MY LIFE IS A MESS: SELF-DEPRECATING RELATABILITY AND THE MEMEFICATION OF STUDENT PUBLICS

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Our current educational paradigm demands that marginalized and silenced student voices be heard. However, this inclusion is hampered by institutional power relations as well as limitations on what topics students are allowed to speak on (Carey 2013). This paper aims to address this discrepancy by analyzing memefied discourses about higher education as an expression of a new student public: How is higher education framed by student memes? What do student memes tell us about the lifeworld and collective identities of students? We also analyze limitations of meme based publics, emphasizing processes of inclusion and exclusion through specific vernaculars of visual and discursive humor.

Memes depicting student issues are gaining increasing visibility in popular media outlets (eg. Horton, 2016), generating a bona fide genre of "student problem" memes. One key source is the international Facebook page "Student Problems" (SP) with almost 3.4 million subscribers. The user submission-based page belongs to the multiplatform brand "Student Problems", promoted as "the home of all the best student entertainment, knowledge and comedy" (studentproblems.co.uk). The paper is based on content analysis of posts over a month-long period through an inductive approach, similar to grounded theory, where posts are coded openly and the emerging themes result in the categories presented.

To understand how student memes frame higher education, they will be considered contributions to a new "student public". The investigation of publics and counter-publics (Warner 2002) has proven fruitful in directing attention to discourses that fall outside the mainstream, and as educators we should take care to regard such valuable content "as

a tool that makes at-risk youth more visible and thus accessible to adults" (Dobson, 2016, p. 179). Here, publics are broadly defined as a collection of people with a shared understanding, identity, interest or rhetoric. We specify this student public as a networked public (boyd 2010), where shareability and relatability (Abidin, 2017) are highly valued. Combined, these features directs the form and content of the meme discourse.

Memeing student life and self-deprecating relatability

SP memes belong to a legacy of self-deprecating memes on the internet that have been enacted to "demonstrate affective affinities with others" (Kanai, 2016, p. 4), and display "young netizens' disillusionment with the apparent lack of possibility for upward socio-economic mobility" (Szablewicz, 2014, p. 259). They are "not simply as the digital representation of a pre-existing 'offline' individual [person] in pain" (Dobson, 2016, p. 179), but make visible emic conversations not normally granted space in higher education dialogues.

SP memes frequently describe higher education as pointless and stressful. While frustration is aimed at both institutions and teachers, the prominent discourse is of internalized failure -of powerlessness and inadequacy. The internalization of external sources of pressure may be understood as an example of governmentality (Foucault, 1979), but also as an expression of the alarming rate of mental health issues among students. Student wellbeing and mental health has recently garnered public interest (eg. Gurney-Read, 2016). The prominence of emotional strife in student memes indicates that this attention is warranted. Given the stigma surrounding mental health issues, we should consider the memefied stories of persistent sadness, fear, and frustration as a valued outlet about topics that might be hard to raise in institutionalized settings for student participation.

If you don't procrastinate until Sunday night every weekend and hate yourself for it, are you even a student?

Assignment deadlines coming at me like

SP

Figure 1: Examples of SP memes describing self-loathing and emotional strife (left), as well as inadequacy and lack of control (right).

Collective identities

The making and sharing of memes is a way to make and negotiate norms through collective identities (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2015). Through a performative lens, the use of memes may be understood as a form of boundary work, where normality and deviance, inside and outside, is continually made and remade. The performance of memes "shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups" (Shifman, 2014, p. 18). A recurring identifier in the SP memes is an everyday life where procrastination, and consequently self-loathing, is commonplace, and where institutions of higher education are too demanding. The collective identity of students in SP memes is thus that of a failing student.

However, in the making of a relatable collective student identity, minority identities are largely erased. While some posts feature People of Colour (POC), the struggles they describe are not related to structural inequality. Instead, the depicted student life world is characterized by non-gendered, non-racialized, non-ableist, and non-ageist issues such as forgetting deadlines, not understanding the lecturer, or drinking to feel better.

Internalized failure amidst a failing neoliberal higher education

Overall, the SP memes tells a sad story about the lifeworld of students. In some ways, they mirror ongoing debates in mainstream publics about the consequences of the neoliberal university, where production and performance is valued to the point of causing harm (through stress, insecurity, depression, and resulting reactions of self-harm) to those involved. Through a close reading of SP memes, our paper offers a register to extrapolate personal struggles to the failing of institutional structures, thus translating dark humor for educators to improve youth wellbeing and mental health in the digital age.

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