"DEAR CONGRESS, JUST PLAY DEAD": TIKTOK'S ABSURD GUIDE TO SURVIVING #LOCKDOWN

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An insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. A global pandemic. An active shooter drill at school. These three lockdowns may appear disparate, yet TikTok creators used the #schoolshooting hashtag to memetically and discursively link them. This paper examines how young TikTok creators enact strategies of playfulness and absurdity in response to violence and trauma. Through a ludic-carnivalesque reading of young people's irreverent engagement with trauma, we demonstrate how youth use TikTok to reclaim emotional control of uncontrollable situations.

We situate our analysis of playful #schoolshooting videos as part of an imitation public that is constituted through practices of mimesis, replication, and imitation. However, we broaden our focus to consider the latent political potential of the publics that memetic practices create. Within this framework we ask: *What discourses and shared practices emerge through playful #schoolshooting memes on TikTok and what are the implications for the everyday politics of youth citizenship?*

Imitation publics

We approach school shootings as doubly memetic: both the actual *phenomenon* of school shootings and the *media texts* created about them function as repetitive, malleable, polysemic, and "contagious patterns of cultural information" that "shape the mindsets and significant forms of behaviors and actions of a social group" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007, p. 199). Extending Shifman's (2012) conceptualization of internet memes, Zulli and Zulli (2020) contend that the infrastructure and vernacular of TikTok

allow for a memetic reading of the platform itself. Memetic practices – made visible and possible through the affordances of TikTok challenges, "checks", hashtags, sounds, and trends – lead to the formation of "imitation publics." The publics emerge through engagement with memetic forms and content, rather than through interpersonal connections, discourses, or ideologies. However, Zulli and Zulli note that this does not preclude the potential for political or ideological engagement. As we will demonstrate, the playful #schoolshooting meme began as a mode of coping that evolved into overt engagement with political discourse.

Irreverent internet and the ludic-carnivalesque

While there is nothing funny about actual school shootings, we contextualize playful and humorous responses as part of what Highfield (2017) refers to as the "irreverent internet," wherein sarcasm, irony, and humor inform communication practices. The platform vernacular of TikTok further incentivizes playful content; therefore, we propose a "ludic-carnivalesque" (Li and Blommaert, 2020) reading of irreverent playful #schoolshooting TikTok memes. Li and Blommaert (2020) synthesize Bakhtin's *carnival rituals* and Huizinga's *ludic practices* to argue that "irrational" playful practices can expose, dismiss, or overturn problematic social orders. Through this lens, joking about the trauma of gun violence, a deadly pandemic, and a riotous insurrection is not only ludic, but also "pregnant with power of deconstruction" (p. 45). The playful memes indicate that the only "rational" response to absurd situations is further absurdity. While the #schoolshooting memes were not initially overtly political, a ludic-carnivalesque reading of irreverent humor and playful critique allows us to consider how "silly citizenship" (Hartley, 2020) and memetic interactions can be activated via imitation publics (Davis, Love, and Killen, 2018; Penney, 2020).

Method and Sample

Heeding Schellewald's (2021) warning to avoid "an overinterpretation of individual videos [on TikTok]," our sample focuses on "embeddedness within the broader background of shared trends, memes, or platform-specific language" (p. 1440). Our methodology consists of two phases conducted over an 18-month period: an initial exploration of the #schoolshooting meme on TikTok and two case studies that represent the "liveness" of TikTok (Zulli and Zulli, 20) and the discursive evolution of the meme.

Our first phase of analysis, performed August–December 2019, relies on collated systemic searches for specific hashtags and sounds that young people use to memeify school shootings. Our analysis focuses on memetic videos that incorporate play, humor, irreverence, sarcasm, parody, and/or satire; we exclude memorials, tributes, or videos expressing affective collective grief. This first phase of analysis allowed us to understand how TikTok creators memeified school shootings and provides the contextual groundwork for our case studies.

In the second phase, we identified two seemingly unrelated events that young people discursively and memetically linked to school shootings: COVID-19 lockdowns from March-May 2020 and the storming of the U.S. Capitol building by radicalized Trump supporters on January 6, 2021. We use these two events as case studies to analyze

how the platform vernacular of TikTok incentivizes memetic practices and how young people use irreverent humor as a springboard for everyday political engagement.

Findings and Analysis

School Shooting Lockdowns

In our first round of analysis, we identified three genres of playful #schoolshooting videos, which we organize according to their memetic function. The first category is *playful parodies* of media stereotypes and tropes (e.g., the "weird" kid as gunman), the second is *playful critiques* of the absurdity of school violence responses (e.g., poking fun at bulletproof backpacks), and the third is *playful coping* through dance and movement (e.g., celebrating a lockdown that cancelled an exam). The videos create an imitation public using *playful mediated bodies* that corporally engage with the replication, mutability, and fidelity of the polysemic meme. The carnivalesque playfulness reveals an acknowledgement and critique of adult-centric neoliberal narratives that attempt to individualize and "make sense of" the absurdity of violence at schools. Although the videos are intended to be humorous, the performative and social affordances of TikTok and the mediated playful body emphasize a ludic-carnivalesque engagement with generationally specific cultural trauma.

Pandemic Lockdowns

During the 2020 pandemic lockdown, school shootings no longer transpired and conversations about school violence dropped out of public discourse; yet TikTok creators were not optimistic about this development. We identified two memetic practices in this subgenre of #pandemic #schoolshooting memes: (1) playful portrayal of the foiled school shooter and (2) a presumed inevitability that school shootings would resume after lockdown. These two memetic and discursive practices within this derivative illustrate young people's awareness of the political forces around the temporary lull in school shootings and highlight their frustrations. They are acutely aware that without structural changes, schools will continue to be spaces of potential violence.

U.S. Capitol Lockdown

TikTok creators drew obvious parallels between the U.S. Capitol building lockdown and school shooting lockdowns. In the immediate aftermath of the insurrection, "Dear Congress" advice videos portrayed young people parroting familiar school safety discourses back to lawmakers. The trending sound clip, with its optimistic tone and absurdly individualizing advice (e.g., turn off the lights, play dead) was jarringly juxtaposed with images of terrified senators cowering under chairs. Back in 2019, young people used TikTok to playfully mock, parody, and satirize this #schoolshooting "advice." Although the original memetic practices offered subtle critiques of policies that failed to create safe schools, they did not explicitly engage with political discourse or address adult institutions. The evolution of the memetic practice – and direct address to lawmakers - reveals the ways in which imitation publics can be activated for political engagement.

Conclusion

Through irreverent humor, TikTok creators build playful imitation publics to critique and cope with structural problems related to gun violence in the U.S. Analyzing these practices through the lens of the ludic-carnivalesque reveals the ways young people enact strategies to demarcate boundaries, articulate cogent critiques of policies and policymakers that do not prevent school shootings, and turn painful and traumatic realities into a fun and harmless Bakhtinian carnival. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic and the insurrection demonstrate how these memetic practices can evolve to activate latent political discursive engagement.

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