

## **Memos and Comment Sections: Mechanisms of Criticism or Harassment?**

**By Hülya Afat & Boran Göher**

In 2020, our lives became online more than ever, as much as we carried our professional lives to our screen, we also fulfilled our entertainment needs online too. With the increase in content consumption online, content creation also increased as expected. These increased numbers revealed the already existed problem of online harassment through both the feedback mechanisms and the content creation itself. We will focus on the misused power of comment sections and meme culture by internet users around the world. Even though the comment sections are an essential part of online content creation, this speed of feedback and the unfiltered anonymous criticism may cause some damage to the peace of the environment, the quality/quantity of the content, and the feelings of the content creator. On the other hand, memes themselves are content creation, in a similar manner to the comment section, the topics they refer to, people they criticize, or the way they do this criticism may cause some damage. Criticism is defined as the practice of judging the merits and faults of something, naturally, every content consumer has a right to criticize the content, but we will discuss the correct ways to do it later. We can define harassment as aggressive pressure or intimidation and define online harassment as these aggressive acts performed online. The reason why online harassment matters are that it hurts the real feelings of real people and it makes real people uncomfortable or upset. You may as well think “just ignore it, a writing on the screen cannot hurt you”, this is not that simple. Ignoring the act of aggressivity online may encourage real-life harassment because of the lack of consequences the harassers face when the act is performed online. Even though there would be no real-life consequence of ignoring online harassment, it is still harassment and no one should be subjected to it. Making sure the harassers face sanctions (even online) is the only way to stop them.

When we think about the comment sections, the first things that come to mind are livestream comment sections on various platforms such as Twitch, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. In contrast to the comment sections of previously edited and uploaded content, the comment sections of livestreams may be used as a real-time dialogue with the watchers, so they serve a different purpose than only criticism, and we will not include the comment sections of livestreams in this article. Moving on with our main focus, every social media platform has some sort of a feedback mechanism, either it is “like/dislike” or a comment section, or both in most cases. Previously mentioned social media platforms are the most used ones, and hence they have the most interaction among its users. It would be unfair to say comment sections are unnecessary or totally destructive, the constructive feedback is an essential element of content creation. Both for the platform and the content creators, the opinions of that platform’s users are very important; content creators need those opinions in order to make their content more appealing, and the platform needs those opinions in order to make their platform more suitable for advertisement. Those opinions being necessary does not give the commentators the right to say whatever they want, the only acceptable and expected intention of commenting is to criticize the content and any other negative motive such as making fun of how the content creator looks/talks or any non-constructive criticism is hurtful and ill-intentioned. Comments including only hurtful intentions are often called “hate comments”, the term itself sometimes is misused by

the creators who are rejecting the constructive criticism and trying to discredit the commentators as “haters”, still, the majority of the “hate comments” on the said platforms actually include unnecessary negativity and aggressivity. Identifying which comment includes hate and which does not is not an easy task, some platforms allow the content creator to delete comments, some of them have word filters for the comment section which does not allow any comment including the filtered word(s) to be published on the comment section. Another mechanism YouTube has in order to make the hate not visible is hiding the like and dislike numbers, which is in control and choice of the creator, of course. Are these mechanisms enough to stop or discourage the hate showing or online harassment? Certainly, not. Protecting the content creators should be the priority of the platforms, instead, they tend to favor the advertisers’ interest and dismiss the creators’ distress, hence discouraging the content creator instead of the “hate comments”. Platforms have the power to show intolerance to inappropriate behavior, the power should be towards making the platform a better and peaceful place for both content creators and consumers.

Meme culture has been developing in the internet circle for quite some time now, and as time passed, it has become a complex, interconnected structure worthy of some deep thought. Of course, over its lifetime, the culture has developed some subcultures. People are not usually worried about memes, but some subcultures are deserving of a closer investigation. Behind the anonymity of the internet, a dark and edgy sub-culture of memes has found fruitful land to grow and prosper on. Whilst this by itself may not sound concerning to you right now, there are a few vital points that might change your opinion.

First of all, at times, these sorts of memes are made with the purpose of ridiculing or making fun of a specific person, which is simply harassment with extra steps. This is extremely prevalent in the fandoms of online content creators, with such memes generally making fun of other content creators not liked in that specific community. It is very obvious how making a meme to try to harm another person is not very ethical, but there does not have to be one specific person to be targeted. Very often, memes are used to explicitly attack a group of people that are usually bound together by political position, by their way of life, or by innate characteristics. This is fine when people are harmlessly laughing at the idiocy of racists, but not so fine when transphobes are mass-producing and spamming vile memes at social media accounts of innocent transgender people. This is again harassment with extra steps, only this time it has a wider area of effect. This kind of meme also serves double duty as a propaganda tool, often ridiculing the intelligence of the target group or trying to discredit the validity of their existence.

Up to this point, we have only considered situations in which memes attacked people with explicit intent. That does not always have to be the case. In fact, many memes which we will now evaluate as being harmful do not have explicitly spelled out targets. They are mostly harmless-looking memes that reveal their insidious nature upon some analysis. Let us start with a question. Have you ever thought “OK, this might be funny but isn’t it a little racist?” after looking at a meme? If you have been browsing the net for a long enough time, you probably have. Even if you have not thought the exact sentence, you most likely thought something with the same sentiment at least once when considering a meme. When this is pointed out, the go-to

response is to say that it is “just a meme” and that people should not get offended over it, despite the subtle undertones of offensive content. This is a wrong way of looking at things, of course, being willing to sacrifice disenfranchised people such as the disabled, transgender people, and the GSRM folk simply to be able to laugh at a higher percentage of memes is really not the way to go. The proponents of these memes state that it is just “dark humor” but that is no excuse to make fun of the disadvantaged people in society. Finally, the “just a joke” and “dark humor” arguments only come up when people need to defend themselves, up to that point, it is ambiguous whether you should take the image in front of you seriously or not. Clearly a two-faced and cowardly way of seeking approval for your views while also trying to spread them.

In addition, this so-called humor is sometimes not even funny. A subset of memes popular with young kids nowadays is edgy memes, but more often than not, they are edgy for no real reason. Middle and high schoolers with underdeveloped senses of humor recognize these memes as funny, which is not directly a problem. After all, most of them will grow out of unsuccessful humor as they grow up but the message they had internalized in their childhood might not go away. Humor that prides itself on saying things that “it is not supposed to”, otherwise called edgy humor, might seem harmless but it normalizes harmful behavior similar to the way dark humor does.

But if these memes are so low-quality, why do they persist? Well, they are easy to make and consume for the users, and an easy way to keep users engaged for the platforms. The low-quality and the “turn off your brain” nature of memes is part of the reason all the other properties we have mentioned earlier arise. Memes are created and consumed within short time periods. This short-timed nature of memes means that they are not concerned with factuality or sensitivity, which is not a problem when consuming a single meme, but the inaccuracies and cruelty accumulate over time. Moreover, memes are often distributed in enclosed online spaces of like-minded people, which acts as a shield against criticism, mostly by the said like-minded people, bringing up the aforementioned erroneous arguments. In the end, memes are created, distributed, and consumed quickly, are massively profitable for companies, defended by fans who have developed a light addiction by stating that you should have low expectations because of its nature, and, when not regulated properly, end up poisoning the consumer. In a way, memes have become the fast-food of the entertainment industry. And just like fast-food, companies will not be against the aspects of it they know are harmful, simply because it is more profitable not to. It is up to the knowledgeable consumers to inform other consumers about the potential harm and to push companies towards less harmful alternatives.

Concluding, we must note that the unique ways of interaction with other people that the internet has given us are very useful and beneficial. This article has mostly considered the negative sides of comment sections and memes and the like, but when used correctly they are valid ways of interacting with others and criticizing others online. Respect and empathy are the crucial factors of these interactions to go positively for all parties. Yet, the greed of companies, the people trying to spread their vile ideologies with underhanded tactics, the uneducated and gullible consumers, and the human tendency of not empathizing with that which is not right in front of you still exist on the internet. Add to that the interconnectedness of the online world and

the ease of obtaining and maintaining anonymity within the internet, and you have got yourself one volatile and dangerous combination. However, this is not to say the existence of harassment and cruelty within the online world is an innate property of the world wide web that we have no means of changing. If we all do our part, we can create a safer, freer, and more beautiful internet landscape for all humanity. Being kind to one another, reading something twice before you send/post it, or simply empathizing during your time online is not hard at all; even though the avid nature of the online presence may encourage more aggressivity, responding with good intentions is up to you. Not agreeing with someone is totally normal and not an excuse to be rude, the time we internalize the tolerance will make the online platforms something everyone enjoys.