that are unnerving to read.

Many of these YouTubers also acknowledge that they receive more supportive comments than hateful ones on a regular basis. Colleen makes this statement in both of her singing mean comments videos (PsychoSoprano, 2015; PsychoSoprano 2016), Lilly expresses her appreciation for supportive comments (IISuperwomanII, 2015), and Jenna describes what these comments mean to her (JennaMarbles, 2015). But Hannah describes the powerful impact of even just one
hateful comment: “To be totally honest and truthful, you can get 99 positive comments, but if you get that one negative comment it really just sticks out like a sore thumb. Mainly because I suck my thumb so hard as I gently weep over my laptop” (MyHarto, 2015). However, because mean comments are more scarce than supportive ones on these YouTubers’ pages—which is likely not only a result of their large fanbases showing support and drowning out the negative comments, but also of their fanbases flagging, downvoting, and reporting them—my data for analyzing the kinds of mean comments each YouTuber receives will consist of the mean comments they have chosen to read or sing in their videos. Because each YouTuber chooses which comments to represent—or which ones not to represent—this approach is limited; however, it still yields valuable data about the number and type of mean comments each commonly receives.

Wotanis & McMillan’s Study of Gender, YouTube, and JennaMarbles

Wotanis & McMillan (2014) provide a paradigm for this content analysis. They compared comments from Jenna Mourey and Ryan Higa (channel name: NigaHiga), the top male and female YouTuber accounts in 2012. They determined that while both received more positive feedback than negative, Jenna not only received more critical or hostile comments than Ryan, but she also received 90% more sexist and sexually aggressive responses; as a YouTuber of mixed race, Ryan received some racist comments, but not nearly as many sexist and sexually aggressive ones. Jenna also received fewer supportive comments than Ryan. Of these comments, she received less overall constructive feedback on the content of her videos or her personality, while she also received more attention for her physical appearance (Table 3).
Table 3

Types of Comments Jenna and Ryan Receive (from Wotanis & McMillan, 2014, p. 919)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Comments</th>
<th>Jenna Mourey’s Videos N=919</th>
<th>Ryan Higa’s Videos N=888</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical/Hostile comments (total)</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content or personality</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sexist/racist or sexually</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aggressive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive comments (total)</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content or personality</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical appearance</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wotanis & McMillan (2014) detail the content of the comments. They explain that in the category labelled “sexist/racist or sexually aggressive,” they analyzed the sexist and sexually aggressive comments Jenna received together with the racist ones Ryan got. They specify that Jenna did not receive racist comments and Ryan did not receive sexist or sexually aggressive comments. However, “While it might be argued that the racist comments directed at Higa are similar to the sexual comments responding to Mourey’s videos, the numbers are much greater for Mourey, signaling a more hostile reception” (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014, p. 921). Wotanis & McMillan (2014) also explain that the nature of Jenna’s sexist and sexually aggressive comments “suggests that the value of the performer is in her status as a sexual object or potential sexual partner for the viewer, effectively ignoring the content of the video performance and the personality of the YouTube performer” (p. 920). They conclude, “Evidence of misogyny directed toward Mourey, the most successful female YouTube performer, suggests the seriousness of
hostility toward women on video-sharing sites” (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014, p. 913). They elaborate:

The fact that her [Jenna’s] videos receive more sexually-explicit comments than those of Higa suggests that many viewers watch her videos simply to gaze…. This suggests that women on YouTube are treated in much the same way as women in other media platforms…, raising the question of whether YouTube is suited to women seeking to have their voices heard. (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014, p. 923)

Indeed, this exploration of the gendered difference between mean comments reveals that females’ presence on YouTube is marked by more hate and more sexually aggressive comments—and thus greater objectification and depersonalization—than men receive. However, I do not agree with Wotanis & McMillan’s (2014) pessimistic question of whether or not YouTube is a suitable digital space for females to speak. Not only can female YouTubers make it a “suitable space” by being aware of and ready to subvert the kinds of online aggression and hate they may face there, but they may have a responsibility to address it and make YouTube a safer space for all identities.

Jenna, Lilly, Hannah, Grace, Mamrie, and Colleen’s Mean Comments

Like Wotanis & McMillan (2014), I examined critical/hostile comments and divided them into categories by type: Appearance, Intelligence, Sexual, Quality, Violent, General Hate, Sexually Violent, and Other. Importantly, although Wotanis & McMillan (2014) mined several hundred comments from Jenna’s and Ryan’s comments sections, I am focusing solely on comments the YouTubers read in their videos. To qualify for this part of the analysis, these comments must be accompanied by a screenshot as the YouTuber reads them. For instance, when Mamrie reads “what the hell was that giant bug with a blond wig you were holding?” in Hannah’s “Reading Mean Tweets!” (MyHarto, 2015) video, a screenshot of the comment is
displayed on the bottom of the screen (Figure 56). I make this distinction because some of the YouTubers also talk about general kinds of comments instead of reading actual ones. For instance, Jenna explains in “Reading Mean Tweets!” “I think some of the worst comments I’ve ever received are things like ‘I bet your dad hates you!’” (MyHarto, 2015). She may be referring to a specific comment, but a screenshot of the comment is not displayed as proof of its existence. As such, I have classified those separately under similar categories: Appearance, Intelligence, Sexual, Racist, Quality, Violent, Sexually violent, Sexist, Intelligence/Appearance/Quality, and General Hate. Among the six YouTubers, I analyzed a total of 112 actual mean comments and 16 general kinds of mean comments (Tables 4 and 5). Although Wotanis & McMillan (2014) studied supportive comments as well, for the purposes of this chapter I did not.

Figure 56. “what the hell was that giant bug with a blond wig you were holding?” (MyHarto, 2015)
Table 4

Actual Mean Comments by Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually violent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophobic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

General Kinds of Mean Comments by Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually violent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence/appearance/quality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the 112 actual comments I examined, 37 (33%) criticized the YouTuber’s physical appearance; these comments consisted the majority of the sample. They generally make statements about the YouTuber being unattractive (Figure 57). Others border on classification under “sexual,” but I ultimately decided to keep them under “appearance” because the focus was so strongly on how the YouTuber looks (Figure 58). On some level, one could make the argument that nearly all comments about the females’ appearance is sexual because they are ultimately deciding whether or not she is attractive enough to engage in sexual relations. Instead, I reserve the classification “sexual” (11 comments, 9.8%) for comments that make explicit references to genitalia, sexuality, or sexual intercourse (Figure 59). I have also distinguished “sexually violent” (3 comments, 2.7%) from “sexual” because these are comments that specifically focus on raping, beating, or killing the YouTuber (Figure 60). Comments in the “violent” (6 comments, 5.4%) category focus solely on causing the YouTuber harm or fantasizing about her death (Figure 61). Tables 6 and 7 also contain representative samples of each type of comment.

Figure 57. “Your not atriative ur very agly” (PsychoSoprano, 2015)
Figure 58. “She's pretty near to the 10/10 body in my books. Tight ass, big teddies, nice shape, good legs. Too bad about the face but you can't have it all. That's why god invented paper bags.” (JennaMarbles, 2015)

Figure 59: “roses are red violets are blue pornhubs is down psychosoprano will do” (PsychoSoprano, 2016)
Figure 60: “I just hope you die. So your saying no makeup no sucky cocky and with lip stick swallow spit or gargle” (JennaMarbles, 2015)

Figure 61: “youre a dumb stupid slut and i hope you die” (Grace Helbig, 2015b)
Table 6

Actual Mean Comments (Representative Samples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>YouTuber</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>“you look uglier than my ass… no ofoinse”</td>
<td>Colleen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>“YOU ARE A BAD BAD PERSON”</td>
<td>Jenna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>“I am not sure if she knows or not but she just comes off as slightly retarded in the vast majority of her videos. How anyone can watch this chick is beyond me.”</td>
<td>Jenna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>“Suck my dick and it’ll make your lips big for sure”</td>
<td>Colleen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>“What the hell was that giant bug with a blonde wig you were holding?”</td>
<td>Mamrie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>“This video is not funny at all’</td>
<td>Lilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>“I will kill u!! Bitch!!!!”</td>
<td>Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually violent</td>
<td>“I hate that unfunny kun sloot. I would fuk her but only if I can brutally murder her afterwards.”</td>
<td>Jenna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
<td>“Womens are half minded”</td>
<td>Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophobic</td>
<td>“she’s gay! the damn bull dykes seduced her from us. grab ur children, especially the girls.. I heard, ‘they are recruiting em’”</td>
<td>Grace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7

General Types of Mean Comments (Representative Samples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>YouTuber</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>“Cut your hair you witch”</td>
<td>Lilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>“I think some of the worst comments I’ve ever received are things like ‘I bet your dad hates you!’”</td>
<td>Jenna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>“They say that they hate me and I’m just, you know, dumbing myself down to try to get famous or try to get views”</td>
<td>Colleen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>“I ship them so badly”</td>
<td>Lilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racist</td>
<td>“Cut your hair you witch [grabs long hair] I don’t know why.”</td>
<td>Lilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>“I think I get more upset when people just say things aren’t funny rather than when they say something about, like ‘I could drive a train through her two front teeth.’”</td>
<td>Mamrie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>“Go die”</td>
<td>Lilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually violent</td>
<td>“I want to fuck the fuck out of you”</td>
<td>Lilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
<td>“Go back to the kitchen and make me a sandwich”</td>
<td>Lilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence/</td>
<td>“You’re not funny and you suck and I hate you and you’re dumb and you’re ugly”</td>
<td>Lilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance/Quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 details how many and what kinds of comments each YouTuber received across the videos I analyzed. Unsurprisingly, nearly half of the comments were posted on Jenna’s videos (48 comments, 42.9%). As the most popular of the six (based on her VidstatsX statistics and subscriber rankings), it seems natural that she would not only receive more comments in general, but also more mean comments in particular. Colleen received the second most (43 comments, 38.4%). Surprisingly, Hannah and Lilly received very few comments (3 comments, 2.7%; and 1 comment, .9%; respectively), despite both uploading mean comments videos to their
YouTube channels. However, in Hannah’s “Reading Mean Tweets!” (2015) video, she only has Jenna, Lilly, Colleen, and Mamrie read mean comments; she does not read any herself. Instead, the only time Hannah reads mean comments is in Lyndsay K’s upload “Hannah Hart Comments On Your Comments at the #NoFilter Show” (2013), where three of the 11 comments are from her page. Similarly, Lilly uploads a video responding to general kinds of mean comments but only reads one actual mean comment during Hannah’s “Reading Mean Tweets!” video.

Table 8
Actual Mean Comments by YouTuber

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Jenna</th>
<th>Colleen</th>
<th>Hannah</th>
<th>Mamrie</th>
<th>Lilly</th>
<th>Grace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually violent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophobic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, YouTubers are free to decide how many comments they will read. This also likely accounts for much of the disparity between YouTubers’ total number of comments as well as types of comments. For instance, although Grace and Colleen have both uploaded two videos addressing mean comments—and although Grace’s videos were both longer—Colleen’s goal for both was to pack as many mean comments as she could into songs while Grace spent more time
making fun of the few comments she pulled out. Further, the YouTubers’ may also choose which comments to focus on. I have been following Hannah, Grace, and Mamrie’s channels as an avid fan for several years, and I have seen several comments that fall into some of the more unsavory categories, such as “sexual,” “violent,” and even “sexually violent”; and because Hannah is an openly out lesbian, she has garnered many comments that would fall into the “homophobic” category. But it should come as no surprise that some YouTubers may not want to display or even read those comments: doing so may be too difficult or traumatic.

Alternatively, displaying or reading those comments may defy the brands they have built as YouTubers. For instance, viewers watch Hannah’s channel for encouragement to practice reckless optimism, so she could decide that making a video displaying violent and homophobic comments would damage her reputation. Finally, all six YouTubers are known for their humor, and reading fantasies involving your own rape or death are understandably difficult to make funny. As I will explain in further detail later, although Jenna opts into reading three sexually violent comments (and is the only one of the six to do so), the overall tone of her video is darker than the others’ videos.

Lilly is an interesting case as well because she opted not to read any actual comments in her video “What YouTube Comments Really Mean” (IISuperwomanII, 2015). She instead offers several different kinds of comments she has received without showing any actual comments. Table 9 shows that a few other YouTubers opted for this method as well, although only offering one apiece. Jenna, Colleen, and Mamrie each mentioned one general kind of comment they receive in Hannah’s “Reading Mean Tweets!” (MyHarto, 2015) video; Lilly offers three examples in the same video. Unsurprisingly, Lilly’s mean comments are the only ones that focus on race. The other five YouTubers are white, but Lilly is of Indian descent and is often
mistakenly construed in her comments as being Muslim or middle-Eastern. As a result, along with more typical comments that offer general hate, she also discusses comments that label her as a terrorist or that ridicule her for her skin color and hair type.

Table 9
General Kinds of Mean Comments by YouTuber

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Jenna</th>
<th>Colleen</th>
<th>Mamrie</th>
<th>Lilly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually violent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence/appearance/quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=16

Overall, this collection of 112 actual mean comments and 16 general kinds of mean comments points to a trend in negative comments posted to female YouTubers’ videos: appearance, sex, and violence. The data from my analysis supports Wotanis & McMillan’s (2014) findings on gender and YouTube. In addition to generally hateful comments, women tend to receive comments that focus on critiquing their bodies—whether they be about physical appearance (especially in connection to being deemed acceptable to have intercourse with), their
availability for sex, and their genitalia and breasts—in addition to comments that reveal a desire to control, damage, or destroy female bodies through rape, assault, and murder.

Kerry Ferris’s (2001) research on fans and celebrities points to why people may be inclined to post these mean comments on YouTubers’ channels. Ferris shows that fans will often go to great lengths to get the attention of their favorite TV show stars and that not all of their efforts are in the best interest of the celebrities. Similarly, YouTube commenters could make outrageous and seemingly harmful comments on YouTube celebrities’ pages in a desperate effort to get their attention and be recognized by the celebrity via having their mean comments read in a video. However, this does not seem to be the case with the six YouTubers I have studied. With the exceptions of Colleen and Grace, each YouTuber has only made one reading mean comments style video. None of them announced their intentions to do so beforehand, so viewers would not have known that their comments could appear in this format. As such, it seems reasonably safe to say that these comments are organic; that is, they are not constructions by fans seeking the YouTubers’ attention.

These comments are also clearly more than just “mean”: they are malicious attempts to silence women’s’ voices and perpetuate hatred toward certain identity groups. Jenna, Grace, Colleen, Lilly, Mamrie, and Hannah seem determined to continue making videos and acting as “awkward older sister” role models for young teenagers, but not every female YouTuber or aspiring YouTuber is likely as capable of continuing in the face of malicious comments like these. Unfortunately, we have no way of determining how many women have been discouraged from starting or maintaining their own channels; there are no interviews with former YouTubers
who quit because of harassment, and many who may have done so were never popular enough to be widely visible.  

This analysis also reveals that the fears voiced by Lange’s (2016) vlogger interviewees are largely unfounded and that methods are needed to reduce the numbers of mean comments posted to YouTubers’ videos. Lange’s (2016) interviewees expressed concern that finding a way to reduce hateful comments on YouTube videos may also limit the amount of useful feedback they could receive. But as both my analysis and Wotanis & McMillan’s (2014) shows, very few comments are focused on providing feedback on the quality of the video. Granted, my study was limited because I only looked at comments presented by the YouTubers themselves, but so few comments fell into the “quality” category (7 actual, 6.3% of 112; 2 general kinds, 12.5% of 16), that the potential for positive impact is negligible. Of the nine actual and general kinds of comments classified as “quality,” only one proved to be constructive. Lilly explained a certain kind of comment that she finds beneficial: “I wasn’t particularly fond of this video because of ‘xyz’” (IISuperwomanII, 2015). She responds by explaining that this kind of commenter is “an adult who has an opinion” and she implies that such comments are favorable over ones that do not provide justification. However, as the data above shows, these productively negative

12 Lest I be accused of employing the “rhetoric of imminent harm” Penney (2015) warns us to avoid when discussing the potential harm of negative media. I want to distinguish that I am not using it to justify censorship. Penney (2015) explains, “When justifying the need to remove an offending image from circulation in the public sphere, activists... often invoke the threat of imminent harm. The idea here is that the media content will not only upset members of the minority community but also endanger their material well-being as viewers are persuaded to act discriminatorily or even violently toward them” (p. 223). As Penney (2015) points out, this rhetoric can be dangerous because it assumes that certain groups are definitely in danger when in fact there is very little evidence to support such claims; as a result, the targeted groups appear weak or powerless in the face of the malicious media that is removed from circulation, when this is not the case. However, while my warning above comes close to using Penney’s “rhetoric of imminent harm” I want to clarify that there are real—mostly anecdotal and unpublished—instances of women being discouraged from participating on YouTube, and I am suggesting that rather than censorship we need to find methods to reduce occurrences of mean comments without violating free speech.
comments are rare. Instead, the majority of comments about “quality” provide generally hateful statements (Figure 62).

Figure 62: “This video is not funny at all” (MyHarto, 2015)

Reading Mean Comments: A New Form of Parody

As a result, it has become increasingly clear that a method is needed to acknowledge, confront, and fight against these kinds of comments that serve only to ridicule and objectify women without offering anything productive. One method that may serve to subvert haters is reading mean comments. Jimmy Kimmel created this video genre in 2012 when he debuted a segment called “Celebrities Read Mean Tweets” on his show Jimmy Kimmel Live! Over the last four years, Kimmel has aired this popular segment 24 times, including two featuring President Obama. The premise is simple: a few celebrities read aloud one mean tweet they have received and then respond to it briefly either verbally or nonverbally while REM’s “Everybody Hurts” plays softly in the background. Some celebrities laugh partway through, while others keep a
straight face the whole time or look confused. Some choose to crack a joke at the hater or the tweet; others jokingly agree with them. The goal seems to be to ridicule the haters while simultaneously subverting the power of their mean tweet. The segment takes a sort of “sticks and stones”\(^\text{13}\) approach to online aggression: the haters can say what they want, but at the end of the day, the celebrity is still going to be a celebrity and continue making music or starring in movies regardless of what a mean tweet says about them.

Over the last four years, the reading mean tweets sensation has made its way to YouTube as reading mean comments. A YouTube search for “reading mean comments” on December 30, 2016, yields over one billion results, most of which had been uploaded within the last two years but a few of which had been uploaded within the hour. It seems nearly every YouTuber has adopted this video genre for at least one upload, so the question remains: why is this genre so appealing to YouTubers? Part of it may be that Jimmy Kimmel has popularized it in mainstream and traditional media and top YouTubers like NigaHiga, PewDiePie, and JennaMarbles have adapted it for digital media, so other savvy YouTubers have figured out that adapting it for themselves can earn them more views and YouTuber popularity. But I think its appeal goes deeper than that for serious YouTubers.

The reading mean comments genre has evolved into a complex form of parody. Part of this parodic method’s appeal stems from the fact that, as Tom Ballard (2016) points out, “the typical primary rhetorical purpose of a parody… is usually to mock that which is being imitated” (10). Dentith (2000) explains that parody is “playful” (p. 11), and Hutcheon (1989) notes that it is “always critical” (p. 93). Put together, this means that parody must playfully yet critically

\(^{13}\) From the old childhood adage “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”
mock a text through imitation. This is similar to what happens when YouTubers read their mean comments. They do not necessarily reinvent the text—the comments—to the degree to which the term “parody” generally implies, but they alter their meaning through reiteration. In other words, the YouTubers “participate in the construction of their [the mean comments’] meaning through practices of active transformation” (Penney, 2015, p. 226). In particular, they reveal the comments as hate speech while critiquing the larger cultural assumptions behind it.

The reading mean comments genre is particularly well-suited for this kind of parody because it has the potential to enact this resistance and subversion through acknowledging “mean comments” as hate speech. When a user reads only one mean comment or even a few, it can be difficult to understand the larger picture of the kinds of online aggression female YouTubers face. However, when users are faced with a cluster of mean comments in a five-minute video, it becomes clear that such vitriol is more than just “mean”: it is hate speech aimed at specific identities. As this study has shown, the majority of mean comments fixate on the YouTubers’ appearances or sexualize them in violent and nonviolent ways, revealing that YouTube remains a space where female bodies are controlled and destroyed, even if only in fantasy.

At the same time, the parody has the power to not only evaluate the original text, but it can also critique the larger cultural assumptions behind it. Dentith (2000) explains that “many parodies draw on the authority of precursor texts to attack, satirise, or just playfully to refer to elements of the contemporary world” (p. 9). In the case of mean comments and haters, the alleged authority is the haters, their hate speech, and their hierarchical worldview that presumes power over women’s bodies. However, through using parody to develop their own, YouTubers resist and subvert the haters’ presumed authority. Rather than allow the hate speech to silence them, female YouTubers are speaking out even louder against such oppressive power. They are
actively working against the idea that YouTube is a space where they are not allowed and instead attempting to open it up as a space for productive discourse about this kind of prejudice. Through reading them aloud, the YouTubers actively transform malicious comments intended to offend or silence into new texts that do the opposite.

These new texts unify YouTubers and their fans through laughter. The haters are not the primary audience of the reading mean comments genre; the fans are. Although the YouTubers read mean comments and sometimes respond briefly to them, they have also set up a framing device that clarifies the fans as primary audience. This frame is important because most of their fans are young, teenage girls, and the YouTubers act as role models for them; as such, by directing the videos to fans instead of haters, they are fulfilling an ethical responsibility to their fans.

Nearly every YouTuber begins by candidly addressing her fans and explaining why they are reading mean comments or what reading mean comments is. In “Reading mean comments” and “Reading mean tweets!” Colleen (PsychoSoprano, 2015) and Hannah (MyHarto, 2015), respectively, both open with “Hey guys!” This is a typical salutation used by many YouTubers and usually addresses their fans. Sometimes Hannah will have an aside that welcomes new viewers, but even this is with the assumption that the new viewer will become a fan, not a hater. Jenna (JennaMarbles, 2015) begins with “Hi friends” before explaining that the reason she has decided to read mean comments is because her fans asked her to: “So I asked you yesterday on my Facebook what you guys wanted to see, and overwhelmingly you guys want me to read mean comments.” Lilly (IISuperwomanII, 2015) welcomes both fans and new viewers before thanking both fans and haters “for their time and effort” and explaining that the over three million comments she has received makes her an authority on what comments mean. And Grace
(DailyYou, 2013; Grace Helbig, 2015b) begins both videos with clips of her joking around with her guests, Pete Holmes and James Corden, before looking at the camera and acknowledging her viewers. However, any fan who is familiar with Grace’s videos knows that this is the way she begins most of her videos, even ones where she appears alone; as such, this technique establishes a clear connection to her fans, not her haters. The only exception to this opening frame is Colleen (PsychoSoprano, 2016) in “Mean comments – an original song” where she launches right into her song; however, she has written at least two other mean comments songs,\(^\text{14}\) so her fans likely knew what was coming without an introduction. Hannah also does not do a special intro in Lyndsay K’s (2013) upload of “Hannah Hart comments on your comments at the #NoFilter show” because this was a segment from a live performance and presumably the only attendees would be fans of Hannah, Grace, and Mamrie.

Similarly, each video ends with a framing device that re-establishes the fans as primary audience. Colleen and Lilly both end their videos by thanking fans for the larger number of positive comments that they generally receive: “I do get a lot of hate comments, but not even close to the amount of wonderful, sweet, loving comments you guys send me. So thank you so much for always being so supportive and being nice and pleasant on the Internet” (PsychoSoprano, 2016). Hannah (MyHarto, 2015) refers directly to her fans when she reveals how staying positive is an active choice she makes every day and encourages her fans to make as well. Jenna (JennaMarbles, 2015) refers back to the beginning by reminding her fans that they requested this video: “So yeah, I hope that this video made you happy because it’s what you guys wanted to see this week.” And Grace ends both of her videos with more witty banter with her

\(^\text{14}\) One of which, “CHRISTMAS HATERS (Original song),” is not included for analysis in this chapter.
guests before encouraging her fans to watch their shows. Again, while she does not directly address the audience in a familiar way—such as when most of the other YouTubers refer to “you guys” to signify talking to the audience—this is typical of Grace’s videos and so signals a concrete call to her audience.

While each YouTuber frames her videos to signify that her fans are the main audience, each also employs a unique parody technique. The basic concept of the parody is the same—read or sing the mean comments while briefly responding to some of them—but each YouTuber adds her own modification to the genre. For instance, Grace has men present in both of her videos, Lilly unapologetically derides the haters, Colleen exaggerates the comments (especially grammar errors) while singing them, Hannah ends on a positive note, and Jenna takes a serious turn. These distinctions are important because they not only reveal something about the fanbase toward which they are directing these parodies, but they also demonstrate Penney’s (2015) “active transformation” of parody. No one parody technique will work for every YouTuber; instead, she must read her audience and actively demonstrate an understanding of their needs and expectations by tweaking the genre as they transform the power of mean comments.

Grace and the Presence of a Male Authority

Grace has posted two reading mean comments videos to her channel. Both are unique from other YouTubers’ similar videos in that she invites guests to help her read and respond to comments: the first video features Pete Holmes (DailyYou, 2013), and the second one features James Corden (Grace Helbig, 2015b), both of whom are male television actors and performers.¹⁵

¹⁵ Although Hannah featured other YouTubers reading mean comments in her “Reading Mean Tweets!” video, Grace’s is distinct from hers in a few key ways. First, Grace’s guests are not YouTubers, while Hannah’s are;
Both videos follow the “You’ve been prazed” format, which is a style of video Grace developed when she was YouTubing on Daily You, a channel that she no longer uses (which is also where “Pete Holmes compliments the sh*t out of you” is hosted). In this segment, she “hazes” her new viewers with praise. The format itself is a parody of the mean comment genre; Grace invents silly and weird comments instead of mean ones to make her fans laugh. Usually, Grace thinks of something goofy and weird to say about the user, often using their username as fodder for a joke. In both videos, Grace takes the concept of this segment and remixes it: she reads mean comments and her guests respond to them by offering praise or providing a far-fetched explanation for why the mean comment was actually a compliment. Grace’s videos are also unique in that although her video is longer than most, she reads the fewest comments per video than the other YouTubers’; instead, the she and her guests spend more time parodying and bantering about the comments than reading them.

In “Pete Holmes compliments the sh*t out of you,” Grace presents five different types of comments for Pete Holmes to respond to (Table 10). The distinctive feature of this video is how Pete responds to the mean comments; his responses are the only instances in this study of a responder outright insulting a hater by name. For instance, in response to the comment “You’re

\footnote{second, Hannah asked her guests to read and respond to their own mean comments, while Grace reads her own and has her guests respond to them; third, Grace’s guests are male, while Hannah’s are female.}

\footnote{16 Grace’s two videos are 5:02 (“Pete Holmes Compliments”) and 5:21 (“Reading Mean Comments”). By comparison, Lilly’s is 4:52 (“What Mean Comments”), Colleen’s are 3:27 (“Reading Mean Comments”) and 2:47 (“Mean Comments”), Hannah’s is 4:24 (“Reading Mean Tweets!”), and Jenna’s is 7:50 (“Reading Mean Comments”).}

\footnote{17 As will be demonstrated below, Lilly makes fun of kinds of haters, but she does not call out any specific users by their username. Pete does.}
a f*cking sl*t Grace; you africa me so much. You are so NOT interesting! BITCH F*** YOU!”

(Figure 63), Pete offers a lengthy rebuttal that ends in an insult:

wafa haj ali, I will say your name sounds like a planet system in the new Star Wars movies. Also, I appreciate that you wrote ‘bitch’ and then you bleeped out ‘fuck.’ Bitch is okay, but fuck is a little over the line for the ‘ol w.h.a. So thanks for africa-ing us you fucking dick. (DailyYou, 2013)

Pete’s response begins similarly to other YouTubers’ in this study; that is, he provides some snarky commentary on the comment, specifically pointing out the haters’ inconsistent self-censorship. However, he differs in that he responds directly to the hater, first addressing him/her by username (and implying that it is a silly username; references to the new Star Wars franchise are rarely a compliment), and ending by calling him/her a “fucking dick.” This is a level of hostility to which the other YouTubers do not resort. However, this hostility also serves as parody. Although Grace tells him that the goal is to respond to the haters with kindness, he often insults them with their own words (ie: “you africa me so much” and “africa-ing,” which is probably a typo that gives few clues as to the intended word).

Table 10

Actual Comments by Type: Grace Helbig “Pete Holmes compliments the sh*t out of you”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophobic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
James Corden takes a different approach in “Reading mean comments” that more closely mirrors the other YouTubers’ responses in this study. The overall tone of the video seems intentionally more playful than the previous one, which may have something to do with it being produced more recently. Grace posted “Reading mean comments” in 2015, when her brand had been more firmly established and when she had begun to emerge as the leader of the “awkward older sister” movement, so perhaps James’s responses are tamer in part because of that. Similarly, Grace selected mean comments that are more innocuous than the previous video’s: three of them are categorized as General Hate and only one is Violent (Table 11). She chose short, mostly silly comments like “f***, dis bich gon get rich,” “i h@ you,” and “Bitch” [sic, all errors] (Grace Helbig, 2015). And, whereas the previous video largely featured Pete responding to the comments with little input from Grace, this video features witty banter between Grace and James that allows for an equal amount of time for each to respond to the comment.
Interestingly, Grace puts most of the work of responding to the comments on the men she features in these videos. She chooses and reads the comments, but leaves it to Pete and James to formulate a response. Even in the case of the second video where she is more involved in the response, James almost always initiates it with his own reaction. Further, when Grace displays the comments she reads, she enlarges and superimposes them over the majority of the screen in both videos. This serves the dual purpose of making the comment clearly visible and obscuring Grace’s face so viewers cannot see her reaction when she reads the comment—whether intentionally or not is unclear (Figure 64). In many ways, then, Grace removes the agency of responding to these comments from herself and instead puts the impetus on her male guests. I can only speculate on why this might be, but if Grace is an awkward older sister, then both men seem to be filling the role of an older brother. As older brother figures, they step in to stick up for their younger sister and protect her from bullies.

As a result, Pete and James represent a male authority that deconstructs some of the gendered hate Grace receives. One example comes from “Pete Holmes compliments,” which includes a wider range of mean comments: “she’s gay! the damn bull dykes seduced her from us. grab ur children, especially the girls.. I heard, ‘they are recruiting em’” (DailyYou, 2013). Pete
responds by both mocking the user and making it clear that homophobia is not welcome on Grace’s page:

David1002a, because David1002 was taken, I do want to say thanks for keeping it really closed-minded and reinforcing the idea that lesbian women are all pedophiles and out to recruit them also into dykehood? And you spelled dyke correctly? What did ya Google it? I like that you painted such a vivid picture. You’re like our JRR Tolkien, if he were a big bag of cocks. (DailyYou, 2013)

As shown above, one of the main reasons women receive so much hate on YouTube is because they are exercising their voices in a public space. Haters post mean comments in an attempt to silence these female YouTubers. However, Grace has invited men to respond to and parody these comments in a move that paradoxically silences and empowers her. She allows the men to speak for her, but doing so proves significant. She seems to recognize that—as white, heterosexual men—their voices afford Pete and James a level of authority that is recognized by the haters, which may give her more authority when speaking out against them. Because two figures of normalized masculinity have aligned themselves with her and against female-identity-based hate speech, Grace enacts powerful parody that subverts her haters.
Lilly and Unapologetic Derision

Lilly’s video, “What YouTube comments really mean” (2015), is distinct from the others in that it focuses only on various types of comments she has received; she does not read or display any of her actual comments. In fact, she has never produced a video in which she reads her mean comments. The only instance of her reading an actual mean comment is in Hannah’s (MyHarto, 2015) “Reading Mean Tweets!” video. As I mention above, she tends to receive a lot of racist and sometimes violent comments. As a result, she may not want to read some of these comments in a public venue. Regardless of why she chooses to only focus on general kinds of mean comments (Table 12), her take on the genre is unique. When parodying each of the general kinds of comments she receives, she juxtaposes her reading with derisively mocking the hater. To emphasize her disdain for the haters, she also uses a camera technique to physically separate them from her on screen.

While reading each comment, Lilly mocks typing as she makes silly facial expressions that illustrate her low opinions of commenters. For instance, when she says, “You’re a terrorist,” she appears on the left side of the screen (Figure 65). Then for her response, she moves to the right side of the shot (Figure 66). This move serves two purposes. First, it helps viewers to easily understand when she is acting as a hater or responding to mean comments. But most importantly, it creates a boundary between her and her haters and the malicious rhetoric they use.

Recall that I left some comments out of this analysis that are irrelevant to this study of online aggression.
Table 12

General Kinds of Comments by Type: IISuperwomanII’s “What YouTube comments really mean”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually Violent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence/appearance/quality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 65: “You’re a terrorist” (IISuperwomanII, 2015)
Lilly’s responses are also unique from the other female YouTubers’. Often the others will casually make fun of the comments themselves or laugh at their ridiculousness, but few reciprocate their haters’ mocking derision (apart from Pete, above). However, Lilly often responds with sarcastic contempt for her haters. Figure 66’s response above to the “You’re a terrorist” comment provides one example where Lilly portrays the hater as an unintelligent but gullible person who doesn’t think for him/herself but still naively believes that chain emails need to be forwarded. Another example is her response to the type of comment “You’re not funny and you suck and I hate you and you’re dumb and you’re ugly” (IISuperwomanII, 2015). This comment earns one of Lilly’s snarkier responses: “I like run-on sentences. Also, I wish they would invent this button on my Internet window that like closed it, you know, so I [wouldn’t] have to watch these videos against my will” (IISuperwomanII, 2015). In addition to ridiculing haters’ general bad grammar, this remark also points to the futility of mean comments. As Lilly
implies, haters do not need to watch the videos they hate on; ultimately, posting a mean comment constitutes a waste of their time.

Through these and other responses, Lilly parodies her haters with unapologetic derision. She doesn’t quite stoop to their level by perpetuating racism, making fun of their appearance, threatening them in any way, or repeating many of the same themes haters tend to, but she does mock their intelligence in nearly every response. Importantly, because she is resisting prejudice and closed-mindedness, she is not re-enacting hate speech but instead parodying it. Finally, she also rewards good comments. She ends her video by thanking her fans for their positive comments and explains that she is “going to take some time right now and respond to as many as I can”; she encourages her fans to “take a second and comment below” (IISuperwomanII, 2015). Lilly shows that she values comments from her supporters but thinks very little of her haters.

**Colleen and Exaggerating Mean Comments through Song**

Colleen (PschoSoprano, 2013; 2015) adds a unique twist to the reading mean comments genre by using negative comments as fodder for song lyrics. She has two videos, “Reading mean comments” and “Mean comments – an original song” where she plays her ukulele and sings the comments in a comical manner. This is not a new type of video for her fans: she often writes and sings original songs as part of her YouTube channel. These two videos are remarkable because of their tendency toward parodic exaggeration. Colleen uses both songs to emphasize her haters’ grammatical errors and ridicule their intelligence. She also uses both choruses to highlight the power she has as a monetized YouTube channel; she makes money from the haters who comment on her videos.
Both songs place strong emphasis on the fact that so many of the mean comments she receives are riddled with errors. At the end of “Reading mean comments,” Colleen says, “let’s be honest, anyone who has grammar that terrible, um, is very uneducated and is probably living in their parents’ garage or basement at age 42. And yes, I’m assuming they’re all male” (PsychoSoprano, 2015). Similarly, in “Mean comments,” the main chorus includes the lines “So keep the comments coming, but here’s some help: before you go insulting people maybe learn how to spell. Dumb da-dumb, dumb da-dumb, you sound so dumb, dumb, dumb, you sound so dumb” (PsychoSoprano, 2016). Colleen admits in the first video that her approach to receiving mean comments is to retaliate publicly rather than passively accepting them: “I choose to sing about them and poke fun right at them right back” (PsychoSoprano, 2015).

Her method for retaliation largely consists of allowing the haters to speak for themselves. Colleen shows their comments while she sings them; at times these videos seem like a dark sing-along. An important aspect of her parody is how she exaggerates her haters’ many spelling errors. Dentith (2000) explains how this exaggeration enhances parody:

One way in which parody works is to seize on particular aspects of a manner or a style and exaggerate it to ludicrous effect. There is an evident critical function in this, as the act of parody must first involve identifying a characteristic stylistic habit or mannerism and then making it comically visible. (p. 32)

When singing and critiquing the comments in both videos, she mostly focuses on comments with one or more errors, often exaggerating a spelling mistake by over emphasizing it. For instance, in “Reading mean comments,” the first three comments she sings have egregious errors that she over-pronounces:

“First of all, you are haribile” [she pronounces the last word “hair-i-bile”]
“Ew wat was that ungly thing it looks like fat nolife” [she hits the “n” in “ungly”]
“Your not atriative yur very agly” [she pronounces “atriative” as “uh-try-uh-tive” and stresses the “a” in “agly”] [sic, all errors]
She continues this tradition in “Mean comments” when she over-pronounces the “l” in the comment that calls her “toltoly stupid” (PsychoSoprano, 2016). Figure 67 shows her sticking out her rolled tongue as she exaggerates the misspelling. Of the 42 comments Colleen sings in both videos, 32 contain misspellings or other errors that she makes fun of. In fact, the first half of “Reading mean comments” focuses solely on exaggerating comments that contain egregious errors, while almost every comment in “Mean comments” does the same. These comments also tend to be the ones to which Colleen directly responds during her songs. For instance, one nearly unreadable comment says “Yo lips fat den a bitch yo shit look like 2 salmon patties” to which Colleen theatrically mouths “What?” (PsychoSoprano, 2016). Through this exaggerated attention to the haters’ grammatical errors, Colleen’s videos act as light-hearted and humorous backlash against mean comments.

Figure 67: “Toltoly Stupid” (PsychoSoprano, 2016)
However, one of the drawbacks of Colleen’s sing-along parody method is that the happy tune of both of her songs belie the serious nature of some of these comments. For instance, the fifth comment in “Mean comments” contains a reference to masturbation: “roses are red violets are blue pornhub is down psychosoprano will do” (PsychoSoprano, 2016). The comment is sandwiched between a lengthy and confusing one that Colleen reads dramatically and another short but silly one. This placement and her silly singing downplays the fact that one of her haters openly admitted that the only reason s/he visits her channel is to sexually objectify her, not to view and enjoy her content; the viewer does not take Colleen seriously as a YouTuber or content creator, but instead uses her channel as an alternative to his or her standard pornography venues. This comment is not the only one that objectifies Colleen. Of the 42 total comments, 12 critique her appearance, three make sexual comments or advances, and two are violent. See Tables 13 and 14 for a detailed breakdown of the kinds of comments Colleen sings in both videos.

Table 13

Actual Comments by Type: PsychoSoprano “Reading mean comments”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 14

Actual Comments by Type: PsychoSoprano “Mean comments – an original song”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, despite this risk of downplaying the mean comments, Colleen also makes an important move by stressing how much power she has even in the face of mean comments from haters. Both videos emphasize that making YouTube videos is Colleen’s primary source of income. She has enabled monetization on her channel, so she makes money when people watch her videos. In “Reading mean comments,” she sings “But the joke’s on you, so keep saying ‘I want you killed,’ cuz your comments make me money and you’re paying my bills” (PsychoSoprano, 2015). In “Mean comments,” she sings “You might think that I’m hurt or I’m feeling abused, but I’m not. I’m getting paid from your comments and views” (PsychoSoprano, 2016). In both cases, she emphasizes the fact that she makes money for every mean comment that gets posted to her channel. In “Mean comments,” she even encourages it: “So keep the comments coming” (PsychoSoprano, 2016). This rhetorical move shows any haters or potential haters who may be watching that their negative comments are powerless over her. If she is bothered by any of these malicious comments, she does not show it in these videos.
Hannah and Ending on a Positive Note

Hannah is known for her optimistic and positive YouTube videos, so her producing a reading mean comments video seems strange at first to fans. She acknowledges this in her intro to “Reading Mean Tweets! #MakeItHappy ft. Jenna Marbles, Colleen Ballinger, Lilly Singh, and Mamrie Hart!”:

Hey guys, it’s Thursday, and usually on Thursdays we talk about our feelings slash news items slash things I learned about that day. But today I just wanna talk about some things that really suck. So recently I got together with some of my best friends to sit around and talk about our feelings while recording them straight to camera. Why, you may ask? Frankly because we’re YouTubers and that’s just how we’ve trained ourselves to cope. Sometimes it’s a little difficult because of comments that are negative in the comments section. (MyHarto, 2015)

Interestingly, although this is Hannah’s video, she does not read any of her own mean comments. Instead, she asks—as the title implies—Jenna, Colleen, Lilly, and Mamrie to read comments that she has selected. Although the main video begins with the four YouTubers talking about the kinds of comments they receive and reading a few negative comments, Hannah’s take on the genre is unique in that she quickly steers the video away from the mean comments and instead focuses on how to make a positive impact using the hashtag “#MakeItHappy.” Her method is complicated by the fact that the video also serves as a commercial promotion for Coca Cola, but it is overall effective in resisting haters through parody.

The main video opens with a montage of Jenna, Colleen, Lilly, and Mamrie talking about the general kinds of mean comments they receive. Jenna notes that she is no stranger to mean comments. Colleen speculates that “people just like to hate” while explaining that her negative comments tend to focus on her intelligence: “they say that they hate me and I’m just, you know, dumbing myself down to try to get famous or try to get views” (MyHarto, 2015). Lilly explains
that she receives a lot of racist and sexist comments on her videos. And Mamrie explains that “I think I get more upset when people just say things aren’t funny rather than when they say something about, like ‘I could drive a train through her two front teeth’” (MyHarto, 2015). Table 15 contains a classification of the general kinds of comments each says they receive.

Table 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Kinds of Comments by Type and YouTuber: MyHarto “Reading mean tweets!”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Hate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, the camera cuts back to a nervous-looking Jenna; off-camera, Hannah says, “I’m going to have you read some negative comments okay?” (MyHarto, 2015). Jenna responds with “Kay” and makes funny faces at the camera until she is handed a laptop, presumably by Hannah. Jenna’s facial expressions and vocal tone are noteworthy. She is known for being goofy and playful, but here she seems almost childish. She appears nervous about the comments she is about to read, which suggests that unlike most versions of the reading mean comments genre, Jenna has not read her own comments beforehand. Typically, the YouTuber is responsible for
choosing his or her own comments and deciding to read them, but it appears as though Hannah may be surprising her YouTuber friends for her version.

Jenna reads and responds to two comments while Lilly, Mamrie, and Colleen read and respond to one apiece. Table 16 details the kinds of comments each YouTuber reads. Each YouTuber also responds jokingly to her comment. In particular, Lilly’s and one of Jenna’s responses deflate any power the comments may have had by agreeing with the haters.

Jenna: [reading] “you are so uneducated and stupid cussing don’t make you cool!” [pause] “Oh it says ‘doesn’t.’ Apparently I’m not educated cuz I can’t even read. Alright [hater’s screenname], you get a point for that.”

Lilly: [reading] “This video is not funny at all.” [Pause, looks at camera] “You’re Probably right.” [laughs]

(MyHarto, 2015)

The others respond similarly by downplaying the comment through sarcasm and playful derision. Jenna’s second comment is “dont rise up your chin all the time” to which she responds by looking up and apparently “ris[ing] up her chin” (MyHarto, 2015). Colleen’s comment says, “coleen needs to contour her makeup,” to which she jokingly replies, “Alright, well that’s not how you spell my name. How rude!” (MyHarto, 2015). Mamrie’s response is the most sarcastic. The commenter insulted her dog, Beanz (a Mexican hairless xolo), by calling him a “bug,” to which Mamrie replied:

Mamrie: [sounding genuinely angry] “Are they talking about my dog? Are they talking about Beanz? If you could train a bug to wear a wig and grow to be five pounds and also pull of any type of hat.” [pause, voice changes to complimentary] “You got yourself a great bug.” (MyHarto, 2015)

Up to this point, Hannah’s video has focused on the negative impact of haters and mean comments without taking it very seriously. The comments are not representative of the kinds of hate the YouTubers typically receive on their videos. Perhaps this is because Hannah does not
want to upset her fanbase—who are used to happy and positive videos and often remark that such content is why they watch her—or perhaps she does not want to upset her best friends. Whatever the reason, Hannah is taking it easy on them.

Table 16

Actual Comments by Type and YouTuber: MyHarto “Reading mean tweets!”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Jenna</th>
<th>Lilly</th>
<th>Colleen</th>
<th>Mamrie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Around the 1:50 mark, less than halfway through the video, Hannah backpedals and admits that reading mean comments can be tough: “Now, I have to interrupt myself because I’m not a total sadist and after making people read negative comments about themselves, I just had to surprise them by putting in a positive comment too” (MyHarto, 2015). As the YouTubers begin to read positive comments about themselves and react to them, the real purpose of the video becomes clearer: in addition to condemning and deriding haters and mean comments, Hannah contrasts the vitriol of the mean comments with the community-building of the positive ones. This method allows Hannah to highlight and discourage the hate speech. At the same time, Hannah reconstructs the discursive space on YouTube; she shows that it has the potential to be a
space that supports females and inspires productive discourse instead of one that derides non-hegemonic identities and closes off dialog.

With the introduction of positive comments, the demeanor of the video changes from apprehension and playful defensiveness to warmth and happiness. Take for instance the difference between Mamrie reading her negative comment and her positive one. She takes the negative one in stride and turns it into a joke, but her initial response as she is reading the comment is to frown while reading it from the laptop (Figure 68); her reading pace is also slower, signaling discomfort or unease. But for the positive comment she turns to look at the camera for the final phrase “just gorgeous!” and her facial expression signals her delight at the comment (Figure 69); likewise, her vocal tone rises, signaling that she is happy and surprised by the kind remark. Through framing her video as a journey from mean comment to positive comment, Hannah illustrates for her fans the power of positive commenting.

Figure 68: “what the hell was that giant bug with a blond wig you were holding?” (MyHarto, 2015)
Although Hannah’s unique spin on the reading mean comments genre has the potential to encourage her fans to spread love by leaving more kind comments on YouTube videos, this video is also sponsored content from Coca Cola. After Jenna, Mamrie, Colleen, and Lilly read their positive comments, Hannah appears to begin to wrap up the video by explaining how staying positive isn’t always easy:

Hannah: In fact, it’s an active choice I make each and every day. You guys always ask me, ‘Hannah, how do you stay so positive? How do you stay so optimistic?’ Well here’s the big secret, here’s the big reveal: I choose to. And not in like a weird repressive sort of way, but by trying to find what shred of positivity there is. Usually you can find it. (MyHarto, 2015)

Typically, this is where her videos would end. However, she surprises her viewers with her next line: “So together with Coca Cola, we’re trying to make the Internet into a happier place. And you can participate too!” (MyHarto, 2015). She explains #MakeItHappy as an initiative to turn negative things into positive. Sometimes her fans have mixed reactions when Hannah posts
sponsored content, but here they are supportive, filling the comments section with “#MakeItHappy and compliments for Hannah, Jenna, Colleen, Mamrie, and Lilly.

**Jenna and Turning to the Serious**

As Jenna states in the intro and outro of “Reading Mean Comments” (JennaMarbles, 2015), she decided to produce this video because her fans requested it. She explains why she has resisted doing it for so long: “So yeah, I’ve been putting off making this video because it’s a downer, it’s fucking sad…. So I’ve sorta been hesitant to do this, but I know that you guys really want to see it, so I wanted to make you guys laugh this week by trashing Jenna” (JennaMarbles, 2015). She also explains that she has gone beyond YouTube to find these comments; some are from Twitter, Facebook, and other “deep corners of the Internet forums” (JennaMarbles, 2015). Unlike some of the other YouTubers, Jenna does not begin lightheartedly; instead, she launches into malicious comments aimed mostly at her appearance. Table 17 details the kinds of comments Jenna reads during the video. Although Jenna begins reading the comments lightheartedly, her video is remarkable because she is the only one who chooses to read not just one, but three sexually violent comments; reading these comments signifies a significant shift in the overall tone of the video.

Even though many of these comments are negative, Jenna spends the first part of the video laughing at and responding to some of them. Importantly, her laughter functions as a response to the common criticism of feminists that they “can’t take a joke”; Jenna shows that she can. One comment reads, “Ugly slut you are” and Jenna responds by smiling and saying “Thanks, Yoda” (JennaMarbles, 2015). Another comment from a Facebook page shows a picture of her and simply displays the word “Idiot” (Figure 70). Jenna responds with seven seconds of
laughter and the admission “That’s one’s actually funny”; she’s still laughing at it when she begins to read the next one (JennaMarbles, 2015). Even if she doesn’t respond to the comments directly, her tone of voice toward the beginning does the work for her. For instance, she reads “without make up on she looks like a guy” nearly tonelessly (Figure 71), but as she translates the emojis at the end of the comment, she pauses sarcastically between them to emphasize her derision—“Blushing face. One-hundred”—then looks into the camera to underscore her contempt (Jenna Marbles, 2015).

However, as the video goes on, Jenna’s tone quickly begins to shift and reveals that she is weary of reading repetitive insults. The shift begins most noticeably around the 3:50 mark when she reads the first sexually violent comment. The comment is a strange blend of sexual violence and illiteracy: “I just hope you die. So your saying no makeup no sucky cocky and with lip stick swallow spit or gargle” (JennaMarbles, 2015). Jenna half-laughs through it because she appears to have a hard time reading the nearly unreadable comment, but after she finishes she repeats while shaking her head, “I just hope you die” (JennaMarbles, 2015). Her shift in tone is
solidified around the 5:15 mark when she reads the second of three sexually violent comments:

“I hate that unfunny kunt [cunt] sloot [slut]. I would fuk [fuck] her but only if I can brutally murder her afterwards” (JennaMarbles, 2015). The look on her face signals that this is not funny; Jenna does not laugh at this one (Figure 72). In fact, Jenna’s facial expression shows that this is
not the first comment she has read fantasizing about raping and murdering her, and that she knows it will not be the last.

Next, she reads a more lighthearted comment in a similar vein to some of the ones she laughed at earlier: “she looks like she was born in a windtunnel” (JennaMarbles, 2015). She even repeats this comment at the end of the video as an example after admitting “some of these were fucking funny” (JennaMarbles, 2015). However, when Jenna originally reads this comment, it is followed by the third sexually violent comment around the 5:29 mark: “I would destroy her vag and dump her in the lake back there…” (JennaMarbles, 2015). Her facial expression mirrors the one from Figure 70 (Figure 73). This comment finalizes the shift in tone and signals an end to the video’s humor. Jenna doesn’t laugh at any more comments until the last one (“You look like a rodent” JennaMarbles, 2015), which she may have strategically placed there so she could end
on a laugh. Jenna looks and sounds tired, even though she slogs through two more minutes of reading mean comments.

Of the six YouTubers, Jenna is the only one who reads sexually violent comments and shifts the tone from humorous to serious. Although this shift defies her typical video style (goofy and silly humor), it is an important rhetorical move for a couple of reasons. First, any of her haters who may be watching can see her reading and reacting to their comments. These haters have the opportunity to see that she is a real person who is being negatively impacted by their online aggression, and that may deter them from writing more mean comments on her or someone else’s channel.

Second, the video further unifies her and her fans while mobilizing her fanbase against haters and mean comments. Many of the video’s comments commiserate with Jenna and reassure her that the mean comments are untrue or that the haters are not worth listening to. A few even

Figure 73: “I would destroy her vag and dump her in the lake back there…” (JennaMarbles, 2015)
say that they will be vigilant and thumbs-down any mean comments they see on Jenna’s videos. Several more of her commenters are confused; they say they’ve seen other YouTubers read mean comments and found the videos funny: “Normally I love people reading hate comments, but this is sad. Like I literally started to tear up...” (Forest of Shadows, 2017). Perhaps inspiring this cognitive dissonance was intentional: people request these videos because they see the most popular YouTubers, most of which are male, read mean comments, so they want to see the top female YouTuber do it too. But what it seems many fans learned from Jenna’s video is that mean comments on female YouTubers’ videos are not like they are on PewDiePie’s or NigaHiga’s. Instead, they are, as Wotanis & McMillan (2014) have shown, largely based in criticizing their appearance or invoking rape and death, all of which are a unique result of their gender.

**Parodying the Hate Speech**

In all of these videos, the parodic moment happens when the YouTuber reads the mean comments. During this process, they actively transform the meaning of the comments through their method for reading. Through their derisive and sing-song tones, Lilly and Colleen strip the original comments of their power by making it clear that they think very little of these haters. The same goes with Mamrie when she reads a comment in Hannah’s video. Jenna’s active transformation differs in that her tone reveals just how much these mean comments have affected her; through using a solemn and weary tone, she shows her viewers that mean comments can have a negative impact on even the most successful of YouTubers. Even the way the YouTubers or their guests respond to the comments becomes a way to parody the haters. For instance, when Pete Holmes “prazes” Grace’s haters he reenacts the mean comment genre by mirroring their derision in his responses. However, despite the fact that parody could be an effective method for
resisting haters and mean comments on YouTube, the repetitive nature of this rhetorical maneuver could also prove dangerous if it is not used carefully.

Conclusion: The Problem with Parody and Why It’s Worth It

Parody is most effective when its “implicit criticism” is obvious (Dentith, 2000, p. 16). As Judith Butler (1990) explains, “Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (p. 189). If the parodist does not draw a sharp line between his/her critique and the original text, then the parody could be mistaken for sincerity. In all of the videos analyzed above, the YouTubers make this distinction by explaining their general thoughts about mean comments and/or by calling out the haters and making fun of them in some way. After watching these eight videos, most viewers would likely understand their parodic elements and see them as clear attempts to resist being silenced by online aggression. In particular, the YouTubers who preclude this legitimization most effectively may be Hannah and Jenna; they are the two who most strongly set themselves in opposition to the mean comments they present. All six YouTubers are clear about their disapproval of haters and mean comments, but Hannah outright addresses the negative impact of the mean comments when she explains what one hater in a sea of supporters can do, while Jenna actively displays it through her tone and facial expressions.

However, another danger of parody is that its inherently repetitive nature can also accidentally legitimize the online aggression it seeks to resist. One particular instance comes from Colleen’s live show where she performs her reading mean comments songs before fans. In one video, captured by YouTuber 138riley138 (2016), Colleen sings “Reading mean comments”
before a live audience. The most notable aspect of this video is the fan involvement. I noted earlier how the sing-along format may undermine the seriousness of the mean comments that she receives. In this live segment, as she sings the mean comments, several audience members can be heard singing along with her. In addition, they often cheer loudly during some of the more unsavory comments. Part of this enthusiasm likely stems from support; they are cheering her on as she faces down the haters and refuses to be silenced by their aggression. Nonetheless, it is disturbing to watch a lone woman play the ukulele on stage while her fans scream insults at her, even if she is singing along and instigated the event.

This video also does not contain context, which Butler (1997) has identified as important to understanding the difference between injurious and non-injurious speech (p. 13). Two things complicate the context of this video, and both of them are connected to audience. First, the recording does not show if Colleen addressed the nature of mean comments during the performance to frame it as a parody. Second, the uploaded video does not contain any context or explanation of what the video is or of its parodic intent. As such, any viewers unfamiliar with Colleen or her videos may not understand the song’s parodic nature. Dietel-McLaughlin (2009) explains that audience awareness is a key part of the subversive power of parody: “audience members must draw from their knowledge of previous cultural texts and rely on multiple intelligences to inform their understanding.” As such, if Colleen is not careful to frame these performances in terms of her parody, she risks perpetuating the very hate she is trying to subvert through audience members who do not understand her purpose.

In addition, repeating these comments even in the service of parody can serve to perpetuate them. Even though the YouTubers all clarify the difference between mean comments and good ones, reading mean comments can still be normalizing. The mean comments are meant
to be laughed at, but the problem is where the laughter comes from. If someone laughs at the
parody while recognizing its evaluative function, then the chance of normalizing and valorizing
the hate speech is reduced. However, if someone laughs at the parody without an awareness of or
appreciation for its critique, the hate speech has a higher risk of being normalized and rewarded
in much the same way that trolling can be on 4chan.

In addition, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, many scholars—including Milner
(2013a), Phillips (2015), and Butler (1997)—recognize that repeating harmful language, even if
for the purpose of criticism or to provide an example, is harmful and could work to normalize
injurious speech. In addition, the fact that these videos were created for humor is problematic. In
an exploration of how mainstream comedy enabled Trump’s 2016 election (even though video
evidence showed him admitting to sexual assault, Deni Ellis Béchard (2017) explains, “Humor,
while a tonic…, can have a powerful normalizing effect. Studies have shown it to increase social
acceptance of discrimination and sexism.” As such the reading mean comments genre has the
potential to perpetuate the hate its users seek to resist. The YouTubers invite us to laugh at the
ridiculous things haters say, in part because they are ridiculous and in part because they are so
futile, but doing so may normalize their mean comments.

However, even though the reading mean comments genre risks normalizing hate, its
potential as a method for subverting online aggression is still promising. In the face of haters
trying to silence their voices in a public place, these six female YouTubers refuse to be silenced.
Rather than ignore the online aggression, they fight back by showing that the mean comments
will not stop them from making their videos and spreading their “awkward older sister”
messages. Most importantly, this resistance has the potential to maintain their comments sections
as spaces for free and open discourse; rather than allowing haters to overrun the comments
sections, Grace, Hannah, Lilly, Jenna, Colleen, and Mamrie fight to keep the space available for their fans to feel comfortable to speak and express themselves as well. Each of these YouTubers regularly demonstrates a commitment to their fans, and their decision to try to keep the comment section free from haters and mean comments is part of that. Parody is key to this action because it evaluates and critiques the hate speech while subverting its authority and power.

The comments sections of these videos are full of supportive comments from fans. Remarkably, although these videos are quite old in the grand scheme of YouTube content—the newest is from September 2016, the oldest from October 2013—most of them are still garnering new comments in February 2017. Notably, these new comments are supportive. Comments on Colleen’s videos emphasize how happy viewers are to comment on and watch her videos so they can help her make more money: “when she said the comments make her money I just want to spam her with comments!!!” (AlexisHappySnuggle Raby, 2016). Comments on others’ videos open up about their experiences with bullying and start commiseration threads: “If I got 20 dollars for every time someone bullied me I would be one of the most richest people in the world.....people bully me a lot and say that I’m ugly” (Stephanie Saldivar, 2017). Still more offer praise for specific YouTubers and attempt to bolster them: “Really? Rape and murder comments? Whoever made those comments, I hope you know you’re fucking disgusting. I feel as if those comments affected Jenna the most. I myself would feel disgusted and shocked. This makes me so angry” (Miekel, 2017). I cannot make any assumptions that these parody videos have resulted in the YouTubers receiving fewer mean comments. However, these positive comments and others like them show that the videos can strengthen the community each YouTuber has built from her fanbase. These parody videos subvert the haters by empowering each YouTuber’s community to engage with each other in supportive dialog.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION: LEARNING TO FEED THE TROLLS

This dissertation has shown that not only do we need to feed the trolls—or more precisely to engage with them—but we need to learn to do so without amplifying their online aggression. I have examined three sites and contexts that are conducive to online aggression—particularly directed at females, the LGBTQ+ community, and people of color—while offering and analyzing three methods for resistance that we can use to feed the trolls. Image macro memes can look like harmless jokes, but in reality can perpetuate histories of gendered and racial oppression when they exploit stereotypes for a cheap laugh. However, counter-meming can reverse the negative messages and affirm identities instead of challenging them. 4chan’s /b/ board can be a place full of gendered insults and racial slurs, proving itself a hostile environment for anyone who does not fit into the anti-PC collective identity it has created. However, using identity rhetoric to rupture the collective identity while still asserting a right to belong can create small windows for open dialog. Finally, haters post mean comments on female YouTubers’ videos, thus attempting to silence female voices on the site. However, the reading mean comments genre can serve as an effective method of parody that strengthens the bond between YouTubers and their fans. Although these three methods may serve to subvert and resist online aggression in these spaces, they are only the beginning. To see a dramatic decrease in online aggression on a large scale, these methods and others need to be taught in university classrooms, these spaces and others
need to be studied more extensively, and we need to be aware of our ethical obligations as global digital citizens.

**Pedagogical Implications and Learning Outcomes**

The findings in this dissertation have implications for how we address technological literacy in the classroom to help students become informed and engaged digital citizens. Cynthia Selfe (1999b) explains that technological literacy is more than the ability to use computers; it is also “a complex set of socially and culturally situated values, practices, and skills involved in operating linguistically within the context of electronic environments, including reading, writing, and communicating” (p. 11). In the early 2000s, scholarship conceived of students as “digital natives,” or people who had grown up surrounded by technology and so were naturally more capable of using it. However, this conception has largely been proven a myth: despite being inundated by technology, students still struggle to use it to produce and consume content critically. Selfe (1999b) explains that “teachers need to recognize that they can no longer simply educate students to become technology consumers without also helping them to learn how to think critically about the technology and social issues surrounding its use (p. 152). A decade later, Stephanie Vie (2008) repeats this call, noting that “students possess technological know-how and access to computers but lack critical technological awareness skills.” Another decade later, the trend of students acting as tech-savvy yet uncritical producers continues, demonstrating the continued need for technological literacy education in writing courses.

Jesse Gainer (2012) has also shown that technological literacy is linked to engaged citizenship and democracy:
A healthy and vibrant democracy requires an engaged citizenry who think critically, take positions on complicated issues, and work collaboratively to solve problems. These qualities parallel demands for 21st-century literacies that deal with the sociological nature of reading and writing multimodally in an increasingly globally connected world. (Gainer, 2012, p. 14)

If we consider that one of our obligations as teachers and scholars is to help students engage with their world as ethical global citizens who are conscious of the implications of both their formal and informal writing—and I think we as scholars and teacher-scholars do (DeLuca, 2015; Duffy, 2014; Frost, 2011; Tryon, 2006; Carlacio & Gillam, 2002)—it seems imperative that we teach students how to read, write, and interact in anonymous spaces as digital citizens. Sameer Hinduja & Justin W. Patchin (2015) have developed digital citizenship pedagogical resources aimed at middle and high school students. However, not only do they omit the role of anonymity and pseudonymity in online aggression, but a PEW survey showing that most online abuse is directed at people in the 18-29 age range (Duggan, 2014) also suggests that such instruction needs to extend in some meaningful way into post-secondary education. Our students are the ones most commonly being harassed and doing the harassing online. Through adding anonymous and pseudonymous social media to all levels of our writing classroom curricula, we can begin to help students be critical consumers and producers of the content they post online.

Many teacher-scholars already use digital social media in some form in their writing classrooms. Ryan P. Shepherd (2015) shows how Facebook helps knowledge transfer from the first-year composition classroom, and Bay VanWagenen (2015) and Samuel L. Head (2016) each link the use of social media to students’ understanding of key rhetoric concepts like audience and author, rhetorical situation, genre, and Burkean identification. David T. Coad (2013) explains that he communicates with his composition students via Facebook instead of a course management system because such a space is “closer to the future of communicative
environments” than something like Blackboard or D2L; Stephanie Vie (2008) also notes that students use social media to connect with each other about their education, sharing notes and asking questions. Erin A. Frost (2011) illustrates the connection students can see between their online identities and their offline lives by guiding students through a rhetorical analysis of Facebook that leads them to understand how the site shapes their interactions and identities.

These examples show that digital social media has the capacity to help students make meaningful connections between their academic and informal writing, with students and instructors, and to their own digital identities. However, much of this work centers on Facebook, a nonymous space. As the examples from this study have shown, a critical awareness of anonymous and pseudonymous spaces is necessary to work against online aggression. In other words, learning how to “feed the trolls” is a crucial component of technological literacy and engaged digital citizenship. The important task at hand for writing teachers and rhetoric scholars is to engage with anonymous and pseudonymous digital social media—particularly the more hostile communities—in a way that will reveal opportunities to inspire the kinds of democratic participation so often lacking in these spaces.

Some may be opposed to this notion, believing that we have an obligation to protect students from the kinds of online aggression that manifest in these spaces. However, such a standpoint is naïve. Our students visit these spaces on a regular basis and are often confronted with online aggression. I implore those who are opposed to incorporating such social media into their courses to talk to their students: ask them how often they see online aggression and hostility in their daily lives. We do our students a great disservice to pretend that anonymous and pseudonymous digital spaces are peripheral to teaching them technological literacy.
As this research shows, we must teach our students not just how to consume and produce content for nonymous social media, we must also teach them to critically engage with anonymous and pseudonymous digital spaces. Erin A. Frost (2011) and Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher (2004) have pointed out that students often have difficulty “seeing” computers and technologies—that is, fully understanding the impact they can have on us, even when we are offline—because they have become so embedded in our lives as to seem virtually invisible. Therefore, our task is to help students “see” the technology and understand how it works with and against them to enact or resist online aggression. When teaching all levels of writing classes, I suggest designing projects that provide opportunities for revealing the discursive power of anonymous and pseudonymous writing. However, they should go beyond analysis. While it is a useful starting point, Bruce McComiskey (2000) points out that focusing only on analysis can leave students feeling helpless; analysis points out problems but does not always offer solutions. As such, production is an essential next step. Students must not only critique digital texts, they must also critically engage in their creation. Importantly, these projects should also be incorporated at all levels of writing instruction, from first-year composition and other service writing courses to technical communication and digital writing courses and even to graduate level digital rhetoric courses.

General Learning Outcomes

Below are some suggestions for general learning outcomes for students in all levels of writing courses, followed by sections with more specific pedagogical goals and approaches and activities for how we can incorporate anonymous and pseudonymous social media into our classrooms.
• Gain awareness of the power of mundane digital discourses and texts
• Develop technoliteracy that includes awareness of social and cultural forces behind digital texts
• Engage in critical digital and multimodal consumption and production that demonstrates awareness of and sensitivity to the varied identities of potential viewers

First-Year Composition

First-year composition (FYC) and other service learning courses are key areas where we can begin to teach students about critically engaging with anonymous and pseudonymous social media spaces. Many FYC courses already ask students to perform visual and rhetorical analyses of texts, so teachers may be able to adapt projects like these to anonymous and pseudonymous digital social media. One method for doing so could involve teaching students to meme and counter-meme (although it is certainly not the only method).

For example, I recently guest taught a class for a FYC course and used the Idiot College Freshman meme to talk about the rhetorical power of memes in a way that the students—most of whom were college freshman—could relate. Idiot College Freshman (Figure 74) perpetuates the stereotype that college freshmen are naïve or unskilled and unable to take care of themselves while away from home for the first time. I used this meme as a platform to introduce the rhetorical conventions of memes, and to encourage discussion on the larger effects negative memes can have. Students discussed how Idiot College Freshman normalizes the trope of upper-level college students treating freshmen poorly or not valuing them. Then, at the end of class I asked them to go to ImgFlip and create their own counter-memes. Only a few completed it by the
end of the class period, but those who did remixed the message to defy stereotypes about college freshmen (Figure 75). This is only one way to approach anonymous and pseudonymous social media in a FYC course, but it was effective. Not only did these students become more aware of memes—mundane digital texts that they uncritically consume and sometimes produce daily—as digital texts that carry a large amount of social and cultural power, but they also had fun while doing it. Table 18 details some broader pedagogical goals adapted from the WPA outcomes statement (CWPA, 2014) that could be used when creating similar projects for FYC courses.

Figure 74. Idiot College Freshman
Table 18. Learning Objectives for First-Year Composition Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical goal</th>
<th>Activities and approaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In order to…</td>
<td>Students can…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain rhetorical knowledge of social media spaces</td>
<td>Study the conventions of anonymous and pseudonymous social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyze and compose in several social media genres and to a wide range of audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critically analyze and produce digital texts in social media contexts</td>
<td>Analyze stereotypes and cultural assumptions behind digital texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compose digital texts consciously and purposefully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examine and practice methods for subverting and resisting online aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remix and subvert hostile texts and discourses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Technical Communication and Digital Writing

The ability to engage with anonymous and pseudonymous social media in professions that require technical and digital writing is becoming increasingly important. An example of this comes from a January KitKat advertisement on Twitter that used the Evil Kermit meme. This meme depicts Kermit the Frog facing another Kermit wearing a dark hood. The text illustrates the double-sidedness of personality, juxtaposing Kermit’s goodness with Evil Kermit’s evilness (Figure 76). KitKat takes the same memetic concept and remixes it into an advertisement on Twitter (Figure 77), to the delight of many customers. Similarly, Success Kid and the Y U NO Rage Face have been spotted on billboards advertising for Hipchat and Virgin Mobile (Figures 78 and 79). These memes have gone from digital to analog. Thus, being able to create, remix, and counter memes—and in particular possessing working knowledge of the five aspects of rhetorical meme literacy discussed in Chapter 2—could be valuable knowledge for students who will be expected to work extensively with digital texts once they graduate.
Since KitKat disseminated this advertisement through Twitter, this example points to another key skill that technical and digital writers need to develop: composing in and engaging with users of anonymous and pseudonymous digital social media. Twitter is a dynamic and active space; any social media marketer or digital content creator needs to be able to not only provide useful content for this and similar spaces, but they also need to be able to do so with a critical awareness of and a social and cultural sensitivity to all potential users. Finally, spaces like Twitter are rife with online aggression. Twitter is actively attempting to curb some of its users more unsavory behaviors (Ingram, 2017), but in the meantime it remains a space where any users—even, and perhaps especially, those who represent companies or other commercial enterprises—need to effectively resist online aggression that could damage their reputation.

I suggest designing projects that enable students to both discover how social media influences the way we behave and communicate with each other and empower them to critically produce content. Such activities and assignments would not only reveal to students how the
social media they use every day regulates their thoughts and digital behaviors, but it would also show them how to resist those regulations. In other words, students would begin to understand how social media sites impact the ways they craft their digital identities and understand how to take more control of them. In a digital writing course, I have developed a project (heavily inspired by Frost, 2011)\(^1\) that enables students to analyze social media interfaces similarly to how I did in Chapter 3: They explore an interface’s technological design and ethos to help them understand how both limit or promote certain user interactions while determining the inherent values behind the interface. To build on this project and address online aggression in anonymous and pseudonymous spaces, I would add one more step: empower students to enact some form of resistance and subversion within the framework of the interface. A project like this could help students gain a better understanding of how interfaces influence user behavior and how users can resist online aggression and open avenues to productive discourse online.

Moreover, the social media platforms we choose for a project like this will impact the outcome of the analysis. Vie (2008) argued that we “focus on incorporating… technologies that students are familiar with but do not think critically about” (p. 10). The site(s) we choose will vary depending on teacher and students’ interests and expertise, but it seems crucial to choose an interface with which students are familiar and with which they may be expected to work in their future professions. Table 19 details some specific technical and digital writing pedagogical goals adapted from the ATTW (2015) “Code of Ethics.”

\(^1\) Like Frost (2011), I assigned students to work collaboratively on a wiki that addressed a variety of social media interfaces. Students worked together in pairs to produce analyses of the key functionality of the interface, the impact of any privacy policies, security features, or rules users are expected to follow. The key part of this project is the implications: how do these functions, policies, features, and rules impact users’ behavior and the kinds of communities that can form within the interface?
Table 19. Learning Objectives for Technical Communication and Digital Writing Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical goal</th>
<th>Activities and approaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensure that all technical and digital public texts are produced ethically and do not marginalize any identity, even accidentally</td>
<td>Critically analyze and produce a variety of technical and digital texts, paying close attention to identity representations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain access to and experience with a range of social media to prepare for careers that may require such knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Develop complex technoliteracy that includes meme literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work extensively with and in the kinds of social media they may be expected to use in their profession (blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examine and practice methods for subverting and avoiding aggression in these spaces</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Upper-Division and Graduate-Level Courses

Finally, graduate-level courses on digital rhetoric and writing should speak to online aggression in some way. Many graduate courses tackle important theoretical, methodological, and practical aspects of digital rhetoric and touch on issues and themes like digital genres, democracy, authorship and remix, the growing importance of visual rhetoric, and how digital communication impacts our culture and the way we communicate with each other, among many other possible course themes. Despite years of evidence that not every aspect of digital communication is advantageous to all users—disparate access to technologies and a subsequent unequal level of opportunity to develop technoliteracy, among others, are major snags in the utopic narrative of digital rhetoric—many graduate-level digital rhetoric courses tend to focus on the benefits and opportunities digital technologies afford without due acknowledgement to how it
can be restrictive for some users. Online aggression is a major barrier to a free and openly accessible Internet that promotes equal democratic participation, and it deserves a spot in graduate-level digital rhetoric curricula.

Digital rhetoric graduate courses that address online aggression could also engage in some level of critical production in addition to analysis and theoretical discussion. This kind of course could posit, analyze, and test methods for subverting online aggression while also addressing some of the key issues digital rhetoric courses cover. For instance, in a course that covers the impact of digital technologies on how we communicate, student discussions could consider why digital social media inspires online aggression while positing and practicing methods for resisting it. Or in a course that addresses visual rhetoric and remix, students could find hostile visuals and remix and subvert them. Rather than assigning learning objectives and outcomes, Table 20 offers some questions graduate students should be encouraged to consider in their digital rhetoric courses; students could also tackle some of the questions I pose in the Future Research Directions section below.
Table 20. Questions for Graduate-Level Digital Rhetoric Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Activities and approaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do recent theoretical and ideological works in rhetoric and digital studies help us understand the connection between rhetoric and online aggression?</td>
<td>Read texts whose theories can be connected to online aggression (ie: Glenn, 2004; Warnick &amp; Heineman, 2012; Brown, 2015; Phillips, 2015; etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss connections between rhetoric, digital studies, and online aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some effective research methods to use when researching online aggression from a digital rhetoric perspective?</td>
<td>Study digital research methods (ie: McKee &amp; Porter, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practice digital research methods while analyzing and learning about various social media interfaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss the role of the researcher in studying aggressive discourses (ie: how do researchers deal with the emotional and physical toll of spending long amounts of time studying hostile texts, some of which may be aimed at denigrating their own identities?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some practical ways to subvert and resist online aggression in digital spaces?</td>
<td>Engage in critical production of digital texts in a variety of genres and formats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engage in critical remix of existing digital texts in a variety of genres and formats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Future Research Directions

The methods I have posited in each chapter for subverting online aggression are far from perfect. In each chapter, I have pointed to the method’s shortcomings: counter-memes are short-lived and their impact can be lost if not reinforced continually; using identity rhetoric can mean
denying key aspects of your individual identity; and parodying haters on YouTube can result in accidental perpetuation of the hateful sentiments behind mean comments. Additionally, these methods may only work for certain users in these spaces, or they may only work in certain contexts, or they may only work in these spaces but not in other similar ones. Importantly, scholars and teacher-scholars need to keep looking at similar spaces and artifacts to determine what kinds of methods can subvert online aggression and promote democratic participation. For instance, what kinds of behaviors silence debate on Reddit? Or Twitter (which is semi-pseudonymous/semi-nonymous depending on how users construct their usernames)? How can we disrupt damaging behaviors in the comments sections on articles and blogs? And how do we do it without “feeding the trolls?” And what do we do if trolls, haters, and cyberbullies find ways to work around our methods to continue silence users in digital spaces? These are exactly the kinds of questions we need to be asking—and answering!—if we want to see online aggression begin to give way to the kinds of democratic ideals we value in rhetorical studies.

Ethical Obligations

Finally, we—as digital citizens—need to tease out what our own ethical obligations are when we encounter online aggression in our day-to-day digital interactions. In the offline world, we are told “if you see something, say or do something”—and in fact, many of us working in public institutions have a legal duty to do so—and are cautioned against the bystander effect. Do we have the same obligations to speak up and/or act when in the online world? I think we do. As such, we should begin engaging in these and other methods for resisting and subverting online aggression. I do not mean to suggest that we should step too far out of our comfort zones to do this. For instance, if you do not view or make memes, you don’t have to start if that’s not your
cup of tea; or if you do not consider yourself a member of /b/’s collective identity, you shouldn’t be expected to pretend like you are so you can enable an identity rupture; or if making YouTube videos isn’t your thing, you shouldn’t have to start. But if we encounter online aggression in any of the digital avenues we frequent or of which we consider ourselves to be members—perhaps a blog, a listserv, an imageboard, or any other social media space—or if we circulate and enjoy different kinds of remixable digital texts, we have an obligation to speak up and act. Silence in the face of online aggression can be worse than feeding the trolls: it can be complicity in the online aggression itself.
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