

The Evolution and Convergence of Zine and Meme Culture

Liv Garber

In the beginning of Rosemary Clark-Parsons's essay, *Building A Digital Girl Army* Parson's discusses in abstract the idea of "safe spaces" (Parsons, 1). She admits that the term "safe space" has been "overused but undertheorized." In this essay I plan to amend this issue by discussing the ways in which zine trading communities and online meme communities have become digital and IRL safe spaces where marginalized groups, activism, and vulnerability function and thrive. I will also explore the ways in which a certain subgroup of memes created in the last few years have crystallized in form over the past year, creating a unique convergence in the visual aesthetics of meme and zine making, and how this overlap of aesthetics impacts the ways in which these artifacts are shared. For the first part of this essay, I will explain the kinds of internet spaces and memes that are similar to zine culture and its origin.

During the 2016 election, the popularization of different kinds of memes on the internet began to take shape. Gone were the days of memes without cultural relevance, sporting one still image with white and black block letters across the top and bottom. Before the election, memes were evolving on their own in the ways that most online visual aesthetics do. However, the election forced many memers, moderators, and admins to turn to a more political and still relatable tone. In order to regulate spaces online, either in one's own personal circle or within a group of more than 20,000 members, memes became a prevalent form of sharing political and academic ideas. In order to decode its visual development and aesthetic changes later, it is important to recognize politics as a catalyst for shifting the cultural environment of popular online meme spaces.

In 2016, a popular Facebook meme group named Post Aesthetics was created. It was one of the largest meme groups spanning the internet, and contained about 20,000 teen members. It began as a private group, and it's content gained so much traction and cultural relevance in other smaller private meme Facebook groups that it's membership

continued to grow until it's ultimate downfall that same year. On Facebook, this group marked the most popular beginning of memes and virtual meme spaces that exist today. Previous to Post Aesthetics, memes were shared online on a public profile, usually not making any sort of extreme statement and was open to the public domain. Post Aesthetics created a space where teens existed within a private community of other teens sharing the most vulnerable content they could create. This content began with the politics of 2016 and continued with mental health memes, financial memes, and even more specific "niche memes" that only a few other people within a group of 20,000 could relate to. This social network within a social network effected and constructed new landscapes within Facebook and inspired other platforms like Instagram to do the same. Although Post Aesthetics marked the beginning of a new era of safe spaces online, it was soon destroyed after less than a year of its existence. When the group reached Facebook's private group limit of 20,000, regulating the group's content proved to be a daunting task for its few admins. Admins were split into two camps, one in favor of policing negative content within the group, and the other a non-policing philosophy. The admins in favor of censorship relentlessly blocked users for sharing extreme opinions within a "safe space." This blatant bureaucracy pushed more members to post extreme and controversial content, to the point where nearly half of the users within the group were locked out in the next few months. In Post Aesthetic's last breaths on Facebook, 20,000 members proved to be too big of a community to deem a "safe space" as its remaining mods finally ran a script to systematically kick out every last member. In retaliation, a new online space emerged called Rach Aesthetics appeared, created by one of the mods under the non-policing philosophy. Only some of the Post Aesthetics members regathered with their community in Rach Aesthetics, a closed group with only about 5,000 members at its peak. After the downfall of the Roman Empire of meme groups, many voiced their opinions about the moderators of Post Aesthetics on this new page, in splinter groups, and even on their public pages. The tumultuous beginning of closed meme groups online proved that there was a need more than ever to find a safe space online, and that safe spaces, much like IRL, have their limit.



Ashe Girard

June 18 at 4:58pm

Since I've finally been banned, here's my thoughts on the PA sabotage:

As a multiply-marginalized disabled person, I don't get out much. I don't have many friends and I don't have the time (or ability really) to get much viewership from the stuff I say.

For me, PA was never a 'meme group' (whatever the fuck that means?).

-It was a place where I could critique cultural norms of transmisogyny and get hundreds of people to interact with it and spark *relevant* and *necessary* discourse.

-PA was a place with 39k people that I felt comfortable calling out ableism and hundreds of people could learn to be Less Shitty Humans™.

-PA was a place where, even though I probably would have hated to interact with 90% of the people I would at least be heard.

-PA was a place where I could semi-reliably depend on mods to come take out the trash.

-PA was a place I could share my [#adventuretimewithBMO](#) stories, my shitty anti-capitalist memes, and my musings on Hollywood and have them actually be read by hundreds of people.

I'm glad to see decentralization, but it will take a long time before any of these splinter groups have nearly the readership.

Directly after the downfall of Post Aesthetics, a new social media platform emerged and seemed like the direct response to a universal outcry among memers for a new safe space online. This platform was called Peach, a network that went up in the summer of 2016, and shortly crashed before the new year. For memers scorned by the reckless mods of Post Aesthetics and the lackluster communities of its splinter groups, Peach was a safe haven. Peach's communities existed in closed groups of a member's choice of 5 to 6 friends, which allowed the sharing of vulnerable content to be enclosed and private in a small group. Much like zine circles, all of Peach's groups were invite-only, meaning that Peach became a space in which people would reveal information about their identities, culture, politics, etc. In my own experience with Peach, the site actually became a safer space when the site "crashed." Much like zine communities, Peach users viewed the site less as a social network and more of a web of interconnected diaries (Bijan, 2019).

The rise and fall of Post Aesthetics and Peach allowed for a newer social platform to shine-Instagram. Around 2017, Instagram became the most popular platform for memers to share content. Meme aesthetics created in deceased Facebook groups leaked it's way over onto a more visual platform. The shift of a word-based platform to an image-based platform rapidly altered the visual aesthetics of meme making. Memes on Facebook and memes on Instagram made its distinction with a gendered divide. Since Instagram is most known for taking selfies, OOTD accounts, and niche memes, Instagram became the unofficial social media of women. With this gendered distinction, a social network emerged within a social network. Much like Post Aesthetics, users are able to create private accounts, and to create a mini network with who they chose to let in, and who they chose to follow. Although Instagram doesn't have an official "group," social circles are created with the selection of who a user follows, and who is allowed to follow, creating groups within the overlap of who follows who and therefore what content is visible.

The birth and collapse of new online spaces allowed for a unique vulnerability on the internet that was first seen in zine culture. Much like the meme, zines created ways to subvert societal pressures and expectations, to take oppressive images, concepts, words and and re-work them into personal entertainment and expression. Through the life and death of the internet's first foray into subversive spaces within a broader social media landscape, the similarities between meme culture and zine culture are astounding. In the next part of this essay, I will explain how zines and memes are alike conceptually, the ways in which they are produced and distributed, what they look like, and their afterlives online.

Conceptually, memes and zines strive to create cultural ephemera that is "authentic," both communities idealizing "the notion of an outside, alternative, free space uncomplicated by political compromise or capitulation" (Radway, 141). Much like zine

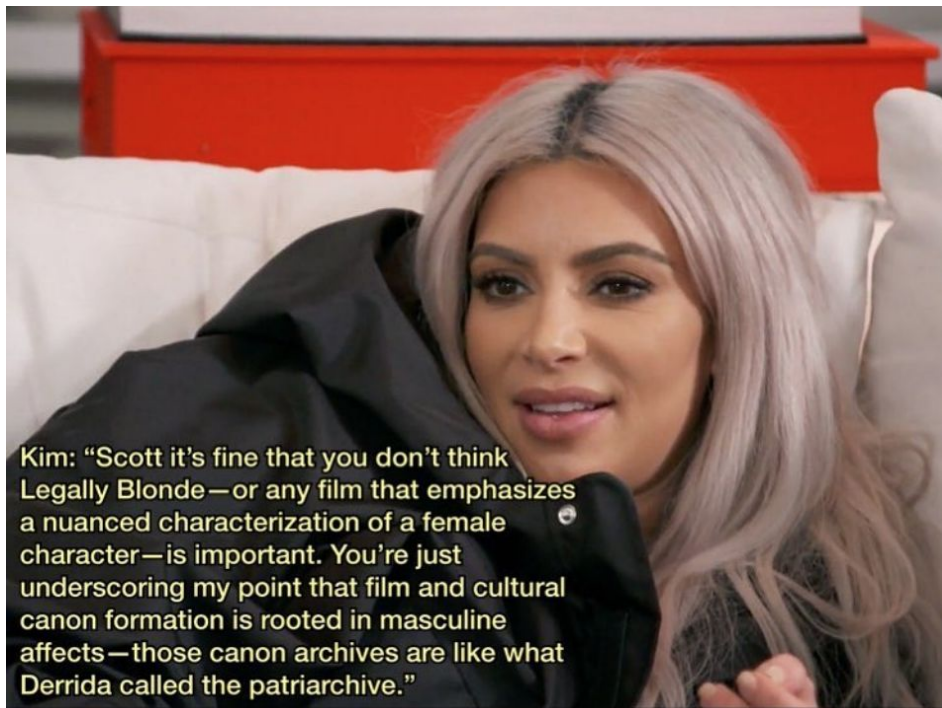
making, meme making is about, “discussing subjects and expressing opinions typically ruled out of the mainstream,” and “broadening public discourse and influencing dominant culture” (Radway, 142). Although both memers and zinesters strive for cultural authenticity, the true authenticity of the meme or zine comes from the writing process, self-reflexivity and “subject formation” (147). The author’s validation of the meme or zine comes from finding an audience that accepts their identities through the reciprocal quality of meme and zine trading. Radway writes that one should be weary of treating a zine simply as an “ideological instrument.” since zines are comprised of tangible materials. Zines are an aesthetic concoction, an ideological statement and an art object at once. However, I believe that placing an emphasis on the tangibility of art places an erasure on digital arts of all kinds, and negates their political and ideological power. Memes, like zines have a purposeful aesthetic, a language and are to be “understood performatively” (147). The nature of the meme is porous, open, and largely “intersubjective,” thriving on shared experiences between memers and are relational to its audience and their network (148).

There is nothing more “self-published” than something thrown into the internet. Zines and memes share this DIY quality and gained visibility nonetheless. Zines became significant due to archivists and librarians, who recognized the importance of zines as writing and as aesthetic cultural artifacts. Legitimizing zine culture through academic spaces allowed greater visibility, wider audiences, and rendered teen zinesters, “as subjects in their own right, as writers worthy of attention rather than as targets of surveillance, policing, and silencing by others” (145). In the same way, memes gained legitimacy through its visibility. When Post Aesthetics was created, teens recognized their own cultural significance just based on the membership alone. This heightened awareness of importance and legitimacy gave agency and power to teens who felt marginalized and ignored. When the zine entered academic libraries and were deemed culturally significant, zines were regarded as art objects. Only recently have memes been placed in the same category due to the growing online presence and prevalence of meme groups online.

However, visibility remains a large issue within meme communities. As recognized with the collapse of Post Aesthetics, meme communities that grow too big crumble from the inside, and too small remain completely anonymous and disappear on abandoned domains like Peach. In the zine community, audiences were self regulated by the amount of zines produced and the amount of personal connections the zinester had to their audience. On the internet, meme visibility is determined by data mining and algorithmic shifts that depend on the platform and the individual. This algorithmic calculation determines visibility, and also guarantees that most content seen by one individual online will correlate to the data they create in real life, meaning online meme groups are usually populated by audiences who are already alike, and who already are familiar with these spaces online, meaning the algorithm helps promote content within potentially supportive communities, but hides it from others. On one hand, the algorithm protects potentially targeted memers, and therefore safeguards a community of vulnerability and truth. On the other, its content is contained, only making political and personal impact on those who are already participants. Zines entering the “public domain” through libraries and academia also target a particular kind of demographic, but since the tangibility of the zine allows for it to be found “by happenstance,” it has the potential of reaching a non-insider. The only way in which memes are distributed outside a closed cultural loop now is if the memer decides to make the post public. The issue here is that these memes are either less vulnerable, or a subject of attack online. Zines appearing in the public sphere happened as an afterthought and years after the authors became full-fledged adults. In this case, memes are automatic, instant, and can cause immediate damage to its author and community.

The visual aesthetics of the memes created in the past 3-4 years made their appearance first on Post Aesthetics. Post Aesthetics became a space where teens could get political with other teens through discourse via the meme. In an interview with Sam Daitzman, one of the admins of Posts Aesthetics, she argued that meme making was a way to counter neo-fascism in an age where politics seemed too out of control for teens to create effective change. After its collapse, the same teens took to Instagram, where a new

meme culture was created propagating feminist and political rhetoric. Ripping from academic theorists, memers began to place dense theory over simplistic and metaphorical images to spread personal ideas and create discussion. These kinds of memes have crystallized in form over the past year, and have developed a zine-like wordy aesthetic that appropriates pop-culture images and reforms them into brief feminist manifestos. In the past year, a popular aesthetic among memers has been to place alternative text over pop culture stills from early 2000s TV shows in lieu of the original subtitles of the image.



@ripannicolesmith

Elle, voiceover: "It suddenly became clear to me that my adversity based on my gender and self-expression that I faced in law school was also in conflict with my complicity in the bourgeois institutional privilege of being in the American university system. But does working for capitalists always make one a capitalist? I wondered."

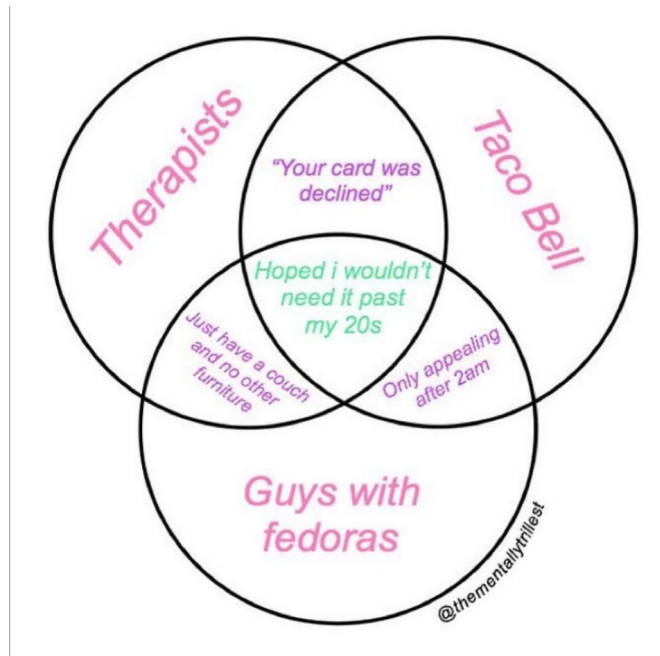


@ripannicolesmith

In the same ways that memes began as a creative form of political expression, memers took to this format to discuss more personal issues like mental health and sexual assault. These types of meme pages became so popular that its community blossomed and inspired others to share their personal stories through memes on less popular accounts. In an interview with @thementallytrillest, a popular memmer on Instagram of 30.3k followers, she describes the feeling of meming online as breaching into a community space she never had before.

People are mentally ill and depressed or whatever and they think they're alone. I mean I've been there, I still think like that...And what I realize, I really think mentally ill people are very similar, and it's awesome. We're like a community and we're like a family. I'll share something so highly specific and so many people will be like, 'oh my god I thought this was just

me,' people just don't realize how much everyone has in common and for that reason, meme format is actually really conducive to this community, something I've learned."



Much like zines, the aesthetic of the meme matters in its relationship to the viewer. Alison Piepmier's *Why Zines Matter* discusses the "trashy" and "handcrafted" nature of the zine and explains why they "revel in informality and threaten conventional boundaries" (Piepmier, 228). Much like zines, there is a casualty to meme making. As zines are normally constructed out of scraps and "waste" materials, the same could be said for the use of online media. Memes are a collection of scraps, of corners of the internet only one savvy enough find could reference. Although the meme isn't literally "handmade" it has a *handled* quality. Memers, much like any other artist have a signature. This could mean a literal signature of their @ hidden somewhere in the image or a trademark niche of images, words, and fonts used to create a visual throughline on the digital page. As zines offer a "greater sense of intimacy" than any other form of print media, memes offer the same level of intimacy online (Piepmier, 229). The intimacy created on meme pages comes from brightly colored collaged images that evoke twinges of nostalgia from similar aged viewers, early 2000s references, and iconic celebrities. The art-making of shared

experiences makes the meme personal, yet public, having the quality of being made "for me." Piedmier notes that one of the unique experiences of zines in print culture is its "gift-like" quality (Piedmier, 232). . In other words, zinesters were concerned with "relatability" just as memers are right now. To memers, the more relatable an image, the more memory it evokes of one's life, the more successful the meme. @thementallytrillest puts it best,

I sort of have different categories in my memory or things that I feel, like, work, like-what I think is like-how I sort of measure a meme-whether I'm viewing it or making it-what sort of chord is this going to strike with someone, that's what makes someone wanna share something or send it to their friend or tag someone in it. How does it strike them? I often go the route of familiarity, where people are like, 'holy shit that's so relatable,' that's really, that's kind of my avenue. And there's a lot of meme accounts that I follow that I love so much that are just, like, absurd, like, not relatable at all, and they're still hilarious and awesome and that's like a different way of doing it, that's like a more shocking and sensational thing and there's like the other way of being like, so...typically a pretty good formula is relatable. Highly specific, relatable situation paired with a sort of niche slash forgotten pop culture image. Seeing, like, Hillary Duff from Cinderella Story with some caption about therapy, that's kind of...I think about this sometimes. If someone doesn't comment on a meme of mine saying, 'I feel personally attacked' then it's a fail. Because people will say that! "I feel personally attacked."

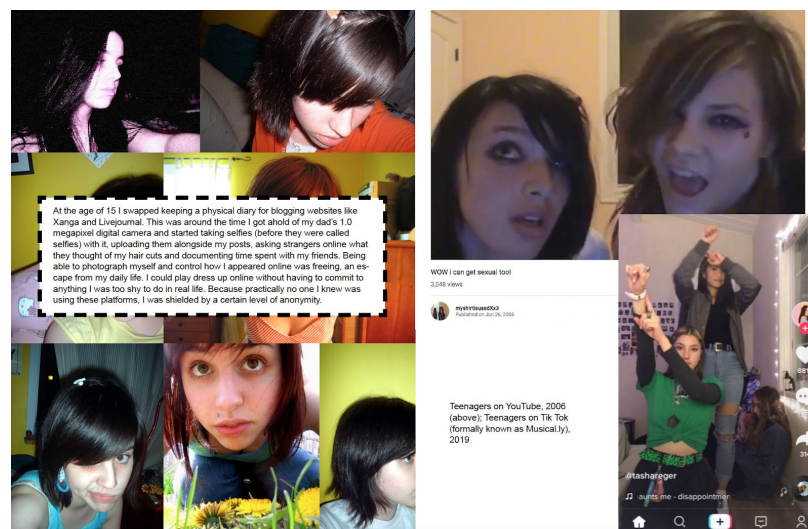
This feeling of being "personally attacked" by content also inspires "reciprocal materiality." When zinesters evoked the sense of it being made "for me," zinesters would get fan mail and zines in response. A similar dynamic happens because of the meme aesthetic online. People relate so much to a particular set of images, that the memers are reciprocated with the natural ability to engage on social media platforms. Memers are not only rewarded with likes and comments, DMs allow for fanbases to get in direct contact with their favorite content creators, structuring a cyber embodied community. Above

embodied communities and connections, memes can inadvertently act as a successful method of online activism, creating a space in which the reader is entrusted with, "the sense of being brought into a privileged confidence, of being assumed to be trustworthy and of the same mind as the author, and this assumption of trustworthiness helps to make the reader an ally" (229). The vulnerability of memes creates intimacy where allyship is automatic, thrust upon the reader due to its informal invitation to confide.

As, "many critics have asked zine makers why they do what they do: zines are time consuming to produce, and they do not generate any of the commodities that our culture generally values, including money, power, or prestige," memers are asked the same question (Piedman, 230). The answers usually offered in response is that, making a meme or a zine is fun, that "zine makers will explain the way their awareness of time slips away while they're creating a zine, or how putting together a zine is a "tactile rush" (Piedman, 230). Memers consider making memes a pleasure as well, and sometimes the only way to cope with the realities of living. This feeling is best described by @thementallytrillest who remarks that memes fulfil something, "no matter how futile my relationship felt or how much I didn't get along with my parents, and how much I couldn't afford my health insurance or whatever, I could still make a meme everyday there was no taking that away and it's really easy to make memes when you're depressed or anxious for me, and so that's a lot of the time." Piedman offers the hypothesis that making zines as an act of pleasure works so well because it is distinctly offline, that "zines bring their creators and readers away from the digital world and into their own flesh" (Piedman 231). I argue that although very much online, memes create the same space for creative freedom. If the tactility of the zine pulls you away from cyberspace, the meme draws you into spaces online that allow what expressions you make to be heard with immediacy. Much like every zine creator interviewed in Piedman's work, every meme creator I interviewed "spoke of the pleasures of zine making, and most linked that pleasure to their bodily engagement with any other art form" (230). Kristen Cochrane (@ripannanicolesmith) puts this sentiment best in her own words, that, "it is cathartic. I feel compelled to do it the way

that painters or writers say they have a compulsion to write. Some people have been describing me as an artist, and I realized, in the past few years, that I do align with the tendencies of an artist—in what I choose as labour and how I experience bouts of existential despair and/or mental illness."

It was with researching this paper that I realized that academic accounts of zine culture are stuck in the Riot Grrl era. There are little to no mentions of the significance of zine sharing and creation online. Zines are written about as a culture that once existed, and is not recognized as a culture that still exists. New zines are being created on new subjects, and also new platforms. At its root, zines represent an aesthetic and a community. Much like any other aesthetic or community, it shifts with the present. Zine culture has shifted onto an online presence, and if not fully online, promoted through online spaces. People now are more vulnerable with zine sharing, and it's recognition of being an art work as well as a piece of writing has not only popularized its creation, but became culturally significant enough to the point where meme culture has converged with zine culture and is found in academic and art spaces. Zines now, more than ever reference the internet as an aesthetic and cultural template. Memers and zinesters often belong to the same circles, and use each community to share both online and tactile media. Zines now are actually about the internet, use memes within them, and discuss the same issues. On the other side, some memes are actually about zine culture, and its relevance.



Molly Soda, Wrong Box

The question that remains is how the internet will be able to sustain these kinds of communities. Post Aesthetics crumbled with Draconian moderators and Peach dissolved due to lack of membership. The traditional method of sharing zines from the Riot Grrl era worked, but has become outdated. The system of private accounts and internet savvy users who brave the backlash from public posts is working, but is there a future? Content creation is a rapid field, and this very research will become irrelevant and outdated in six months. As Rosemary Clark-Parson's wondered about the future of Girl Army, I wonder about the safe spaces, or "*safer* spaces" that will be developed with the rapid overlap of two important subcultures. The first attempt at a safer space in Post Aesthetics was a good exercise in boundary work but will there be another?

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