

“LIKE TO CLAIM!”: Anonymity and influence in college meme page culture

On December 18th 2021, the Yale Daily News posted an article with the headline “Harvard remote for first three weeks of January, Yale sees largest-ever single-day COVID spike,” sending Yale College students all over social media into panic. Students reposted the YDN post on their Instagram stories with captions indicating fear, desperation, and loss of hope. However, shortly after, students were uploading another post on their story—a post by the meme account @yale_affirmations that said in capital letters: “WE WILL BE BACK IN PERSON SPRING SEMESTER.” The post received over 1,500 likes and was shared over 600 times, making it the meme page’s most popular post. Furthermore, @yale_affirmations followed up with an Instagram story encouraging students to submit words of positivity. The account reposted dozens of student responses, both satirical and serious, which said things such as “my professor will round my C up to an A” or “We will be okay!” Twitter user @Jesus_Here75 tweeted: “Yale affirmations working overtime after the YDN article 😭 first thing I saw when I woke up 😞.” Instagram user @brice.valure posted the YDN headline on their story with the caption “relying on @yale_affirmations to get us through this one.”

The headline ended up being misleading. It made it seem as if Harvard’s undergraduate classes would be remote, but in reality, undergraduate classes would be starting after those three weeks. Regardless, stressed students were too overwhelmed with finals and the pressure of the Omicron COVID variant to feel any sort of positivity. The collective coping that was facilitated by the @yale_affirmations account was unexpected to the account administrator¹ herself: me. I was just as nervous as the rest of the student body, but having a large platform enabled me to have an influence that was shocking even to me. This essay will guide readers through the way a

¹ “Administrator” will from now on be referred to as “admin” for it is more representative of the term used in the Affirmations group chat and on the Internet in general.

normal college student can become an influential figure in their community all the while remaining anonymous. I will examine what this means for the admins of these accounts and what their experiences index about the college community and meme pages overall.

On January 1st 2021, @affirmations posted its first post on Instagram: an overexposed image of some buildings with flare effects and bold green capital text on top saying “I CAN BECOME AN INFLUENCER.” Today, the account has nearly 900K followers and is known for posting satirical words of affirmation (which end up being truer than you think). This account inspired the creation of hundreds of parody accounts, leading to the development of the college affirmations landscape. Yale Affirmations was created on July 14th 2021 and since then has amassed over 3,500 followers—a number close to 75% of Yale’s undergraduate population. On September 9th, @yale_affirmations was added to a group chat with dozens of other college affirmation pages. Since then, the chat has been an active place where college students bond over meme creation, influence, anonymity, and other miscellaneous topics.

Before getting into what this group chat reveals about college lifestyle, anonymity, and impact, I will briefly explain the format of the affirmation meme. In application to memes, a semiotic approach, which examines the relation between the signifier (form) and the signified (meaning), could be useful for looking at the relation between the image style of affirmations and the text itself (Huntington, 2013, p.3). In this case, affirmations memes are marked by a usually abstract image that is edited in an eccentric way. Some common features we see are overexposed or distorted images overlaid with sparkles or other graphics, resulting in an overstimulating edit reminiscent of when new editing technologies first came out. Though the original @affirmations account leans towards using completely abstract images that have nothing to do with text, the college affirmations pages tend to use images somewhat related to their college and text. The text



on top is typically an ironic statement affirming one's sentiments; for example, "Everyone does not secretly hate me." Though they are satirical posts, many affirmations are multilayered in that there is actually truth to the false statement that is being ironically projected as true. In this example, "everyone hates me" is a false sentiment that many relate to. "Everyone does not hate me" is posted ironically, drawing attention to

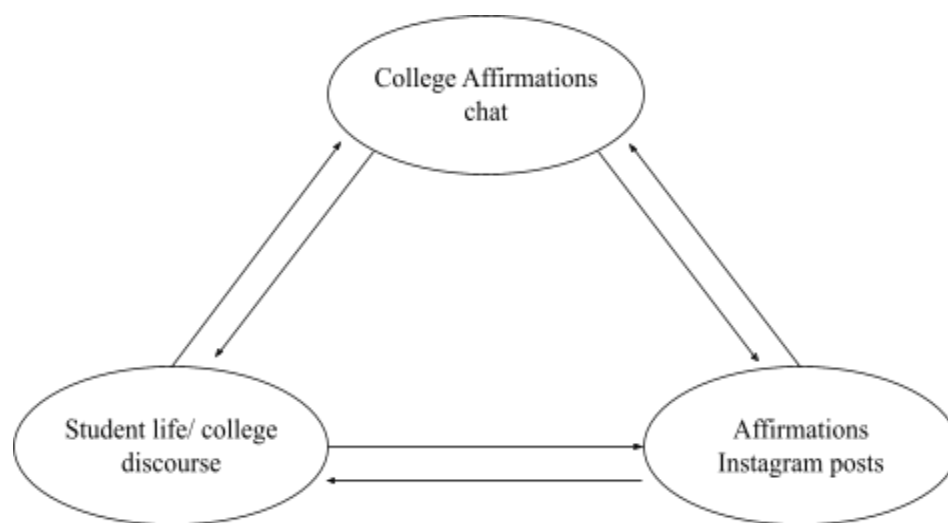
the fact that followers sometimes *feel* like everyone in fact *does* hate them. However, followers may reflect on the fact that the satire is not that satirical after all—that it is irrational for everyone to truly hate them. This irony juxtaposed with a ridiculous image generates a humorous punch and also softens the intense truth that sometimes underlies these statements—which is useful when it comes to collective coping, given the fact that followers are aware these posts are being engaged with by many others.

The discursive approach argues that "the production of knowledge by language is mediated by history and the culture in which it occurs" and, with regards to memes, can be used to see "how people construct meaning relevant to cultural contexts" (Huntington, 2013, p.3). This is more useful for analyzing college-specific affirmation posts, since most of them rely on a shared referent among the student body. For example, a post by @yale_affirmations from November 4th 2021 reads "There will not be increased police presence at the Bow Wow." This was posted following an Yale Daily News article that exposed students for stealing from the Bow Wow, which led to outcry from hundreds of students all over different social media platforms. A meme is uniquely positioned to show resistance by reducing complex arguments into simple

wit—in this case, the argument against increased surveillance and profiling of students by a wealthy institution.

Visual rhetoric “combines elements of the semiotic and discursive approaches to analyze the persuasive elements of visual texts” (Huntington, 2013, p.2). These visual symbols generate meaning by taking advantage of the unique position humor has to index deeper and serious issues. Huntington (2013) emphasizes that “memes are more than internet humor” and they “can operate in subversive and representational ways” (p.3). The Affirmations ecosystem, in addition to providing relatable content about common struggles, is generating subversive conversation that breaks through dominant conversations about mental health and well-being in the media. These sentiments and struggles are shared among all students and affirmations admins, but the discourse is not always transparent. Using humor as a coping mechanism is a common practice online, and college meme accounts go further by building community around that humor. This paper will first discuss

how the admins’ own experiences inform the content they produce and how that content generates a stronger bond among the community by creating



opportunities to engage with shared referents. After understanding this core pillar of relatability, I will shift to how the memer’s position as an admin distances them from the average student, imposing the pressure of influence. That will lead to a brief discussion on what it means to be a

memer versus an influencer. From there, I will delve into the power of anonymity to have authentic influence and generate subversive commentary.

The college affirmations group chat is an interesting site because the discourse in the chat is reflected in the posts created which is reflected in student life and vice versa. This can be pictured as a triangle with arrows connecting in both directions. We can use the chat as an origin point to determine what is indexed by the discourse within. One major topic of conversation in the chat is mental health and other general struggles. The group chat tends to discuss all things in a light-hearted and humorous manner, which feels appropriate given that it is a chat filled with Internet comedians. The juxtaposition between serious topics and humorous tone is key for understanding coping via a comedic digital medium.

In the chat, people share things that would be considered “stigmatized” due to their sensitive nature. For example, one of the admins for Ohio State shared how they were institutionalized in a psychiatric ward. This did not make the atmosphere of the chat heavy or dark. Instead, UT Austin replied with “You get the socks yet” (referring to the socks the hospital provides). The conversation continued with images of the admin in a hospital gown and a picture of their socks. All of this was presented in a very nonchalant fashion, which speaks to the radical normalization of mental illness among college students. The topic of mental illness and stress has come up several times in the chat, and many admins, including myself, have used the chat as a space to vent. Take the following conversation as an example:

yale	hi y'all
	im stressed lol
YES	Ouh Nou
yale	actually maybe it's more in my head 🤪

auburn affirmations	why??
yale	school 😞😞
	anyway that's all LMAO
Ohio State Self Hypnosis	valid
UT AUSTIN AFFIRMATIONS	You are academically qualified and capable 🙏!❤️
Ohio State Self Hypnosis	ACADEMIC SUPERSTAR 🤩🏆🏆
yale	I WILL NOT BURN OUT 2 WEEKS INTO THE SCHOOL YEAR 😏😏😏
GT affirmations	Yale, I'll drink to your academic success today. So if you feel buzzed tn it was me 🙏
TARTAN SELF HYPNOSIS	MY BURNOUT IS NONEXISTENT 😏

As seen above, I, Yale Affirmations, used the group chat as a space to vent about the stress of school. Admins from other schools responded with a tone reflecting that of our affirmations posts. The usage of ironic emojis indicates a sarcastic tone that, despite its irony, is still conveying a true and helpful message. The struggle here is not brushed away but nor is it taken too seriously. It seems that many times, students just need to verbally let it out, and this chat has become a safe space to let out any thoughts—especially those relevant to college life and struggle. The conversation immediately shifts to humorous satirical responses, which ended up becoming posts for some accounts.

Yale Affirmations uploaded a post saying “I am not already burning out” which was reshared by many other students within the community. The visual rhetoric of the post is also important. The text was overlaid on an image of flames and a slightly transparent 😊 emoji. This

image is crucial in conjunction with the text, for it amplifies the emotion in the text via the satire embedded in the emoji as well as the representation of despair in the flames. The resharing of the post is a follower's way of "letting it out." Students are often denied the space or lack the energy to voice their struggles, but being able to repost a meme that represents heavy sentiments coated with humor provides a (minor) sense of release and indexes the acknowledgment that others are feeling the same way. Flecha Ortiz et al. (2020) describe how memes are born out of a social response to a problem and how those memes serve as a coping "mechanism to channel and decrease stress levels and strong emotions" (p.178). In college atmospheres, these emotions and stress are shared and assumed to be a relatable feeling to all. This common struggle ties students together with a particular identity. According to Zomeran (2010), "relevance of group identity facilitates emotion-focused coping and moderates problem-focused coping with collective disadvantage" (p.366). In an era where student mental health is declining rapidly (Miron et al., 2019) and mental illness is stigmatized, memes may "[articulate] shared pain that might be difficult to express in other forms" (Ask & Abidin, 2017, p.840). Humor, thus, serves as a very convenient outlet for frustration, for it does not burden anyone by requesting for actual help and acknowledges that everyone in the community is feeling a similar way.

But what happens when the meme makers themselves start feeling a burden from creating these outlets for frustration? Once a meme page has gained enough traction and "fame," there is a pressure to keep up with consistently posting content.

UIUC Affirmations	guys i am so lazy
	i have a whole notes app page of affirmations
	and i simply do not want to make them
	don't know if this means my mental health is on the up or rapidly declining

tamu affirmations	bro samee i haven't posted in a while and i just don't feel like it sometimes 😞
GT Affirmations	I've had massive burnout and realistically haven't posted anything for over a month (admin 2 has been doing everything lol) been focusing on my other meme accounts
your fav manifestor	sameee it can get so draining 😭
	we need free therapy for all meme admins 😊
UMICH Affirmations	We need an affirmation page for affirmations admins
Ohio State Self Hypnosis	honestly i make the most affirmations when i'm on a mental health bender...
Pitt Self Hypnosis	^^^
DePaul Self Hypnosis	sameee it's like coping

Admins seem to draw a relation between mental health status and creative output. For some admins, such as tamu and GT, a decline in mental health corresponds with a decrease in content. Others, such as Ohio State and DePaul, think poor mental health facilitates the production of more content because it is a way to cope. There are two interesting cycles to draw out. The first is one in which mental struggle facilitates creative humor which leads to community engagement which necessitates a pressure to continue engaging that community which perpetuates further stress and mental struggle. The second is the same except the pressure to engage community is actually aided by mental struggle because one can channel that struggle into more creative content. The creation of an affirmation accomplishes individual coping and posting the affirmation aids collective coping for the follower base. While admins may not always derive the same sort of collective relatability as their followers, they can turn to the chat to relate over the experience of making relatable posts. In mapping this out, one can see that our equivalent of an affirmation page for admins is, in fact, our affirmations group chat. Imbued with a meta-layer of

relatability, the chat acts as a supportive online community that both reflects and inspires our content. Our collective coping comes through especially when admins send memes about being meme page admins. On November 9th, UIUC Affirmations sent a meme with the text “Being popular on Instagram is like sitting at the coolest table in a cafeteria at a MENTAL HOSPITAL.” The message was liked by 7 members of the chat. There’s a consensus among the group that each of us have some degree of popularity. However, this sort of fame and influence is quite difficult to define because of the fact that most admins are anonymous.

In celebrity culture, “the right to be anonymous is exchanged for all that fame has to offer” (Rockwell & Giles, 2009, p.186) and celebrities grapple with an “inner conflict of wanting fame while longing for anonymity” (Rockwell & Giles, 2009, p.195). Affirmations admins are lucky in that they reap certain benefits of fame while also protecting their privacy and thus their authenticity. The members of the chat are relatively anonymous to one another. Though some faces and personal Instagrams were revealed and exchanged in the early days of the chat, the majority of interaction occurs under our respective school names. Though a few admins have done public facing identity reveals, most seem to be secretive of their identity. On September 23rd, GT Affirmations sent a meme with the text: “When you beat the ‘affirmations admin’ allegations.” (For context, this was a trending phrase at the time. “When you beat the *insert phrase* allegations” is intended to show the allegations the creator has allegedly beaten; for example, “when you beat the gay allegations” or “when you beat the ‘who farted’ allegations.” It is implied that the creator actually is whatever allegation they claimed to beat.) Ohio State Self Hypnosis replied with “Lmao we could have used that two weeks ago. we staged banning admin 4 because someone thought they were blues clues and figured her out.” Bama affirmations added, “I’m like the last person someone would suspect so I’m chilling.”

There is something exciting about remaining anonymous. While for typical “influencers,” the face is their brand, “memers” seem to find thrill in being “figured out.” A thrill parallel to that of hiding during Hide’n’Seek. VT affirmations said: “Literally people have no idea i run this account and when they find out i feel famous.” This process of being recognized is thrilling because the positive sentiments someone has built up about you as a meme page can finally be poured onto an identifiable person. It feels excellent to be on the receiving end of that. I am met with dropped jaws and gasps every time I reveal my identity, and it was especially exciting to hear the class exclaim in shock after I announced my final project idea. Memers are uniquely positioned in that they get to control their doses of fame, carefully treading the line between complete privacy and burdensome recognition.

Anonymity, in addition to making sure the humor is received without bias, serves as protection from that sort of pressure and burden that face forward influencers have. Memers still get to reap the benefits of fame, such as feeling validated. UF Affirmations messaged, “when i’m looking at my irls stories on my main and i seen that they’ve put my posts on their story it fuels my god complex.” The anonymity, while allowing for feelings of validation, prevents any sort of mass recognition. This is probably better since the lack of recognition allows admins to be more free and authentic in their posts. According to Rousseau, “authenticity is diminished by the need for the esteem of others; one’s guide to conduct in life should come not from social pressures or external rules” (Bown et al., 2019, p.104). This places meme creators in an interesting position: one where they have the anonymous freedom to be authentic but also the pressure to entertain their audience and seek their validation.

This brings us to the distinction between a memer and what we call a traditional “influencer.” I make the argument that the “face” that influencers show is most often not

authentic. It is a facade demanded by constant performance necessitated by their mass recognition. A “memer” is often faceless but still produces content. Both can profit off of their content in similar ways. And both still “influence.” But where did the term influencer come from and why does it seem to have such a narrow definition? “Influence” comes from the Latin word “influre” which meant “into” plus “flow,” as in, “to flow into.” The term “influencer” seems to have been attached to the concept of a social media figure who has a large platform and thus the power to influence their followers. This relatively neutral position becomes slightly tainted in the public eye as corporations team up with the figure for brand deals. In an article in the New Yorker, Laurence Scott says, “The relentless commercialization of influence is also a corruption of the more uplifting processes through which we can affect and inspire one another. Our ongoing challenge, then, will be to negotiate the inherent inauthenticity and cynicism of an influence economy while preserving our ability to be occupied... by the alien ideas of other people.” With digital influencers, there is a more salient awareness among followers of a force trying to persuade you, given the transparency with brand deals and pseudo-excited smile an influencer puts on when showing you their “favorite new product!” This differentiation in terminology between “memer” and “influencer” is really a product of capitalism restricting the boundaries of the word “influencer.” It also goes to show that while the operations of both groups are similar, the impact of memers is more covert though just as real. This influence is recognized by admins as well.

UMICH AFFIRMATIONS	An interesting feeling I've gotten is that I'm running more than a meme page — @afffirmations has given interviews saying people follow because it's satire, and they stay because it's actually positive 😊
	I'm now like wow i am making affirmations and making ppl feel good :)

GT Affirmations	I just feel like I'm passive aggressively critiquing my school with this account
Ohio State Self Hypnosis	that's why i followed but sometimes i'm like "oh shit that's kinda true tho"
UT AUSTIN AFFIRMATIONS	No yeah started a jokes and then people commented that they started to feel better because of them even though it a meme

The awareness of their impact enables affirmations admins to do two unique things: generate subversive commentary and monetize their existence. Vickery & Nelson (2013) demonstrate how “anonymity allows users to appropriate and repurpose humorous image-based memes in ways that simultaneously challenge and reproduce hegemonic culture” (p.1). In some contexts, anonymity can be equated with freedom in that “a practice and system of anonymity protects [Internet users] from the regulation or punishment that peers or authorities might attempt to enact” when it comes to offensive, critical, or inappropriate content (Davison, 2012, p.132). This protection from consequence allows meme creators to be more authentic and truthful and in turn produce subversive content that the average user cannot say freely online. The Affirmations ecosystem in particular does not only generate relatable commentary about mental health and struggle but also generates critical commentary about the institution that ties the particular account’s followers together. The following conversation took place on September 14th.

auburn affirmations	Do y'all think it's ok that I speak my opinion with this affirmation page? My friend told me not to but I feel like I have a lot of influence and there's a protest going on about the sexual assaults in auburn and I think the Frat needs to be held accountable but I don't know if it's my place to say anything.
UIUC affirmations	i definitely think you should

	but that's my opinion
auburn affirmations	A lot of my followers are women so I think it's very important to use my position but I don't know
UIUC affirmations	i think that having such a big platform is useless if ur not going to use it to speak up
	like we all acknowledge that we have influence over the student body and our accounts are widely talked about
auburn affirmations	True and I mean if someone disagrees with me then they can unfollow
...	
auburn affirmations	Brb about to go influence 🙌

While this is just one example of an account taking advantage of anonymity with a large platform, there are more overt examples as well. For example, Yale Affirmations posted an image with the text “It’s okay to steal from the Bow Wow.” Because the identity of the account is anonymous to most and since the post is a “joke,” it is quite difficult to be implicated for criticizing the institution or admitting to theft. But we must return to the point that these posts are built on relatable experiences—in this case, the experience of stealing a \$2 granola bar that you couldn’t fit within the \$9 lunch swipe a \$40 billion institution gives you. That relatability is precisely why these posts become so popular in the first place. This unique position to critique one’s institution in front of the masses all the while remaining funny and deepening community is precisely what makes the affirmations meme ecosystem so captivating. Not only is there a perceived moral dimension of speaking for the people but also the added benefit of capitalizing off this type of “fame.” Many admins have followed in the footsteps of @afffirmations and commodified their posts and brand.

GT Affirmations	I'm gonna do it besties: ima start monetizing my page, sell stickers or something. Instagram just gave me access to online store tools
	Has anyone else done this and what's the feelings towards this
auburn affirmations	You should once I have a better following I have a button maker so I'm gonna do that and stickers [and] posters

Mercer Affirmations	I'm releasing a drink at our campus coffee shop for 2000 followers [pic of drink]
	it looks like hell b
	but it's gonna be fun
Ohio State Self Hypnosis	that's so fucking cool
Mercer Affirmations	All proceeds are going to a nonprofit

What is the difference between this sort of commodification and the brand deals that turn influencers inauthentic? The key differences are scale and ownership. For one, a college meme page admin is not going to make \$10K from selling buttons in the same way an influencer could make \$10K for a 20 second sponsorship in their YouTube video. Secondly, memers own the intellectual property that they would sell. In the case of Mercer, proceeds aren't even for personal gain but rather an act of charity. Regardless, the mechanisms that allow for one to profit off their still exist. But this profit does not necessarily affect the authenticity of the meme page, which I propose is due to the power of anonymity.

We have seen how a group of “normal” college students can end up becoming influential by creating humorous commentary that further binds their college community together. For these student admins, being “normal” is crucial to everything they do. It keeps their content authentic

and relatable. It protects them from the burden of influence. The college affirmations group chat serves as a microcosm of both college culture and meme culture. These split identities, being a regular student versus being a famous memer, actually work in tandem with each other and inform the content of the affirmations accounts. The style of the affirmation meme speaks to prevalence and relatability of human struggle, giving followers solace in their problems and hope for positivity.

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