

# **Meme is the New Mean: Bullying Behind the Screen**

**By Shani Major**

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## #Anything for Likes

Social media is defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Currently, the most popular social media sites and applications include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and LinkedIn with millions of active users. Users merge across age, gender, and even race and nationality. As a result, social media has made a significant impact on popular culture.



Social media's influence on popular culture is evident in the marketing realm as various sectors are constantly seeking consumers through social media or the appeal of social media.

Examples include commercials, billboards, and online advertisements that highlight social media and pop culture. The Waffle House franchise recently released an advertisement for a drink special that reads, “relationship goals,” a nod to the popular hashtag on Twitter and Facebook. A billboard for a popular hotel franchise reads, “Eat. Sleep. Tweet.” reminding consumers that they offer free Wifi as a means to access their favorite social media sites throughout their stay. The use of acronyms to convey phrases with the same meaning preserving characters or words is a common theme on social media. The acronym A.F. literally stands for “as f\*\*\*” and expresses an extreme or exaggeration. It exaggerates meaning when placed directly after an adjective. In a Fiat commercial, the phrase, “Stylish A.F.,” is initially used to gain the consumer’s attention with the not so subtle use of profanity but puts a spin on the phrase as the license plate reads, “stylish as fiat.” Social media is even leaving its mark on the music industry. Two chart-topping hits this year incorporated elements of social media. NERD’s “Lemon” featuring Rihanna, contains the phrase, “mad ethnic,” sampled from Retch’s viral Twitter video. Khalid’s “Location,” candidly describes his desire for a meaningful relationship in the lyrics, “I don’t want to fall in love over subtweets.” These examples are just the tip of the iceberg. Over time, social media has become a focus for marketing and advertisers as a way to connect with consumers. Our behavior on social media is of particular importance due to the amount of time we spend on such platforms collectively.

Our minds and bodies engage in a number of processes that contribute to the general appeal of social media. Understanding the mind and body processes that we

subconsciously engage in daily can help us understand our personal behavior and the behavior of others regarding social media. Perhaps the most important mental process is that of the conscious and subconscious mind and their relationship. The conscious mind handles will power, long term memory, logical thinking, and critical thinking, while the subconscious mind handles beliefs, emotions, habits, values, protective reactions, long term memory, imagination, and intuition.

Social media often contain content that examine and describe what we think, the way we feel, and how we behave. Thoughts are an automatic process and are heavily influenced by the world around us. This mental process is troubling as we are limited in our ability to control the content that we are exposed to via social media and often fail to actively monitor our conscious thoughts, which are influenced by our subconscious.

Social media's mass appeal could be linked to our need of love and belonging explored and defined by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is defined as a motivational theory in psychology made up of a five-tier model of human needs. Our behaviors are motivated by our needs, and once the needs in each tier are met, we move to the next tier in hopes of fulfilling that need. Our most basic needs are food and water followed by security and safety. After which are belonging and love needs followed by esteem needs and ending with self-actualization needs. Our needs as humans are divided into basic needs, psychological needs, and self-fulfillment needs. Beyond food and safety, we are met with the need to fulfill our need for belonging and love.



Many attempt to fulfill this need through social media. Social media provides us with groups in which we can belong. Maybe more importantly, some people attribute likes to love and approval. It may be hard for some to admit, but likes, loves, and shares help people feel loved and liked. When it comes from “friends” we know, it acts as a confirmation\affirmation of the love we believe exists. When we gain likes and love from “friends” we do not know, a heightened sense of “approval” is achieved, resulting in a false love that many crave, pushing them to post any and everything for (attention) likes, including memes.

The idea of receiving approval from members of the online community refers to the psychological theory of external validation. In their book *On Self and Social Organization*, social psychologists C. H. Cooley and Han-Joachim Schubert called this phenomenon the Looking-Glass-Self and summed it up as follows: “I am not what I think I am and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think that you think I am.” In many cases, we choose to associate with people whose opinions we value and respect—some psychologists call this the “in-group”—and we seek approval and validation from them. The opinions of this in-group become the basis for how we value ourselves, for our self-acceptance. The problem, given what we now know, is that if you base your self-concept on what you think others think of you, then you will always be vulnerable. Your self-concept has no true foundation. If the other person is having a good day and responds to you in a friendly, affirming manner, then you feel good. If not, you wonder what you did wrong. We are constantly trying to project an image of ourselves based on what we think others want, but since we really don’t know what they want, what we are really doing is deciding what we think they want and then trying to project that image. It’s a losing game.<sup>1</sup> Envision your favorite picture of yourself on one of your social media accounts. I challenge you to revisit that picture and note the number of likes and comments that particular picture has. Is it high in comparison to other pictures you have posted?



Control appears to play a major role in the amount of time that users spend on the internet and social media. For many, our online presence is one of the few things that we control in our lives. We spend most of our lives being controlled or directed. Parents, teachers or professors, supervisors, traffic laws and lights dictate what we do and when. Even as parents, much of our time is spent fulfilling obligations to ensure that our children are healthy and well taken care of.

These individuals even dominate our spare time through responsibilities and expectations for school and the work place. The internet and social media sites provide a space where users are essentially in control. Through profiles, pictures, comments, likes, and shares, we are able to share our lives and show love and hate at our own discretion. For some, it even enables them to be the person they wish they were offline.



## MEME IS THE NEW MEAN: BULLYING BEHIND THE SCREEN.

me allowing music to give me a false sense of confidence and control over my life even tho i just finished having mental breakdown 5 min ago



The manner in which we view ourselves affects the way we interact with others both on and offline. Carl Rogers developed the self-concept which is defined as an individual's beliefs about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is. Rogers believes that the self-concept has 3 different components. The first component is self-image which is the way you view yourself. The second component is self-esteem which is defined as how much value you place on yourself. The third component is the ideal self. The ideal self is what you wish you were really like.

Common, negative behaviors observed on social media are possibly rooted in the psychological theories of projection and the hierarchy of needs. Psychological projection is defined as a theory in psychology in which humans defend themselves against their own unconscious impulses or qualities, both positive and negative, by denying their existence in themselves,

while attributing them to others. Creating a negative depiction of others is all too common on social media. Personal insecurities and vulnerabilities are projected onto others through the creation and sharing of memes that attack others' "undesirable" characteristics. The act sends a serious message about the way we view ourselves and others.

## #Mind Your Meme

Bullying is traditionally defined as intentional actions repeated over time that harm, intimidate, or humiliate another person.<sup>2</sup> (Olewus, 1993). Cyberbullying is defined as the use of electronic communication to bully a person. It is my belief that bullying can take on a third form that is both discreet and indirect. Sometimes harmful, intimidating, or humiliating acts are not directed at an individual but at a group of people or anyone that identifies with a victim. In addition, a bully or source of negativity is not always an individual or identifiable. Sometimes, the bully is within through internalization. When subjected to bullying in this manner, power is shifted not by physical means but granted psychologically.

Social media appears to be losing an ongoing battle at the hands of bully culture. Bully culture is defined as “the context or venue in which a bullying pattern of behavior is ordinary or routine. It is about an imbalance of social, physical or other power involving a person or group. The culture of bullying includes daily activities and the way people relate to each other.” Society is seemingly desensitized to bully culture and its presence in the media. Acts of physical aggression and altercations can be found online, on television, and within mainstream music. Fight compilations and videos of adults and juveniles engaging in confrontation and altercations appear on websites such as YouTube, Worldstarhiphop, and Facebook.

In the past, bullying has been displayed as a common, social experience within media. As previously stated, bullying has the ability to take on many forms. Traditional bullying is most often experienced at the hands of peers. Bullying of this nature can be observed in the 1984 classic, *The Karate Kid*.



Bullying is not limited to peers. Some experience bullying through interaction with family members, as illustrated between Matilda and her father in the film, *Matilda*. Still yet, others bully themselves through negative thoughts and beliefs such as those

developed and expressed through Professor Klump's alter ego, Buddy Love in *The Nutty Professor*. The media appears to have shifted from depicting bullying to actively promoting or encouraging bully culture through its content.



Reality television shows, such as *The Bad Girls Club*, feature confrontations and physical altercations throughout their episodes. Even though fighting is not condoned and cast members are removed for fighting, the show promotes bully culture through airing physical altercations, promoting and framing the content as a positive image or aspiration, and airing the interaction after the fights, which often include celebratory conversation and gestures that celebrate the fights.



Mercer writes, “Defining the women as “bad girls,” produces a dichotomy between good, safe behavior and outrageously bad and entertaining behavior, encouraging women to produce more of the latter. For example, the opening narrative sequence of season’s one pilot episode, “It’s Easier to Be Bad,” is particularly guilty of causing this bifurcation. First, definitions of the words, “bad” and “girl,” are shown on the screen in pink to provide audiences with a context as to what constitutes a “bad girl.”



After you get finish watching bad girls club



“By framing the women who actually range from ages 21 to 35 as “girls,” the show condones and glorifies these “immature young women’s outrageous behavior” and almost suggests it is a rite of passage to womanhood. Moreover, the show also sends a message to young girls that it is okay to act like a “bad girl” since older women in their twenties and thirties are rewarded with camera time, an unlimited supply of alcohol and a fancy limo to chauffeur them to endless party venues. In this sense, normal behavior is portrayed as boring, undesirable and unworthy of

attention, not just from men, but from television producers and casting crews. In turn, instead drama, fighting, and excessive drinking is advertised as a more “normal” part of girls’ lives.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth season of *The Bad Girls Club* was considered the series’ breakout season and averaged over one million viewers per episode. “Research shows in the short term our own concepts of aggression are activated in the brain when we watch these shows [reality television] and we are primed to behave aggressively,” said psychologist Sarah Coyne.”<sup>4</sup>

“The Brigham Young University assistant professor has authored dozens of studies that examine the impact aggressive behavior in the media has on its viewers. Reality TV, she found, depicts nearly twice the number of aggressive acts as dramas or comedies.”<sup>5</sup>

Reality television shows such as *The Apprentice*, *Hell’s Kitchen*, and *Love and Hip Hop* are a few examples of television that not only appear to feature, but also promote bully culture. These reality television shows are just a few examples of a growing niche within media industries that promote bully culture to its audience.

The media is also illustrating a shift in the manner in which aggressors bully. Social media is increasingly being depicted as a tool which aggressors use for bullying. Examples from two recent movie releases include: *The Duff* and *Unfriended*. Both movies deal with social media experiences that result in a character being taped without their consent and the content is shared on social media without their permission and without



their knowledge. Both movies depict characters and situations that are not too far from reality. They show the true ability of social media to effect lives in a destructive manner. Unfortunately, many true stories end as the character in *Unfriended* that decided to take her life. This shift is also illustrated offline as I have observed firsthand the relationship between bullying and social media influences. My own fourth grade students share experiences in which they have been kicked out of online game rooms and blocked, their peers bully them and write mean comments about them on their social media pages, and even get teased for not having certain social media accounts.

Individuals are also capitalizing off of bully culture and promoting aggression and fighting. Social media personality, Danielle Bregoli, rose to fame after appearing on an episode of *Dr. Phil* that examined relationships between parents and disobedient children. During the episode, Bregoli and an audience member engaged in a verbal exchange in which she told the audience member to "Catch me outside." Video footage and memes of the incident went viral, and as a result, Bregoli is widely known for her history of misconduct and catch phrase and capitalizing on her popularity. Bregoli has also reportedly landed a record deal with a major recording label and achieved success with her current singles. Viral videos of aggression and even the glorification of "stars" like Danielle Bregoli send the youth a message that aggression and fighting are to be celebrated and viewed as entertainment.



The three attributes of social media that contribute to online bullying include anonymity, physical barriers or absence of physical contact, and lack of consequences. Anonymity, or the ability to remain anonymous is an appealing aspect of social media for many. Many social media platforms allow users to create screen names or aliases that protect their true identity. As a result, some users act or behave in a manner that does not align with their true identity or behavior offline.

Another catalyst for online bullying is physical barriers. As social media platforms are accessible through electronic devices, such as cellular phones and computers, physical contact is not necessary to connect with friends or other users on social media. The absence of physical contact can lead to questionable or inappropriate behavior online as the physical barrier acts as a protection.

Lack of consequences for poor online behavior appears to encourage online bullying incidentally. Consequences such as physical altercations or damaged reputations are avoided

through anonymity and barriers. As a result, social media users ultimately attain digital courage.

Digital courage, much like liquid courage, makes users uninhibited and behave in a manner that they ordinarily would not, due to social media's unique characteristics, such as physical barriers and perceived anonymity.

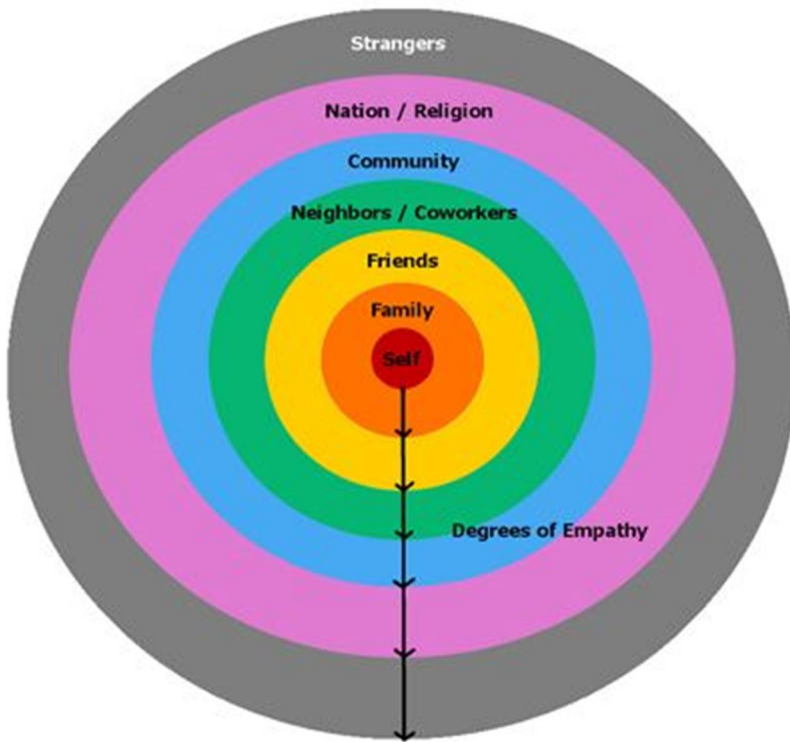
The chapter previously discussed how and why some individuals choose to bully others.

The remainder of the chapter will discuss why we choose not to intervene when we witness someone being bullied in any form. The Olewus Bullying Prevention Program, describes how every bystander to a bullying episode is involved in some way. For example, the "follower" joins in, the "defender" actively supports the victim, and the "disengaged onlooker" is not affected by seeing the bullying (e.g. Olewus et al, 2007).<sup>6</sup>

Researchers have investigated the effects of witnessing bullying by exposing children to recorded incidents of bullying and observing their physiological reactions. After viewing a child being bullied, the emotional group, 43% of children, displayed heart rate acceleration. The unemotional group, 57% of children, displayed heart rate deceleration. Children in the emotional group displayed higher levels of fear, sadness, and anger to the bullying videos than the unemotional group.<sup>7</sup> This study sheds light on physical reactions to witnessing bullying in a traditional sense. What factors contribute to the physical reactions of the unemotional group? Could this be an indication or tool for predicting aggression later in life? What results might yield from

duplicating the study with witnesses of cyberbullying exchanges?

Witnesses to both traditional and cyberbullying have the power to make a meaningful impact. In the event of traditional bullying, witnesses may discourage bullying by defending the victim, verbally or physically, or contacting a third party that can.



It is not surprising that many individuals feel detached when witnessing bullying in its many forms. Empathy circles suggest that our reactions are completely natural. Empathy circles align the many people in our lives, relative to their relationship, or

distance from us, within circles. The creator suggests that we should consider empathy as a resource and each of us has a finite amount of empathy. Naturally, we tend to allot or treat those closest to us with higher levels of empathy. As individuals move or lie further from us in empathy circles, we tend to have or give less empathy. As a victim of bullying lies further removed from an individual within empathy circles, an individual is less likely to defend a victim and more likely to “join” or choose to be an “onlooker.” As previously mentioned, the internet provides a physical barrier for all parties involved. In addition, the internet and social media make sharing, commenting, and liking almost instantaneous. Unfortunately, as the number of “followers” grow in these instances, the less likely an individual chooses to defend the victim.

Although it may be perfectly natural to feel less empathy for those further removed from ourselves within empathy circles, perhaps if we allocated more of our empathy purposefully to those individuals, cyberbullying would not be such a prevalent issue. Relative to cyberbullying, it costs nothing to offer a kind word or even defend a victim.

As bully culture remains imminent in multiple forms of media, bullying on social media platforms is a relatively new, ongoing issue as well. “Shame sharing” is a phrase used to describe the act of sharing content that shames or purposefully embarrasses an individual or group of people. The content is negative in nature and, for that reason, aligns with and perpetuates bully culture. It appears that the creation and sharing of memes are often overlooked as a form of bullying.

## #Isms from the Outside In

Memes are the new mean because memes are short, accessible, and easy to create. Memes send messages and ideas to viewers quickly. Memes are simply created using an image and text. The pairing of images and words may create new meaning as the words or images have different meaning when independent of one another. Meme creators have the ability and power to produce messages that may not have been considered otherwise. Meme generators make creating memes even easier. Meme generators are sites in which a phrase can be typed into a search and the site provides an image and space to add text, generating a meme. Memes are accessible as they are easy to share. They are often found on social media platforms which rely heavily on sharing content. Memes reach a vast number of people with a click of a button. Memes are mean as many creators use memes as a license to spread negativity. There is no true context for memes because there is often no connection with the creators as creators are not identified. Users and viewers are given no context to base their experience or interaction with memes. Context is important as it often draws the line between entertainment and offensive content. It matters whether or not creators belong to the in group versus the out group. It's the difference between playfully teasing a friend or loved one and defending them against insults from "outsiders."

## MEME IS THE NEW MEAN: BULLYING BEHIND THE SCREEN.

The creator of a meme holds a great deal of power to create and express any message they wish. But often times, that narrative is a lie. Disguised as entertainment, memes make a bold statement, defining stereotypes, gender roles, and standards of beauty. The perception of the viewer is key. Beliefs and life experiences affect the way that individuals understand or react to a stimulus, in this case, the stimulus being memes. It is important to develop and broaden our understandings of the ways in which media and images can affect the way that people perceive and interact with the world around them.

This image is best described as a Christmas photograph of a happy family. What do you see?



Now ask yourself, what images or ideas do you associate with the term, “baby mama?” Consider any personal experiences, movies, news stories, or studies you may have encountered. What are your personal feelings about the term?

What types of emotions does the term evoke within you? Does it offend you?

Take a moment to view the meme below. What assumptions, if any, did you draw about the family in the image? Does the word's connotation effect your thoughts about the women in the image?



Depending on the individual viewing it, this image could be processed in a number of different ways. Beyond being humorous to some, this meme triggers stereotypical, negative ideas and assumptions for others. Unfortunately, for that reason, this meme sparked controversy and discussion surrounding the term and stereotypical ideas and generalizations about "baby mamas." Social media users should be wary of the messages and ideas they encounter on social media. More importantly, users must remember that memes are often created with a false narrative.



MEME IS THE NEW MEAN: BULLYING BEHIND THE SCREEN.



Good Morning!!! Cocoa Puffs  
anyone? queen melanin  
blackgirlmagic blackgirlsrock  
chocolate beautiful naturalhair  
natural original  
motheroftheearth cocoapuffs

Is it her brown skin that makes her beautiful and attractive or her bikini-ready body? Isn't melanin magical all the time?

This meme suggests that the sole basis or purpose for their relationship is money. It also implies that the woman in the image is undesirable or unattractive as a result of her weight.



This meme supports the idea of classism and implies that wealthy individuals are capable of attaining their desires through monetary gains. A direct comparison is made between being ugly and poor and being wealthy and beautiful.

nobody's ugly, just broke



The question must be posed whether or not online behaviors (shares, likes, and posts) are a true reflection or accurate representation of society's beliefs. Analysis of the comments sections associated with such memes suggests that the latter is true.

Many memes create narratives that perpetuate stereotypes. The manner in which members of society react to such memes indicates their beliefs and actually validates specific stereotypes for some. Responses, in the forms of liking and sharing, encourage not only the stereotypes, but also the creation of such memes. These stereotypes are deeply rooted within culture and society. For some, they evoke negative emotions, or worse, go unnoticed. Memes of this nature aid in developing a negative self-image through the manner in which people subconsciously interact with images and messages.



#BLM

The -isms are proponents of division. As a result, various groups, in groups and out groups, are created. These groups are deeply rooted within our social existence. Historically, these groups were socially constructed, meaning they were created by men and given "labels." Defining groups is not so much the problem as the interaction between the groups, as well as the beliefs and generalizations developed about members of the

groups. The -isms exist between two groups or a hierarchy within multiple groups. Examples include racism, sexism, and classism. The creator of the meme appears to provide the perspective of the meme. The message within the meme is in favor of the in group and seeks to tease or bully members of the out group through negative messages.

It is important to acknowledge that the cyber world offers an alternate space to view and analyze society through an alternative lens. Just as classism, racism, sexism, and other ideals exist in the real world, as do memes that illustrate such ways of thought in the cyber world. And as the memes exist, so do individuals that believe and perpetuate these ideals in reality. Likes, shares, and comments are an indication that there is a parallel or major connection between the cyber world and the real world. Not only do individuals express their support, but they also bully and attack others through their comments.

When the chow mein was on point  
but you kinda miss your cat 🙄



MEME IS THE NEW MEAN: BULLYING BEHIND THE SCREEN.



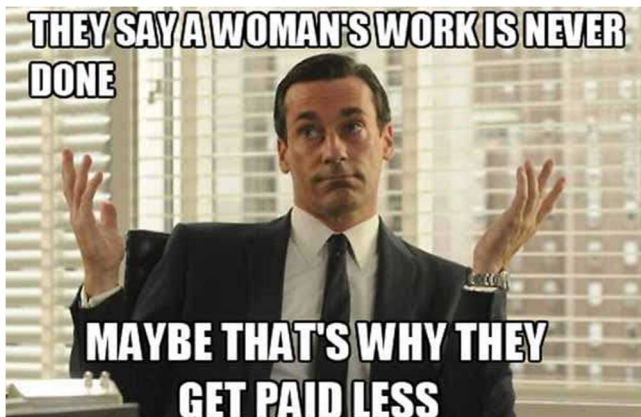
when the laser turns  
into a bindi... 🎯😂👏



That awesome moment.

SHANI MAJOR

When a white kid shoots up the school the same day you planned to bomb it



MEME IS THE NEW MEAN: BULLYING BEHIND THE SCREEN.

Normie: "Your meme's are racist  
and offensive, I'm unfollowing"

Me: "take this on your way out"



Damn she be fire if she was light  
skinned





When your sister sleeps with your dad  
instead of you





## #Celebritease

The term celebrity refers to a famous person or the state of being well known while the term tease refers to making fun of an individual. Celebrities are especially vulnerable to being “meme’d” as countless images of them are readily available on the internet and advancements in technology allow for manipulation of those images. Unfortunately, celebrities are used to create memes that send negative messages and or messages that have not been endorsed by said celebrities.



#000000 @audacityofDOPE\_ · 10h

"This recipe is quick and easy, just like you trendy women that don't wear clothes. First you will need flour."



1K



879





Not only are celebrities used to create memes without their consent, but also celebrities are often teased and ridiculed through memes. Their children are often forced to endure similar

mistreatment. Social media users are shortsighted in that creating memes and posting hurtful comments may be a trend for the moment, but the memes and posts remain long after the gossip settles.



Treating celebrity families in this manner inadvertently teaches our youth that certain people do not deserve compassion or empathy due to their circumstances and or wealth. It also supports the notion or ideal that celebrities trade their fame and fortune for privacy and constant criticism. This is unfortunate as their trials are relatable to most. An estimated 26.2 percent of Americans, ages 18 and older, or about one in four adults, suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year.<sup>8</sup> One in three women and one in four men have been victims of some form of physical violence by a partner within their lifetime.<sup>9</sup> One in five women and one in seven men have been victims of severe physical violence by an intimate partner within their lifetime.<sup>10</sup> But when it happens to a celebrity, we view and respond to it as

entertainment. The lines that separate their work as entertainers and their lives as entertainment have become blurred.

Oddly enough, celebrities fuel an industry that essentially uses and exploits them. According to The New York Times, the celebrity gossip industry accumulates over 3 billion dollars a year. According to a piece published by The New Yorker, sources are paid thousands of dollars for compromising footage of celebrities and tell-all interviews.<sup>11</sup>



MEME IS THE NEW MEAN: BULLYING BEHIND THE SCREEN.







The industry has experienced major changes as a result of social media's growing popularity. In the past, celebrity gossip gained most of its sales from print magazines such as OK! and The National Enquirer. Its television presence flourished through a large base and shows such as Entertainment Tonight and Extra. The transition stemmed from the popularity of the internet and social media. It sparked the rise of countless gossip blog sites such as Perez Hilton and Necole Bitchie. It was also the catalyst for companies such as TMZ with both an online and television presence. Even Youtubers are profiting from reporting celebrity gossip on their channels. Now, celebrity news and gossips circulates much faster as sites are now linked to social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter so that each application allows users to not only read the story, but also comment and share the story with others.

Celebrities are also noticing the shift due to the growing popularity of social media. Social media has not only changed what it means to be a celebrity, but also the manner in which celebrities interact with their fans. Social media is a tool that celebrities use to engage with fans in an effort to gain and maintain their fan base. Actor, Will Smith, noted, "Limited access to stars created "bigger than life" personas in the past but now actors must form a sort of "friendship" with the fans." "The relationship is less like the time of Madonna and Michael Jackson, your Tom Cruise, these gigantic figures," he added. "The shift is to, 'We're best friends'."<sup>12</sup>

It is my belief that fan clubs helped preserve some of the celebrity mystique. The traditional fan club has evolved from sending a letter or subscription in the mail and receiving an

autographed poster to identifying with fellow fans through your new nickname and defending your favorite celebrity from “trolls” on social media. With the advent of social media, access to celebrities is now just a click away.

Constant access to celebrities through social media platforms creates pressures to create and uphold an image that aligns with positive popular opinion. For many, celebrity is synonymous with role model. A role model is defined as a person who serves as an example of the values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with a role. Who you are versus who you are expected to be are sometimes two totally different people. Celebrities face this conflict just as we do, but on a much larger scale and with a bigger audience. Have you ever adjusted or changed your behavior to fit societal norms to avoid being teased or bullied? Sometimes, society, an external, forces celebrities to play a role or assume a position that does not align with who they truly are.

Back in 2003, Brandy announced that she had gotten married the year prior, and was expecting. Brandy had a baby girl that June and her fans were able to watch her along the process in a reality series featuring herself and Robert Smith titled, “Brandy: A Special Delivery.”





Ella  
@FentyLKnowles

Follow

People actually believed Angela Simmons when she said she was a virgin.



Many years had passed, after they announced their divorce, when Brandy told the media she never loved Robert, and their marriage was fake. Brandy appeared on the Tyra Banks show confessing: “I felt the need to lie about it because at the time I was 23 years old, I had this good girl image, this role model image and I was taught that you should be married before you have a child. I felt the pressure of what people would think and disappointing little girls. I felt responsible because young girls looked up to me and I didn’t want to disappoint them. I was afraid.”<sup>13</sup>

It is unfortunate that the singer felt forced to uphold a false image after accomplishing so much as an entertainer. At that point in her career, Brandy was already a Grammy award winning artist, starred in her own television series, and made history as the first black princess in Roger and Hammerstein’s Cinderella.

Angela Simmons, reality television star and daughter of Rev Run of Run DMC, recently experienced much of the same criticisms. As a teenage reality television star, Simmons was known for her wholesome image and vow to remain celibate until marriage. After her engagement and pregnancy announcements, many took to social media to voice their disbelief in not so subtle fashion, not excluding negative memes about her pregnancy and beliefs that she lied about being a virgin. Brandy's experience notes the unseen pressures that many celebrities and entertainers face. Angela Simmons's experience describes the manner in which social media has transformed what it means to be a celebrity and illustrates the "license and liberty" many users believe social media provides to gossip and comment on the personal lives of celebrities.

Normani Kordei, one fourth of the pop group sensation, Fifth Harmony, depicted her experiences with cyberbullying in a recent Nightline interview. "I got bullied, like terribly, on social media. I did an interview. It was taken out of context completely and there were images, people were calling me, like the N-word, like it was really ugly." Many believed she was disrespecting a bandmate within the interview. Kordei apologized but the cyberbullying persisted. "I was getting racial slander. Images of me being hung, whipped, beaten - and it really affected me." "I went to a predominately white school and I stuck out because I was the Black girl but I would get teased for the color of my skin and I would wonder why. I remember we were playing outside and the first thing that this girl, this little girl could tell me was, "Leave me alone, you burnt biscuit." Where do you get that from, especially being so young?" "Was it worse? The second

grader in the playground, or the multitudes of faceless people on social media?" "Honestly, it felt the same."

Kordei used her experience as inspiration to perform a contemporary piece on *Dancing with the Stars* that received a perfect score from the judges. Kordei believes that she is stronger now and the ultimate lesson she's learned is that bullying has nothing to do with her and everything to do with others' insecurities within themselves.<sup>14</sup>

A number of celebrities have faced scrutiny as a result of their behavior on social media platforms. After her swift rise to success, rapper, Cardi B., was scrutinized and accused of being transphobic for previously referring to gay people as "trannies" on social media. The artist received much backlash, including negative press and harsh criticism via social media. As a result, Cardi B took to Instagram to express her frustration. "I hate when people keep writing and talking about Cardi, you're a bad role model. I'm not going to change myself because you want me to set a good example for your kids. Be your own kids' role model! Why do people expect public figures to be role models? When I was a kid, I wanted to be just like my Mom. When I have a kid, she's gonna wanna be just like me, but not the rated R version."

A few months later, the rapper used Instagram again to express a change of heart, "I realized after Halloween, a lot of little girls, they be looking up to me. They love me and I'm thinking to myself, like, 'Yo, I really need to be a better example. I've been trying to be more PG-13, less rated R.'"

Cardi B.'s experience with fame and social media illustrates the unrealistic expectations and standards that celebrities are held to due to fame. Though her social media behavior is not excusable, many individuals, with or without children, behave less than favorably online. But their behavior goes unnoticed or unaddressed because they lack fame. Her treatment affirms that celebrities are held to a different standard. Some individuals are setting a higher standard for public figures than they set for themselves, which is not only wrong, but also unfair. As Cardi B.'s change of heart illustrates, one cannot be forced to behave in a manner that is deemed acceptable to others, rather individuals have the right to choose their image, character, and behavior for themselves, both on and offline. These instances illustrate the shift celebrities have faced at the intersection of fame and social media.

## #Beautymark

Several distinct ideas about beauty prompt many to engage in bullying and other unhealthy behaviors on social media. Understandings and beliefs about beauty are developed within individuals at an early age. Research suggests that those beliefs are based upon each individual's environment and experience. Experiences pertain to interactions with family and friends while environment may pertain to any form of entertainment among other factors. Disney princess characters, Barbie dolls, and peers are influential elements of a child's environment that may affect beliefs about beauty.



For many, aside from educational television, Disney movies were one of the first forms of media they were exposed to as children, meaning that they potentially helped shape their ideas about beauty during a critical time in development.

Although the Disney princess characters continue to evolve through story themes, trends among physical characteristics remain. Common physical characteristics of Disney princesses include long hair, clear skin, perfect teeth, exceptional eyesight, and thin body types. Ideas about what it means to be “beautiful” continue to be expressed through memes and negative user interaction on social media.

growing up i always wanted to be a  
Disney princess but instead i think i  
turned into one of these bitches



About 95% of the Females i  
Know

Barbie dolls are often another early element in children's environments. Playing with Barbie dolls can potentially give children an early impression that Barbie's body type is the norm, even though the average woman is a size. As Barbie dolls are often associated with beauty, children may associate that particular body type or weight with beauty as well. This may also lead to inner conflict for children as they experience conflict

between their true self and the self that they wish for in terms of weight and body image.



Unfortunately, social media appears to have become a space for criticizing individuals that fail to fit the mold, or society's stringent standard of beauty. Memes not only hurt the individuals that they target, but they also send a message that it is acceptable to mock or attack others based on their physical appearance and characteristics.

Statistics mirror the growing body dissatisfaction expressed among young girls and women on social media platforms. The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reports that Americans spent more than 15 billion dollars on combined surgical and nonsurgical aesthetic procedures for the first time ever.<sup>15</sup>

The alarming body image statistics coupled with the rise in cosmetic enhancement surgeries suggest that body image is a

social issue beyond memes. But unfortunately, memes are being used as a catalyst to perpetuate false ideas about beauty and encourage unhealthy behaviors such as bullying and negative self-image. The recent rise in plastic surgeries could possibly be attributed to the popularity and influence of social media. A shift has been identified in main stream standards of beauty the manner in which beauty is measured, in part, due to social media trends. This shift contributes to growing pressures to achieve likes and attentions as a byproduct of “beauty.”



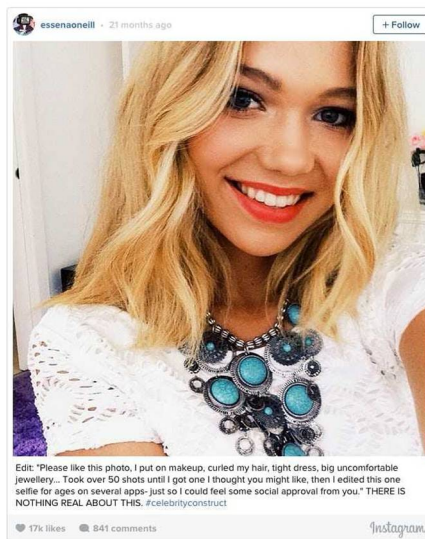
Essena O'Neill, an Australian teenager with more than half a million followers on Instagram decided to shut down a few of her social media pages in 2015 as a result of feeling overwhelmed by the pressures of social media. O'Neill referred to social media as “contrived perfection just to get attention.” One of her popular Instagram photo captions reads, “Edit: Please like this photo, I put on makeup, curled my hair, tight dress, bug



## MEME IS THE NEW MEAN: BULLYING BEHIND THE SCREEN.

uncomfortable jewelry...Took over 50 shots until I found one I thought you might like, then I edited this one selfie on several apps – just so I could feel some social approval from you. THERE IS NOTHING REAL ABOUT THIS. #celebrityconstruct”

The following excerpts are quotes from real young women that were asked whether they feel pressured to appear a certain way on Instagram and how the platform affects their self-esteem by The Guardian, online magazine.





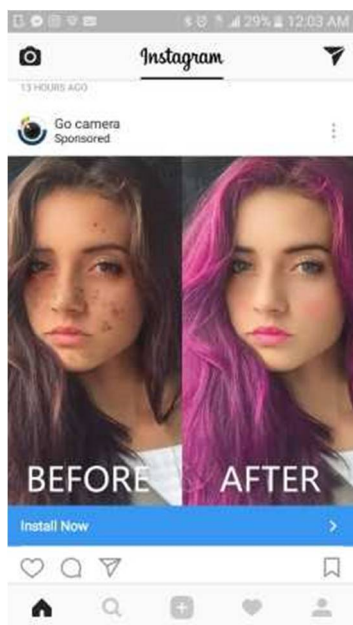
Summer Andrews, 18: 'If it doesn't get enough likes, I take it down'

"I do feel insecure if I see girls who look prettier than me, or if they post really pretty pictures, and I know I won't look as good in any that I post. I do feel pressure to look good in the photos I put up. I don't feel anxious about not getting enough likes on a photo but if it doesn't get enough likes, I will take it down."<sup>16</sup>

Lindsay Correia, 22: 'I like having control'

"I use Instagram just to give people a glimpse into my life. And I like that I can show the parts that I want them to see and make them think I have a cooler life than I do. I like having that kind of control. I do feel pressured to appear a certain way. I would hate for people to think: 'She looks totally different in person.' But I would never edit anything to make it not look like me. I definitely feel that I have to look as good when I go somewhere as I do on Instagram. I feel more pressure in real life.

I take at least 50 shots when I put up a picture, on a day I'm really dressed up, and I'll edit it but make sure I'm true to myself. As much I sometimes want to Photoshop, I don't.



I try not to post too many selfies because I don't want people to think I'm super narcissistic, and I try not to post too many photos with drinks in hand. I do delete pictures that don't get enough likes (140 like for a selfie, on average) because I think I probably didn't look good enough for my followers."<sup>17</sup>

Research suggests that young women share identical experiences to those described by Andrews and Correia. "Several correlational studies have examined the relationship between social media usage and body image. Studies on pre teenage and female high school students have found Facebook uses report more drive for thinness, internalization of the thin ideal, body

surveillance, self-objectification, and appearance comparisons than do non users.” Studies also found a positive correlation between overall social media usage combination of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest usage and self-objectification.<sup>18</sup>

“The large number of images posted on some social media platforms (10 million new photographs are uploaded to Facebook every hour [27]) provides regular opportunities for users to make appearance-related social comparisons, and research shows that regularly comparing one’s appearance to others (particular to those who are seen as more attractive to oneself) can lead to negative body image [28].<sup>19</sup>

Self-criticism is psychologically defined as how an individual evaluates him or herself. This process applies to both physical and non-physical attributes. This experience manifests through memes in which the creator illustrates or emphasizes a negative quality or characteristic about themselves. Offline, this experience is best described as a situation in which an individual draws attention to a negative attribute or characteristic about themselves before others can draw attention to it in an effort to avoid being hurt.

The danger in this behavior lies in both beliefs and reactions. When we behave in this manner, we are inviting others to confirm\affirm or deny negative beliefs about ourselves. Though the technique is often used as a strategy to protect our feelings, when others choose to affirm our negative beliefs, we may end up feeling poorly about ourselves. It also exists as a form of external validation.

## MEME IS THE NEW MEAN: BULLYING BEHIND THE SCREEN.



Internal ideas about beauty are not the only factors that influence individuals' beliefs about the topic. Tools and features within social media platforms that encourage external validation influence the beliefs of many about beauty. One such tool is the Instagram poll, which is a fairly new feature that allows users to post a poll on an Instagram story. A frequently used poll is "Beauty or Not" and users can submit their answers based upon a preselected image. The feature appears to encourage external validation, which has negative effects.

Photoshop applications and filters are commonly used tools to adjust and alter images and photos before posting and sharing on social media platforms. Altering images for "likes" suggest that users prefer altered self-images to true self-images.

Constant comparisons to others and increased acceptance of altered self-images can lead to negative self-image or may even encourage individuals to alter their physical appearance permanently.

Social media could easily be considered a beauty driven industry as much of its content targets and lends itself to the beauty and cosmetic industry consumer. Beauty and cosmetic are products promoted and utilized heavily on social media. Examples of beauty driven content on social media include make up tutorials, make up reviews, Get Ready With Me (GRWM) videos, and videos that describe how YouTubers Photoshop and edit their pictures for Instagram.

Kids playing with  
makeup in the 90s



Kids playing with  
makeup in 2015



As beauty continues to drive the industry, beliefs about beauty are not only developed and affirmed through social media, but it has also become a space in which individuals face scrutiny and bullying as a result. Often overlooked, are the effects that memes may have on the individuals featured within them. Jessica Torres, plus-size blogger, body positive advocate, and stylist

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shared her story to give others insight on the potential effects of memes and shame sharing.

“Recently my body went beyond friends, fans, and family and turned into an international joke. Various accounts reposted the meme and it accumulated millions of likes and comments. At first I felt a pang of hurt but I quickly buried it. Heck, I had meme’d myself first anyway. How could I feel offended if I started the joke?



Tacos and horchata  
vs. a Salad and water.



People I know (and strangers) messaged me to let me know that I'd been meme'd. I told them it was fine and I wasn't losing any sleep over it, which was a lie. I make a living encouraging women to love their bodies – one meme was not going to break me. I feel responsible for the women who look up to me and my confidence. I had to remain strong and unbothered. But I was in denial. The meme did hurt my feelings.

I tried to convince myself that the meme was funny. But when I showed it to my family oy, it was a whole different story. My siblings and I are very over-protective of each other. The meme did not amuse them...They reminded me that I am allowed to feel insulted. They made me realize that I have a right to be upset. I am allowed to stand up for myself if I feel offended.

Did I get in the comments and start clapping back? No. But I stopped burying my feelings about it (like I did when I was younger). Sometimes it's not about a grand statement or an epic clap back. It's about validating your own feelings, rising above, and keeping it moving."<sup>20</sup>



The honesty and courage displayed in Torres's piece mirrors the honesty and courage necessary to improve the quality of our experiences on social media. Honesty with ourselves about the ways we are affected by social media experiences and the courage to begin meaningful dialogue both on and offline about accountability and monitoring our personal behaviors online. This shift is necessary to create a healthier online environment for ourselves and generations to come.

## #Next Gen

Bullying is a prevalent issue in the public education system. At the elementary level, true consequences for misbehavior are delivered through the school's administration. If and when children receive consequences for bullying, the true causes and underlying effects for both aggressors and victims are not often addressed. Some students need assistance beyond that which is provided by the public school system. This may be one of the many reasons that bullying appears to take on a cyclical form or nature.

Addressing bullying at the elementary level presents a number of barriers that often prevent true resolution. Accountability is an ever present issue as accountability seems to take on the form of musical chairs among student, parent, teacher, and administrators. School administrations are encouraged to keep out-of-school suspension and in-school suspension numbers down and offered incentives for target numbers. One such example is the Baltimore school system. The Baltimore school system is paying bonuses to teachers and administrators at struggling schools that reduce suspensions, drawing criticism from union leaders who say the program could provide a financial incentive to ignore problems and jeopardize school safety. Marietta English, president of the Baltimore Teachers Union, said she believes teachers across the district are

under-reporting incidents, even “hard offenses,” such as physical abuse, that trigger automatic suspensions.

“To me, verbal abuse is worse,” English said. “The reality is that you cannot get away with these things when you go out in society. We’re setting children up for failure when there are no real consequences for this behavior.”<sup>21</sup>

Often, those students receiving consequences for bullying are engaging in disruptive and unfavorable behavior in addition to bullying. Alternative schools are non-existent at the elementary level, so in turn, children continue to receive a “slap on the wrist” for unacceptable behavior and or bullying and repeat offenders do just that: repeat the offense.

One such example is that of Mandy Brown, a Colorado mother of 5, who took to Facebook to express her frustration surrounding bullying in April of 2017. In the post, Brown expressed her frustration with a group of girls bullying her 15-year-old daughter. The bullying had gotten so bad that her daughter was escorted by security from class to class and to and from the bathroom as well as to and from her mother’s car. Brown has since pulled her daughter out of school, concerned for her safety.<sup>22</sup>



Incidents of this nature happen all too often in schools across the nation. The girls' behavior is comparable to the extent that aggressors cyberbully in terms of frequency and nature of harassment. Students' experiences suggest that cyberbullying is even easier to get away with than traditional bullying. "So you don't tag a person, and you don't name them but everyone knows exactly who you're talking about." "It's a loophole to bully someone without (adults) finding out...it spreads around the school like wildfire," she said.<sup>23</sup>

Consequences that children and adolescents face for bullying may not match the magnitude of the offense. Current consequences in the public school system fail to actually address the problem. Providing a consequence such as in or out-of-school suspension does not identify the reason or catalyst for bullying. Counseling or activities that promote socio-emotional intelligence and growth should be provided for both the victim and the aggressor.

As children move through their education and age, the methods that are used to bully shift from isolated, face to face

incidents to happening face to face in conjunction with incidents of cyber bullying. Their behavior gets worse and is magnified by the pressures and developmental changes associated with adolescence.

Many incidents of bullying are “handled” improperly and continue until there is a major or violent incident initiated by either the aggressor or the victim. Often times the aggressor accidentally kills the victim, the victim accidentally kills the aggressor or purposefully takes their own life.

A stark increase in the rate of child/adolescent suicides in recent years may stem from bullying both online and offline. As technology advances, adolescents and adults are finding more and more invasive ways to bully. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for college age youth, ages 12-18. Research reveals that 42% of teenagers with tech access report being cyberbullied over the past year. Of the 69% of teens that own their own smart phone, 80% are active on social media. In addition, 7.5 million Facebook users are under 13 years old.<sup>24</sup>

It is vital that children and adolescents understand the ramifications of bullying, especially now that technology has advanced and shifted social environments and exchanges. Children and adolescents must be equipped with knowledge that addresses accountability, awareness, and allowing. It is important that children and adolescents develop an understanding of accountability. Being responsible for their actions and facing consequences for the activities they engage in, both good and bad, may discourage them from bullying online.

It is also important for children and adolescents to develop awareness, in reference to developing their social emotional intelligence. It is vital that they understand what bullying is, as well as potential effects of bullying on the victim and the aggressor. Understanding the body, mind, and emotions is key to understanding those effects.

The act of allowing plays a major role in the way many respond to bullying. If children and adolescents understand that they have power, even when they witness bullying. The act of allowing strips individuals of their power. Allowing occurs when children and adolescents allow themselves to be influenced by others to bully their peers. This also occurs when individuals do not stand up for victims of bullying.

Lulu Williams' experience with bullying may have been prevented if the aggressors were aware of the effects of bullying or witnessed others previously held accountable for similar behavior. Wigs used to provide a sense of comfort for 16-year-old Lulu Williams. The high school student from Franklin, Tennessee, had eczema and psoriasis, which caused scalp issues that made her hair patchy. So Williams turned to wigs. "I've never told anyone because I was embarrassed by it, and I felt like I'm not as beautiful as all these other girls because my hair is like this."



A student at her school ripped off her wig while another recorded it and posted the video on Snapchat. "When they tore that off me, I felt basically naked and I felt so insecure myself and just terrible." "My hair is like my one place where I can feel safe, and I loved having wigs to express myself." Her mother, Mykelle Williams, took to Facebook to post the video — titled "weave snatchin" — which shows a male student quickly ripping off the girl's hair and sprinting down the high school hallway. So Lulu decided to send a message to the student who did it — and shaved her head. "My hair was one of my biggest insecurities so I felt like he had taken my power and I wanted it back."<sup>25</sup> Lulu's experience illustrates a power shift from the aggressor to the victim through her decision to shave her head and prevent that bully or anyone else in the real world or cyber world from bullying her in the future.

Generally speaking, some adults tend to fall short of their expectations for the youth. Adults should be leading by example, but instead some adults tend to model intolerance and

lack of empathy. Experiences help shape a person's understanding and perspective of the world and unfortunately many people have come to know and experience bullying as adolescents and adults. Memes are a tool that have come to perpetuate the bully culture prevalent in society in which, ideals of normalcy and standards are pushed upon the masses. In turn, anything considered "different" or an "alternative to the norm" is scrutinized and depicted negatively.

Bully culture online and throughout social media remain unchecked because many "silently approve" of it. Even those that do not partake in negative behavior online or feel it is wrong, often say nothing. It is a trend that exists because many allow it and many have become desensitized to the forms of bullying that are witnessed on a daily basis. Just as there is a connection between high levels of violence spills over to our reaction and use of violence in reality, bullying works in the same manner. Bullying can be observed online, at work, during commutes, and even out shopping. It has become prevalent and necessary that individuals become more conscious and aware of the ideals they are supporting and the consequences of their online activity.

Society promotes and endorses bully culture online in a number of different ways. As mentioned previously: shame sharing, crude comments, and teasing celebrities encourage and promote bullying. As a result, the following generations will grow to be more hostile individuals as a majority compared to the generations that precede it. A number of factors contribute to this idea including increased exposure to the internet and or social media, developmental differences between adolescents



and adults, and the psychological effects of experiencing bullying.

Members of later generations will undoubtedly experience increased exposure to the internet and social media due to its current and growing popularity. For young adults that experienced the introduction of Facebook and other social media applications, the applications had not reached their current peaks or heights until after those users had experienced puberty and adolescence thereby, having a minimal effect on their social experiences and interactions throughout their formative, adolescent years. Those experiences will change and continue to evolve for future generations as the internet and social media now play an integral role in the adolescent experience.

Developmental differences among adolescents and adults suggest that increased exposure to the internet and social media has the potential to harm young users psychologically. The human brain begins development long before birth but does not finish development until an individual's mid-twenties. Research suggests that the gray matter of the brain, which contains most of the brain's neurons and is known as the part of the brain that thinks, is still growing in teens. However, for adults, the brain's gray matter development is complete. Alongside this is the still developing frontal cortex, which completes its growth during ages 23-26. The frontal cortex performs reasoning, planning, judgment, and impulse control.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, recent research has revealed that individuals that have experienced bullying and or teasing have lasting effects on their brain development. Young adults, ages 18-25, with no

history of exposure to domestic violence, sexual abuse, or parental physical abuse, were asked to rate their childhood exposure to parental and peer verbal abuse when they were children, and then they were given a brain scan.

The results revealed that those individuals who reported experiencing verbal abuse from their peers during middle school years had underdeveloped connections between the left and right sides of their brain through the massive bundle of connecting fibers called the corpus callosum. Psychological tests given to all subjects in the study showed that this same group of individuals had higher levels of anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, dissociation, and drug abuse than others in the study.<sup>27</sup>

Verbal abuse from peers during the middle school years had the greatest impact, presumably because this is a sensitive period when these brain connections are developing and becoming insulated with myelin. (Myelin is formed by non-neuronal cells, brain cells that are also known as “the other brain”, or glia.)<sup>28</sup>

Although social media is a fairly new construct, the effects of social media on adolescents and young adults are currently being investigated. Researchers have proposed a new phenomenon called “Facebook depression,” defined as depression that develops when preteens and teens spend a great deal of time on social media sites, such as Facebook, and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression. Acceptance by and contact with peers is an important element of adolescent life. The intensity of the online world is thought to be a factor that may trigger depression in some adolescents. As with offline depression, preadolescents

and adolescents who suffer from Facebook depression are at risk for social isolation and sometimes turn to risky Internet sites and blogs for “help” that may promote substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, or aggressive or self-destructive behaviors.<sup>29</sup>

Children are given access to technology and social media at increasingly earlier ages. Some babies learn to operate cell phones before they learn to talk. But earlier access to technology does not necessarily equate to access to social media. It could be argued that adolescents are not developmentally ready for social media as many do not handle their online presence in a mature, healthy manner. Using social media to target and bully individuals is not an uncommon practice for adolescents and young adults. Social media exposes adolescents to messages and ideas that they may not be developmentally ready for, especially as they are still understanding and forming thoughts and beliefs about who they are as individuals. It serves as another layer of pressure to fit a “mold” or battles stereotypes about who they are still in the process of becoming. It becomes not only a conflict within, but also a social conflict for online interaction with users that have harmful intentions.

## #Take Cover

Although the internet and social media pose significant concerns for the psychological health of young adults and adolescents, it does offer some positive resources. The internet and social media provide the opportunity to connect and communicate with individuals near and far. It also offers a wealth of information allowing users to gain knowledge. Even memes aren't all bad. Memes can be a source of inspiration, offer an alternate perspective, and identify the human experience.

Although positive memes exist, it appears that there is an imbalance relative to negative and positive memes. Negative memes appear to gain much more attention, meaning they are shared at a much higher rate and reach more people.



It is important to be aware of the messages and potential effects of memes and online bullying. Use these tools to help others or yourself manage the online world in a healthy manner.

1. Encourage dialogue with friends and family, young adults and adolescents, about their experiences online and personal digital citizenship.

Efforts on behalf of the Department of Education include backing initiatives that educate elementary students about technology use and etiquette in schools. Digital citizenship can be defined as the norms of appropriate, responsible behavior with regard to technology use. Current courses on digital citizenship explore internet safety, privacy and security, relationships and communication, cyberbullying and digital drama, digital footprints and reputation, self-image and identity, information literacy, and creative credit and copyright.

The true challenge will lie within children unlearning poor habits and behaviors that they currently engage in online. It is much more difficult to accommodate or adjust beliefs, learning, and behavior than learn new information without any previous beliefs, learning, or behavior. This learning will be a different experience for students and children that do not already access social media platforms or spend an extensive amount of time online. It will be interesting to see how academic teachings and expectations relative to digital citizenship will transfer or shift children and adolescents' behavior online during leisure activity beyond academic settings.

## **Protection vs. Privacy**

Parental struggles include balancing privacy and protection. Granting privacy allows adolescents to gain autonomy and trust through the ability to navigate social media with minimal supervision. Gaining autonomy and trust is an integral part of adolescence and development. Protection, is two-fold as it prevents adolescents and young adults from hurting themselves and allowing others to hurt them. Adolescents often place themselves in compromising positions through oversharing or neglecting their digital foot print. In addition, adolescents are often hurt by others through cyberbullying or exposure to inappropriate and or negative online content.

Parents should act as active observers rather than passive observers of their children or loved ones' online activity. "A recent study revealed that 37% of parents monitor their children's online behavior. A study of students' use of social media found that about half admitted to abusing social media. About three-fourths of students had a cell phone. Slightly more than half had a smart phone. 84% had a computer in their home and 50% had their own computers. 78% of students texted at least once a day. 56% texted ten times or more a day. About 37% had checked upon a partner using technology; 16.3% had shared private or embarrassing pictures with the intention of hurting someone, and 12.5% had repeatedly sent out unwanted messages to someone."<sup>30</sup>

There are many ways to monitor and encourage healthy online behavior. Monitoring online behavior is not enough. Being actively engaged is key. Parents should create and enforce rules

for online behavior in an effort to counteract negative external online influences. Communication is key.

## 2. Encourage Self Development

Encouraging self-development and self-discovery is important because elements of social media often send messages that are negative in nature and encourage beliefs and ideas that are self-defeating. Having an advanced sense of self and high self-esteem helps users combat the frequent negativity faced online. It is also important to consider that not much time is devoted to self-development in traditional educational settings although it is the setting in which many first experience bullying and often acts as a catalyst for cyber bullying. Traditional schools are an extremely social environment, though the social experience is viewed as secondary and often does not equip children with the necessary knowledge to handle their experiences in a healthy manner.

## 3. Understand that the online world does not necessarily reflect reality.

Online behavior is often altered due to perceived anonymity and limited consequences. In addition, many individuals are not revealing their true, authentic selves and or lives online. Avoid wasting time comparing your life to the half-truths of others. Find happiness and comfort in the truth that is your own, both on and offline.

## 4. Believe that power is internal rather than external.

Internalizing, or making the choice to believe something is what makes it true. Words are given power by people. Choose to keep your power. Do not give your power to anything or anyone outside of yourself. This includes memes, comments, and any other forms of media that can potentially harm you. When your opinion matters more, everyone else's matters less.

## 5. Avoid the Pursuit of Perfection

"We are too obsessed with being perfect," an observation of society in troubling times expressed by Tia Mowry-Hardrict during an interview with Huffington Post Live.<sup>31</sup> The meme world appears to stem from a space in which we pick each other apart for being anything less than perfect. It seems that many individuals are developing unrealistic expectations. We are no longer operating and living by the truism that nothing is perfect but rather we should obsess, scrutinize, modify, and omit online until things appear as close to perfection as possible. This pursuit of perfection is disguised as #goals, wherein we define ourselves by what we aren't instead of what we are. Though many of us have not reached our #goals yet, it appears to be harder to find memes that illustrate the journey rather than the goal. Perhaps that is because the journey is less appealing than the lavish lifestyles and luxuries attained as a result of the #goal. I believe that these images encourage us to constantly compare ourselves to others. The problem with comparing your life to someone else's is...everything. If it's not inspiring you, it's not serving you. More of us need to believe that we are already #goals and lift ourselves and one another up.



6. Exercise your right to ignore, block, deactivate, and power off.

Use social media tools and features to block negativity. Make a personal habit of ignoring or blocking individuals that consistently post harmful media. Even social media can be a sacred space if you are intentional and allow it.

7. Limit your social media use.

This is extremely important as the internet and social media are relatively new phenomena that have yet to be researched and studied at length. Many of us would like to believe that we are “unaffected onlookers” of cyberbullying and covert bullying, but the brain’s system of the sub conscious and conscious mind could potentially prove otherwise. Social media feeds are based upon the activities of “friends.” Content cannot be blocked or flagged until it is seen, meaning that it also must be exposed to our subconscious minds. The way that our minds manage information, specifically and more importantly negative information, is based upon our individual minds and experiences.

8. Know your online rights.

It’s time to address the hot pink elephant in the room, better known as privacy. Privacy is defined as freedom from unauthorized intrusion. The online and offline experiences of many are a stark contrast to our traditional ideal of privacy. Offline, it is not uncommon to witness or experience intrusion of privacy through the use of recordings or images without consent. What’s worse is the material is uploaded to social media, again,

without consent. This results in the inability of individuals to control their own image or narrative online.

Social media platforms allow users to “invite” others into seemingly every aspect of their lives. Examples include YouTube vlogs, snapchat stories, and tweets and posts in which many users divulge personal information about themselves. Many also choose to tag or share their locations on social media. Social media essentially allows us to share with strangers as some users elect to have public accounts or befriend and accept friend requests from strangers.

Protect yourself by reading the fine print on social media platforms. It is important to know and understand your online rights as well as any agreements that you may have entered as a result of establishing an account.

In addition, it is important for users to be aware of their digital footprint. It is a great concern for adolescents as their online behavior today has the potential to haunt or hurt them in the future

## 9. Practice Empathizing Versus Trivializing

Trivialization on social media is important to address as social media platforms provide both individual and social experiences. Specifically, the trivialization of mental illness is a growing problem on social media. Research indicates that a disease can be trivialized in three distinct, yet related, ways: oversimplification of symptomology or causes, skepticism about severity, and through overuse of humor, mockery, or to describe the condition (Pavelko and Myrick, 2015).<sup>31</sup>

## MEME IS THE NEW MEAN: BULLYING BEHIND THE SCREEN.

Lack of empathy for members of society that suffer from mental illness stems from lack of knowledge and experience with mental illness. Lack of knowledge pertaining to disease stems directly from being misinformed or forming judgments based upon the media and stereotypes. Without a direct experience or personal connection, many rely upon unreliable sources to inform themselves about mental illness or disease. As illustrated through empathy circles, if no one in an individual's immediate or close circles suffers from mental illness and their knowledge or understanding of the conditions are limited, the individual will likely lack empathy. Lack of empathy may contribute to trivialization of mental illness.



**Laughing is the  
best medicine.**



**But if you're  
laughing for no  
reason, you need  
medicine.**

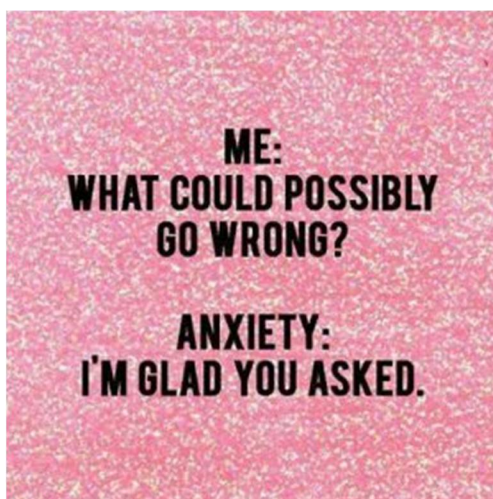
**Chompsy**  
CHOMPSEY.COM

**THE FIRST RULE OF THE  
OCD CLUB**

**IS THAT THERE HAS TO BE A  
SECOND RULE, SO WE HAVE  
AN EVEN NUMBER OF RULES.**



Fr



Mememes that trivialize suicide send messages to users, specifically younger users, that suicide is not a serious matter. I believe it fuels unhealthy online interaction. It is impossible to identify the mental stability of other users. Interaction includes communicating directly with a user as well as indirectly, through viewing or engaging with a post through likes, shares, or comments. These messages encourage the trivialization of mental

illness and lack of empathy. Over time, the distance and stigma results in insensitivity due to false beliefs and ideas that remain unchecked.

5 likes and I'll kill myself

I keep losing these things 🙄👉



Person: How are you?

Me: Fine

Also me:



#### 10. Find and exercise alternatives.

Alternatives to popular forms of social media provide spaces that are safe and healthy for users. One such platform is Shots, an application that eliminates shame sharing through several of its features. Comments are disabled completely. App users are only able to like pictures. Emojis and dislike buttons that evoke negative emotions are not present to purposefully discourage bullying. Filtered and altered images cannot be uploaded to the app. It encourages app users to share and live in the true moment.

#### 11. Post Mindful Media

Trolling and bully behaviors are popular and common because of the attention they gain. Support others by using your voice to defend victims and ignore negative posts. The key to changing the negative behavior patterns of cyberbullies includes

changing their beliefs and thinking patterns about bullying. Bullies lack empathy. It is important that these individuals understand the effects of being bullied. Consequences could be provided that are severe enough to discourage people from cyberbullying for fear of facing those consequences. Eliminating their source of gratification, which is the attention gained from their behavior. Be mindful of the content that you are creating and sharing. Avoid sharing content that is negative in nature or bullies others. Use your voice to defend those victims that need support. Spam the comments of memes that bully or tease individuals and groups of people.

Cyberbullying can be faced and conquered with a united front. Social media is not the enemy, rather, our minds and behaviors relative to social media create socially irresponsible and or unhealthy online environments. Meme is the New Mean, was designed to explore these mindsets and behaviors such as the act of self-comparison, and linking our self-worth to likes, or using comments, shares, and memes to perpetuate stereotypes or bully and tease others. These are acts that we choose to engage in online. When we seek and explore the bigger picture beyond the images projected on our computer screens, we may recognize our power to create a healthy online experience for ourselves and for others. There is potential power and energy in all that we do through and because of social media. In the words of Erik Qualman, "The power of social media is that it forces necessary change."



## Notes

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