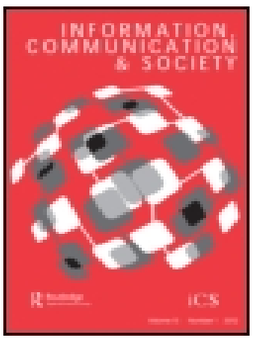

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My life is a mess: self-deprecating relatability and collective identities in the memification of student issues

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate memes about student issues. We consider the memes as expressions of a new networked student public that contain discourses that may fall outside the mainstream discourse on higher education. The paper is based on content analysis of 179 posts in the public Facebook Group 'Student Problem Memes', combined with a nine-month media watch and a discussion workshop with 15 students. Through self-deprecating humour, students create an inverse attention economy of competitive one-downmanship, where the goal is to display humorous failure instead of perfect appearance. Our analysis shows that students use humour to express, share, and commiserate over daily struggles, but also that the problems related to work/study balance and mental health, are experienced as a persistent feature of student living. We also analyse limitations of meme-based publics, emphasizing processes of inclusion and exclusion through specific vernaculars of visual and discursive humour where issues related to gender, race, orientation, class, and ability are sidelined in favour of relatable humour.

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Student voices and counter publics

The inclusion of student perspectives in higher education is frequently lauded as both necessary and valued. However, many processes used to include student voices reduce their contribution to 'student feedback', which places limits on what issues students can speak of, and is tied to institutional attempts to gain a competitive edge (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). Consequently, we need alternative ways to engage with student discourses, also in non-institutional settings, to ensure that students are heard. We believe memefied discourses on the internet represent one such avenue that can give us insight into otherwise marginalized stories about students and issues they face.

On the internet, stories about the life of students take a variety of forms: Opinion blogs on news portals (Istudent, 2016), listicles on popular media outlets like Buzzfeed (Misener, 2013; Stryker 2015), and dedicated forum threads on platforms like Reddit (/r/LifeHacks, 2017). In recent years we have also seen a rise in visual and short form user-generated

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content on social media used to air grievances and form digital communities of support with each other (Horton, 2016; Malhotra, 2011; Sylvester, 2017; Weinberg, 2016). The online presence of student stories has culminated in a bona fide genre of 'student problem' memes dedicated to sharable, remixable, and relatable narratives about the student life world.

In this paper, we address these memefied discourses about higher education to investigate the lifeworld of students: How is higher education framed by student memes? How do memes produce collective identities of students and what characterizes such identities? A rising numbers of students around the world grapple with struggles like student debt (Connick, 2017; Rivero, 2017), mental health issues (Burns, 2017; Wakeford, 2017), racism (Frias, 2017; Lord, 2017; Porter, 2017), and sexism (Geek Girl Rising, 2017; McCombs, 2017). How are such issues of inequality articulated, if articulated at all, in memetic discourse?

We focus on a widely popular Facebook Page that collates and publishes user-generated submissions from students around the world known as 'Student Problems' and refer to them throughout the paper as SP Memes. With over 7 million subscribers at the time of writing, and 3.4 million subscribers at the time of data collection 10 months earlier, SP memes is escalating in prominence among Facebook users around the world. It belongs to the multi-platform brand 'Student Problems' and is promoted as 'the home of all the best student entertainment, knowledge and comedy' (http://www.studentproblems.co.uk). The paper is based on content analysis of Facebook content posted during two weeks in March and May 2017 through an inductive approach which generates theory as gleaned from the data (Thomas, 2006), and coded according to the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). We also analyse limitations of meme-based publics, emphasizing processes of inclusion and exclusion through specific vernaculars of visual and discursive humour.

Memefied networked publics

We argue that the SP Memes are representations of a counter-public built on collective identities and shared experiences as students. The investigation of publics and counter-publics (Warner, 2002) has proven fruitful in directing attention to discourses that fall outside the mainstream, and as educators we should take care to value content 'that makes at-risk youth more visible and thus accessible to adults' (Dobson, 2016, p. 179). Here, publics are broadly defined as a collection of people with a shared understanding, identity, interest or rhetoric. Since the SP collective is intimately tied to their online presence, they are further specified as a networked public; 'a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media' (Ito, 2008, p. 2). Networked publics position the makers and sharers of memes as active users and contributors (rather than as a passive audience or consumer) and poses their own set of challenges. For instance, some audiences are visible while others are unseen, audiences may maintain distinct social contexts or engage in collapsed contexts, and audiences may shift between public and private spheres of discourse (boyd, 2010).

Networked publics are built on technical features that allow for increasingly complex communication and the property of bits means that memes are performed in a space with material affordances for persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability.

This means that when content such as memes are shared in networked publics, they are materially configured to be automatically archived, easily duplicated, potentially seen by many and can be retrieved by searching (boyd, 2010). In other words, the practice of meme-making and meme-sharing is often a public but social practice. Additionally, as a networked public of a Facebook Page, shareability (Jenkins, Ford, Green, & Green, 2012) and relatability (Abidin, 2017; Kanai, 2016) are highly valued social practices that can be achieved through competence in particular forms of internet vernacular, which in the case of SP Memes is related both to the use of memes as expression and use of humour in said expression.

Another key feature of networked publics relevant to our study is how it positions digital technologies, screens, and social media as established and ubiquitous features of our everyday lives. The concept actively encourages us to avoid dichotomous divides between online/offline, users/producers, and the social/material. Instead, it embraces the diffuse co-presence of both digital and physical spaces, distributed and loosely connected creative communities and the co-production of technology and culture (Ito, 2008). Taken together, these features direct the form and content of the meme discourse, and in turn shape how meme producers and audiences relate to each other.

Meme culture, relatability, and self-deprecation

While there are several competing definitions of memes, in this paper we focus on the intersection of the following three (overlapping) fields. From vernacular cultures, we understand memes as 'the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumours, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet' (Shifman, 2013, p. 362), a form of 'pop polyvocality' or 'a pop cultural common tongue that facilitate[s] the diverse engagement of many voices' (Milner, 2013, para. 9). From the perspective of media and communications, we deem memes a form of 'shared social phenomenon' propagated through 'imitation', 'competition', and 'selection' (Shifman, 2013, pp. 364–365); and from the socio-cultural frame memes are a 'common instrument for establishing normativity' (Miller & Sinanan, 2017, p. 193).

Analysing memes as objects beyond mere internet frivolity, we support the idea that they shape the mindsets, forms of behaviour, and actions of social groups' (Shifman, 2014, p. 18). As highly adaptable and penetrative visual units, memes have the power stimulate contentious public commentary (Bayerl & Stoynov, 2014), overcome the hegemony of messages dominated by mainstream media (Huntington, 2013; Leaver, 2013), and delegitimize long-standing corporate discourses (Davis, Glantz, & Novak, 2015). Through a performative lens, the use of memes may be understood as a form of boundary work, where normality and deviance, inside and outside, are continually made and remade. Familiarity with certain memes and meme vernacular are ways to distinguish between groups and to create a sense of belonging, as only those with the requisite intertextual know-how will understand the joke (Miltner, 2014). Consequently, the making and sharing of memes is a way to make and negotiate collective identities through shared norms and values (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2015).

To understand how memes create a sense of community, we also consider the concepts phatic communion (Miller, 2008; Senft, 1995) and phatic communication (Malinowski, 1993; Žegarac, 1999). The notion of the 'phatic' is derived from anthropologist Bronislaw

Malinowski, who in his study of human communication wrote about a form of speech in which the 'mere exchange of words' fosters 'ties of union' (1993, p. 10). This phenomenon has been studied as a 'communion' practice between speakers who communicate for 'exclusively social, bonding functions' (Senft, 1995, p. 3), and as a 'communication' structure with its own social conventions that differ from regular information-driven talk as opposed to feeling-driven talk (Žegarac, 1999). In the digital age, such phatic communions and communications are argued by new media scholar Vincent Miller (2008, p. 387) to be derived from 'the social contexts of "individualization" and "network sociality", alongside the technological developments associated with pervasive communication and "connected presence"'.

While prior research on phatic communities in digital spaces has focused on the structural aspect and communicative frameworks of conviviality (Varis & Blommaert, 2015, p. 43), we wish to focus on the social aspect and relational practice of 'self-deprecating relatability' that is especially evident among student populations and publics in meme culture. SP Memes belongs to a legacy of self-deprecating memes on the internet alongside other prominent meme genres such as 'losers in china' (Szablewicz, 2014), 'what should we call me' (Kanai, 2016), the 'no make-up selfie' (Deller & Tilton, 2015), and 'girl pain' (Dobson, 2016) memes. Self-deprecating memes have been enacted to 'demonstrate affective affinities with others' (Kanai, 2016, p. 4) and display 'young netizens' disillusionment with the apparent lack of possibility for upward socio-economic mobility' (Szablewicz, 2014, p. 259). In this way memes display emergent practises for identification that emphasize affective dimensions where 'alternative desires and forms of mobility may be imagined and enacted' (Szablewicz, 2014, p. 260). As such, the memefication of everyday struggles are not merely online presentations of offline pain (Dobson, 2016, p. 179), they also allow new public discussions to take place by addressing conversations and topics not normally granted public attention.

The three themes from our data – (1) Overwhelmed, stressed and ashamed; (2) Self-deprecating humour, flexibility and seriousness; and (3) Procrastination, control and self-blame – represent both existing and new discourses about student lives, where the meme format has rendered some experience visible, while silencing others. Drawing on our collective experience and fieldwork on highly prolific digital communities such as Influencers (Abidin, 2017) and gamers (Ask, 2016), whose 'visibility labour' strategies (Abidin, 2016) are oriented towards the market logic of positive self-branding, we also argue that the self-deprecating relatability of SP Memes has arisen in opposition to the rise of pristine, prestigious, and celebratory content.

Methodology

The paper builds on content analysis of memes posted on the SP Memes Facebook Page in 2017. Data were collected in two periods, namely 15–31 March and 1–15 May, where all posts were downloaded and saved amounting to 179 posts. All posts were then coded using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) informed by the coding principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017): Initially, posts undergo substantive coding in which data is extracted from our sample. Then, the data is subject to open coding in which we read for emerging themes and core categories. Finally, we analyse and further fracture each of our open codes via axial coding, until core and related concepts emerge

upon saturation. To facilitate this coding process, each post was summarized in text form, coded with key words for content, and saved with a free-form description of what the post considered relatable and who was visible in the post. Our aim was to identify central themes addressed in the data, as well as how the memes were used to produce relatability and shared identities through memefied discourse.

Following Shifman's (2013) framework for memes, our data may be described as conventional in form, persistent in stance and varied in content. The posted memes consisted of either only text or a combination of image/gif/video and text, which in most cases recontextualized old and popular memes to a student setting. There was little to no remixing in the comment section, which was primarily used to tag other users or express sentiments of relatability ('same', 'that's me!', etc). The stance was largely the same throughout the material, with self-deprecating humour being pervasive, while showing great variety in content (though limited to student problems as dictated by the genre), making it our focus for analysis.

In addition to content analysis, we have gathered supplemental material to contextualize the dataset, as our own positions as professional academics might skewer interpretations. The first author hosted a small workshop where a group of 15 students (both BA and MA level) participated in coding part of the dataset (a total of 27 posts) and answered a short questionnaire about their perception of student memes. Their coding and interpretation of what the memes were saying, as well as what the memes considered relatable were in line with our own readings, validating our analysis of the material. Responses from the survey also reminded us that students varied in how much they related to the problems depicted, and humour/being entertained was the primary motivation for use. These discussion points were incorporated into our findings. Furthermore, our study has been supplemented by a nine-month long (January–September 2017) media tracking of current student trends and issues, culminating in a data set of press articles, expert commentaries, and opinion editorials that have circulated widely among student and academic circles on social media.

We would also like to note the limitations of our data set given that SP Memes is an entity largely prolific on Facebook despite having several interconnected digital estates. SP Memes on Facebook represent merely one facet of student publics, being hosted on the platform Facebook that is dominantly used only in some parts of the world, corresponding to a host of users who are likely English-speaking, middle-class, college-aged students from around the world. As such, the differentiated visibility of the student population and student experience on SP Memes may alienate marginalized student populations such as the disabled, mature aged students, non-English-speaking students, and students from low-income backgrounds, to name a few.

Theme 1: overwhelmed, stressed and ashamed

SP memes builds its community through commiseration and self-deprecating humour, where 'telling' and not 'solving' is the primary directive. However, how student's problems are framed: as ubiquitous, something impossible to change, and as an inescapable part of student life, is cause for concern. The shared SP identity is one where the demands of student living are insurmountable, and the only available option is to endure the agony.

Consider this small sample of memes that we deem to be exemplar of posts depicting distress and student life. The post on the left illustrates how the management of seemingly normal everyday responsibilities (money, assignments, work, exams, sleep) presents as an overwhelming experience. While there are memes dealing with each of these issues separately, they are often shown as an unmanageable package deal. Some might interpret this as a sign of a coddled or immature student body, but an equally valid interpretation is that students are undergoing financial struggles, feeling academically inadequate, attempting to balance work with studying, and not finding time to rest. These various strands of distress, especially when compounded over time, are in fact a set of powerful stressors. In corroboration of this, an ACHA Report on US student health (American College Health Association, 2017) showed that in the last 12 months 86% felt overwhelmed by all that they had to do, 82% felt exhausted (not from physical activity) and 50.9% reported feeling things were hopeless, and we believe the memes articulate this experience.

We are not arguing that all students feel overwhelmed all the time, but rather that student issues extends beyond academic pursuits, and that something an adult/non-student might find mundane or manageable is actually a struggle in the context of student life. The laundry list of basic stresses – money, assignments, work, exams, sleep – are an almost universal struggle for all students and thus appeals to a wide spectrum in the SP meme audience, although the memes do not differentiate between students, the intersectionality of their identities, and thus their varying resources to cope with these stresses.

The ubiquitous presence of students' stressors that stretches far beyond the classroom and study hall is also articulated in the post in the centre (Figure 1). Although 'watching Netflix' is used as an example of leisurely pursuits, it is but a placeholder for several other relaxing activities students may engage in, as evidenced by the vast collection of similar memes on the Page. The general narrative is that while engaging in a leisurely pursuit, the act of remembering or being reminded about deadlines, exams, or assignments disrupts a student's ability to rest. Such memes convey that seemingly safe, everyday activities of leisure are regularly and suddenly interrupted with feelings of dread, hopelessness, and anxiety due to the omnipresence of stress. As the post on the right (Figure 1) points out, this distress is something you should hide. The meme uses an image of a man who is literally on fire, but walking in a calm manner, to illustrate the experience of hiding distress and keeping up appearances. While direct mentions of 'shame' in the captions did not feature often in our data, the visual and discursive stories embedded in the memes indicated that these negative feelings and experiences were deeply shameful and difficult to express.

Figure 1. Examples of posts theming distress and student life.

This interpretation is strongly supported by similar memes in our data, where the 'audience' watching a student 'keep it all together' interchanges between fellow students, educators, and family members, also implying that dealing with distress and shame is a lonely experience.

Seen together, the memes in Figure 1 build on relatable experiences of feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and ashamed. The way distress and student living is intertwined corresponds with how student issues were represented in our media watch, and current research on the wellbeing of students. The media watch was abuzz with a 'student health crisis', referring to the rising number of students with mental illness (e.g. Gurney-Read, 2016). The American College Health Association (2017) reported that among US students in the last 12 months 66% felt very sad, 60.8% felt overwhelming anxiety, 38.2% so depressed it was difficult to function and 10.4% seriously considered suicide. Similarly, studies on mental health in UK (Thorley, 2017) and Norway (Nedregård & Olsen, 2014) show a rising number of students with mental illness, mental distress and low wellbeing.

While entertainment value and humour are important for the success of the genre, the memes are also articulating shared pain that might be difficult to express in other forms. Given the stigma surrounding mental health issues, we should consider the memefied discourses of persistent sadness, fear, and frustration as a valued outlet about topics that might be hard to raise in general, and especially in higher education where characteristics like resilience and independence are praised. We should also see SP Memes in connection to how validation from peers helps combat the surrounding stigma (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016), and how young adults with mental illness are more likely to use online communities to seek support (Gowen, Deschaine, Gruttadara, & Markey, 2012). However, we are not implying that the making and sharing of memes are in and of themselves therapeutic. In the next section, we further investigate the importance of humour in creating flexible and relatable narratives and making this pain palatable.

Theme 2: self-deprecating humour, flexibility and seriousness

Several subgenres of memes are dedicated to laughing at one's own or others' misfortune. The classic 'Fail' meme, and later iterations like 'You had one job' and 'Karma', depict both trivial and epic mistakes where enjoyment comes from observing the failure of others, akin to a Schadenfreude. On the other hand, SP Memes (like other self-deprecating Problem Memes such as First World Problem Memes, Gamer Problem Memes or Girl Problem Memes) derives its humour from identifying and relating with the depicted experience. In addition to referring to a shared identity, the self-deprecating humour is also a way of constructing that collective identity, and in this section we will analyse how humour is used in telling the student story.

In line with previous research, we found that sarcasm and silliness were prominent forms of humour in SP Memes alongside 'comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, surprise' (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 288). In particular, exaggeration was a dominant form of expression, where the difficulties of studying or the personal failing of students were taken to extremes. For example, in a meme about how university is going (Figure 2, left), the answer to the question 'How would you describe your university career?' is 'Failing My Way to Success. An Emotional, Financial and Physical Journey from

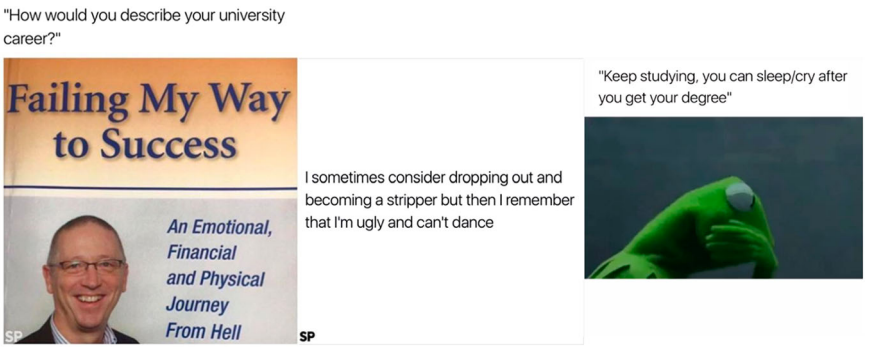

Figure 2. Memes about higher education as painful.

Hell'. While the meme is referring to a shared experience of distress (as described in the above section), the exaggerated nature of the response adds flexibility to the statement by allowing for multiple interpretations. For some, the description of a 'journey from hell' is accurate, for others it is mainly an entertaining way of articulating challenging aspects of student living. Similarly, a meme with the text 'Exams don't even test your knowledge they just test how much stress you can handle without having a mental breakdown' may be relatable for those who simply worry about test results, as well as for those experiencing crippling anxiety during exams. As responses from the student workshop reminded us, they relate to the memefied statements to a varying degree. Some found joy in how SP memes describe a relatable experience in a humorous way, others simply saw them as exaggerated for the sake of entertainment and not really referring to real-life situations. In this way, humour fuels the memes' virality by expanding their relatability.

In other memes, the degree of silliness is more unclear. This is illustrated in Figure 2 (middle): 'I sometimes consider dropping out and becoming a stripper, but then I remember that I'm ugly and can't dance'. Humour is derived from exaggeration (of the student's lack of skills) and a put down of both themselves and strippers (as an accessible occupation that does not require a degree). However, the humorous exaggeration does not necessarily extend to the potential honesty of the message's implication: that a degree is the only way to ensure future employability, and that quitting higher education is in many cases not a 'real' option. As Figure 2 (right) demonstrates with the text 'Keep studying, you can sleep/cry after you get your degree', academic success is not only rated as more important than personal well-being, distress is framed as something students have to simply endure, as whatever distress is experienced currently is nothing compared to the pain a future without a degree would bring.

In these posts humour and exaggeration are still the primary effects of the message, but the selection also shows how student sentiments in meme form also can be keyed in a more serious tone. Internet memes have a strong association with humour, and is sometimes used interchangeably with internet humour, but humour is not a required feature. Memes are also used to share experiences of distress and failure, where eliciting sympathy with the memefied position or statement rather than laughter is the goal (Lindsay, 2017). SP Memes make jokes, but they also speak to real experiences and the liking and sharing of such memes may just as well represent support, as it does entertainment.

Theme 3: procrastination, lack of control and self-blame

The third and final theme in our data is procrastination and is by far the most common topic in our dataset of SP Memes. It is also the one topic that all the students participating in our workshop related to. The high relatability factor is not surprising considering that 80–95% of college students procrastinate and almost 50% do so regularly (Steel, 2007). Procrastination is defined as the voluntary delay of due tasks, and can negatively affect learning, achievement, academic self-efficacy, and quality of life (Steel, 2007). Some choose to delay tasks to work under pressure and find good use for their postponement tactics (active procrastinators), others do so involuntarily and with negative consequences for both health and performance (passive procrastinators) (Chun Chu & Choi, 2005). However, in the SP Memes procrastination was always expressed as the latter, as something negative that not only impacted academic performance, but also happiness and self-worth.

While procrastination is defined as the *voluntary* delay of due tasks (indicating that there are no external forces or seemingly rational reasons for postponing) the SP Memes speak to an experience where delays happen for seemingly no reason and are beyond their control. The posts alternate between (1) relatable moments of delays getting out of hand; (2) descriptions of powerlessness as the procrastination continues; and (3) the consequences that follow from procrastination. All three are present in the meme on the left (Figure 3):

> That awkward moment when your 10 minute study break turns into 2 hours of Netflix, sleeping for the rest of the week, failing your exams, being disowned by your parents, and spending the rest of your life as a Mongolian goat farmer.

Not only does the meme describe a gradual decent from safe leisure to feared future, it also makes a direct and causal link between failing to study, being socially shamed (disowned by family), and having poor career prospects (goat farming). The sense of futility that procrastination may bring is illustrated in the image on the right (Figure 3) where studying for exams after a semester of procrastination is equated with throwing a single bucket of water on a massive fire.

In our dataset, even though only a small number of posts (3) use the word procrastination explicitly, a larger number (30) addressed it in variants as 'not studying' or 'failing to study', often by referring to time being spent on something else. Activities like eating, sleeping, drinking, going out/meeting friends, and watching TV were frequently

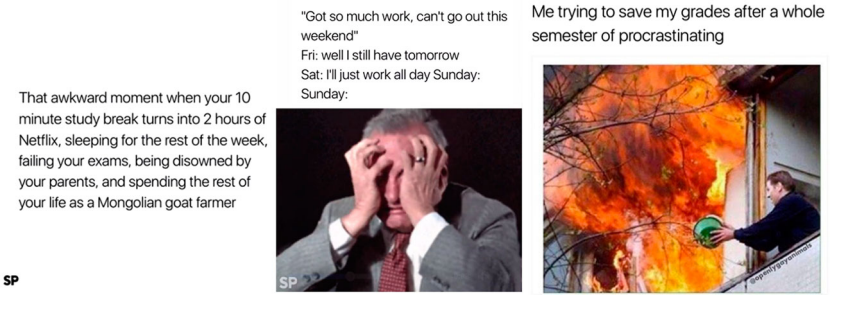

Figure 3. Examples of posts theming procrastination.

positioned as something that either got in the way of studying, or as something that was deliberately used to ignore academic responsibilities. Although many of these activities are central components of well-being, their importance is severely underplayed in the memetic discourse, and often framed as antithetical to studying. This framing corresponds with research showing that procrastination, and its related experience of shame, may prevent students from doing things that will improve their well-being and health, including working out, eating healthily, being social, or doing enjoyable activities (Sirois, Melia-Gordon, & Pychyl, 2003).

Studies in psychology show that for the procrastinator, the delay is marked by discomfort that can manifest as anxiety, irritation, regret, despair, or self-blame (Glick & Orsillo, 2015), and these findings matches the affective dimensions in our data: anxiety (about exams and life post exams), regret (for not studying enough), despair (about the future), and self-blame (for 'wasting time' not studying). While either of the above emotions, when compounded over time, represent a risk to mental health and well-being, we wish to highlight the role of self-blame in the framing of student problems.

It is notable that with the exception of jokingly calling multiple exams in one day a 'breach of human rights', the responsibility for student-related problems is projected inwards. Although the primary discourses on student problems in our media watch focused on institutional failure and structural inequalities in society as causes of student stresses, the SP Memes place the blame squarely on the shoulders of each individual student. While there can be many reasons for not finding the time to study (many students are, for example, reliant on income from part-time or full-time jobs) the narrative is still parochially one of personal failure. With procrastination being common and leading to self-blame, we are likely missing important feedback about student lives and their learning, as student problems are individualized rather than used to fuel institutional critique. Internalizing institutional failure is a problem for academics as well as students (Gill, 2010), but in dealing with student issues, the internalization of responsibility may further compound students' relative lack of voice in higher education and their potential to change problematic structures that shape their student experience.

Collective identities, relatability and limitations of memefied publics

In many ways, the SP Memes mirror ongoing debates in the mainstream public about the consequences of the neoliberal university, and the effect it has on academics and their well-being. The increasing pressure to publish and perform, compounded by factors such as individualization, insecure job situations, audit culture, and the intensification and extensification of work has highlighted and normalized insecurity, stress, anxiety, and shame (Gill, 2010). It is telling that the following quote about the feelings of inadequacy and shame of academics also adequately summarizes the student experiences we have just analysed:

> These feelings, these affective embodied experiences, occupy a strange position in relation to questions of secrecy and silence. They are at once ordinary and every day, yet at the same time remain largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of the academy. (Gill, 2010, p. 229)

The blurring of audiences in a networked public, combined with self-deprecating humour to add flexible interpretability, makes memes an appealing way of articulating

common, yet silenced, aspects of everyday life. As such, SP Memes may be understood as a safe way of expressing and sharing negative emotions about student living.

One of the reasons SP Memes appears as a safe venue to express potentially shameful experiences is because they are framed as relatable. SP Meme admins frequently introduce posts with comments like 'All the time', 'Every weekend', or 'Currently me' (usually accompanied by an appropriate emoji). By giving clear instructions to users to identify with the situation or emotion depicted in the meme, as opposed to ridiculing the content, they simultaneously show that such experiences are not unique and that it is ok to share in them and commiserate together. Because of this explicit framing, we should understand relatability not as something inherent in the posts or the community, but as the result of explicit practices of sociality. Furthermore, the use of SP Memes becomes a form of boundary work that results in a collective SP Memes identity, as it tells stories about 'us' and what 'we' relate to. However, this shared identity expressed through memes has its limitations.

Whereas the 'we' in SP Memes appear to be quite general, depicting and speaking to students who, to some degree or another, feel like they are failing, it is in other ways quite specific. Of the many student issues depicted as SP Memes, any problem related to structural inequalities is conspicuously missing. In great contrast to our media watch where issues of sexism and racism were prominent, SP Memes depict a student life world characterized as free of issues related to gender, sexuality, race, or ability. By rendering these voices and issues invisible, the narrative implies, at best, that issues of discrimination are outside the genre constraints of SP Memes, and at worst, that issues of social inequality are unimportant or irrelevant for the average student. Either way, the shared student identity is built on a discourse where it is acceptable for students to complain about being stressed, but not about being sexually harassed or racially profiled. A range of problems faced by students because of structural inequality is rendered invisible and outside the collective, and implied 'normal', student experience. Consequently, the memetic expression that for some students provide a space and means to speak of issues that is difficult to address, might serve to further marginalize others.

Memes have great potential to subvert dominant discourse and critique those in power. Examples of this include how users added new subtitles to Hitler's emotional breakdown in the World War 2 movie *Der Untergang* to point out heretical behaviour and media spin among politicians and companies (Silva & Garcia, 2012), and how memes were used in the 2016 US Presidential election in attempts to delegitimize the candidates (Ross & Rivers, 2017). At the same time memes may a force for consolidation of norms and exclusion of marginalized groups. Even though many memes employ racist symbolism and stereotypes, critique is frequently dismissed because they are 'just jokes'. Memes then become ways to perform discourses that deny structural racism while simultaneously mocking people of colour (InJeong, 2016). Analyses of 'It Gets Better' meme, aimed at preventing gay teen suicide, demonstrate how an attempt to create more openness and inclusion, amplified already privileged voices (Gal et al., 2015). Similarly, our own analysis shows how white, able-bodied, middle-class students are given further visibility and prominence through the meme discourse, evidencing that not all racialized bodies are granted equal visibility and politics in the visual culture of the internet (Nakamura, 2008)

The one student issue (beyond mental health as already discussed) where our data from media watch and memefied discourse overlapped was money, or rather lack thereof. The rising debt associated with higher education and insecure job market is clearly of concern

to both the public and to students. However, also in this case the lack of differentiation of student identities hides how issues of debt, employability and social capital is also affected by gender, race, class, and ability. Paying attention to such differentiating categories might not be necessary in the construction of a meme-based collective student identity, but it limits its potential to address issues from all students – and thus how accurately the memefied public can describe the lifeworld of students.

Student problem memes: competitive onedownmanship and the need to support student life

Laughter fosters group identity (Terrion & Ashforth, 2002). Within the community of SP Memes in particular, the self-deprecating humour that has generated feelings of competitive onedownmanship where students strive to ironically outdo each other in performing and conveying self-deprecating inferiority, failure, and struggles in other to gather the most relatability, sympathy, attention, and engagement with other students. We argue that competitive onedownmanship has arisen in opposition to the normative attention economy of self-celebratory social media posts, and emerges as an anti-thesis to prestige on social media. It is an alternative meme ecology hinged upon self-debasement, and an inverted hierarchy of social capital where students who feel they are unable to succeed in higher education can instead acquire a different form of social status by competitive memeing. In addition to catharsis and community building for struggling students, SP Memes has emerged as a shadow economy to the normative higher education system, where instead of academic achievement and a healthy lifestyle, students instead assign value to the linguistic acrobatics of memeing, practising honesty through humour, disclosure through deprecation, and relatability through rhetoric.

In this sense, we may also understand the memes as forms of emotional or affective labour where the liking and sharing of memes are ways to transform lived pain into relatable and humorous (and therefore palatable) struggles (Kanai, 2017). As this takes place on Facebook where socio-material scripts direct users to self-branding and quantification of worth (Van Dijck, 2013), we may also interpret this as a form of 'feeling rules' where one is expected to have the right feelings as the right time (Kanai, 2017). Humour is used to increase relatability by adding flexibility, and allows students a degree of plausible deniability should their meme repertoires ever be rigorously interrogated or intruded upon by an unwelcomed authority.

Having expounded on the value and importance of digital shadow economies such as SP Memes, as researchers of internet culture and educators of digital literacies, we want to emphasize the importance of learning digital, youth, and student literacies in order to conscientiously access and understand student discourses in the appropriate context. After all, proclaiming an intentionally exaggerated account through memes to attempt virality is not quite the same as joking about depression among close friends in a large group chat as revelry, or disclosing personal struggles to a guidance counsellor in person to seek help and intervention. Each setting solicits a different vocabulary, fosters a different affect, and assumes a different audience, thus reminding us that platform vernaculars (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Cater, 2015), community norms (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017), and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1958) are all crucial to understand the student experience.

We have analysed the SP Memes as memefied discourses of student lives to investigate how they frame and describe higher education and the student experience. Overall, higher education was positioned as important and necessary, while the student experience described as interchangeable with mental and emotional distress. At first, it was conflicting that the high value placed on higher education was contrasted with the miserable experience of the education system. However, they appear to be intimately linked. It is exactly because higher education is seen as so vital to future success that so much misery is tacitly accepted along the way. Through a close reading of SP Memes, our paper offers a register to extrapolate personal struggles to the failing of institutional structures, thus translating black humour for educators to improve youth wellbeing and mental health in the digital age.

The analysis shows how memes articulate the lived experienced covered under the heading 'student health crisis', how humour is integral in creating relatability and virility, and finally how student problems are framed as individual failings while underplaying systemic inadequacies and issues. The range of issues that SP Memes have addressed is however limited by never addressing social inequalities, and might thus serve to further marginalize minority or vulnerable students.

While digital spaces and repositories such as SP Memes provide valuable avenues and stimulants for students to construct a safe and supportive environment to air their woes and manage hardship through humour, the implicit messages of their struggles is worrying and warrants care and attention from educators, as well as action and dedicated resources from higher education systems. User-generated digital artefacts such as SP Memes should thus be treated not as mere internet frivolity but as valuable and insightful discourse on young people's personal experiences. After all, SP Memes serves as an effective but only transient panacea for student struggles, and while humour and solidarity may briefly lift one's spirits, it cannot feed the hungry, claim justice for the discriminated, or right the internalized shame, blame, helplessness, and mental stress that current and future generations of students undergo en masse.

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