"All the Other Kids with the Pumped Up Kicks" -

An Investigation of School Shooting Jokes Told by American Teenagers on TikTok

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Abstract

Ever since the events of the Columbine Massacre in 1999 ushered in a new era of school violence, school shootings have been an ongoing concern for parents, teachers, and students alike in America. The reach and psychological weight of events such as these can be difficult to track. However, a deeper examination of folkloric forms, such as jokes and humorous narratives shared amongst students, may be an untapped resource. Dark and sick humour that is created and sustained by the student population may reveal more about the current state of youth mental health and perceptions of safety in relation to school shootings. This thesis investigates a collection of humour told and spread on the social media app TikTok, with a focus on the jokes told by current students and recent graduates of the American high school system.

These jokes are generally characterized by themes of distrust in the school system (including questioning the effectiveness of lockdown drills and other procedures), the inherent "Americanness" of school shootings, and anxiety about future shootings. Taken collectively, this body of jokes indicates that school shootings, and specifically the threat of future shootings, may occupy a larger portion of students' anxieties than present psychological reports indicate. Additionally, these jokes illustrate the humorous culture that American students have built around the topic, which may be of use to scholars studying other aspects of school shootings for which there is little present data.

Acknowledgements

I want to begin by giving my thanks to my supervisor, Daniel Peretti. His advice and insight throughout this process has been crucial to the development of this thesis, and I would not have been able to complete it without his help. I would also like to extend my thanks to all of the faculty in Memorial's Folklore department, for supporting me through all six years of both my BA and MA degrees. It has been a pleasure to be a student in this department.

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Table Of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

In early 2019, while still completing my Bachelor's degree, I stumbled down a YouTube rabbit-hole of videos and documentaries concerning school shootings in the United States and their aftermath. There was a wide variety of content available, as many short documentaries had been produced for the recent twentieth anniversary of the Columbine Massacre, the five-year anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting, and the one-year anniversary of the events in Parkland, Florida. At some point I found myself clicking on a video produced by *HiHo Kids,* a professional, corporate YouTube channel that creates child-oriented content with a small cast of child actors. The video, uploaded on August 10, 2018, is a part of their "Kids Meet" series, which sees their young cast meeting noteworthy adults, who either work interesting jobs or have had uncommon life experiences (HiHo Kids 2018). Previous guests have ranged from a professional ballerina to a death row exoneree.

In the episode I had found, the older teenage members of the cast met with Kristina Anderson, a survivor of the Virginia Tech Massacre and the founder of the Koshka Foundation, which aims to create safer schools. Predictably, the conversations are awkward and stilted, but fascinating, nonetheless. When Anderson sits down with a teenage girl named Niray, there is clearly a lot of tension in the room as Niray attempts to broach the topic of Anderson's traumatic past. Almost immediately, Niray begins to giggle nervously, which is received positively by Anderson. After she regains control of herself, she asks Anderson, "Is it okay to laugh about that? I feel like I'm making a joke out of it but it's just because it scares me." Anderson is quick to reassure her, replying,

"You're totally allowed to laugh about it, I often have to make jokes about it, to make it lighter." Later in the video, Anderson talks with another set of teens, twins Veronica and Talbott, and the exchange seen in Figure 1.1 occurs. Talbott's reply is only heightened by the fact that this is one of his only contributions in the final edit of the video.
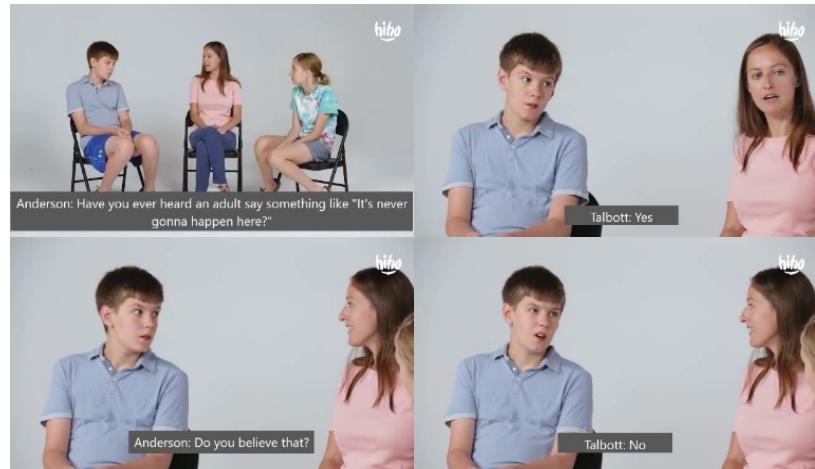
Figure 1.1: Stills from Kids Meet a School Shooting Survivor by HiHo Kids. The final three stills are a single, unedited shot, and Talbott's reply is almost immediate.

Dark and sick jokes about school shootings, such as that found in Figure 1.2 are far from rare on the internet, but the interactions between Anderson and these teenagers forced me to consider them in a new light. As Alan Dundes wrote of sick jokes, "As a folklorist, I have come to believe that no piece of folklore continues to be transmitted unless it means something— even if neither the speaker nor the audience can articulate what that meaning might be" (1987b, vii). While sick and dark humour is easily dismissed as trivial, these jokes often reflect and display the ongoing social, cultural, and political climates that they are performed in, and as such provide a unique view of history. I believe that school shooting humour can be approached in the same way. Attempting to prescribe a singular motive or meaning to these jokes would be both inaccurate and

Figure 1.2: A typical example of school shooting humour.

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dismissive of the diversity within these jokes. This is especially true considering the wide age range present, with many joke creators at both different life stages and at different stages of humour development. Ultimately these jokes can be categorized in a myriad of ways and can be seen as serving a number of different purposes. Thus, I believe that this humour and these jokes are best understood as a site of discourse among the youth population; a place where politicians are mocked, the school system's ability to protect students is scrutinized and degraded, and the very foundation of American identity is questioned and deconstructed.

The remainder of this chapter consists of the literature review and methodology of this thesis. The second chapter looks at the digital context of TikTok and the in-app mechanisms that humour conforms to. This is followed by a more in-depth overview and analysis of school shooting humour, including the major plotlines and themes found within it. The next three chapters look more at different aspects of this humour, specifically the cultural scripts of school shootings and how they are presented here, American identity in school shooting humour, and gender differences in this humour. This is followed by the conclusion, which brings the various strands of my argument together to offer a complete view of the various dimensions of school shooting humour and its use amongst American teenagers.

Literature Review

Folklore and Humour

Debates over the exact nature of folklore have raged ever since the term was coined by William Thoms (1999). In the years that have passed, numerous scholars have

offered up a myriad of potential definitions (e.g., McNeill 2013; Sims and Stephens 2011; Toelken 1996; Ben-Amos 1972). These definitions tend to stress the informal, collective, expressive, aesthetic, and communicative nature of folklore. Especially important is the emphasis on traditional, static elements juxtaposed with dynamic, changing elements, which collectively signal the values of a group as they evolve over time, as well as render a folkloric text recognizable as it spreads through new moments and audiences (Brunvand 2001; Toelken 1996). Under these definitions, it is not difficult to see how humour, and specifically forms such as the joke, fit into the study of folklore; scholars such as Antti Aarne studied jokes when the discipline was still in its infancy (Aarne 1973). Jokes have historically been primarily oral, and thus relatively fleeting and heavily reliant on continued transmission between and within groups for survival. Jokes tend to have static, formulaic forms that are easily recognizable, while at the same time having dynamic content that shifts and changes due to the contemporary cultural context, the audience they are being told to, and the whims and stylings of the teller (Dundes 1987b).

The joke is a relatively new genre that emerged in cultural lexicons alongside industrialization (Wickberg 1998; Röhrich 1977). Short, and self-contained, jokes are easy to collect and thus have been a favourite form for folklorists and other humor scholars to study (Chafe 2007; Chiaro 2018). Although humour in general has been seen as trivial or inconsequential in popular thought, and as a result the field has not always had the attention it deserves, cultural scholars such as folklorists understand that if humour did not have meaning, it would not be transmitted and communicated. Like other parts of folk culture, jokes reflect society, and by tracing the contents and structures of these forms, and what continues to be transmitted over time and what is not, folklorists

and other scholars are able to see how these jokes reflect current events, attitudes, and opinions (Dundes 1969). This is best seen in joke cycles, which often dominate for a period of time before dissolving suddenly.

Sociologist Giselinde Kuipers defines the joke as "basically a short humorous text with at its end an unexpected turn or denouement, the punchline" (2006, 6). It is specifically this last element, the punchline, that separates jokes from other forms of humorous texts (Oring 1992; Chiaro 2018; Dow and Lixfeld 1986; Raskin 1985). Folklorist and humour scholar Elliot Oring notes that punchlines are characterized both by their ability to trigger humour and reveal the joke and by their placement at the end of the joke's text (1992). A potential joke with a narrative that continues past the punchline becomes a humorous story. This is also true of punchlines in visual and multi-modal humour such as cartoons, although it appears that there has only been limited work done on punchlines in multi-modal humour (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017; Dudek 2020), which is somewhat to the detriment of this study, as it deals heavily with the abstract multi-modal humour common on the internet.

Humour Theory

A brief look into the state of humour studies reveals quickly that humour, despite being a fairly ubiquitous part of most people's lives, is a complex form of communication that proves difficult to analyse from a scholarly angle. Even something as simple as defining humour has proved to be a challenge. For example, humour is often accompanied by laughter, which was the basis for some early theories of humour. However, laughter can be prompted by fear and anxiety rather than play, and one can be

amused but fail to laugh for one reason or another (Keith-Spiegel 1972). Additionally, using laughter as a defining element does not account for cases of failed humour, where humour was intended, but ultimately not accepted by the audience. To counter this, some theorists stress the importance of intention, which allows for these complexities (Roberts 2019). A more psychological definition of humour sees it as a mental state characterized by the positive emotion of amusement and the tendency to laugh (Martin and Ford 2018; Gervais and Wilson 2005; Veatch 1998; McGraw and Warren 2010). Other scholars, such as Kuipers, see humour from a social and cultural perspective and define it as "the successful exchange of joking and laughter" within group settings (2015, 7). All of these definitions have shortcomings and cannot be applied universally to all situations that people may find funny or humorous. As a result, many scholars simply define humour through the theory of humour their work utilizes.

A tremendous number of theories and frameworks propose an understanding of humour, many of which have only minor variations between them,[1] further complicated by the various approaches used by different disciplines.[2] In response to this large number of theories, cultural scholar Arthur Berger proposed a four-category classification, which splits humour theories into the groups of psychoanalytic theories, superiority theories, incongruity theories, and cognitive theories (1987). This separation is based on the emphasis a theory places on the structure of jokes, with cognitive theories having the

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[1] See Keith-Spiegel 1972; Morreall 1983; 2009; Roberts 2019; McDonald 2012 for overviews of this history.
[2] For example, psychology is preoccupied with the cognitive processes of the brain in relation to the creation of humour, while linguistics is focused on the linguistic mechanisms used to create humour. Disciplines like sociology, anthropology, and folklore tend to look at humour as a social phenomenon and a form of communication within groups (Raskin 2008).

most structural emphasis, and psychoanalytic theories with the least. This general division

is utilized by most scholars, although cognitive theories of humour are utilized almost

exclusively by the field of psychology and thus typically not acknowledged by other

scholars. Others further collapse this difference into affective theories of humour and

cognitive theories of humour (Roberts 2019). It should be noted that these are loose

categories at best, and the positions of certain theories are debatable within this

categorization.[3]

Psychoanalytic theories, also known as release and relief theories or aggression

theories, have largely been shaped by Sigmund Freud's contribution to both humour

studies and psychology. Freud approached joking from the perspective of his own theory

of dreams and the unconscious, and he believed that jokes allowed people to express

repressed ideas and emotions (Freud 1905; Oring 2016; Camfield 1997). Specifically,

Freud argued that all jokes could be sorted into two categories: hostile jokes, which serve

the purpose of aggression, satire, and defense and obscene jokes, which served the

purpose of exposure (Oring 2016). This positions humour as a way to relieve tension,

anxiety, and frustration, and gain relief from the realities of life (Apte 1985; Robinson

1991; Keith-Spiegel 1972), aligning with functionalist theories of humour, which focus

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[3] For example, Semantic Script Theory of Humour, a linguistic theory of humour that later developed into the General Verbal Theory of Humour, was deliberately distanced from incongruity theories by its creator, Victor Raskin (1985). However, other scholars, including the co-author of General Verbal Theory of Humour, have since posited that this theory would be better understood as an incongruity theory of humour (Oring 2016; Attardo 1997). A similar issue plagues Benign-Violation theory, which was initially presented by its authors as an entirely new theory separate from the major three categories. Some scholars have accepted and utilized Benign-Violation theory as a middle ground between incongruity theory and the affective theories of humour (Marsh 2015), but others believe that it is yet another version of incongruity theory (Oring 2016).

on how humor contributes to the maintenance of social order (Billig 2005; Apte 1985; Paton et al. 1988; Stephenson 1951).

Superiority theories, also known as Superiority-Disparagement theories, hold that humour arises from the juxtaposition of the favourable position of the joke teller in comparison to the inferior butt of the joke. This theory operates under the assumption that humor is based in a perceived superiority or as a way to compensate for a fear of inferiority (Simon 1988; Robinson 1991). Superiority theory is one of the oldest theories of humour, having originally been proposed by Aristotle, and later by philosophers Thomas Hobbes and Alexander Bain (Cooper 1922; Halliwell and Aristotle 1998; Hobbes 1651; Bain 1888).

Psychoanalytic and Superiority theories are closely related to one another and have similar flaws. The most notable is that they cannot explain why neither superiority nor arousal are necessary for humour to occur (Roberts 2019). Additional criticisms note that they also struggle to explain absurd humour, which has no target or obvious way to vent aggressive impulses (Morreall 2009). Although both theories are often applied to ethnic humour, they struggle to explain why members of a targeted group might spread these jokes amongst themselves, forcing the scholar to either modify the theory significantly or impose masochistic desires onto the group (Oring 1992). In recent decades, Psychoanalytic and Superiority theories have lost popularity in favour of the final category, Incongruity theories.

Incongruity as a concept has been a constant of humour studies throughout the field's history, as both Aristotle and Freud both acknowledged that incongruity and surprise seemed to be key ingredients in creating humour (Morreall 2009). Incongruity

theorists argue that humour is created from a clash or opposition between two scripts, or an expectation that is violated in some way (Oring 2016; Morreall 2009; Tsakona and Popa 2011). As a result, Incongruity theories have a much heavier focus on the structural elements of humour. That being said, this focus does not ignore the social and cultural aspects of humour, as these are often integral to understanding the presented incongruity (Oring 1992).

There are several major issues with incongruity theories. The first is that many are very wide reaching and often poorly defined, making general references to incongruity without elaboration or specification (Morreall 2009). There are also many issues with the concept of incongruity itself. Not all cases of incongruity generate humour, and even incongruous jokes can fail (Oring 2003; Marsh 2015). The heavy focus on structure also means that many incongruity theories do not engage with debates about the ethics or morality of humour, despite this being an important part of the performance of humour (Marsh 2015).

Despite these flaws, Incongruity theories have prevailed, and are used widely in humour studies. Although their focus on the mental processes behind humour make it more obviously applicable to certain disciplines, it can and has been adapted to account for social and cultural contexts (Kuipers 2008). In one of his many defenses of incongruity theory, Oring notes that studies of humorous communications must first consider the conceptual and cognitive processes behind humour production. That is, a scholar's first step should always be to pay close attention to the structural elements of humour, lest the meaning of jokes be lost in the rush to assign meaning and motivation

based on content alone (Oring 1992). For this reason, this thesis will primarily rely on incongruity theory.

Sick Humour

School shooting humour is best classified as a form of sick humour. Sick humour has no set definition but is generally seen as humour that breaks social conventions as to what is appropriate to joke about (Attardo 2014). The topics of disease, deformity, disability, and especially death appear often in these jokes, although offensive racist and sexist humour is sometimes included under this umbrella as well (Mindess et al. 1985; Narváez 2003). Although disturbing or crude at first glance, sick joke cycles[4] rise and fall over time in connection with the broader cultural context, and thus are a powerful tool for understanding and reflecting on culture at any given moment (Boskin 1997).

As might be expected from jokes that deal with offensive subjects, issues of morality and motivation are prevalent in studies of sick humour. It is generally agreed that the boundary transgression inherent in these jokes is central, and the role of the audience, who may accept or reject this transgression, is highlighted.[5]

Gallows humour is another notable subset of sick humour. Freud saw this form of humour as a defence mechanism, a way for one to escape the horror of impending doom by relaxing into amusement. In his view, joking and making light of impending doom allows individuals to focus on reality while also recognizing their own insignificance

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[4] For examples of sick joke cycles see Sutton-Smith 1960; Dundes 1987a; Abrahams 1962; Dundes 1979.
[5] For an overview of reception to sick jokes, see McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw, Williams, and Warren 2014; Gubanov, Gubanov, and Rokotyanskaya 2018. For sick humour reception and gender, see Mundorf et al. 1988; Herzog 1999; Kotthoff 2006; Aillaud and Piolat 2012. For the debate surrounding the morality of sick humour, see Rappaport 2005; Moira Smith and Saltzman 1995; Pickering and Lockyer 2005; Moira Smith 2009.

(Freud 1927). In general, gallows humour is seen as a way for individuals and oppressed groups to obtain psychological liberation in dire situations (Freud 1927; Obrdlik 1942). However, it should be noted that gallows humour does not have a set definition and there is no overarching census as to what exactly qualifies as gallows humour. For example, sociologists see gallows humour as a primarily intergroup phenomenon, created by oppressed peoples to fight back against their oppressors, while psychologists see it as a way to psychically lessen the strain of stressful situations (Lewis 1987). Meanwhile, psychologist James Thorson uses a very broad definition, seeing gallows humour as any humour that is intentional and takes an aggressive stance towards the importance of death, a categorization that would include a significant portion of sick humour cycles (Thorson 1985; 1993). Additionally, gallows humour is often used to describe the humour of physicians and emergency workers who work closely with death, despite their own deaths not being imminent.[6]

Disaster humour is a specific subset of sick humour that has been of great interest to humour scholars in the past. This humour typically springs up in cycles in the aftermath of major incidents, such as terrorist attacks or celebrity deaths. Notably, disaster humour is a relatively new genre, with the first cycle generally being attributed to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 (Wolfenstein and Kliman 1965).

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[6] For more on gallows humour, see Lewis 1987; Thorson 1993; Obrdlik 1942; Maxwell 2003; Freud 1927; Thorson 1985; Launer 2016. For more on humour as a coping mechanism or strategy generally, see Lewis 2006; Fry Jr 1987; Robinson 1991; Mindess 2017; Lefcourt and Martin 2012; Bizi, Keinan, and Beit-Hallahmi 1988; Martin and Lefcourt 1983.

Thus, it is believed that television's ability to bring images of disaster and public death into people's homes was a necessary ingredient for this form of jokes to arise.[7]

There are two major interpretations of disaster humour. The first sees disaster jokes as a method of coping with the visual images of horrific event occurring worldwide, and the underlying anxiety about death and mortality that these images bring (Morrow 1987; Smyth 1986; Simons 1986; Emmons 1986; Dundes 1987b). Many of the proponents of this view utilize a psychoanalytic theory of humour. Other scholars, usually utilizing incongruity theory, believe that disaster humour is the result of the mediatization of disasters and is a rebellion against the emotional hegemony of the media and its enforced morality (Davies 2003; Kuipers 2011; 2002; Ellis 2001; 2003; Oring 1987).

School shooting humour does not necessarily fit cleanly into any specific subset of sick or dark humour. This is partially due to the wide range of material and content encompassed within this study, as some aspects could be looked at as elements of disaster humour or gallows humour. For this reason, I am broadly classifying it as a form of sick humour.

Jokes in the Digital Age

Historically, the focus for the study of jokes has been primarily oral, as this is how the majority of jokes are transmitted (Dundes 1987). However, with the introduction of new technologies over the past four decades, this prevalence has begun to change. One of

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[7] A significant body of work exists surrounding the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster in 1986 (Morrow 1987; Smyth 1986; Oring 1987; Emmons 1986; Simons 1986), and the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center (Csaszi 2003; Ellis 2001; Kuipers 2002; Gournelos and Greene 2011; Kuipers 2011; Ellis 2003; Blank 2013). Other disasters studied include the incident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant (Kürti 1988), the Three Mile Island incident (Kassovic 1981; Blank 2013, chap. 3), and celebrity deaths, such as Princess Diana and Michael Jackson (Davies 2020; Bradley et al. 1998; Blank 2013, chap. 6).

the first examples of mediated jokes to gain academic attention was photocopylore. This expressive communication was initially dismissed by some folklore scholars, who saw it better situated under the heading of mass or popular culture, on the basis that photocopiers allowed for exact reproductions of images, and thus lacks the variation that folklore emphasizes. However, other scholars were able to recognize the value of these forms and noted that variation and editing still occurred, with forms being altered, recontextualized, and reappropriated as they travelled from office to office. It was on this foundation that folklorists Dundes and Pagter argued against a definition of folklore based on oral transmission or the absence of technology, which was soon echoed by other scholars (Dundes and Pagter 1987; 1992; 1991; 1996; 2000). Notably, this remixing and reappropriating of materials is still the basis for the majority of internet culture today, although the specific forms and methods have changed significantly.

Although the internet was initially seen by some as simply a storehouse for vernacular culture (Bronner 2002), it soon became clear that internet users were not simply collecting pieces of offline traditions, but altering them, building on them, and connecting them with entirely new traditions (Blank 2014). As folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, "Electronic messages are neither a playscript nor a transcript... They *are* the event," (1995, 74, emphasis in the original). Additionally, the nature of digital spaces meant that there were stark deviations from forms found in live spaces,[8] as digital users are constrained by the affordances of the digital medium they are

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[8] For example, Oring notes that a website for humour is not like the oral repertoire of a traditional group or individual, as typically in these contexts, jokes are edited or removed from the repertoire in response to the group's needs. In contrast, a website that maintains a body of jokes may aim for quantity over quality (Oring 2003).

using to create and communicate humour. Affordances dictate what an object allows a user to do with it (Gaver 1991), and they are especially important when considering digital spaces (Phillips and Milner 2017). The affordances of digital spaces, such as social networking sites and apps, allow online participants to create, circulate, and transform vernacular media much more easily than in previous eras (Phillips and Milner 2017). The end result is a massive, expanding repertoire of source material that is continuously remixed and reappropriated, taken out of context and shuffled from one platform to another, and folded into the new forms that follow it, often without accrediting the original creator (Phillips and Milner 2017). Over time, this culture developed into a digitized folk system, with unspoken, unconscious rules about social etiquette surrounding the creation and sharing of these materials (Blank 2013).

Although the humour found in online spaces may seem at first glance entirely disconnected from earlier forms of humour traditions, in reality it is often possible to trace connections. Blank reminds us that it is rare to see an entirely new form or genre spring forth, and that most internet forms are the result of hybridization, a joining of the old and the new (Blank 2013). For example, the internet places a heavy emphasis on visual forms of humour, a shift that began with the switch to Web 2.0. Although the ease of digitally remixing, reappropriating, and sharing these images was new, joke images (today known colloquially as internet memes) have clear ancestry in photocopylore of the paperwork empire.

In order to talk about school shooting humour, it is useful to first discuss the topic

of school shootings more generally.[9] School shootings have garnered a large body of

work in the last twenty years, primarily in the fields of psychology, sociology, and

criminology. These works include, but are certainly not limited to, discussions of the

effects that anti-school shooting legislation and safety protocols have on school children.

Notably, this field is somewhat hindered by the fact that currently there is no

official definition of a school shooting utilized by any American government department.

Different news outlets, activist groups, and researchers may use radically different

definitions of what shooting events qualify as a school shooting depending on their

understanding of the situation and their personal or collective goals. This is largely due to

the ambiguous nature of a school shooting. This is exemplified on the Center for

Homeland Security's School Shooting Database's website where they outline their

methodology and provide the following example:

> In August 2018, a shooting occurred during a high school football game held on the
> property of Palm Beach Central High School in Florida. The shooting caused chaos
> in the stands as students, parents, and visitors fled the stadium. When it was
> determined that the shooter and victims were not students, the chief of the Palm
> Beach Sheriff's Office said, "This is not a school shooting," and "this was not a
> random act of violence and had no bearing on the students, faculty, and/or staff".
> This is just one example of many underreported shooting incidents that have
> occurred after hours at high school football and basketball games. (2022, n.p.)

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[9] For an overview of the work done on school shootings as a whole, see Wike and Fraser 2009; Katsiyannis, Whitford, and Ennis 2018; Jonson 2017; Rocque 2012; Jaymi Elsass, Schildkraut, and Stafford 2016; Bondü and Scheithauer 2011; Fox and Fridel 2018; Newman 2004; Linder 2014; Ash and Saunders 2018; Heitmeyer et al. 2011. For work done on school safety, see Gilmore 2019; 2018; Tanner-Smith et al. 2018; Musu-Gillette et al. 2018; Musu et al. 2019; Theriot and Orme 2016; Fisher et al. 2018; Jonson 2017.

The researchers then problematize the issues with defining school shootings, especially those that fall outside of the mainstream perception of active shooter events.[10] Because of the sheer number of gray areas, it is very difficult to determine what does and does not count as a school shooting.

Many definitions do make use of or reference the definition of a mass shooting utilized by the FBI and other US departments, which requires four fatalities in a single time span (Cornell 2020). Sociologist Glenn Muschert uses the somewhat ambiguous "expressive non-targeted attacks on a school institution" for his research (2007, 63). Researcher Katherine Newman specifically defines *rampage shootings* as those where the shooting (1) took place on school grounds or at a school event; (2) claimed two or more victims; (3) was conducted by a student or students enrolled at, or recently enrolled at, the targeted school; and 4) targeted at least some victims at random (Newman 2004). This definition neatly eliminates more targeted attacks, such as gang shootings and domestic violence that occurs on school grounds. This extreme divergence in definitions also accounts for differences that may be seen in terms of school shooting fatalities and other statistics.

Due to the nature of these differing and often conflicting definitions, I have opted to base my definition of a school shooting on what the common definition among students seems to be. In general, students seem to opt for a wide-ranging definition that includes any kind of gun violence that occurs on or near a school campus. It is often *implied* that

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[10] For example, what if a shooting occurs on a school bus? What if it happens on a school bus, but the shooter is actually outside the bus? What if the shooter is the partner of a teacher and is specifically targeting them (an incident that is normally considered domestic violence), but they happen to hurt or kill some students?

the gunman in question is a student, and the scenes acted out usually depict scenarios that would be best described by Newman's definition of a rampage shooting, but this is not universal.[11] When considering what qualified as a school shooting joke, I took the same open approach.

Lockdown Drills

Whenever school shootings are discussed, discussions of the safety measures are never far behind. This is true of lockdown drills and their effectiveness, which is a common topic in school shooting humour. This interest is of course shared within school shooting literature. Despite this, only limited studies regarding the effectiveness of these safety programs have been conducted, and "[i]n terms of school shooting prevention programs, the field is largely operating a-theoretically" (Peterson, Sackrison, and Polland 2015, 136). Additionally, it should be noted that lockdown drills conducted in the United States have no set form and can range from simple safety presentations to extremely realistic simulations complete with simulated gunfire, crisis actors, and fake blood (Zraick 2019). Currently, thirty-three states have local laws dictating emergency plans for schools, however, many of these laws do not dictate *what* these protocols or crisis plans should be, only that each school district must have one in place ("School Safety Plans: A Snapshot of Legislative Action" 2014). Due to this general lack of oversight, it is extremely difficult to access data or statistics concerning how many schools are running

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[11] For example, one user refers to an event that occurred at their school as a school shooting, even though the incident actually involved a student who took their own life on school property with a firearm, and it does not seem that the deceased student had any plans to harm their classmates. It is also interesting to note that many students will refer to school shootings and school bombings in the same breath and make limited attempts to distinguish them. For example, one student shares that her school had "13 shootings and bomb threats" within a single year.

lockdown drills, and perhaps more importantly, which *kinds* of drills are being utilized.

Many school districts furthermore pass the burden of safety protocols down onto

individual schools, resulting in major differences even within a single district

(Schildkraut, Nickerson, and Ristoff 2019).

School shooting drills fall into two major categories. One is the traditional

lockdown drill, which attempts to remove students and staff from harm by simply having

them hide in locked classrooms and other relatively safe areas (Trump 2011). These drills

are common, especially since they can be easily adapted for a wide variety of emergency

situations outside of an active shooter incident (Jonson, Moon, and Gialopsos 2020;

Jonson, Moon, and Hendry 2018). The other major form is the multi-response drill, such

as the ALICE Program or Run, Hide, Fight. These programs emphasize a series of

recommended actions that individuals can tailor to the emergency situation that they find

themselves in, rather than adhere to a strict protocol to follow.[12] The effectiveness of

these measures is debateable, as are most of the security measures implemented into

schools post-Columbine (Burrow and Apel 2008; Schreck and Miller 2003).[13]

In terms of lockdown drills, the evidence for their effectiveness is far from

conclusive. For a significant amount of time, a psychology study by Zhe and Nickerson

was the only work that was not entirely theoretical (2007). This study found that

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[12] Although there are many variations of this training, most recommend some variation of a) fleeing the scene when possible, b) blocking off areas with barricades and hiding, and c) fighting a gunman only as a last resort (Jonson, Moon, and Gialopsos 2020).

[13] Some research suggests that visible security measures can actually be harmful to students and their perceptions of school safety (Tillyer, Fisher, and Wilcox 2011; Kupchik, Brent, and Mowen 2015; Bachman, Randolph, and Brown 2011). However, more recent research has suggested that students have acclimated to these conditions (Connell 2018).

traditional lockdown drills were effective and had few negative results or increases in anxiety from children. In contrast, newer studies have found that while lockdown drills increased feelings of emergency preparedness in high school students overall, they did not increase perceptions of school safety. Furthermore, students' perceptions of school safety went down in the open areas of the school, such as the gym and cafeteria (Schildkraut, Nickerson, and Ristoff 2019). Researcher Peterson and his team found that feelings of preparedness *and* feelings of fear both increased in students who participated in a drill (Peterson, Sackrison, and Polland 2015). Another study found that students who experienced an active shooter drill in high school reported increased feelings of fear, increased perceptions of risk, and a decrease in perceptions of school safety (Huskey and Connell 2021). Notably, many of these studies were conducted with different age ranges and a variety of methods, which further complicates analysis.[14] The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) have created a document with their recommended best practices to limit potential trauma,[15] but it is unclear how many, if any schools use this document ("School Safety and Crisis: Mitigating Negative Psychological Effects of School Lockdowns: Brief Guidance for Schools" 2018).

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[14] Additionally, with the exception of the research conducted by Huskey and Connell (who surveyed students regardless of the type of drill they experienced), all of these studies were done with the traditional lockdown format, and not the multi-response drill format.

[15] This includes a recommendation such as having schools stay with traditional lockdown drills; all teachers having trauma training and awareness of signs of trauma before, during, and after drills; students always having advanced notice of drills; and that participation should always be voluntary. They generally recommend that schools start with a base of low interaction activities, such as safety presentations or table-top exercises, before allowing students to work their way up to full-scale drills as they age. Additionally, they caution against running too many drills in a single time frame, as this may heighten fear of an imminent attack in students. They also firmly warn against using simulation drills and recommend that these only be used with adult staff who volunteer.

Overall, the literature available on school shootings and how they affect students is lacking. What does exist reveals a complex situation that only proves the needs for more work in this area, especially studies that take student perspectives into account.

Research Questions

1. What motivates American students to participate in school shooting humour?

2. What are the major patterns and themes in these jokes?

3. How does this humour change based on demographics?

4. How does this humour compare to previous work done on dark and sick humour?

5. Does this research have any larger implications?

Significance and Purpose

I believe that this project has significance not only within the discipline of folklore, but also within other disciplines that are looking at school shootings. In general, this study builds on earlier work done in the realm of sick humour and disaster humour cycles, especially among teenagers. Much of this work to date has concerned the joke cycles of the twentieth century, and, with the exception of work done around the 2001 World Trade Center disaster jokes, there has been limited work following sick jokes into the twenty-first century. This is especially unfortunate given that we are seeing humor develop in new and unique ways, especially with the introduction of social media apps like TikTok. Although this thesis will not be able to cover all the humour on TikTok, it is a step in the right direction.

This research may also be of interest to members of other disciplines who are investigating school shootings, and the effects that school shootings and lockdown drills

have on high school students. It became apparent to me that many of these studies are being conducted by individuals who, while competent researchers, have limited experience of life in a post-Columbine high school, and limited awareness of the youth-culture that surrounds school shootings and lockdown drills. In the jokes I have collected, it is clear that there is great ambivalence among many students towards these drills, and many students openly question and disavow lockdown drills. I am unsure how this would be accounted for in a formal study, but it seems relevant to consider. Overall, school shooting humour may provide an alternative route to understanding how teenagers are thinking about and understanding school shootings and lockdown drills, as well as provide a snapshot their thoughts and feelings in a way that a questionnaire may not.

Methodology

Projects involving digital folklore and culture can be difficult to design. Folklorists typically operate through ethnographic fieldwork, and while digital spaces have been accepted as an appropriate field to work in, they often require different approaches and have significantly different challenges than live fieldwork. This is especially true of projects dealing with a social media app that sees high volumes of content and a fast-paced vernacular culture.

This study is limited on two major accounts. The first is the unexpected difficulty with the nature of this humour. It quickly became clear to me as this research progressed that many of these tiktoks do not fulfill the definition of a joke as a structured unit of speech followed by a punchline. In some cases, this may be attributed to the young age of some of the users. Studies suggest that young children often find any incongruity

whatsoever to be humorous, and the need for appropriate incongruity or resolution in humour develops at some point in late childhood (McGhee 1974). Additionally, multimodal humour tends to be particularly challenging for young jokesters (Pedrazzini et al. 2021). This corpus of humour certainly lends credence to this theory. Many of the jokes made by the younger students were excluded from this analysis simply because they were ill-formed, often to the point of being borderline nonsensical. For example, many are presented as jokes, but are lacking punchlines, while others are effectively just a punchline with no set up. In other cases, however, instances of humour are more ambiguous— they are clearly humorous, but do not quite fit into the standard definition of a joke. This is an issue that has plagued this research since its beginning, and over time I have come to a similar conclusion to that of folklorist Ian Brodie, who ran into a similar issue in his study of stand-up comedy. He writes, "In the end, 'joke' is only ever an emic category. Something that is identified as a joke within a culture can certainly be studied and labeled as such by the folklorist, but the connotation remains of a cultural phenomenon that can be abstracted from its context" (Brodie 2014, 31). In his work, "joke" is used to refer to the texts that are culturally recognized as jokes within the context of stand-up comedy. Similarly, this thesis will be using the term "joke" to also encompass these forms which do not fully fit into the scholarly definition but would be recognized as a joke by TikTok users.

The other major hindrance involves joke reception. Humour is one form of performance that brings the importance of the audience into sharp focus. However, it is difficult to record this when working on TikTok due to the nature of the platform. In addition to issues with TikTok's algorithm, which are elaborated on in the next chapter,

TikTok is also extremely hostile to attempts from outside parties to collect data from the

comment sections. As a result, audience reception to these jokes is difficult to quantify or

analyze.

There have also been some additional issues with transcription of the individual tiktoks

used as examples within this thesis. I have found that the aural elements of tiktoks tend to

be difficult to represent in writing, especially in tiktoks that use instrumental songs with

no lyrics. As discussed in the next chapter, these musical elements can be background

features that set the scene, or they can be directly relevant to the understanding of the

joke. Thus, I have chosen to represent music in the transcription in cases where that

information is necessary. Musical information, such as the name of a song or lyrics, is

marked with the following symbol: ♫.

Additionally, it is relevant to note that while I have done the majority of the transcriptions

for the examples included here, in some cases users included on-screen transcriptions in

their original tiktok. My transcriptions are done with white text on a black bar on the

lower third of the screen (see Figure 2.4 for an example), any variation of this was

included by the original user.

Parameters

In total, I found 1485 instances of school shooting related humor using TikTok's

search and hashtag features. The dates of collecting range from September of 2020 to

January 2022, but the majority were collected in April-June of 2021. I initially started

with the hashtags clearly related to school shootings, and then branched out to hashtags I

had become aware of during my initial gathering. An overview is provided below (Figure

1.3):

Figure 1.3: A table of the hashtags used to survey and discover relevant jokes.

#schoolshooting	# StonemanDouglasHighSchool	#schoollockdown
#schoolshootings	#schoolshooters[16]	#schoolsooting
#Columbine	#schoolshooterchallenge[17]	#lockdowndrill
#SandyHook	#schoolshoter	#ALICEdrill
#Parkland	#schoolshooterz	#school_shooting
#ColumbineHighschool	#schoolshootingmeme	#school_shooter
#SandyHookMassacre	#americanschool	#schoolshooterr
#ParklandShooting	#americanpublicschool	#schoolshooterjokes

Notably, each of these hashtags included a variety of humorous and non-humorous

content within it, with humorous content in the minority. The exceptions to this are the

hashtags that make direct reference to humour, such as *#schoolshootingmeme* and

#schoolshooterjokes. Hashtags such as *#lockdown* or *#schoollockdown* were briefly

investigated, but not useful for this project due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic

giving new meaning to the term "lockdown."

TikTok also allows users to search via the specific audio clip that a tiktok uses,

and I found multiple audios that were closely associated with school shooting humour.

The most notable are the songs "Pumped Up Kicks" by Foster the People and

"Bulletproof" by La Roux.[18]

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[16] Notably, *#schoolshooter* is actively suppressed by TikTok, and it is impossible to search for tiktoks with this hashtag. In January 2022, *#schoolshooting* was also being actively suppressed by TikTok, however this suppression seems to have ceased by July of 2022 for unknown reasons.

[17] Although this hashtag may initially be concerning, it actually refers to a dance challenge referred to as the "school shooter" or "active shooter," not to a "challenge" for students to shoot up their school.

[18] Other moderately popular songs include "Sweet Caroline (with guns)", which is an edit of "Sweet Caroline" by Neil Diamond, but with gun shots edited into the chorus, and a song called "Thomas the Dank Engine," which is actually a mashup of the Thomas the Tank Engine theme song with "Come On" by Biggie Smalls.

TikTok has another feature called #Stitches[19] that allows users to digitally link their own creation to that of another user. This is often used in a call-and-response format, where one individual will create a tiktok asking for responses of a certain kind, and users will "stitch" their TikTok with their responses. I was able to use TikTok's search feature to find stitches of tiktoks that were likely to spawn humorous replies.

Additionally, I received some unintentional help from TikTok's infamous algorithm. Over time, the algorithm picked up on the patterns of the content I was seeking out and started specifically recommending school shooting humour to me as a result. In many cases, this was humour that I likely would not have come across on my own.

I downloaded each tiktok using a third-party tool, gave it a unique file name, and then coded for relevant information such as the date posted, caption and hashtags, etc. This information can be found for each tiktok example included in this thesis in Appendix 1: Breakdown of tiktoks Used.

Ethical Concerns

A major concern regarding a project such as this is privacy of the individuals involved. Since I made no direct contact with any users, and all tiktoks were publicly posted, there was no ethical review required. However, it is still important to maintain privacy whenever possible, especially since school shooting humour is not universally acceptable and is socially somewhat risky. Additionally, many of the individuals making these jokes are minors, and it is especially important to protect their identity. Thus, I will not be utilizing the images of any users who appear to be under the age of 13, as at that

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[19] See chapter 2 for more on the #stitch feature.

age they should not even be on the app, per TikTok's terms of services. Outside of this group, I will attempt to maintain privacy as much as possible and avoid revealing any identifying information, and whenever possible opting for examples that do not include individuals' faces in them, or examples where the face is obscured in some way.

There are also additional ethics to consider concerning the demographic data included in this project. Because I have made no contact with the individuals making the jokes, I have only very limited self-reported data to fall back on, in the form of users' short bios on their profile. Instead, I must rely primarily on my own observations of individuals. This is especially problematic when it comes to the categories of race and gender, as without self-reported data it is hard to capture the full complexity of these identities.

Gender has been coded into the simple categories of Male, Female, and N/A.[20] Race was coded equally simply as Black, White, Other, and N/A. This system is obviously overly simplistic, and risks excluding or prioritizing one racial identity over another for any mixed-race people. Initially more racial categories were recognized, including Asian and Pacific Islander identities, these categories were eventually folded into one.[21]

Age was divided into the categories of Middle School (under 13), High School (roughly 14-18), Young Adult (roughly 18-30), and Adult (30+). I have chosen to identify

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[20] Anyone who identified as a binary trans person was coded into the category they identified with (ex. a trans woman would be coded as Female.). Individuals who identified as a nonbinary identity were coded as N/A, as in the end they made up only a very small representation of the population.
[21] This is partially due to my own lack of confidence that I was coding individuals correctly, and also because these groups proved to be very small in the final counts, and there was limited evidence that these groups were approaching school shooting humour in different enough ways to justify coding them separately.

age by these subjective labels rather than hard age groupings to emphasize the roughness of these categories. Again, unless the individual in question self-identified in their bio, it was often difficult to determine exactly how old an individual is in each tiktok.

Nationality was split into the categories of American, Other, and N/A. Nationality is not as inherently observable as gender, race, or age, but it was possible to determine in most cases. Many people include this information in their bios, and some added location tags, such as *#NYC* or *#LA* to indicate where they are located.

Another major ethical concern involves the publication of investigations into sick and dark humour and the effects that such publication may bring. Often there are concerns that publishing obscene or offensive material may legitimize that material and thus actually spur its reproduction and introduce it to a larger audience (Phillips and Milner 2017). This debate is complex, and there are many factors of possible harm (both to any informants and to the targeted group represented in the joke) that must be considered and weighed against the benefits of documenting such humour. However, in the case of school shooting jokes, I do not believe this is an issue. Any connection between school shooting humour and actual school shootings would be better solved by initiatives to end gun violence altogether.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered a brief overview of the topic, a history of humour studies in relation to folklore scholarship and an overview of the relevant literature on school shootings. Additionally, it has covered the methodology of this thesis, and highlighted some of the ethical concerns and limitations of this project. The next chapter will take a

deeper look into both the interface and vernacular culture of TikTok, and the way that

humour is performed on the platform.

Chapter 2: Digital Context of TikTok

TikTok's history and predecessor apps

TikTok is a social media app[22] that is centered around the creation of short-form videos called tiktoks that range from fifteen seconds to three minutes in length. Through the app, users are able to access a robust editing suite, which includes features such as custom video filters. TikTok is often seen as a spiritual successor to the similar app Vine.[23] TikTok was acquired by the Chinese company ByteDance while still in development, and officially launched in 2017 (Shu 2020; Isaac 2020). In August of 2018, ByteDance made the decision to merge TikTok with another visually oriented social media property they had acquired, Musical.ly, a lip-syncing app that had gained popularity alongside Vine. Many of Musical.ly's unique features, such as the duet feature (discussed below), were folded into TikTok's interface. TikTok (and Musical.ly before it) has a large, young audience, and has risen to astounding popularity worldwide. TikTok currently has an active user base of 1.5 billion active monthly users, 100 million of which are located in the United States alone (Sherman 2020; Sweney 2022).

An Overview of TikTok

TikTok's main feature is the For You Page (FYP), which allows for endless scrolling through content that has been algorithmically selected for the viewer. It is

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[22] TikTok does have a web browser version, however, the company is focused heavily on their mobile application and the browser version is missing many features, including but not limited to the ability to film and edit video footage. Additionally, TikTok's status as a social media platform has recently been called into question, as the company's head of global agency and accounts, Khartoon Weiss, described it instead as an entertainment platform (Honigman 2022).

[23] Vine was a video app run by Twitter from January 2013- January 2017. In actuality TikTok was already under development at the time that Vine shut down (Carson 2016).

unclear exactly how the algorithm works, as TikTok does not release this data publicly. However, TikTok does acknowledge that this algorithm is based heavily on how users interact with the tiktoks they are shown. The primary factors considered are watch time and user interaction (WSJ Staff 2021; B. Smith 2021).

When a new tiktok is uploaded, the algorithm is similarly responsible for determining viewership. Creators do have the option to make a tiktok private, which makes it viewable only by their followers, but otherwise have very little control over who sees their content.[24]

In addition to the FYP, TikTok also has a search feature, allowing users to narrow selections by key word.[25] If a user chooses to add an audio[26] to their tiktok, the app automatically links that creation to the audio. When scrolling on the FYP, a user can click on the name of the audio and be brought to a page that displays all tiktoks made using that audio (see Figure 2.1). Often, trends on the app are centered around use of audios, similar to how image macro memes use stock images (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017). This is one of the ways that TikTok encourages collaboration between creators and provides built-in interlinks between individual tiktoks. These functions were vital in helping me locate school shooting humour and understand how other people find and interact with it.

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[24] Notably, TikTok restricts users under the age of sixteen from being discoverable through the FYP in an attempt to protect them, but this requires the app to reliably identify child users, and underage accounts can often still be found through search functions.

[25] Specifically, TikTok allows users to keyword search tiktoks, popular hashtags, audio clip names, and usernames. The search is ranked based on popularity, but there are some advanced search features that allow users to rank by date.

[26] The term "audio" here refers to the discrete units of sound clips that are used on the app. Officially, these clips are referred to as Sounds by TikTok, but are called audios in the user bases' vernacular. Audios range from professionally recorded music (provided through the app) to snippets of spoken dialogue from popular media that have been uploaded, to audio clips taken from other users' original content.
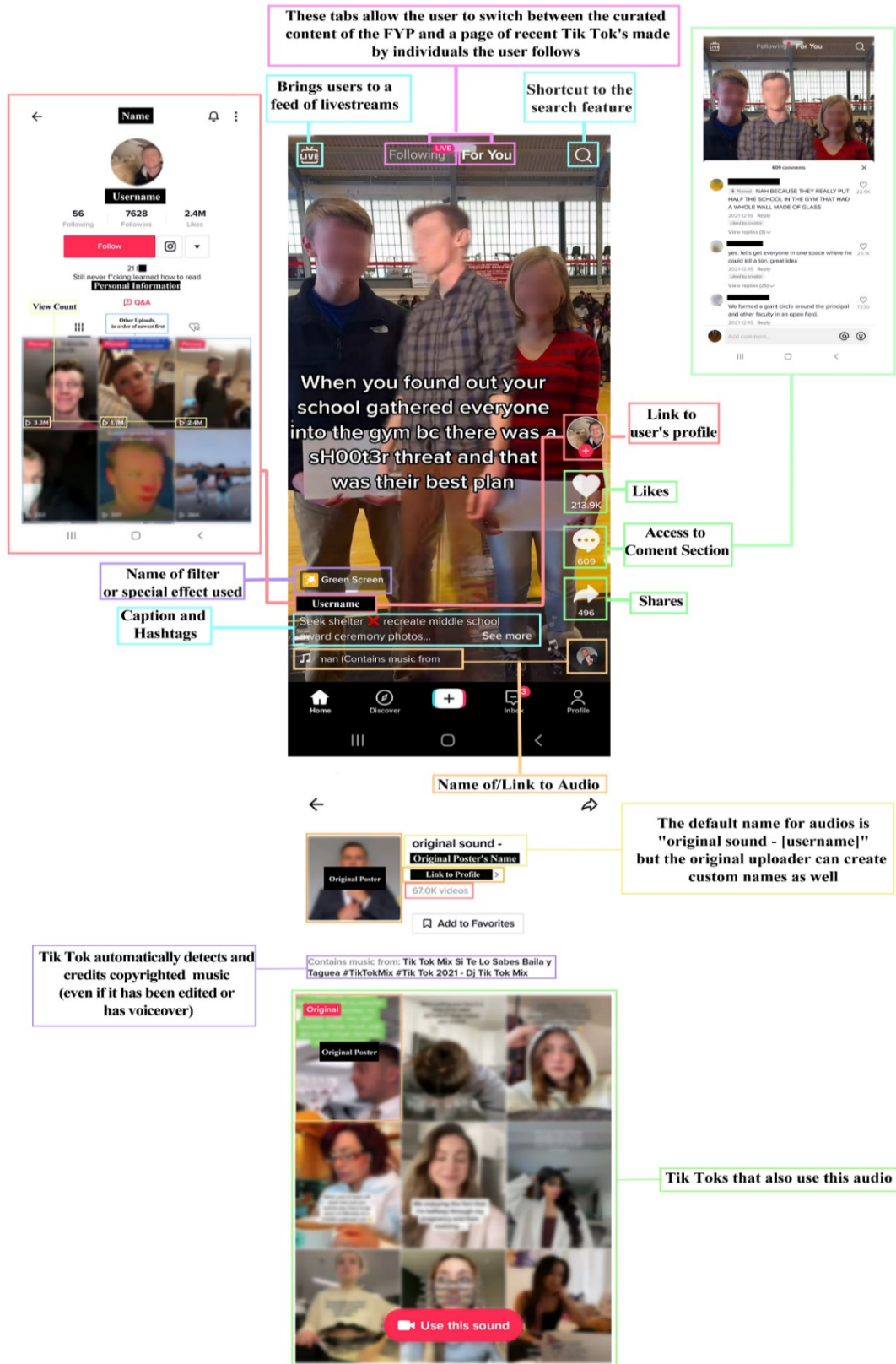
Figure 2.1: An Anatomy of a tiktok

31
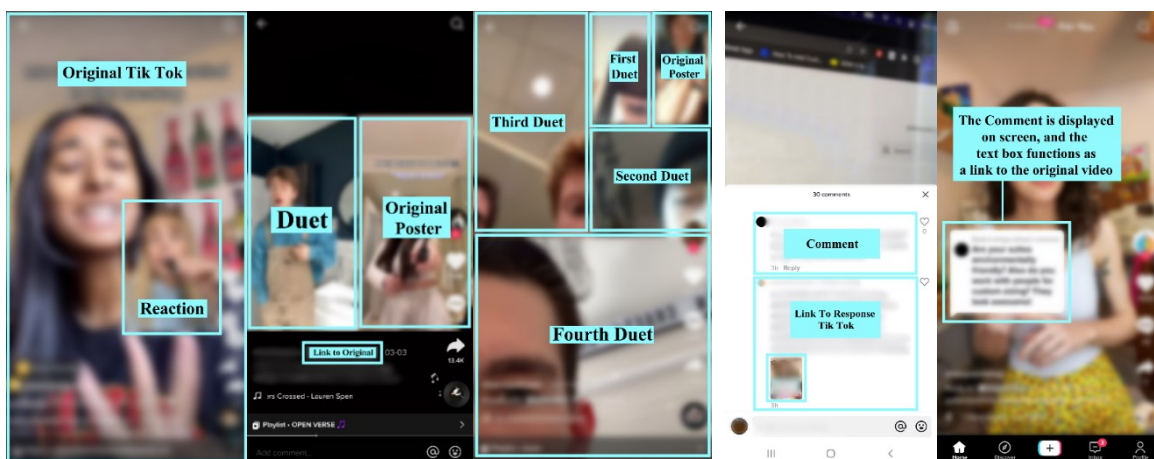
Figure 2.2a-d: Several examples of TikToks intertextual features.

TikTok also has a selection of intertextual features that allow users to link their creations to one another. There are four major features that allow this. One is the React feature (Figure 2.2a), which allows a user to film their reaction to another user's tiktok, which is then layered over the original tiktok in a small window that can be moved around the screen.[27] The Duet feature allows users to film a new tiktok that is displayed alongside the original (Figure 2.2b). Duets can also be "duetted," which can result in duet chains (Figure 2.2c). The Stitch feature allows a user to edit another user's tiktok down to about five seconds, and then add their own commentary. This is often used by creators to emphasize a single point that the original creator made, and then expand on it. Sometimes, users will ask for other users to stitch a video, usually in order to elicit responses or stories from a specific community. The last feature is the comment reply feature, which allows a user to reply to a textual comment with a tiktok (Figure 2.2d). The comment automatically shows up in the new tiktok, as does a link to the original tiktok and the context of the comment.

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[27] The React feature was introduced early in TikTok's run but was quietly discontinued sometime in 2020. Still, the effect is easily recreate-able using green-screen filters, and the format is still widely used.

TikTok is a mediated platform wholly unlike any live space that revolves around humour. Typically, in performance theory, a performance is seen as the assumption of accountability to an audience for a display of communicative competence. A performer is competent if they are able to successfully utilize their knowledge of appropriate social behaviour to connect with their audience (Bauman 1975). This is, of course, also true of joking. However, the TikTok algorithm complicates and obscures the ways in which the performer is able to interact with and adjust to their audience and vice versa. Unlike with live performance, the primary method of transmission on TikTok is not user-to-user. Instead, the algorithm effectively functions as something of a middleman, deciding what users will see (Tiffany 2022). For all intents and purposes, a creator's initial audience when uploading to TikTok is not made up of other users, but rather the algorithm itself. Furthermore, their true audience is obscured from them, and while the creator can use hashtags to guide the algorithm to one demographic over another, there is no guarantee that a tiktok reaches the intended audience. As such, it is extremely difficult for a creator to modify their performance for their audience, because they do not know who that will be.[28]

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[28] The presence of the algorithm is especially troublesome for those studying expressive and vernacular traditions. As discussed in the literature review, a major defining feature of folklore lies its transmission. However, the assumption is that this transmission is between person to person. Even in discussions of folklore in digital spaces, there is still an assumption that people are sharing between themselves. While that obviously still occurs on TikTok, a huge amount of power is given to the algorithm. This is also problematic when considering Kuipers definition of a joke as a social phenomenon, one based in the transmission (Kuipers 2015). The need for transmission is what keeps joke repertoires relatively stable-only jokes deemed worth repeating by their audience will continue to be transmitted. However, on TikTok it is possible for a joke that may be quite successful in a live space never to see success, not because it was judged as unworthy by an audience, but simply because it was denied any audience at all by the algorithm.

The algorithm also affects the ways in which audiences can interact with tiktoks.

Humour support, defined as positive responses to jokes, is relatively easy to convey on

TikTok using positive comments, stitches, duets, and likes (Hay 2001). However,

communicating *negative* responses to jokes, such as unlaughter, prove to be more

difficult. Unlaughter, a term coined by social psychologist Michael Billig, is a negative

response to humour— not merely the absence of laughter or positive support, but rather

the pointed non-acceptance of a joke (Billig 2005; M. Smith 2009). Unlaughter usually

carries with it the implication that the joke (and by extension, the teller) is immoral in

some way. While there is a myriad of ways for an audience to communicate this

expression in a live context, TikTok's algorithm makes it difficult. For example, if a user

does not find a joke to be moral or tasteful, they may simply choose to scroll away

quickly, without engaging with it, or leave the app in disgust. This sends a message to the

algorithm that the user does not enjoy this content, and that similar content should not be

spread to them, or users with similar profiles. However, this action is not communicated

to the *creator* of the disliked joke, who may not realize that a percentage of their reached

audience dislikes the joke because they do not receive any negative feedback. On the

other hand, a user may attempt to communicate unlaughter similarly to how one would in

live spaces, such as leaving a negative comment that states their displeasure, leaving an

appropriately judgemental emoji such as 😐 or 🫨, or by duetting the original tiktok so

the creator and other users can literally see their lack of laughter. However, all of these

actions are engagement with the content, which will be read as *support* by the algorithm.

Similarly, a joke that would otherwise fizzle and die may find purchase with an audience that the creator would otherwise have no access to.

Thus, unlaughter cannot be communicated without also unintentionally supporting the content.

As this suggests, the algorithm frequently pushes controversial tiktoks, rather than tiktoks that are wholly favourably received. This is relevant when it comes to assessing the motivations for telling jokes on TikTok, and especially for telling transgressive jokes. While some users may find these jokes legitimately funny, others may be telling them for the sole purpose of baiting viewers into leaving negative comments and thus boosting their content and hopefully gaining them new followers. For example, one user I collected several jokes from briefly attempted to amass a following by posting one "dark joke" a day, with the caption "Dark humour until 1500 followers day _." Many of these jokes were related to school shootings, and he claimed to look forward to seeing outraged and offended people in his comment section (Figure 2.3a-b). When his tiktoks failed to be picked up by the algorithm, he abandoned dark humour and looked for other ways of gaining followers.

Caption 2: #sandyhook #darkhumour #fyo #foryou #viral #GhostMode #ItBeLikeThat   *Caption 2: I'm ready for the ❄s and Karen's in the comments :D #sandyhook #darkhumour #viral #kids #punch*

Figure 2.3a-b: A user likely attempting to gain followers by telling a dark joke, with the hopes that angry and outraged people would interact with it and thus spread it further. This is indicated by his liberal use of "#viral" on nearly every post in this series.

Another major factor to consider is the presence of censorship on the platform. TikTok is a corporately owned platform attempting to provide an ideal advertising space for advertisers and investors, and that requires maintaining certain standards in terms of content. Thus, there is an automated system in place designed to supress or remove

content that violates TikTok's Terms of Service. In theory, this is meant to target individuals harassing other users, posting discriminatory content, or posting content that is sexually explicit or violent, but many users believe that the system also censors and suppresses certain communities on the app ("Terms of Service | TikTok" 2019). In the past, TikTok has been forced to apologize for suppressing content created by disabled, LGBT, and plus-sized creators under the guise of protecting them from harassment, and many Black creators have been suspicious of racial bias and discrimination as well (Asare 2020; Botella 2019).

The conversation regarding this perceived suppression can be difficult to follow. Official TikTok policies about inappropriate language and topics are opaque, and much of what is known about censorship on TikTok is vernacular in origin.[29] Additionally, TikTok seems to prefer to quietly *suppress* unruly content rather than fully removing it, a process referred to as "shadow banning." The fact that this system seems to be moderated primarily by bots, which may erroneously censor noncontroversial content, rather than real people makes it all the more complicated.

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[29] It does seem to vary by country. For example, if a user located in Great Britain uploads a tiktok with the word *cunt* in it, it will often fail to post or be taken down in a matter of seconds, but that is not true of American users.

Due to this situation, many users have begun to develop something of a coded language, sometimes called "algospeak" (Lorenz 2022, n.p.).
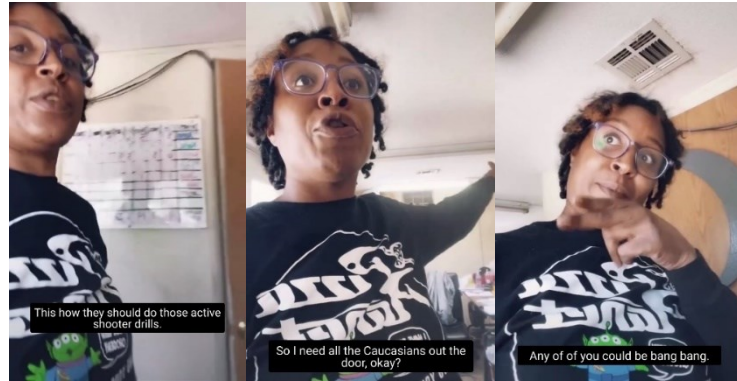
Figure 2.4: Creator referring to a school shooter using coded speech (Note: this is an edited excerpt, as the full joke was too long to include in its entirety).

Common examples include using "unalive" to mean die, death, or kill, "sewerslide" to mean suicide, "grippy sock vacation" to refer to a stay at a psych ward and calling the pandemic a "panini" or "panda express."[30] This coded language can prove to be challenge for humour research on the app, as much of it can come off as incongruous and unintentionally humorous. For example, in one tiktok, the creator refers to school shooters as a "bang bang" while mimicking a gun with one hand (Figure 2.4). In this case, she *is* being humorous overall, but it is ambiguous whether this wording specifically was meant to be taken as part of the joke, or if it only exists to avoid potential censoring.

Jokes told by already popular users, especially those known for producing humorous content, may also have questionable motivations. Although the specifics are unknown, it is generally known that TikTok's algorithm is favorable to users who post on a frequent schedule. Popular creators who wish to keep their audience often find

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[30] Many of these examples are fairly straightforward, but some may require contextual or cultural knowledge to properly parse, such as referring to sex workers as accountants or using the sunflower emoji to refer to Ukraine, while others border on simple puns and misspellings of taboo words. Some of these workarounds have also mutated multiple times; for example, some lgbt creators felt that the word lesbian was being censored and began using "le\$bian" in their captions or on-screen text, which eventually turned into "le dollar bean."

themselves under pressure to keep up with that demand and as a result may find themselves making morally questionable jokes that they would not under other circumstances. Situations like these can be challenging when analyzing the meanings of jokes that aren't present in orally circulating jokes, as joke tellers may have external and complex motivations beyond what is typically expected. This issue is complex and warrants research of its own. However, the full implications of this digital environment are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Humour on TikTok

Humour on TikTok is diverse and difficult to quantify, and thus I will be focusing specifically on the forms and content seen in school shooting humour. TikTok is likely best understood as a unique semiotic domain, which produces meaning through the combination of multiple semiotic modes— the visual, the verbal, and the aural (Tsakona 2009; Gee 2003). These modes interact with and reinforce one another in unique ways, resulting in a non-linear reading of individual tiktoks, similar to what is seen in cartoons (Hempelmann and Samson 2007; Samson and Hempelmann 2006). Additionally, TikTok users have collectively developed something of a vernacular iconographic code, in which different verbal, visual, and aural elements have taken on additional expressive and communicative meanings beyond the literal (Tsakona 2009). It has been said that cartoons are "sometimes able to convey a message in a much more immediate and condensed fashion than language" (Refaie 2003, 87), and this also seems true of TikTok humour.

A central feature of humour is the play frame, the communicative object that establishes an informal, often casual tone that signals to other participants and audience members that the speech and actions within are not to be taken literally or interpreted as normal information (Goffman 1974). On TikTok, play frames can be established in a myriad of ways. In the examples included in this thesis, TikTok's filters and overlay effects,[31] on-screen text, costuming, and audio are readily used to indicate humour and levity. These elements are especially effective when paired with sick humour, as they are used to create an informal and lighthearted atmosphere that heightens the incongruity at the core of the joke. Additionally, body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice are also used, as they are in offline spaces. Notably, TikTok is a social media platform that has become renowned for entertainment and especially humorous content. Many users open the app expecting humorous content, reliving much of the burden of establishing a play frame from the creator.

Types of Verbal Humour

Jokes on TikTok typically take a narrative form, rather than the riddle format that is common of orally spread jokes. Narrative jokes account for 78% of all jokes. This high number seems to be primarily due to the limits of the medium. TikTok emphasizes images, and many jokes that originally circulated orally simply do not lend themselves well to being acted out, especially in their original formats. There are some users who attempt to make the oral format work. For example, they may film themselves telling

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[31] A favourite filter seen in many jokes in this thesis, including **Error! Reference source not found.**b, is the flashing rainbow light effect, which overlays a user's footage with flashing, coloured lights reminiscent of those found at a nightclub or concert.

others a joke, or simply post the text of a joke over unrelated video (Figure 2.5a-b), but this is fairly rare.

Figure 2.5a-b Two styles of joke telling.

Some creators attempt to tease a narrative structure out of the riddle format. For example, a common school shooting joke found off of TikTok goes as follows:

Q: What was the last thing that went through the kids at Columbine's heads?

A: Probably bullets

One user turned that joke, or a variant of it, into the following (Figure 2.6):
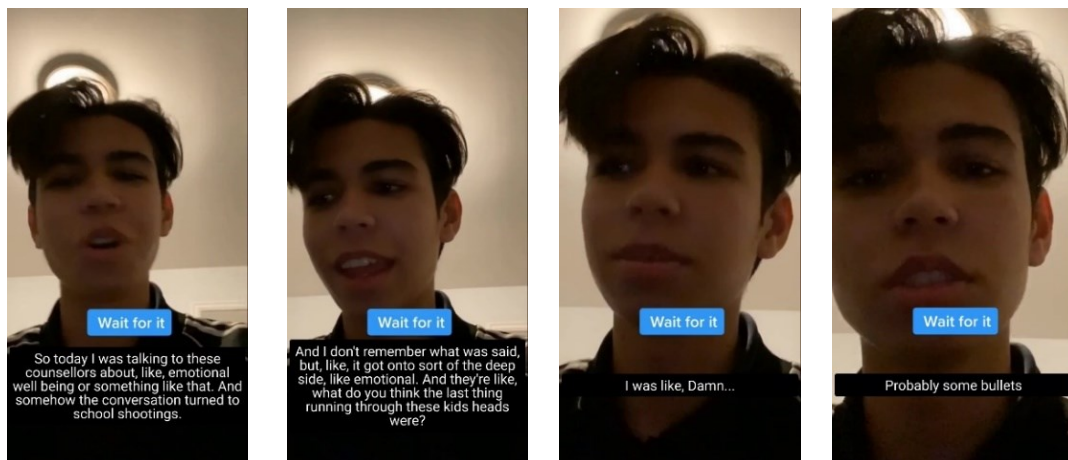
Figure 2.6: A riddle joke turned into a narrative joke. Notably, this is also one of the only examples of a riddle joke being turned into a personal narrative joke.

However, this adaption is easier said than done, and pulling a joke like this off effectively often requires some level of skill and charisma, which may be unachievable to the average user.

Additionally, jokes that rely primarily on word play are few and far between, even within narrative jokes. This can likely be attributed to two factors. The first is the difficulty with visually representing certain

Figure 2.7: An example of a word play joke.

jokes that rely on this technique, similar to the issues seen above. The other likely factor has to do with the young age of the user base, as many users may not have experience with crafting well-formed jokes of this nature. For example, one word play joke that I collected several variants of involve a teacher trying to escort their students out of a classroom during an active shooter event. The teacher gives the students an order, such as "Stay calm, or "get down," only to reveal that there is a student in the class named Calm or Down who misinterprets this statement and stays behind in the classroom, where they are killed by the shooter (Figure 2.7). This joke enjoys a limited amount of popularity among creators in the middle school and high school age ranges and would likely be a lot more humorous (and more popular) if Calm or Down were actually common names. The foundations of a successful joke are present, but the creators' humour skills are not yet refined enough to fully pull these jokes off.

In addition to narratives, there are two other major forms that can be identified in school shooter humour. As previously stated, riddle jokes are occasionally seen, although they only account for 3% of all jokes. The jokes that do exist are typically adapted from

circulating oral jokes and are often found on accounts that primarily or exclusively post transgressive humour.

What the youth population lacks in word-play skills, they make up for in sarcastic satire. Notably, the majority of the humour that falls into this category cannot be considered true jokes, as they often lack a real punchline. Instead, many of these satirical statements work by introducing a playframe and creating a set-up for a potential joke by drawing attention to a prominent incongruity in society, but ultimately provide no punchline or resolution to the joke (Figure 2.8a-c). These jokes have a "funny because it
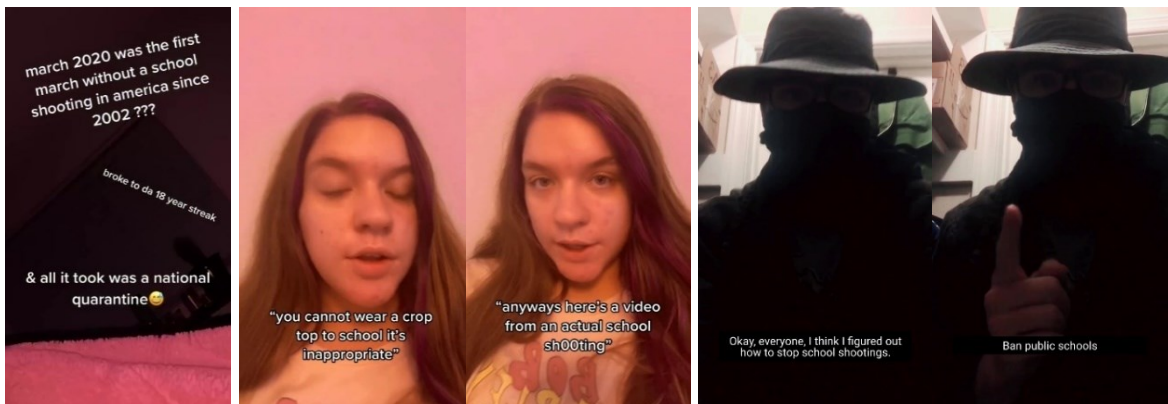
Figure 2.8a-c: Three satirical jokes. The first is utilizing a rainbow flashing light filter. The second is of a girl pointing out the incongruity with what it considered appropriate or inappropriate for students to view. The third is one of the few examples of a satirical joke that has a proper punchline.

is true" effect, and cause equally as much discomfort as humour, as they often leave the audience to contend with the highlighted incongruity but no relief. These account for 10% of all jokes.

There are an additional 9% of jokes that cannot be accounted for in the above categories.

The majority of narrative and satirical humour on TikTok takes the form of what's known colloquially online as "relatable humour." This form of humour is very similar to observational comedy and revolves around making jokes about the everyday mundanities and frustrations that connect people. These jokes often use second person language, which encourages the audience to mentally step into the joke and insert themselves in the place of the protagonist.[32] On social media sites other than TikTok, these jokes usually take a text-image form, with text describing the protagonist and the situation they are in, and an image that visualizes their reaction or emotional state (Figure 2.9). With the advent of social media platforms such as Vine, Music.ly, and now TikTok, these jokes have transitioned into video form.

When ur trying to get a 4.0 GPA, do homework, volunteer, sleep 8 hours, eat 3 meals, exercise & have a social life but a day is only 24hrs

Figure 2.9: An example of a relatable student meme.

The video format has resulted in significant changes in the form of these jokes. Most notably, where the majority of relatable humour memes rely on stock image macros that would be reused again and again, with only the text changing, due to the nature of TikTok, there is more emphasis placed on the individual creating the joke instead. While a TikTok's affordances do not actively restrict users from simply reposting the text of a joke on a blank background, this is somewhat underwhelming and would not be accepted

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[32] Relatable jokes have not been studied in depth by scholars, but studies by Koltun 2018; Burton 2019; Ask and Abidin 2018 cover similar topics.

by the majority of users, as it is not using the app to its full potential. As a result, the majority of tiktoks involve the creator filming themselves and reappropriating trends with their own face or body. For example, one girl posted a tiktok of her filming herself criticizing the American school system, and how students are adept at hiding from school shooters thanks to constant drills but often lack practical knowledge (Figure 2.10). Another user then took that audio and recreated it, with her own changes (Figure 2.11). In the case of this example, the audio also spurred another trend, with more users taking this audio clip and using it to prove her point, by showing off their ability to hide quickly at a moment's notice (Figure 2.12a-d). Some of these were played straight, with users filming themselves hiding in plausible locations (Figure 2.12a-c), while others picked less plausible locations for the sake of humour (Figure 2.12d)

Figure 2.10: An original tiktok criticizing the American school system.
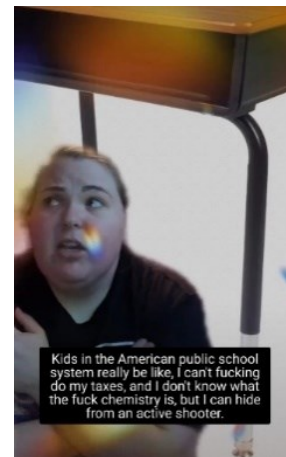
Figure 2.11: Another user performing the audio clip in Figure 2.10, using the greenscreen feature for additional scene setting.

Figure 2.12a-d: Various users using the audio clip from Figure 2.10. This trend first became popular in March 2020 during the first COVID-19 lockdowns, which is why several users are hiding in their own homes rather than at school.

Tiktoks demand a significant visual component— there has to be something for the audience to look at for a period of time to justify its nature as a video instead of a still image. As a result, creators dramatize the majority of tiktoks. Although some creators do engage in full-length skits, the majority of them are condensed narratives, many barely longer than ten seconds. The short nature of these videos is likely due to the lingering influence of the app Vine, which allowed for only six-second videos, which resulted in a vernacular visual shorthand that was used to effectively condense complex narratives as much as possible. This included elements such as *instant characterizers*: props and costume elements used to signify details about a character (Marone 2017). For example, within school shooting humour, a character who is slouching and wearing a sweater with their hood up is almost always understood by the audience to be the school shooter. These identities are usually reinforced by the on-screen texts, which provide short descriptions of the character, and brief introductions to the scene and context. Additionally, vernacular

shorthand as well TikTok's editing features are used to condense narratives while preserving as much context and set up as possible (Figure 2.14-Figure 2.13).

Figure 2.14: Example of a typical "school shooter" costume.

Figure 2.15: This character wears a towel on their head to signal female identity, a visual shorthand that some boys use in lieu of a wig, a practice that originated on Vine and was carried over to TikTok.
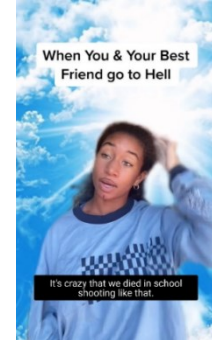
Figure 2.13: An effective use of greenscreens to set the scene, in which the protagonists are kicked out of heaven.

Audio

Audio clips are extremely important to humour culture on TikTok. Usually, audios are remixed and reappropriated in various ways and are rarely interacted with in a serious manner. It is hard to communicate the vast ways that audios are utilized in jokes on TikTok, but there are roughly three major uses:

1. Jokes in which the lyrical content (if applicable) and intended meaning or usage of a song are not relevant to joke being communicated. In these cases, typically, the overall mood of the song is significantly more important than the lyrics. These audios are often used to either invoke or heighten the playframe of the joke. For example, a lighthearted, happy sounding song may be contrasted to the text of a dark joke, and thus increase its incongruity through irony. Often, elements like a sudden beat drop, tempo change, volume increase, or a change of tone in the song

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will be timed to reinforce the punchline of a joke. See Figure 2.16a-b below for examples.
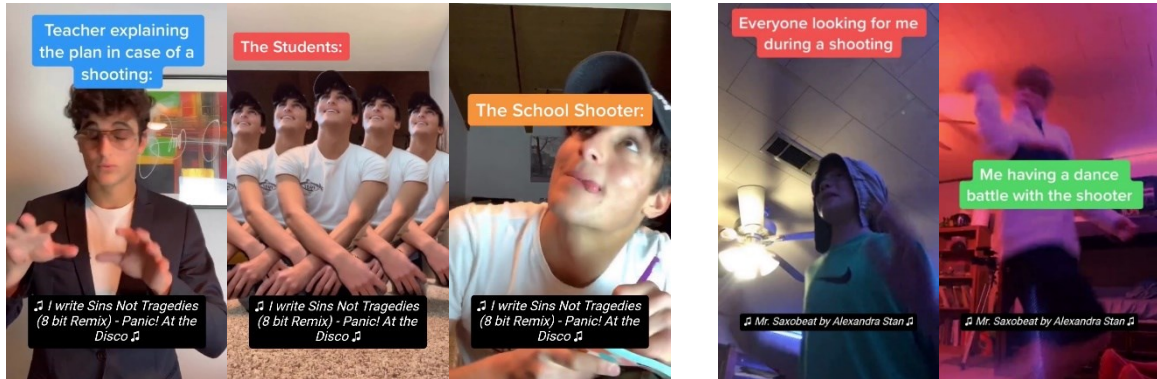
Figure 2.16a-b: Some examples of tiktoks with the first kind of audio.

2. In the second grouping of audios, the *majority* of the lyrical content in an audio is not relevant, with the exception of the last line of the song. A key element of these audios is that there is a semantic connection between this line of a song and the situation presented in the joke, regardless of the greater meaning of the song. An example of a song being used like this in school shooting humour is the song "Bulletproof" by the duo La Roux. The actual song is about a bad romantic breakup, but part of the chorus *"This time, baby, I'll be bulletproof"* is used out of context as the punchline to many school shooting jokes (Figure 2.17).
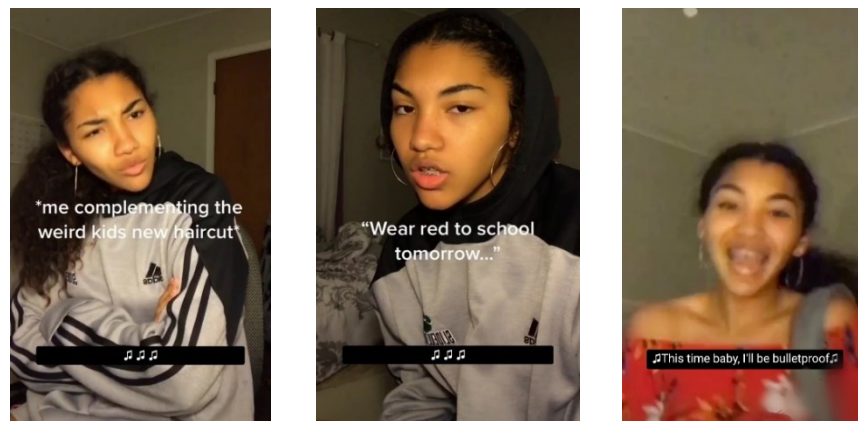
Figure 2.17: An example of the second audio type.

3. The third grouping of songs includes audios that have gained some kind of additional vernacular meaning outside of their intended meaning and lyrical content, and it is this vernacular meaning that is invoked or played with in some way in a tiktok. These differ from the second grouping of audios as the meaning that is being manipulated goes beyond the basic semantic potential of the song lyrics, and often is not gleanable at first glance. Often, these audios effectively signal a playframe in which joke telling can occur. One example is the song "Pumped Up Kicks" by Foster the People.

Pumped Up Kicks

"Pumped Up Kicks" was written by Foster the People's lead singer Mark Foster and officially released in January of 2011. It debuted to surprising popularity, and eventually peaked at #3 on Billboard (Peters 2011). The lyrics of the song are popularly thought to recount a school shooting,[33] as they chronicle the story of a teenager named Richard with a rough home life who discovers a gun among his father's possessions. This leads to the chorus:

> *All the other kids with the pumped up kicks*
> *You better run, better run*
> *Outrun my gun*
> *All the other kids with the pumped up kicks*
> *You better run, better run*
> *Faster than my bullet (x2)* (Foster 2011)

"Pumped up Kicks" has largely maintained its popularity to the present day, over ten years after its original release, partially due to its associations with internet meme

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[33] Foster has taken issue with this interpretation and clarified that "the school shooting part of it was never spoken about in the song. I think people filled in the blanks that it was about a school shooting, but I never say anything about a school in the song" (Zellner 2019, n.p.), and stated that his intentions were to write from the perspective of an "isolated, psychotic kid" who turns to gun violence (Doyle 2011, n.p.).

culture and school shootings. There are two major contributing factors to this association. The first is the incongruous nature of the song itself. The instrumental track is surprisingly upbeat and contrasts sharply with the dark content matter of the lyrics, which are sung in a detached monotone. Although the song itself is not inherently humorous, this incongruity makes it easily exploitable for humorous purposes.[34]

Second, there is something of an esoteric factor to the song and the vernacular culture that surrounds it. The upbeat nature of the instrumental track combined with the light distortion on Foster's voice results in lyrics that are easily misheard or ignored. As a result, the song has become notorious for being played in some hilariously inappropriate situations. Specifically, many people who were middle or high schoolers in the years following 2011 (myself included) have fond memories of this song being played at school dances (Figure 2.18). Additionally, some people have reported playing a rendition of the song in their school orchestras or choirs or have heard the song played in other inappropriate locations.[35]

Figure 2.18: A joke about "Pumped Up Kicks" being played in inappropriate places.

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[34] This incongruity may explain why more serious songs about the same subject, such as "Pumped Up" by Kilgarde (based on Foster the People's song but told from the perspective of the shooter's classmate) or "School Shooter" by XXXTENTACION, have not been utilized in humour at all.

[35] Humour and unease alike arise from the combination of a song about school shootings and actual school events. This is driven by juxtaposition of a celebration and happiness with lyrics that describe one of the worst possible outcomes of that gathering. This is furthered by the ambiguous motivations of the adults in these situations. If an orchestra director or school DJ doesn't realize what the content of this song is, then it is funny, because the students are effectively getting away with a transgressive act. However, for an adult, especially an adult charged with keeping students safe, to knowingly play a song so heavily associated with school shootings and violence against children crosses an even larger boundary beyond the harmless fun that the students are having.

Since its debut, Pumped Up Kicks has been used for humorous content. This includes two YouTube montages of Columbine news clips set to the song,[36] and a number of "humorous" remixes of the song. One, entitled "'Pumped up Kicks' but You're Hiding from a School Shooter," and another called "'Pumped up kicks' playing on the PA system while you're in the restroom hiding from the shooter," both involve the song altered to sound like it's playing over a school PA system. As the song plays, gunshots and the sounds of students screaming and running can be heard.[37] Nothing about the remixes themselves are textually humorous in any way, but they are presented as and interacted with as humorous by both the creators and audience, and the comment section is filled with jokes. Other vernacular interactions with this song include pranks pulled by middle and high school students, which usually involve playing this song at school or over the PA system, with hopes of causing fear and panic in other students.
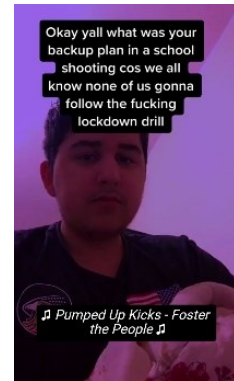
Figure 2.19: An example of "Pumped Up Kicks" being used to indicate satirical humour.

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[36] The first was uploaded on April 8th, 2013, by user N0toriousFinN, and the second was uploaded on November 5th, 2015, by user Alan Ortega. Neither video is currently available for viewing, but the page on *KnowYourMeme.com* that details the vernacular history of "Pumped Up Kicks" implies that these videos were meant to be received as a form of dark humour ("Pumped Up Kicks" 2020).
[37] The latter video is even more detailed- it also includes the sounds of the heavy footsteps of the shooter, which get louder and quieter to simulate walking past the listener's hiding place, and a young woman's loud sobs can be heard throughout. It ends with the sound of a door opening, and a male voice says, "Hey there," before a final gunshot.

In general, this song is closely related to school shootings and specifically to school shooting humour and is heavily utilized in the following tiktoks. It often serves as a signal that the creator is invoking a humorous frame and not a serious one (Figure 2.19). In some cases, it is the *only* indication that a tiktok is meant to be taken as humorous. In

Figure 2.20: An example of "Pumped Up Kicks" being used to indicate the relation to school shootings.

others, its inclusion is the only thing that makes a joke a *school shooting* joke specifically (Figure 2.20).

Joke Types

Early into this project, it became increasingly clear that although school shooting humour encompasses a large number of forms and themes, generally these jokes can be split into three major types: jokes about real school shootings; jokes about generic, fictional school shootings; and humorous stories about real-life events related to shootings that happened to the creator.

The first major category is jokes about real school shooting events that have occurred recently. Many of these jokes are formulaic riddle jokes that have been adapted from oral circulation.[38] Overall, these jokes largely seem to fall under the category of disaster humour, although they have circulated for a longer period of time than cycles about other disasters. These jokes account for only 4.6% of all jokes collected, making them the smallest category of jokes. This category also has the highest rate of riddle

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[38] Notably, 30% of these jokes concern the Columbine Massacre and 46% concern the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. For unclear reasons, there seem to be very few jokes that regard the Parkland shooting, as these jokes count for only 9% of the category, and Parkland jokes are practically non-existent off TikTok. The remaining 15% is made up of jokes about an assortment of other shootings.

jokes, which account for roughly 30% of the category. For examples see Figure 2.21a-c below.
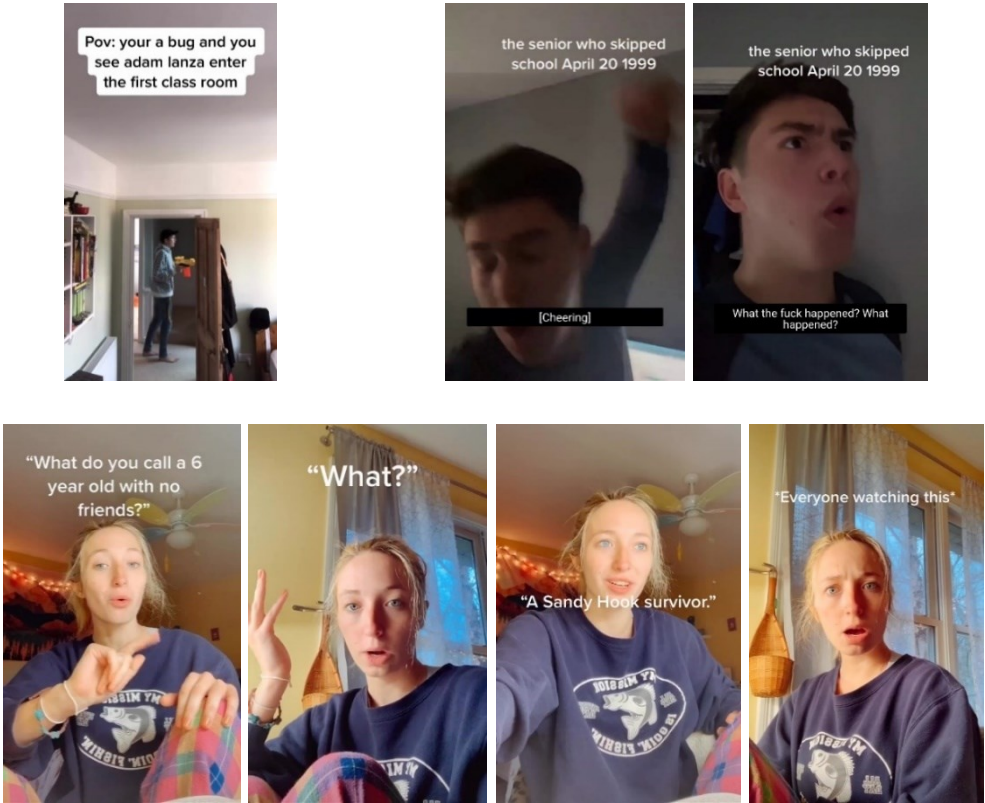
Figure 2.21a-c: Three examples of joke type 1.

The second major category is that of jokes which refer to school shootings in a much more general sense. These jokes almost always feature hypothetical future shootings that have not occurred yet, are about potential school shooters, or poke fun at lockdown drills. Many of these jokes operate on the assumption that school shootings and school violence are common in America, and that school shootings are common experiences among students. Only 1% of these jokes are in the riddle format. 11% are satirical humour, and 77% are narrative jokes, with the remainder not being easily categorized as any of the above. This is the largest category of jokes, accounting for 71.2% of all jokes, and these jokes are the main focus of this thesis. See examples in Figure 2.22a-c below.
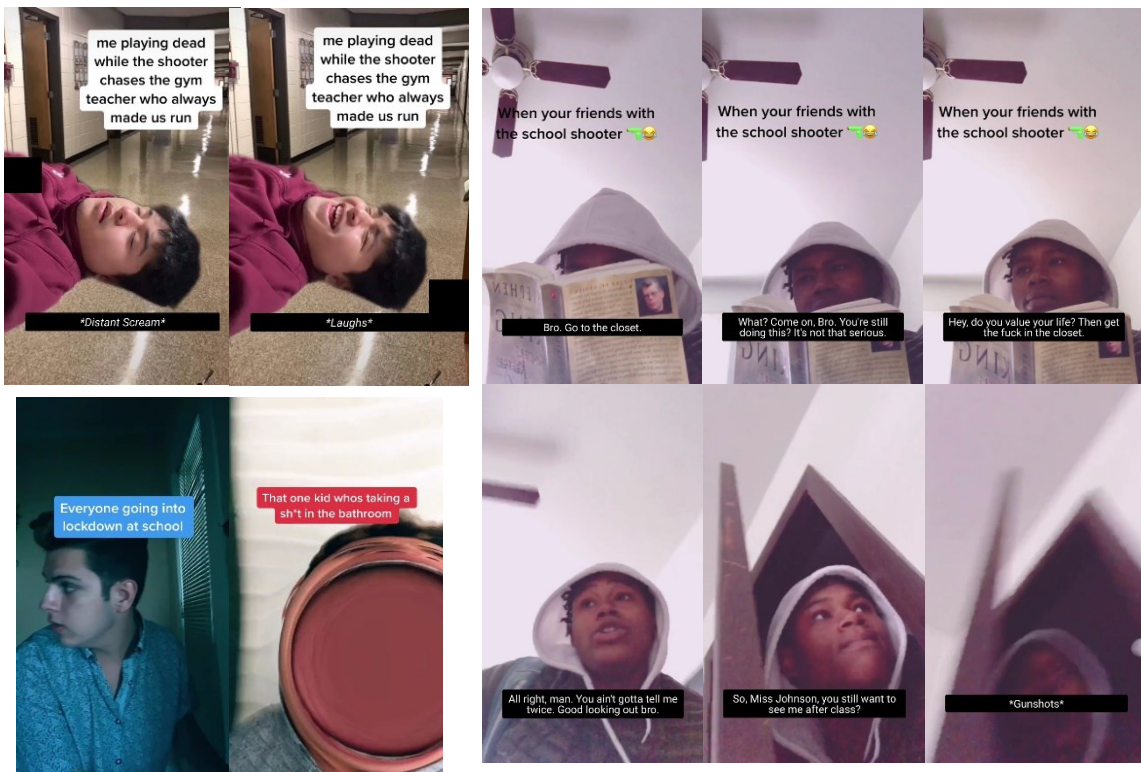
Figure 2.22 a-c: Examples of jokes from Category 2.

The third major category is that of humorous stories and jokes based on the actual lived experiences of the creator. The jokes and stories contained in this category can vary wildly from stories and jokes about lockdown drills and false alarms, to minor incidents that occur on or near campus, to major incidents where fatalities occurred. Notably, this category includes jokes from two survivors of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting (Figure 2.23), and three from individuals directly connected to the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. Additionally, many of

Figure 2.23: A joke by Jordan Gomes, an activist and survivor of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre. She is using a filter to enhance her sarcastic dancing.

these stories include contextual information about lockdown drills in schools and how threats are handled by faculty, information that is severely lacking in academic literature (Figure 2.24). The humour in these stories closely resembles what might be called gallows humour or survivors humour (Ritz 1997; Haas 1977; Tangherlini 1998). Many of these stories are told as a form of one-downsmanship, in which users almost compete to tell the worst story; many are informal and have a loose, conversational tone, and lack structure.

Figure 2.24: A girl humorously recounting how lockdown drill discussions go at her school.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused primarily on the structure of humour on TikTok, beginning with the structure of the app itself, and the ways in which the algorithm subtly guides and constrains the expression of humour, and moving onto the humorous culture of the app, developed by humans creatively interfacing with these digital structures. Understanding these aspects of the app are vital for conducting this research and understanding how people are approaching and creating humour on TikTok. However, this only affords a surface-level look at school shooting humour as a whole. The next chapter looks deeper into the common themes and plot devices to be found within school shooting humour.

Chapter 3: Jokes Overview

Introduction

Before attempting an in-depth analysis, it is prudent to look at the jokes included in this corpus more generally, including the major demographics, plot variations, and themes contained within. This includes a deeper exploration of the central theme of death, and specifically how joke tellers' distance themselves from death in relation to the incongruity of these jokes. Finally, this chapter also looks at the potential origins of some of these themes in the humorous stories found in Category 3.

Demographics

In total, 1485 examples of school shooting humour were collected. Out of this sample, 64.2% were created by Americans, 8.8% were created by non-Americans, and the nationality of the remaining 27% could not be determined. Of the non-American creators, the majority were from England, with Australians and Canadians in distant second and third places[39] (for more on the jokes told by non-Americans and how they differ from the jokes told by Americans, see Chapter 5). Notably, nearly all of these jokes were created by students, fewer than five were created by teachers.

Overall, the gender differences weighted towards male joke tellers, who accounted for 54% of the jokes, while females accounted for 35.5%. The gender of the remaining 10.5% could not be determined. At 55.6%, the majority of creators were white, 21.6% were Black, and 11.6% belonged to another racial background. Another 11.2% could not

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[39] Notably, a number of tiktoks in the hashtags I focused on were in Russian and Spanish; however, these were not collected, nor can I be certain that they were actually relevant to this project.

be determined. For more on gender and race and the differences in how these demographics joke, see Chapter 6.

There was a relatively diverse age range within these jokes, especially considering how young the app's main demographic is. The oldest joke teller was around sixty years of age, while the youngest was around seven years old. The majority (57.8%) fell into the high school age range. Young adults were the second largest group at 20.5%, followed by middle school aged children at 7.8%, and finally adults at 4.%. An additional 9.9% could not be determined.

Major Plot Variants and Themes

The jokes collected are extremely diverse. Once analysis began, I was able to identity some key themes as well as major plotlines that the jokes seem to follow. What follows is brief overview of these plotlines and themes.

Plot Variants

Notably, the following plot variants are specific to the narrative jokes about actual shootings and the more generic, relatable jokes. The humorous stories about real experiences do not follow plotlines. Thus, they are not considered here, although they are included when discussing themes in the section below this.

The majority of these jokes (52%) have plotlines centered around the protagonist's survival of a school shooting. This survival can be accomplished in a myriad of ways, but it is notable that none of these protagonists survive by attacking the perpetrator. Instead, survival is primarily accomplished via more passive routes. For example, in 17% of jokes, the protagonist survives simply by befriending the suspected

shooter beforehand, thus ensuring that they will not be targeted when that classmate inevitably goes on a rampage[40] (see Figure 4.3a on pg. 93 for an example). In 9% of jokes, the protagonist is able to take some action to help assure their safety, such as running away or playing dead (see Figure 6.8 on pg. 133). In 3% of jokes, survival is accomplished by the protagonist simply being late to class or staying home sick from school that day (See Figure 4.3c on pg. 93). There are also a minority of jokes (3%) in which the protagonist is able to take agency away from the shooter by doing something unexpected, such as challenging him to a dance-off (these jokes are typically performed by young boys), or by revealing that they are actually suicidal and actually *want* to be shot by the shooter (see Figure 2.16b on pg. 47 for an example of the former, and Figure 3.9 for an example of the latter).

Many of these jokes end ambiguously, with the protagonist surviving to the end of the punchline, but not necessarily to the end of the event—even in the self-deprecating suicidal jokes mentioned above, we rarely see the shooter act (Figure 3.1). Due to this, a number of these jokes (13%) heavily emphasize the moment of reveal, or the moment when the protagonist realizes that a shooting is about to take place, with the joke ending before they have a chance to take any major actions, and their fate remains unknown.

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[40] In some cases, this is genuine friendship, in others, the friendship is explicitly for the sake of survival.
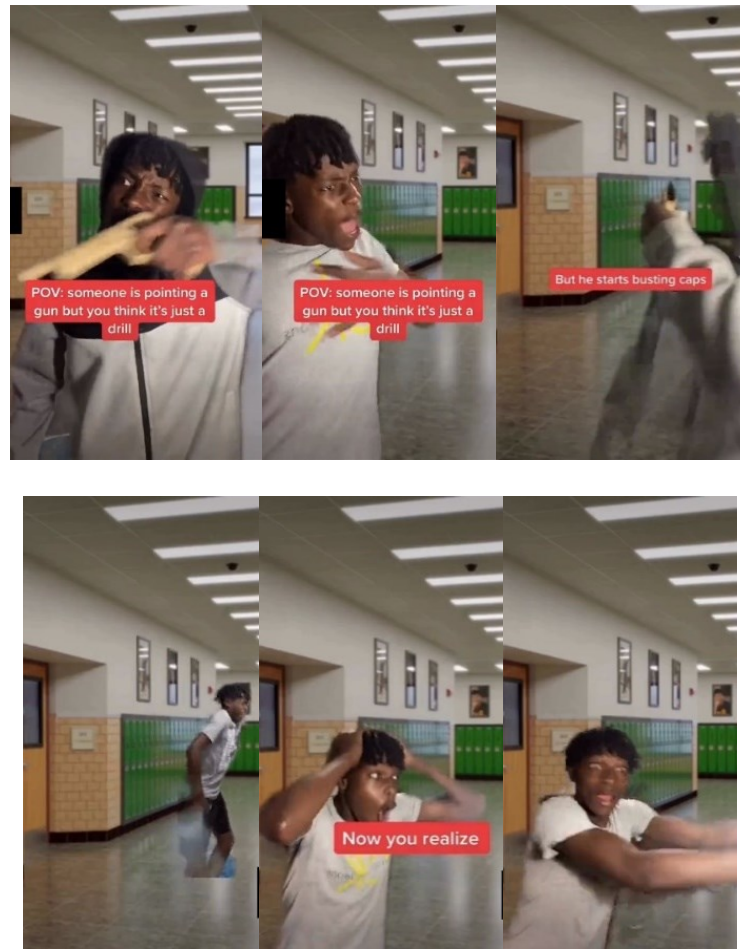
Figure 3.1: An example of a joke with an ambiguous ending— it is unclear if the protagonist survives this encounter, as the joke ends here.

There are also a small number of jokes (7%) that could be considered survival jokes but do not fit into any of the categories listed above.

Another major category of plot lines is the fantasy, which accounts for roughly 17% of all jokes. These jokes differ greatly from those above; rather than focusing on a student attempting to survive a school shooting, they typically make the assailant the protagonist. In 8% of jokes, these are clearly humorous revenge fantasies, with the character reacting violently to common slights made against them by their teachers,

school faculty, or other students. These jokes primarily use exaggeration as a humorous technique. In the remaining 9% there is no explicit motivation for the gratuitous violence the character shows, and it is often unclear what the punchline is supposed to be. These jokes are discussed more in Chapter 6.

Another 14% of jokes are centered around conflicts other than those that occur between the shooter and their victims. In some cases, the joke is still about school shootings in general, such as jokes that criticize the American government's lack of effective response to school shootings (see examples in chapters 5 and 6). In others, the school shooting is just a useful narrative tool the teller is using to frame a joke about a separate conflict, such as those with a teacher or another student. In the case of the latter, these plotlines usually involve finding humour in the demise of disliked classmates at the hands of an assailant (Figure 3.2).
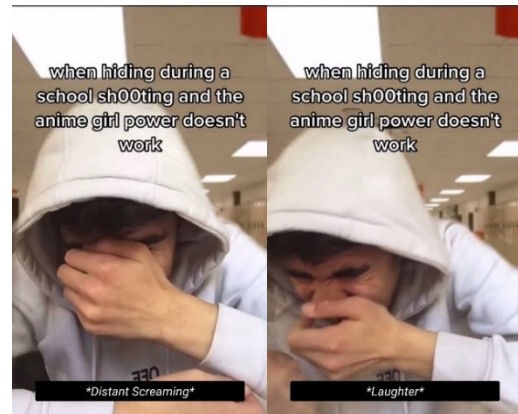
Figure 3.2: A joke mocking a "weird" classmate. In this case, a female classmate who (presumably) enjoys roleplaying as characters from her favourite anime.

The remaining 17% of these jokes cannot be accounted for in the above categories. Many of these are absurd jokes with nonsensical plotlines, or unique plotlines that are not part of a larger trend.

Themes

In addition to the variations of plotlines found in narrative jokes, many smaller themes show up repeatedly. Notably, many of these are themes that I have read into these

jokes— whether or not the original creators may agree with my interpretation is impossible to know without conducting interviews. This is especially relevant when considering the jokes that I believe hint at a student's anxiety about shootings, which is not always explicitly stated.

24% of all tiktoks collected make note of the fact that school shootings are a uniquely American phenomenon. This can be the main focus of a joke, such as in many of the political and satirical jokes, or it can be a brief offhand remark in the caption or hashtags of a tiktok. Additionally, there are some notable thematic differences between jokes of this nature made by Americans, and those made by non-Americans. For more on America and American identity in school shooting jokes, see Chapter 5.

32% of jokes are critical of the (American) school system. Of these tiktoks, 15% are general complaints about the school system, not necessarily related to school shootings but rather to issues and conflicts that commonly occur between students or with teachers. These jokes often use the general conflict plotlines mentioned previously. Some examples of these jokes are found in Chapter 6. The remaining jokes are more directly about issues between the school system and school shooting threats. In 8%, the creator displays a general lack of faith in the school system to protect students in an active shooter emergency, and questions standard safety procedures like lockdown drills. 5% focus specifically on how teachers can accidently undermine students' feelings of safety during lockdown drills, 1% involve school administrators or officials not taking threats seriously, and 3% highlight issues with how safety information is communicated to students. Examples of these can be found later in this chapter. In contrast, only 6% of jokes can be read as explicit condemnations of the American government. The majority of

these jokes are general, but 1% make specific mention of Republicans, and 2% reference gun control. All but one of these jokes views gun control positively.

Caption 3: "Please don't say I'm the only one #schoolshooting"

Figure 3.3: A joke that portrays thinking about future attacks as being somewhat normal.

In 35%, creators make some reference to the long-term effects of school shootings. This includes the lasting trauma caused by such a traumatic event, as well as jokes that note the frequency of school shootings and the anxiety that some students feel. How these themes appear can differ based on whether it is in a fictional joke or a humorous personal story. In humorous personal stories, the creator will often directly refer to feelings of anxiety and fear due to the ongoing threat of shootings. In the generic relatable jokes, long-term effects more commonly take the form of the implication that thinking about and making plans for future shootings is a normal thing for students to experience (Figure 3.3).

22% jokes involve what I have broadly termed "policing of classmates." The majority of these jokes include descriptors of and warning signs of classmates who could be potential shooters. Since Columbine, the classroom archetypes of the class clown, the jock, and the teacher's pet, have seen themselves gain a new member, often labeled "The Quiet Kid," a classroom pariah, often portrayed as depressed, irrational loners alienated from their peers. They are usually white, usually male, and sometimes the victim of bullying. There is one in every classroom, and everyone "knows" that they are the most likely to shoot up a school. Jokes about the Quiet Kid include details such as what they tend to wear, how they behave around others, and what their home life is like. These details are based partially on popular depictions of school shooters in media, but more

often arise from the vernacular cultural scripts of school shooting present in contemporary youth culture. See Chapters 4 and 6 for examples of these jokes. However, some of these jokes do not concern the shooter, but rather focus on other students and the protagonist picking on other students that they dislike, with the protagonist finding pleasure or humour in the disliked students' demise (See Figure 3.2 above). These themes often use the conflict plotlines mentioned above.

There are a concerning 5% of all jokes that could potentially be read as threats by the creator against their school. These are "jokes" in the sense that they seem to be non-serious and invoke a playframe, but there is no real incongruity or punchline. While I do not believe that any of these jokes *are* serious threats, it is very likely that these jokes could result in serious consequences for the creators if shown to a school administrator or other authority. As might be expected, many of these jokes fit into the revenge fantasy plotlines. Some examples of these jokes can be found in Chapter 6.

5% of jokes touch on the subject of race in some manner, and specifically a common perception that only white people are school shooters. For more on this, see Chapter 4.

3% of jokes make some mention of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These jokes often cross over with the jokes that criticize the school system, as they often mock schools' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rush to attempt to adapt school activities to virtual classes (Figure 3.4).

The remaining 16% of jokes contain minor themes that do not make up large enough categories to note here. This
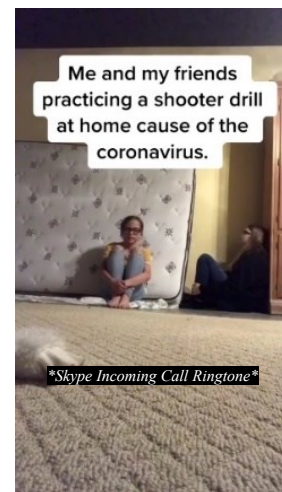
Figure 3.4: A joke mocking the idea that schools would continue to run digital lockdown drills during online schooling.

includes jokes that mention sex, which accounts for less than 1% of all jokes. This is

notable, as sex is often a major focus of dark and sick humour, especially when employed

by young people. However, in these jokes, examples of sex are surprisingly few and far

between. The ones that do appear typically involve the survival plotlines, with girls

flirting with or offering to sleep with the suspected shooter pre-emptively in order to get

in their good graces and be spared. There are also a small number of necrophilia jokes

told by young boys.

While there are many plotlines and minor themes employed in school shooting

humour, the central theme that runs through nearly every joke is death, or the threat of

death. Death is a staple of sick humour and the many dark joke cycles of the past, but

upon closer inspection it is clear that school shooting humour does not utilize death in the

same way as past joke cycles.

Distance and Death in School Shooting Humour

It is often assumed that, when using dark humour, joke tellers are attempting to

mentally distance themselves from death, and specifically from the looming threat of their

own death. This is discussed in depth by psychologists McGraw, Williams, and Warren

(2014), who utilize benign violation theory to determine generally when sick humour will

be accepted as appropriate. They argue that dark jokes must employ a delicate balance,

selecting topics that are psychologically distanced from the teller and audience enough

that they are not seen as a true threat to them (which would be too great a violation), but

also not so mentally distant or irrelevant that the joke produces no violation at all

(McGraw, Williams, and Warren 2014). This distance can be temporal, spatial, social, or

hypothetical (as in, depicting hypothetical or fictional scenarios) in nature (Gubanov, Gubanov, and Rokotyanskaya 2018). As this distance increases, people will increasingly begin focusing on the abstract aspects of that experience. This is important for humour research, as abstraction allows people to better hold incompatible and incongruous ideas at the same time (McGraw, Williams, and Warren 2014).[41] Thus, distance from certain events can allow individuals to see something as both tragic and humorous.

Building on this, Gubanov et. al note that black humour can be characterized as a shift from a specific interpretation of events to an abstract one, and that the trigger for this shift seems to be the repeatability of the same information (Gubanov, Gubanov, and Rokotyanskaya 2018). They connect this with previous work on disaster humour, specifically work that focuses on the mediazation of disasters. Dundes and Smyth saw disaster humour as a means for joke tellers to release anxiety and mentally distance themselves from the death they were observing. Smyth notes that "In Freudian psychology people can never imagine their own death (one is always there as a spectator) and in their unconscious people are convinced of their own immortality" (1986, 253). In their view, our inability to grapple with our own death is tested with the graphic depictions and focus on death and dying that occurs in the aftermath of media disasters such as the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster or the attack on the World Trade Centers. These public deaths, and specifically the way that the media replays disaster footage over

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[41] McGraw et al. draw on Construal Level Theory, which proposes that humans form abstract mental construals of distal objects in order to experience memories, thoughts of the future, and hypothetical alternative realities. In this theory, the further away a concept is from the current self, the more abstract a mental construal must be. Additionally, abstraction is characterized by a loss of detail in favour of focus on central (and presumably, important) aspects (Trope and Liberman 2010).

and over again, may bring human mortality into sharp focus, and jokes become a way to stave off the anxiety that follows. Furthermore, engaging in the mockery of death can transform an anxious feeling into a pleasurable one and create a sense of defiance against our own encroaching death (Blank 2013). Notably, the majority of these interpretations rely on psychoanalytic theory. However, it seems generally accepted that much of the humour about death is designed to allow people to literally laugh at death, and by extension, the dead.

English scholar Paul Lewis applies this perspective to his analysis of what he calls "killing jokes"— the snappy one-liners often utilized by horror movie villains in the aftermath of a kill.[42] Lewis investigates why the theatre audiences would find the brutal and gory on-screen deaths amusing, especially when they were likely rooting for these protagonists only moments before. He argues that seeing a protagonist with whom the audience likely identified have their body mutilated and destroyed on-screen makes the audience feel uncomfortable with that identification. Thus, to relieve their discomfort, they laugh at the body, and by extension align themselves with the villain (Lewis 2006).

In school shooting humour, we see a much lower level of abstraction than in the above jokes or other forms of sick humour. In the dead baby jokes collected by Dundes, for example, the dead baby is an abstract infant, not a reference to a specific deceased child (Dundes 1979). However, in school shooting humour, students are not distancing themselves from the dead bodies portrayed in these jokes. In fact, the relatable nature of

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[42] For example, in *Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Gate*, a male character is murdered by Freddy Kruger when his mattress suddenly fills with water, to which Kruger quips, "How's this for a wet dream?" (Lewis 2006).

these jokes requires not only the teller but also the audience to be able to directly connect to and identify with the characters and their near-death experience. Unlike disaster jokes reviewed by Dundes and Smyth or the movie audiences Lewis was studying, these students seem much more likely and mentally ready to acknowledge their potential kinship with the on-screen victim. There is still a level of abstraction that originates from the hypothetical nature of these jokes— the acknowledgment that this is a possible future, and one that is set within a playful frame— but it is a much lower level of abstraction than expected.

This carries over into how death is utilized in these jokes. Dead baby jokes and similar forms of dark, shocking humour from the same time period operate by violating the traditional riddle format— the audience is presented with a question, and assumes that the answer is somewhat logical, just as a real riddle would be. This logic is disrupted and made humorous by the violation of the incongruous answer, and this incongruity is heightened by the further moral violation of the dead infant. In this way, these jokes are similar to elephant jokes, which Oring believed to be anti-establishment jokes based on how they played with the rules of riddling (1992). It is the violation of riddling rules in combination with the gross moral boundary transgression that makes these jokes funny.

In school shooting humour, the incongruity and humour of the situation instead comes from how the characters within the text interact with and respond to the death that occurs to them and around them. Specifically, in these jokes, the characters do not react with the alarm, haste, or disbelief as they would in a real emergency. Instead, the characters often meet death largely unemotional and unperturbed, or with annoyance and exasperation (Figure 3.5).

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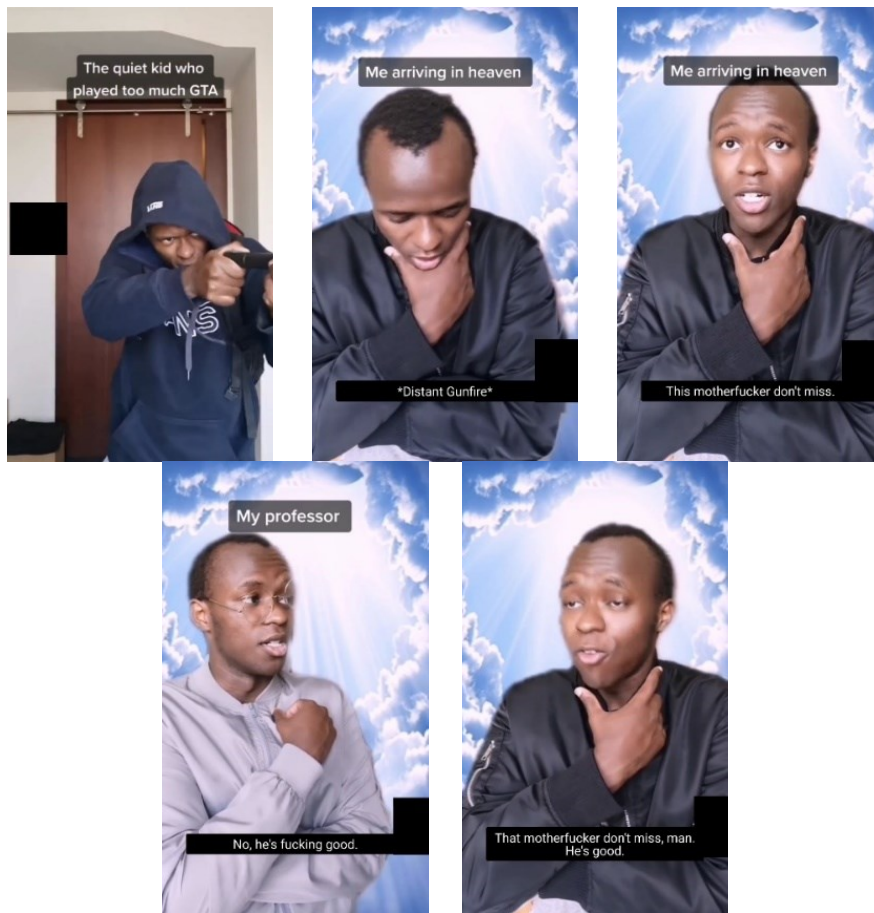
Figure 3.5: A character underwhelmed by his own demise.

In this sense, these jokes bear significant resemblance to the Little Willie and Little Audrey jokes that circulated in the first half of the twentieth century. These jokes involve children inflicting, witnessing, or being the victim of great harm, and we see similar nonchalance from the characters—both those doing the violence and those subjected to it.[43]

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[43] An example of a Little Willie quatrain:

> *Little Willie hung his sister;*
> *She was dead before we missed her.*
> *Willie's always up to tricks.*
> *Ain't he cute? He's only six* (from Thorson 1993)

Little Audrey jokes tended to take the form of short stories and can be identified by the use of phrases like "Little Audrey just laughed and laughed," which almost always precedes the punchline. For examples of Little Audrey jokes, see Chambers 1937.

However, there are some major differences. School shooting humour tends to diverge from other similar jokes; unlike the Little Willie and Little Audrey jokes, the characters being joked about are not fictional, they are stand-ins for real people: specifically, the teller and the audience. Furthermore, this attitude towards death extends outside the fictional playframe, and is reflected in students' attitudes about actual harm towards themselves.

This nonchalance towards death can also be seen in the humorous personal stories found in Category 3. While these stories are primarily told after the described incident, there are some notable exceptions, such as when students instead upload footage that was originally shot *during* an active crisis situation (Figure 3.6a-c).
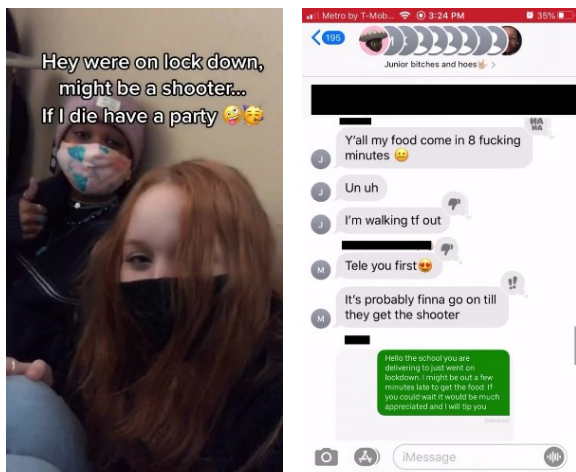
Figure 3.6a-c: Examples of students joking during active shooter situations. In Figure 3.6c, we see a group chat during an active shooter event, in which one student was significantly more concerned about their food arriving than their own life.

Within these clips, we often see students turn to humour over the course of these events, meeting real danger with the same sense of detached disinterest that they claim to do in jokes. In these clips, many students have no qualms about making jokes, even in the middle of very serious situations. Other students present do not visibly object to the joke-making, and the stories are uploaded with the expectation that other people will find it funny. The thought of having to defend their laughter at something so serious does not even seem to cross the creators' minds— this is *not* a major moral violation or transgression for them. Many seem to be posting with the full confidence that other students will not only excuse their humour, but fully understand it and perhaps join in with stories of their own in the comment section. These events are seen as notable, but relatively normal.

Taken collectively, it is possible that these jokes are thus best examined as a form of gallows humour. Specifically, there seems to be some level of kinship between these jokes and the gallows humour often employed by those in the medical profession and those serving in active warzones. In these occupations, death often becomes so commonplace that it is no longer taboo to joke about it, and it can feel necessary for survival (Tangherlini 1998; Cook 2013). In these situations, dark humour functions as a coping mechanism. This interpretation of jokes seems to be popular among those making them, and especially when it comes to the jokes made during actual crises. This is made clear in a tiktok (Figure 3.7), in which a young girl has posted a tiktok of herself dancing, while on-screen text informs the audience that she is playing absent due to a threat of a shooting occurring at her school. Interestingly, this post *did* receive some pushback in the comment section,[44] which led to the following exchange (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.7: A girl reacting to a possible threat at her school.
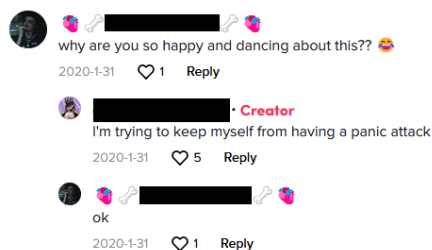
Figure 3.8: An exchange in the comment section of Figure 3.7.

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[44] This is possibly due to this girl's identification of herself as a furry, which is a subculture that is often seen as "cringy" and as fair game for mocking on the internet.

In this case, humour is very clearly being used as a coping mechanism — the girl is aware of what she is doing, and furthermore this explanation seems to be accepted without question by the commentor. Many other tiktoks have expressed similar attitudes, as they view both the humorous stories of Category 3 and the relatable jokes of Category 2 as coping mechanisms— distractions from the constant threat of potential shootings. There is of course one obvious issue with this interpretation— school shootings and death are not *that* commonplace in American schools.

It is certainly true that America is one of the only Global North countries where school shootings occur at such high rates; however, these jokes exaggerate the rate of active shooter events in schools by a considerable amount (Fox and Fridel 2018). While gun violence is common in America, and homicide is the second most common cause of death for children, only 2% of these fatalities occur at school, and even less are due to firearms specifically (CDC 2021). Furthermore, in the last forty years, the risk of dying in a school shooting has never reached above 1 in 10 million, and most victims of gun violence on school grounds were involved in one-on-one, often gang-related altercations (Fox and Fridel 2018). Strictly by the numbers, students are relatively safe at school, especially if they are not involved with gang activity.

It is possible that these jokes are being bolstered somewhat by the already nihilistic outlook that many members of the current generation possess (see Burton 2019; Koltun 2018). Death humour, and especially suicide humour, has been a staple of the Millennial and Gen Z generations, who often use it to express frustrations and anxieties about daily life (N. Smith and Linker 2021). However, there is one notable difference between suicide humour and school shooting humour: while both are based on

exaggeration and hyperbole, suicide humour is based on an *overreaction* to a minor

incident, such as threatening to drink bleach because you forgot to do your homework,

while school shooting humour is based on an *underreaction* to an extremely dangerous

situation. It is possible that these school shooting jokes similarly encompass other issues

or fears within them. Students are currently entering into an extremely unstable world.

The primary age group studied here was born in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and the

societal and cultural chaos that has followed, including a major recession and now the

COVID-19 pandemic. All of this, on top of the normal volatility of adolescence, as

teenagers are preparing to enter the world, exploring their identities, and making major

life decisions. Thus, it is possible that some school shooting humour is about more than

just school shootings and has become a way for students to funnel their anxieties about

the future and general state of the world into a tangible format.[45]

Another possibility takes us back to the concept of abstraction and distance in

morbid humour. Abstract thinking is often triggered by the repetition of the same

information (Gubanov, Gubanov, and Rokotyanskaya 2018). Humour scholars Gubanov,

Gubanov, and Rokotyanskaya were focused on over-active media responses to disaster,

but, as they write, "Any information repeatability, even in relation to socially important

themes, ultimately leads to indifference" (2018, 381). Thus, it is possible that repeated

lockdown drills may also contribute to the attitude of the humor. It is difficult to

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[45] This interpretation echoes Oring's reading of dumb blond jokes (2003). Oring resisted the notion that blond jokes were broad attacks on women and femininity or reactions to the threat of women in the workplace, and instead believed that these jokes were simply "signs of the times…[that] serve as loci for the crystallization of values…These values are manipulated in jokes to define the boundaries of this world and register new expectations" (Oring 2003, 70). Something similar may be occurring in these jokes, as the world has undergone a significant amount change in recent years, and jokes like this are simply how this generation is expressing these changes.

determine the validity of this, as there is almost no data available regarding the frequency of lockdown drills in American high schools. However, in some of the tiktoks I collected, some students imply that their high school was running these drills as frequently as once a month, far beyond any recommended or required amount (NASP 2021). It is possible that if lockdown drills— especially drills that involve dramatic simulation elements such as simulated gunfire— are run too frequently, they begin to desensitize students to school shootings altogether, similar to how extended, sensationalist media coverage of disasters inevitably leads to jokes about that disaster.

It may also be possible that feigning nonchalance in the face of death is a way of mentally stripping a school shooter of their power. Many school shooters have been motivated explicitly by a need to cause massive harm and distress to school communities, often with specific goals to "beat" other mass shootings' death count (Larkin 2009). By simply not having a distressed reaction, they are able to metaphorically disarm a shooter (fictional or real) and deny him his fantasy. This is hinted at in suicidal jokes (Figure 3.9).

Figure 3.9: An example of a suicidal joke.

Granted, it is relevant to note here that only 8% of jokes end with a confirmed death of the protagonist— in 59% of jokes, the protagonist survives to the end of the joke, but not necessarily to the end of the dangerous situation. Their actual fate is unclear to the viewer. Only 32% of jokes see the protagonist surviving unambiguously. Thus, even when placing themselves into dangerous situations, students still do distance themselves somewhat from death.

Interplay between Categories 2 and 3

The jokes discussed in the section above hint at the connections to be found between the jokes in Category 2 and the humorous stories in Category 3, with students often displaying the same mentality towards death in both categories. This is true of other themes found within both categories as well, and perhaps more importantly, the potential origins of themes found in Category 2 can be located in the Category 3 jokes.

The humorous stories found in Category 3 are extremely important in their own right, and certainly warrant further study. Although the humorous stories of lived experience are anecdotal and are likely exaggerated by their tellers, they represent some of the only data on the frequency of lockdown drills, student perspectives on drills, and issues with how schools implement them. Collectively they paint a cohesive picture of the vernacular culture surrounding school shootings in American high schools today and can inform what is found in Category 2.

One of the best examples of this involves the role of teachers in school shooting jokes. In the fictional jokes of Category 2, teacher-characters are often non-existent in the text of the joke. When they do appear, it is often only briefly as a background character,

and they typically fail to react appropriately to the events unfolding around them. While they rarely act maliciously, they are often portrayed as incompetent. Unlike the protagonist, who is usually portrayed as recognizing a potential shooter in advance of a shooting (even if it is only seconds prior), teacher characters rarely do, only realizing the danger they are in when it is far too late. Take for example the following joke (Caption 4: "When the quiet kid finally talks! 😬 #4you #4youpage #foryou #foryoupage" Figure 3.10), in which the teacher is clueless, while the student realizes the danger almost immediately. When teachers do initiate action, it is typically simply enacting the steps of the lockdown drills. This is only seen in jokes that specifically mock lockdown drills and question their effectiveness, which often portray teachers as mindless drones following useless bureaucratic routines.
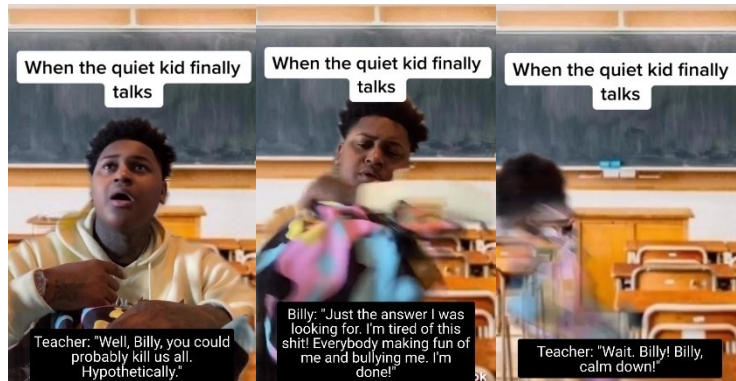
Caption 4: "When the quiet kid finally talks! 😄 *#4you #4youpage #foryou #foryoupage"*
Figure 3.10: An example of a joke involving a teacher.

The joking stories based on real-life experiences may provide some illumination about the portrayal of teachers. In these stories, many students recount situations with their teachers that left them feeling uncomfortable or untrusting after a lockdown drill or safety presentation and indicate that the events

Figure 3.11a-b: Two examples of teachers threatening (likely jokingly) to run away in an active shooter situation.

have damaged their trust in teachers and school administration to act adequately in a real

active shooter scenario. According to student stories, some teachers openly admitted to their students that they believed the standard lockdown drill to be ineffective, even going so far as to instruct students to disregard lockdown instructions and make alternative suggestions. This usually involves escaping the school building rather than staying put (Figure 3.11a-b). These statements are usually interpreted by students as the lighthearted and distracting jokes they are likely intended to be, but some students take issue with these statements, such as in the example below, where this student describes a former teacher as a "psycho" (Figure 3.12).
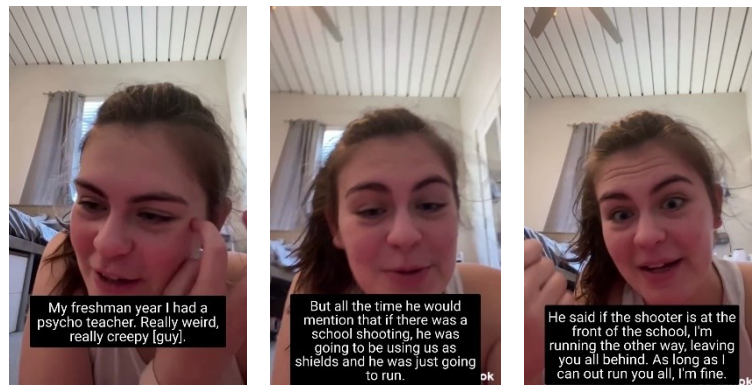
Figure 3.12: An example of a student who felt their teacher's joke went too far.

In December of 2020, a fairly popular young adult creator made a short tiktok in which he reminisced on how lockdown drills were often conducted at schools, and the plans that would be discussed and created as a result (Caption 5: "Americans live the plot of the hunger games daily im convinced #fyp #foryoupage"
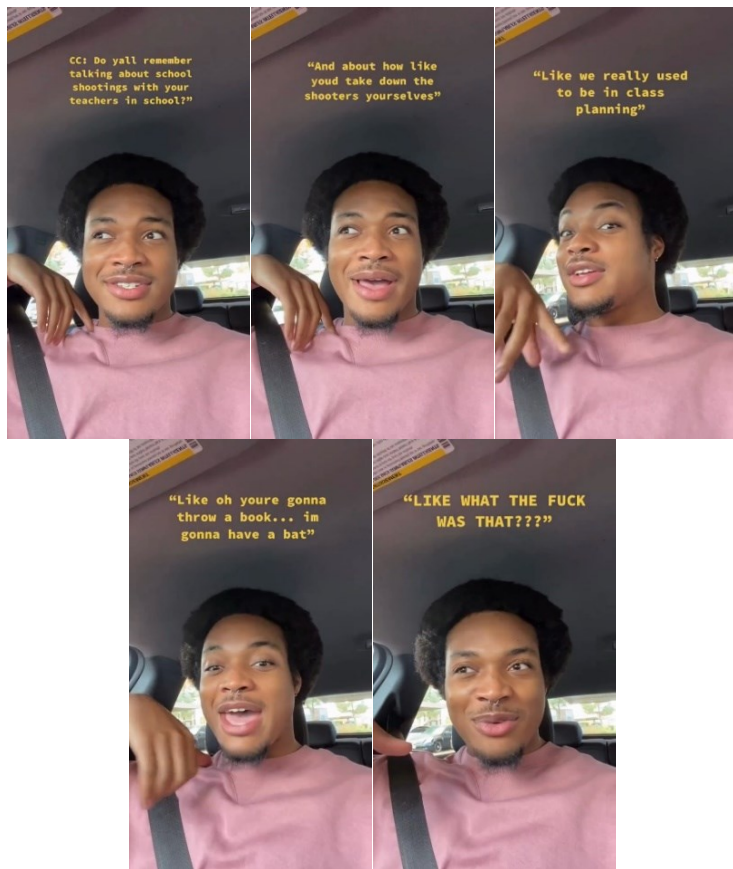
Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.13: An upload from a popular creator on TikTok talking about his experiences with lockdown drills.

Many other current and former students used TikTok's stitch feature to add their own memories of high school, and many of them detailed the plans that were created in their own school. Interestingly, a large number of the students who responded to this tiktok reported that as a part of discussing lockdown drills and active shooter safety, many of their teachers revealed to their students that they kept some kind of "weapon" within their classroom with the express purpose of using them in a real active shooter situation (Figure 3.14). To be clear, these were typically

Figure 3.14: An example of impromptu weaponry being kept in a classroom. This tiktok is a #stitch with Caption 5: "Americans live the plot of the hunger games daily im convinced #fyp #foryoupage"
Figure 3.13 above.

mundane items that would feasibly be in a classroom that a teacher thought they could use as suitable weapon in case of an attack. These weapons range from the understandable to the wildly illogical, and highlights include belts, brooms, crowbars, a bucket of rocks, and a large American flag. While these stories account for only a small number of students (thirty-four in total, less than 3% of all jokes), the comment sections of these stories were often filled with students reminiscing about similar experiences.

The specific attitude and mannerism teachers employ when discussing drills also seems to have a great impact on students. In some cases, students talk about teachers who *technically* followed procedure but stood out for being almost enthusiastic about the idea of an active shooter event occurring. This typically involved female teachers who were

Figure 3.15: A student sharing a story about an overzealous teacher.

enamoured with the prospect of being a martyr for their students, or male teachers (often retired military) who were concerningly excited about the "fight" part of "run, hide, fight" (Figure 3.15).

These stories inadvertently reveal the inherent issues that come with communicating school shooting information to highschoolers. Some students saw their teachers' antics as positive— the jokes were seen as comforting and as evidence that their teachers were "cool." Many students expressed relief that their teachers would be willing to bend or break the rules in an emergency and found their willingness to disparage official procedure as validating of their own view. In other cases, however, students felt that the diverse lockdown plans were overwhelming and anxiety inducing. These stories may support and enhance the practical studies of lockdown drills that were highlighted in the literature review, which often had complicated results— seeing students anxiety levels fall in some regards but rise in others.

Collectively, these stories help to reveal and explain the issues that students have with teachers that they also express in the relatable jokes of Category 2. Although it is impossible to tell how widespread these issues are throughout the education system, a not insignificant number of students seem to be interacting with teachers who openly defy official lockdown plans or display other concerning behaviours. Many of these teachers likely have good intentions, but the result is a collage of contrasting and contradictory directions and messages for students to decipher. It is no wonder that teachers feature so rarely in the fictional jokes of Category 2; from students' perspective, teachers are either naïve conformists ignoring major flaws within the drills they are conducting or are openly agreeing with students that the current lockdown plans are insufficient but offering no

other viable options. Teachers do not appear in most school shooting jokes because teachers are generally not able to present themselves as authority figures in the context of a school shooting.

Another issue that seems especially significant here is that of communication between the school and students in emergency situations. When telling and recounting stories about actual active shooter situations in which they have been involved, many students will pull up screenshots of group chat conversations and texts sent during the event to help validate their story. These conversations are illuminating, both because we can see students joking with each other over text while dangerous situations are playing out (see Figure 3.6a earlier in the chapter and Figure 3.16 below), and also because they highlight the lack of official communication that students receive. Even in the midst of actual active shooter situations, students find themselves relying not on official sources for information, but rather on their own vernacular channels.
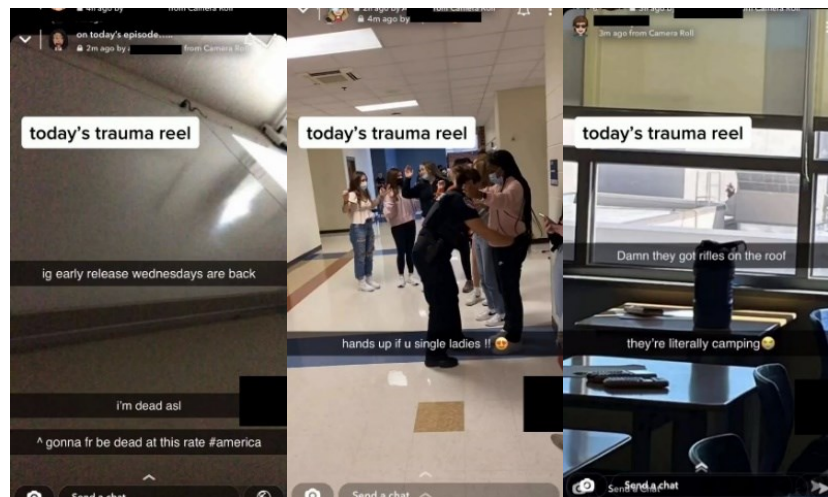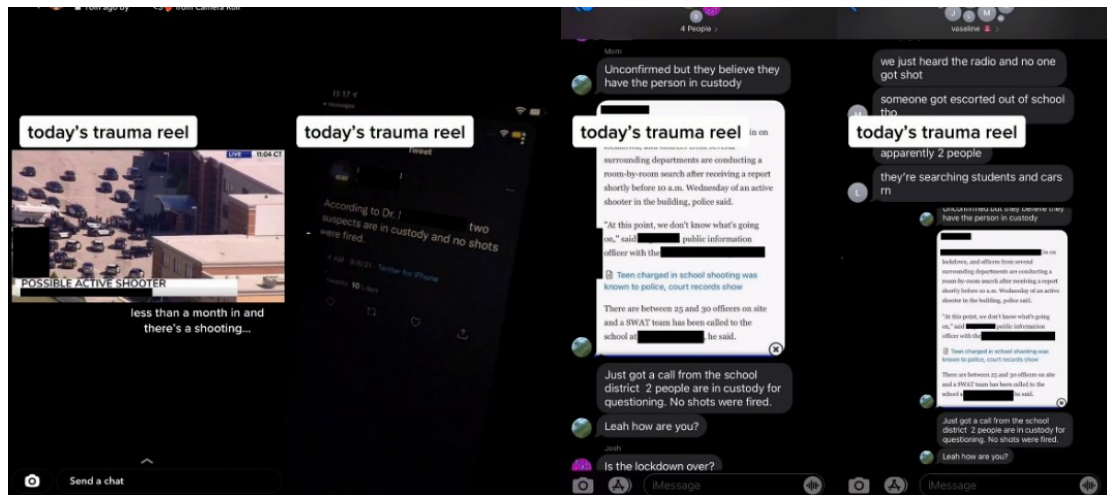
Figure 3.16: A compilation of screenshots that a creator collected over the course of an incident, showing information being passed along vernacular communication channels. Note use of humour throughout.

In the above example, we see a compilation of messages being spread between students as an incident unfolds.[46] Notably, there *are* official sources of information present here—the news footage, the school's official twitter account, and the news article—but even these are being passed along by students through unofficial channels

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[46] These appear to be spread primarily on the app Snapchat, as well as in private group chats between friend groups.

(usually with additional commentary), implying that not all students have direct access to these sources.

This seems to be a common issue in how information is disseminated to students. At first glance, it appears that there is conflict between the informal and official channels of communication within schools. However, it may be more accurate to say that informal vernacular communication runs rampant due to a lack of clear, easily accessible official sources for students to turn to. A repeated theme in these stories is a lack of transparency in the aftermath of major events. This often leads to a low-trust environment that simultaneously puts students and staff in conflict with each other and facilitates the spread of rumours. Collectively, this may lead students to believe that they were in much more danger than they actually were. This lack of faith can also appear in the response to threats that have (supposedly) been handled appropriately by the school, such as that seen in Figure 3.17. Based on this student's account, there is no

Figure 3.17: A story about a threat to a school that was mishandled by the administration.

reason to doubt the school's claim that the issue has been nullified. However, the lack of transparency around this suspected threat— if it was real, if the authorities were involved, and how the threat was neutralized— means that students simply have to take the school's word for it, with no real debriefing of what the situation was and what action has been taken. Given that students are often already skeptical of their schools' ability to protect them, it seems that they are unlikely to trust that the school was able to handle these threats sufficiently.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the main themes and plotlines found within school shooting humour at large, including the way that death is utilized within jokes, and the ties between the humorous personal narratives in Category 3 and the jokes in Category 2. The following chapters look more in-depth at these themes, including cultural scripts of school shootings, gender and school shooting humour, and American identity in school shooting humour.

Chapter 4: Cultural Scripts of School Shootings

A rather striking feature of school shooting humour is its divergence from contemporary cultural scripts that are present in adult discourse surrounding the topic of school shootings, and especially the motivations of school shooters. Media created by adults is often focused on the motivations of past school shooters, with news media focused on sensationalist speculations about the shooters' lives, while popular media attempts to explore the mind of killers (Ash and Saunders 2018). While school shooting humour does attribute motivations to potential shooters, youth in general seem much less concerned with this aspect of school shootings.

Moral Panics and Folk Devils

In the modern western world, youth culture has repeatedly been the center of moral panics. Moral panics consist of hysterical episodes where certain issues or objects of culture are positioned as malicious and disastrous affronts to a society's normative foundations (Walsh 2020; Cohen 2011). In the aftermath of major shooting events, school shooters and their motivations will often find themselves at the center of moral panics, cast as folk devils and harbingers of doom, physical manifestations of adult fear of out-of-control youth[47] (Walsh 2020; Schumann 2011). These moral panics inadvertently play a dual role in the aftermath of shootings, as they give adults and the news media physical forms on which to project their fears of youth culture while also directing the population's attention away from the complex issues that underlie school shooting events.

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[47] Folklorist Linda Dégh went so far as to argue that the numerous copycat shootings in the aftermath of Columbine could be seen as a form of ostension- that Harris and Klebold had effectively ascended from personhood into a legend for likeminded individuals to repeat (Dégh 2001).

Three major motivations or causes of school shootings arise in popular thought in the aftermath of a major shooting: violence in video games, mental illness or developmental disorders such as Autism/Asperger's, and the effects of bullying. Notably, although it is accepted that some of these supposed motivations may be factors in a student's decision to kill, current research suggests that none of these popular motivations are the sole or major cause behind shootings.

Video Games

The emphasis on violent video games came to the forefront post-Columbine, as the nation grappled with the seemingly unprecedented events. Video games were a new, unknown, and hard to control technology that were popular among youth, making them a perfect scapegoat for a fearful adult public.[48]

The actual association between violent video games and violent crime is difficult to sum up briefly. The links between violent games and aggression is fairly well documented in young children, but the evidence is much hazier and actively evolving when it comes to adolescents (Bensley and van Eenwyk 2001). In general, work related to this topic has yielded mixed results, but it is generally believed that video games do not cause violence. Some studies have found minor links between video games and heightened aggression after playing (Markey, Markey, and French 2015; Barlett et al.

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[48] This fear was heightened when the FBI was unable to provide any concrete psychological profile of a school shooter, leaving the members of the public to speculate on their own (Sternheimer 2007). Additionally, the demographic of concern post-Columbine was primarily suburban white youth, who were previously free of stereotypes of violence, so the recent introduction of widespread video games provided a useful scapegoat (Markey et al. 2020).

2009; Ferguson 2007). Other studies have shown no effect, or even benefits such as a decrease in criminal behavior in relation to playing video games (Markey, Markey, and French 2015; Ferguson 2007). However, it is acknowledged than an *obsessive* interest in violent media can be an indicator of violent behavior or a potential school shooter (Bondü and Scheithauer 2011).

Mental Illness and Developmental Disorders

Mental illness— specifically, misunderstood conditions such as psychosis, schizophrenia, and personality disorders— as well as developmental disorders such as Autism/Asperger's are often seen as probable causes for violence and shootings as well. However, while in some cases, mental illness can be a *contributing factor,* modern psychologists do not believe it to be the *root* cause of a shooter's violence (Metzl and MacLeish 2015; Knoll IV and Annas 2016). Instead, the focus on mental illness and Autism is largely produced by the media alone, as well as politicians. Folklorist Simon Bronner examines the folk psychology prompted by the Sandy Hook shooting, when politicians, the media, and members of the public alike posthumously diagnosed shooter Adam Lanza with a variety of disorders, including Autism/Asperger's syndrome (Bronner 2014). Bronner writes that the expressive culture suggests that American folk psychology sees youth violence as a result of individual responsibility and public morality. In the aftermath of cases like Sandy Hook, where violent actions were committed by a seemingly normal boy, there is increased anxiety about the boundaries between normal

and abnormal behavior, and who else among the population might be successfully hiding their secret disease.[49]

Bullying

The last major cultural script we see applied to school shootings is that of bullying, which largely emerged post-Columbine. Prior to Columbine, shootings were often not rampages, but targeted attacks directed towards certain students with clear, usually revenge-driven motivations. In the immediate, chaotic aftermath of Columbine, the media largely settled on bullying as the major motivation of Harris and Klebold's killing spree. This had the unintended affect of making martyrs out of the boys, which in turn lead to copycat shootings. As Larkin writes, "The Columbine shootings redefined [rampage shootings] not merely as revenge but as a means of protest of bullying, intimidation, social isolation, and public rituals of humiliation" (2009, 1309).

Bullying is by far the most prominent and easily accepted motivation for a school shooter. However, the evidence for this link is limited at best— some shooters have had documented histories of being bullied, but many others do not, and some were known for being bullies themselves (Mears, Moon, and Thielo 2017; Reuter-Rice 2008; Rocque 2012). Mears et al. argue that there are two major reasons why bullying is so prominent in cultural scripts. First, it is easy to accept— bullying is an understandable and sympathetic motivation for a shooting that even individuals who were not bullied in school can comprehend. Second, if bullying is truly the major cause of school shootings, then this

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[49] Bronner then compares these narratives to those of wild children from other folklore traditions, which feature unruly children who lack attention from parental figures. Many of these legends furthermore mirror some early academic understandings of autism, which often saw the disorder as the consequences of inadequate parentship.

issue has a simple solution— one that likely requires little taxpayer money or the attention of adults who do not work within schools.

Collectively, these three factors dominate the cultural discourse that current high schoolers have watched develop in the aftermath of shootings as they have grown up. However, it is clear from looking at school shooting humour that current high school students neither accept nor positively acknowledge these cultural scripts, propagated by adults. These cultural scripts paint teenagers and adolescents in a generally negative light, and its clear that teenagers resent this treatment.

Motivations in Jokes

It would be expected then, for the motivations of a school shooter to feature as heavily in school shooter humour as they do in other media; however, this is not the case. When the motivations of shooters *are* remarked upon, youth culture deviates from the cultural scripts and narratives of adults. It is clear that there is a disjunction between emic and etic views of school shootings and school violence.

School shooting humour almost never supports video games as a legitimate motivation for a school shooting. Only a handful of jokes acknowledge this alleged motivation, and it appears only in the context of mocking adults who genuinely believe it (Figure 4.1a-b). [50]

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[50] There is one exception to this, found in Figure 3.5 on pg. 58. In this joke, the shooter is casually labeled as a person who "plays too much GTA," implying that the shooter's love of *Grand Theft Auto* and other violent video games has caused that shooting.
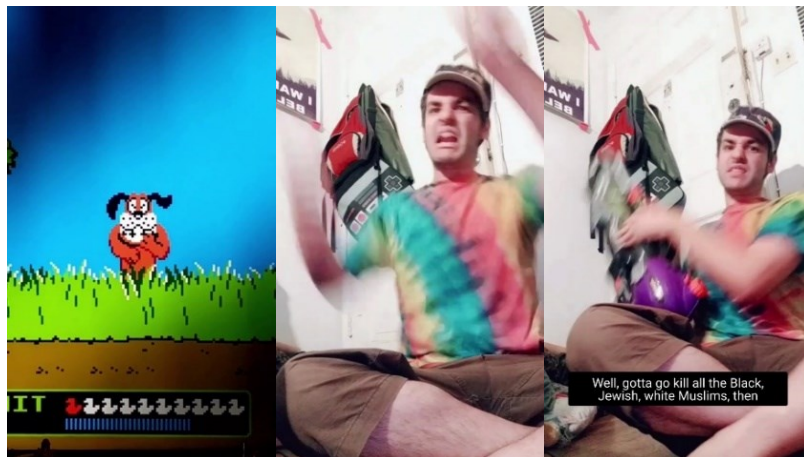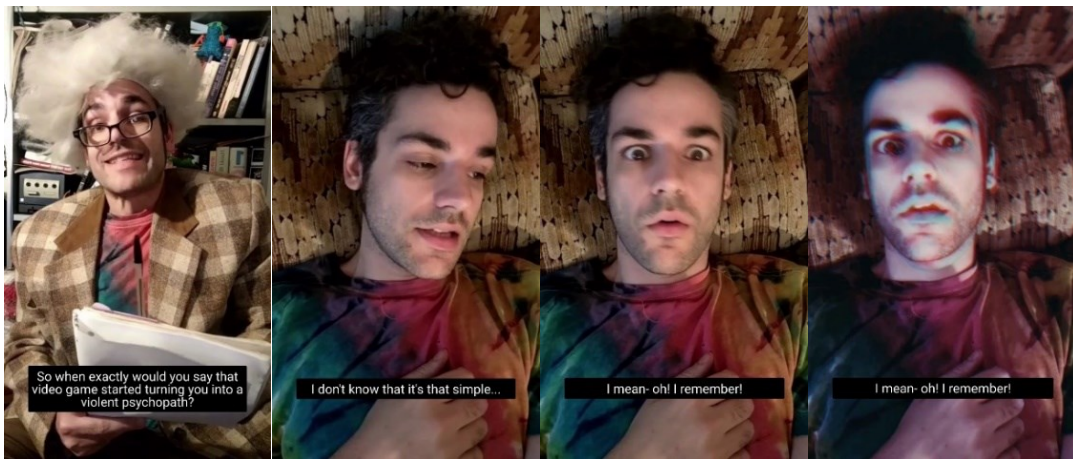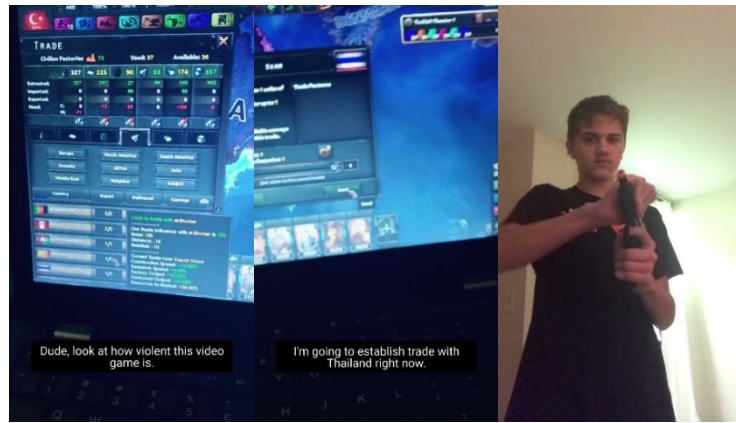
Figure 4.1a-b: Two jokes mocking the idea that video games cause violence. Notice that that the second joke also calls attention to racism and white supremacy.

The logic behind these jokes is never explicitly stated, but the implications seem clear enough. For adults post-Columbine, video games were a new media that had unknown effects on their children. However, for current high school students, video games are just another form of media that has become fully integrated in their lives, and many were first exposed to video games when they were very young. This argument likely fails to convince youth simply because it conflicts with their own lived reality, as nearly 87% of children have regular access to video games from young ages, and the overwhelming majority of those children will not grow up to become school shooters (Tran 2018).

Despite this rejection of adult discourse, many jokes *do* include some imagery and language associated with video games. This includes the few word play jokes in which the protagonist is unable to separate reality from fiction and as a result harms real people by accident (Figure 4.2)
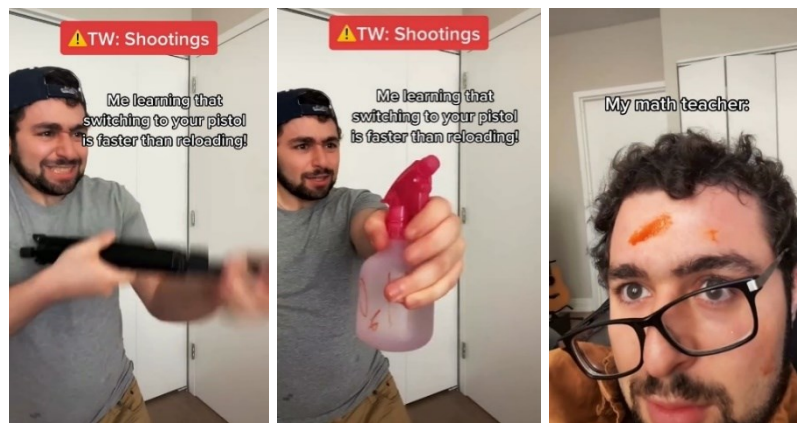
Figure 4.2: An example of a joke in which a school shooter is unable to tell fiction from reality.

This is one of the underlying fears that the older generations have about video games, but here it is turned into a joke, not something to be taken seriously. It should be noted that many jokes do use the language and visual imagery of video games, as seen below in

Figure 4.3a-c; however, this seems to be a product of how the language has become being fully integrated into students' vernacular rather than a desire to make statements about the impact of violent video games.
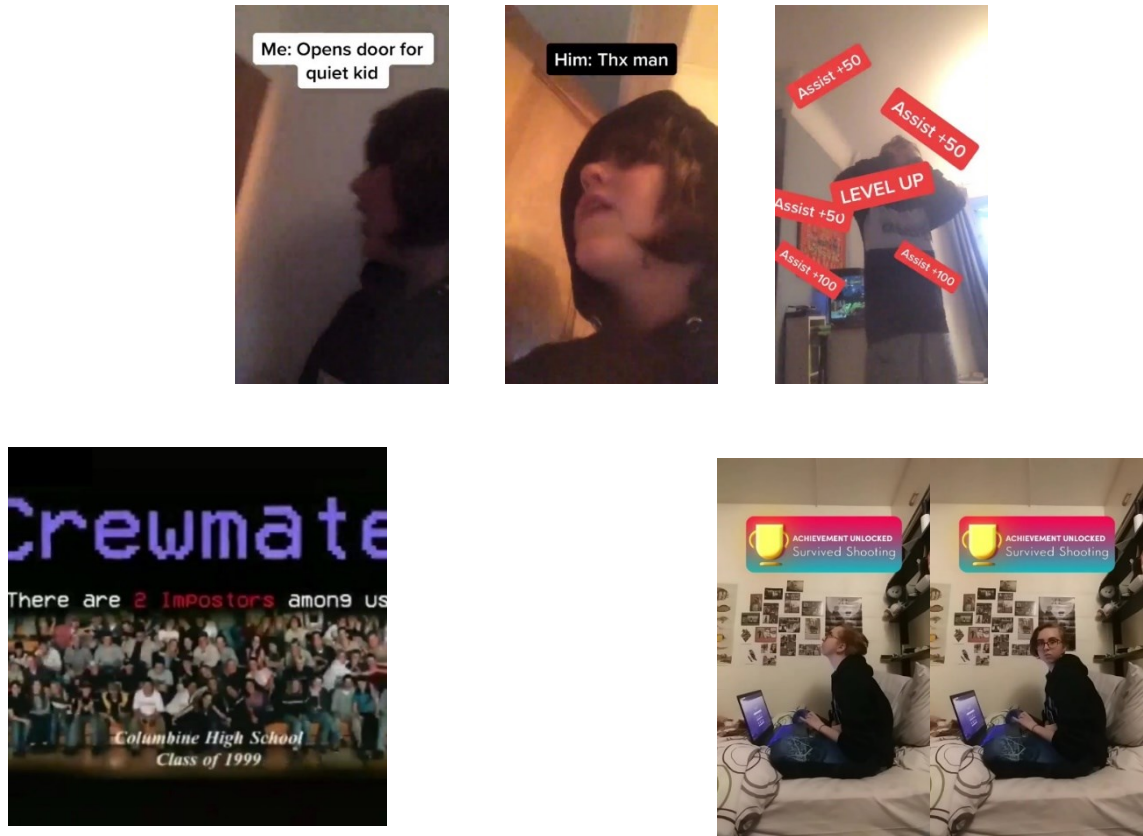
Figure 4.3a-c: A collection of jokes that utilize video game language and images. The first implies that the protagonist is receiving experience points for "assisting" the shooter in his kills, a reward mechanism that occurs in some multiplayer games. The second refers to the video game Among Us *in which a group of players must determine who within the group are imposters trying to kill the rest of the players. The final tiktok uses the imagery of an "achievement," which typically pops up at the top of the screen when a player reaches a certain goal within the game.*
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In perhaps the largest deviation from adult discourses, jokes made by American youth almost never acknowledge the mental illness/autism cultural script in these jokes. The reason why is unclear, although it could be related to the rising rates of diagnosed mental illness in this generation (Patalay and Gage 2019; Twenge et al. 2019). High schoolers today have more general awareness of mental health and better access to information about the more misunderstood mental disorders; thus they have a greater

awareness of the baselessness of claims that mental illness is the root cause of school shootings. Interestingly, there *is* a small corpus of jokes about autistic children and school shootings. These jokes, which account for 1.7% of all jokes, feature disabled students (usually explicitly labeled as autistic, but sometimes more generally as "special needs" or "spec ed") who inadvertently endanger themselves, and sometimes their entire class, due to their inability to understand the situation they are in (Figure 4.4).
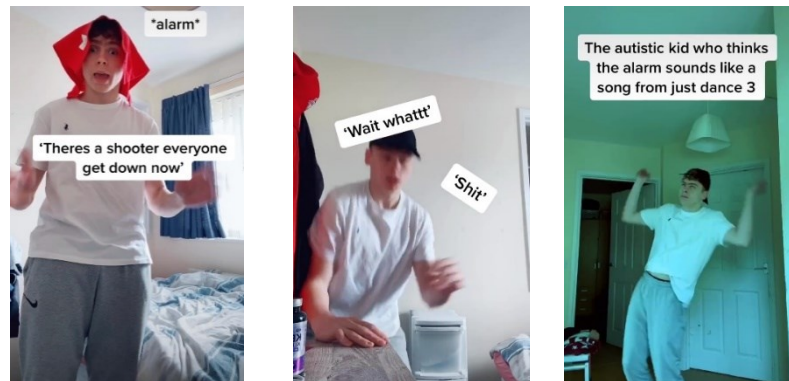
Figure 4.4: An example of an "Autistic Kid" joke. Many of these involve the disabled student dancing.

The reason for this inversion, from Autism/Asperger's creating shooters to instead creating victims, is unclear. It is possible that the answer has nothing to do with youth culture, but rather a shifting of labels. Since 2013, Asperger's has not been considered a valid diagnosis in the United States (for more on cultural effects of this change, see Bronner 2014); instead, it was folded into the category of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This change, and the decreasing awareness of Asperger's, may have affected the perception of school shooters, especially among young people who are unfamiliar with the outdated term. Bronner argues that Asperger's was seen as dangerous because individuals with Asperger's were not always immediately obvious as a person with a developmental disorder to outsiders. Thus, it was viewed by the public not as a disability, but as an emotional deficit, a dangerous time bomb hiding in plain sight. Autism,

94

however, has a significantly different connotation with the public, as it is typically viewed as a severe disability. By recategorizing Asperger's syndrome, children who would have been diagnosed with the disorder have now effectively been removed from the pool of potential shooters.

It should be noted that many of the traits associated with the Quiet Kid or potential shooters, such as social awkwardness, a lack of eye contact, and odd facial expressions, can all be read as symptoms of Autism. This does complicate the above analysis, as it could be argued that many students *do* attribute school shootings to Autism, they just may not realize it.

When school shooting humour does focus on the potential motive of a school shooter, it is almost always bullying. 9% of all jokes give bullying as a motivation. However, even this cultural script is rarely accepted at face value and is often problematized by the joke. Sometimes this is done very explicitly, such as in the joke shown in Figure 4.5, where the teller uses the visuals of a character select screen that is found in some genres of fighting video games. Where the description of a character's skills would normally be are the traits or circumstances that this creator believes to be typical of a school shooter. Bullying is only one of several motivations listed. This is a common theme in other jokes as well, with an underlying implication that even when a student is bullied, they are additionally irrational, quick to anger, and emotionally unhinged, and that it is *these* traits that cause them to become a school

Figure 4.5: A joke listing the traits of a school shooter. This joke implies that school shooters are poor, have issues socializing, and are occasionally bullied.

shooter, not the bullying itself.[51] It is often implied that the shooter is blowing a bullying

incident out of proportion, reacting with much more violence than the situation calls for,

and targeting individuals who were not directly involved. Overall, even when the shooter

is presented as being bullied, it is never portrayed in a sympathetic manner— there is

almost always an additional layer of irrationality and entitled anger.

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[51]In some cases, the shooter is portrayed as not being bullied, but rather as misinterpreting genuine attempts at friendship or lighthearted ribbing as insults. In this sense, it is the shooter's own lack of a sense of humour that ultimately condemns his classmates. The concept of sense of humour is widely valorized in western culture, and lacking one is often tied to a number of negative traits (Smith 2009). Taken together with Kuiper's observations that someone with a good sense of humour is typically someone you *share* humour with (2015), these jokes reinforce the notion that school shooters are inherently alien or "othered" from other students in some way.

Many of the above themes came to light in the aftermath of the mass shooting at Oxford High School that occurred on November 30, 2021. As might be expected, discussions of mass shootings and the motivations behind them began surfacing all over social media, including TikTok. Figure 4.6 is one such discussion that went viral.
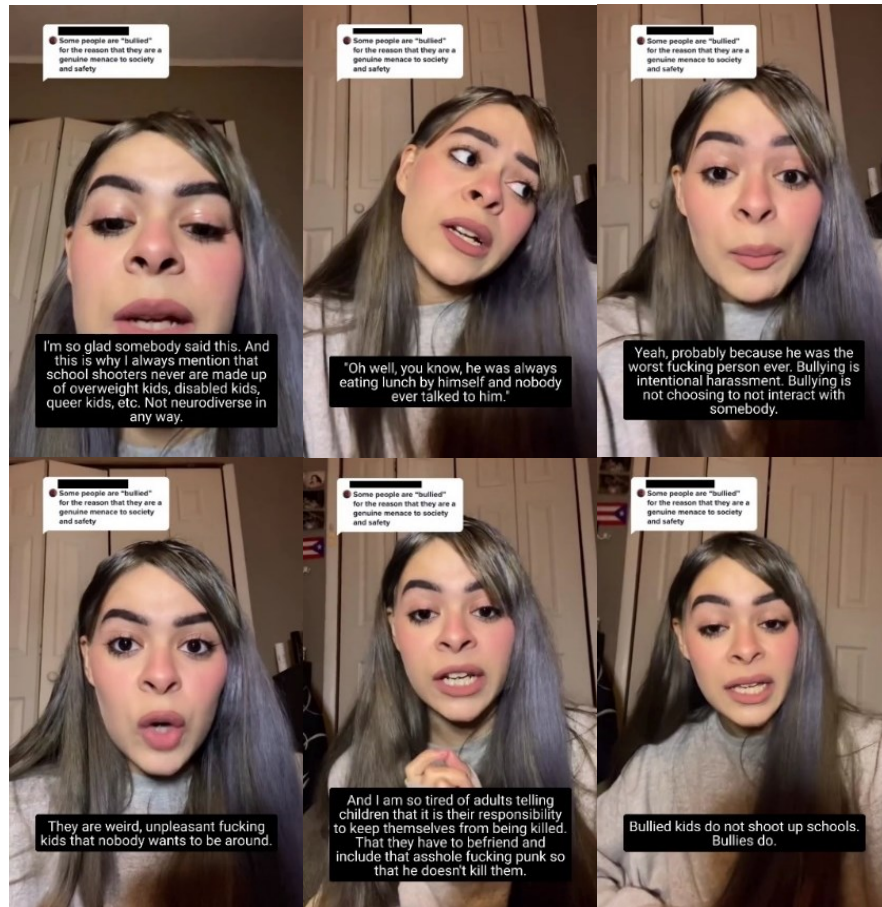
Caption 7: "sometimes kids shut out other kids for a reason"
Figure 4.6: A very popular and well received TikTok about bullying as motivation for school shootings.

This tiktok has received an overwhelmingly positive response, with the majority of comments agreeing with the creator (Figure 4.7). There seems to be some collective agreement that it is not the bullying that makes some students become killers, but rather that they feel entitled to revenge

Figure 4.7: A collection of comments from the tiktok in Figure 4.6.

through violence. This conforms somewhat with writings on the ties between school shootings, hegemonic masculinity, and aggression, which often take the perspective that school shootings are caused by bullying, or at least by feelings of inadequacy and inferiority in the male shooter (Böckler, Seeger, and Heitmeyer 2011).[52]

Untangling the many perspectives around bullying is difficult, and far beyond the scope of this thesis.[53] We can see in the above that American high school students have largely rejected the common cultural scripts applied to school shootings and similar events of mass violence. However, this does not mean that students are not interested in

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[52] This is a dense topic (See Larkin 2011 for an overview), but it is generally noted that western society places great emphasis on the masculine attributes of strength and assertiveness. Furthermore, the association of masculinity with violence has become a cultural norm, and media and popular culture have continuously propagated the notion that violence and aggression are acceptable means of attaining one's goals (Newman 2004; Katz and Jhally 1999; Böckler, Seeger, and Heitmeyer 2011). From this perspective, school shooters, regardless of motive, are simply acting according to cultural norms. They believe that they are entitled to something, and that violence is the best way to gain it.

[53] It is noteworthy that the majority of tiktoks and jokes that mention bullying as motivation are made by young men, while non-joke discussion about bullying (such as above in Figure 4.6a) are headed by young women. It is possible that these young men are not challenging a dominant narrative about school shootings so much as they are justifying acts of aggression and hostility towards fellow male classmates whom they may believe are worthy of ridicule. On the other hand, these young women are also not necessarily protesting the narrative that bullying causes school shootings either but are instead protesting the ways in which this narrative is often applied, which causes young girls to be held personally responsible for their male classmates' violence because they had the audacity to turn down or discourage unwanted romantic or sexual advancements.

the motivations of school shooters— and there is one specific characteristic of school shooters that many joke tellers remark on in their jokes.

Whiteness and School Shootings

Notably, the youth culture surrounding school shootings seems to support an additional theory of shooting motivation, specifically centered on the race of the shooter. The fact that most shooters are white males has become something of an elephant in the room in both mainstream media and the bulk of academic literature. Not only are white students more likely to become school shooters, but the likelihood of a fatality as a result of a school shooting is 85% greater at a predominantly white institution in comparison to a predominantly non-white institution (Livingston, Rossheim, and Hall 2019; Bushman et al. 2018; Gregory 2020). The racial discrepancy is especially odd when considering the potential contributing factors towards this kind of violence, as both white and Black children within the United States have roughly equal access to firearms in the home, similar rates of mental illness, and similar bullying rates (Riddell et al. 2018; Modecki et al. 2014; "Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for the 2015-16 School Year" 2017; Gregory 2020).

In academic spaces there is a small body of work addressing race, although it is not nearly to the size and scope of the more popular motivations for mass shootings. What work does exist is somewhat divided. Academics such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Tim Wise have published works that problematize the concepts of school shootings in general

(Bonilla-Silva 2012; Wise 2001).[54] Both have argued that it is the very racial stereotypes that promote the suburban white school as safe in contrast to urban non-white schools that blinds the community to the crimes that occur within it.[55] This line of thinking results in white suburban schools being *under-policed* and with concerning behaviour being dismissed or downplayed by authorities, thus allowing for an escalation of violence, potentially leading to events like school shootings. In this view, school shootings should not necessarily be seen as the unique, unprecedented events, but instead as integrated with and connected to other crime committed within and around the school.

Other academics have looked at how the construction of whiteness itself may be contributing to school shootings. In this view, whiteness is "a location of structural advantage, of race privilege…. a 'standpoint,' a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society…. 'Whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenberg 1997, 1). Joshua Gregory argues similarly that whiteness as a construct is an inherently unstable identity. Whiteness has historically displayed shifting boundaries, initially excluding groups such as the Irish, only to allow them in later, and is overall more defined by what it is not than by what it is (Thandeka 2000). This makes whiteness extremely fragile, especially in the face of encroaching multiculturalism and a growing disavowal of white supremacy. White youth

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[54] Also relevant to this discussion is the work of Abraham DeLeon, who looks at how white school shooters are constructed in the media as being calculated, cunning, and clever, while Black children who commit violent actions are seen as simply succumbing to their base instincts. White shooters are "a few bad apples" while Black offenders are seen as a reflection of the community that they grow up in (2012).

[55] Wise goes into detail, noting how at the time of Columbine, white students were 34% more likely to sell drugs, twice as likely to binge drink, and nearly twice as likely to drive while intoxicated when compared to their Black counterparts, and yet in popular consciousness it would be assumed that those statistics would be reversed (Wise 2001).

are thus vulnerable to growing existentially unsettled and alienated in ways that non-white students are not. Additionally, Gregory notes that whiteness often causes a sense of circumscribed humanity in children, as white children come to know themselves as such by gradually internalizing a sense of separation from those whom white adults identify to them as non-white, causing a vague sense of alienation and inauthenticity in white children that does not have a definite cause. Gregory argues that this reduced ability to connect to other humans combined with an inherently unstable identity may be a major motivator of violent crimes like school shootings and should be investigated thoroughly.

English scholar Benjamin Balthaser goes further, arguing alongside American historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and journalist Mark Ames that contemporary American gun culture is built directly from America's history of racialized violence (Ames 2005; Balthaser 2018; Dunbar-Ortiz 2018). He connects mass shootings to the phenomenon of spectacle lynching, which he argues emerged to consolidate white supremacy and create a white public through collective white violence. Balthaser argues that mass shootings are the result of a neoliberal modernity, which stresses individualism over community— the white public has effectively been privatized and made much less stable as a result. As he writes, "The mass shooter is blowing up a public sphere that can no longer provide the collective violence or collective security necessary to reproduce his identity" (2018, n.p.). Overall, there appears to be some

Figure 4.8 a-c: Stills from several jokes that label the school shooter as being white. Notably, in the last two jokes this is more subtle, as one implies that the name Luke is a white name, and the other implies that school shooters are not normally black.

101

connection between whiteness and mass violence such as school shootings. Seng-Hui

Cho, who perpetrated the Virginia Tech Massacre, and Salvador Ramos, who committed

the recent shooting in Uvalde, Texas, seem to be the exceptions that prove the rule.[56]
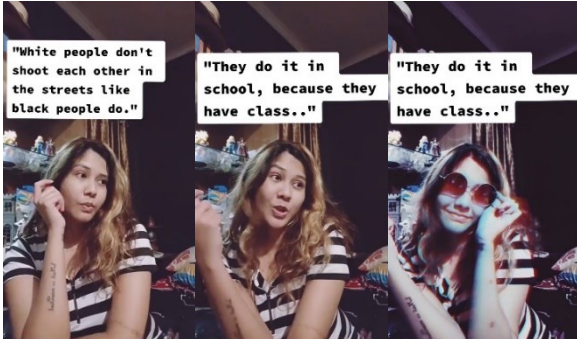
Figure 4.9: A word play joke mocking white people. The filter change in the last frame is reinforced by a tone change in an instrumental song that is difficult to capture in transcription.

Although school shootings humour is not nearly nuanced enough to support these more complex arguments connecting race and violence, many of these jokes are intrinsically aware of the racial aspect of school shootings. The school shooter characters, when they appear, are often

explicitly labelled as being white within the text of the joke (Figure 4.8a-c). Other jokes

are fully centered on this observed relationship between race and school shootings. For

example, one joke plays with racist stereotypes of crime (Figure 4.9). Another features

an amateur stand-up comedian who details his experiences of being one of the only white

kids in a black majority school— and inadvertently earning himself the nickname

"Columbine" because of his quiet nature (Figure 4.10).

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[56] Michelle García, a journalist with the *Texas Observer*, challenges this, arguing that while the Uvalde shooter was not white, he was reacting to and acting in accordance with the quiet violence of the state-sanctioned, white supremacist border security apparatus that is constantly present and policing daily life in southern Texas (García 2022).

Figure 4.10: Stills from an amateur stand-up comedian's set. Note that this is not the full joke, some frames were removed for the sake of space.

A quick perusal of the comment section reveals that he was not the only person with this experience. Still other jokes mock white people and white culture as part of their
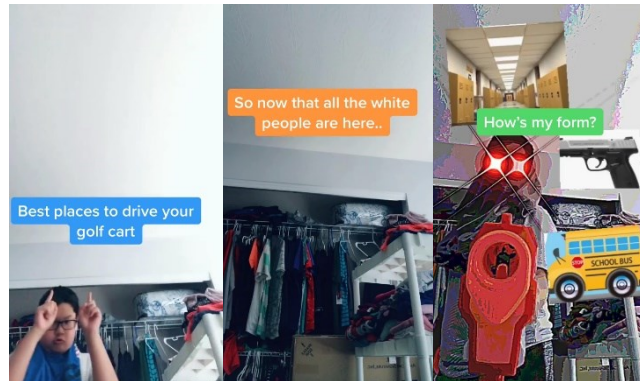
Figure 4.11: A young boy mocking white culture in general.

punchlines, such as in Figure 4.11. In this joke, this boy uses something he thinks that is "white" (in this case, driving a golf cart) in an effort to catch the attention of and bait white people into continuing to watch, only to turn around and imply that school shootings are a part of white culture, or that all white people are potential shooters.

The meaning behind these jokes varies. In some, the mention of a shooter's whiteness is a mere afterthought, an offhand observation that is standard and integral to the character that the creator is portraying, but not worth delving into further. Furthermore, these jokes do not seem to have any underlying political intentions, and the creators do not seem to anticipate much pushback from viewers because of it. It is seen as

a simple truth and a part of the expressive culture they are interacting with and contributing to.

For some white jokesters who do delve deeper, including racial components in the jokes is often a way to reveal the hypocrisy of the government, usually pointing out that if a Black student was responsible for a rampage shooting, the racist backlash would likely have resulted in gun control laws (for example, Figure 4.8a above). In this sense, these jokes may also function as a way for white youth to openly perform their anti-racist stance while also cleanly separating themselves from other overtly racist white people. For Black students, jokes about expelling white students from classrooms during lockdown drills or implying that their white classmates are inherently dangerous may be a way for them to mock and turn cultural stereotypes on their heads— a mirror that mocks the dominant discourse that criminalizes Black students and allows white students to instead be seen as the monster. In these jokes, the actions and bodies of white students, specifically white males, are dangerous and in need of policing.

Conclusion

The fact that the cultural scripts of school shootings differ significantly in adult and juvenile spaces is fascinating and brings with it implications for the future and further research. It will be especially interesting how the prevailing perceptions of school shooters and their motivations in adult media changes as this current generation ages and begins integrating into the adult institutions that uphold these preconceptions.

Chapter 5: The Inherent American-ness of School Shootings

Introduction

One of the major themes found in school shooting humour is the awareness of and emphasis on the American nature of school shootings. Many of the creators of these humorous tiktoks seem to be distinctly aware that school shootings are a primarily American phenomenon. The following chapter investigates the origins of American humour and how school shooting humour fits into traditions of American joking, and how American identity is expressed through these jokes.

Origins of American Humour

Humour is a cultural expression, and like other expressions it is heavily rooted in and influenced by the socioeconomic and cultural realities that it finds itself in over time. While it is difficult to boil down the characteristic humour of any nation to only a few characteristics, especially with a nation as large and diverse as the United States, scholars tend to gravitate towards three major traits when defining American humour: a penchant for exaggeration as the major humorous mechanism, an affinity for cartoonish violence and dark humour, and a general disparaging of the American Dream and all the elements of American identity encompassed by it (Keough 1990; Blair and Hill 1978; Blair 1937; Rubin Jr 1973). These traits find their origins in America's status as a former colony of England, the harsh environments awaiting early American settlers, and of course, the optimistic naivety of the American Dream.

Early American humorous literary works were still heavily influenced by English culture and humorous tradition. As Mark Twain said, "Americans are not Englishmen,

and American humor is not English humor; but both the American and his humor had their origin in England, and have merely undergone changes brought about by changed conditions and a new environment" (1906, 131). American humour did not begin to diverge from the English traditions until around the 1830s, when the nation began to generate its own sense of culture that was not reliant on the European traditions and norms (Keough 1990).

America was largely built on exaggeration, with many early settlers drawn in by heavily inflated claims of endless summers and lands rich in gold and silver that ultimately failed to manifest, and thus exaggeration features heavily in American styles of humour (Blair and Hill 1978). This exaggeration, and the need to mock inflated claims, began to show up in specific cultural forms. This is best illustrated in the traditional genre of tall tales, which were commonly told in the American frontier among settlers. Folklorists Blair and Hill note that the earliest forms of these stories were likely not intended to be overtly humorous, and instead reflected the extremely harsh environments that early settlers and frontiersmen faced.[57] Over time, the comedic value of these stories was recognized, and some tale tellers began using them as a way to test gullible newcomers and prank foreign tourists, by seeing how far they could push belief in their ridiculous tales (Blair and Hill 1978). Although the tall tale is no longer a popular oral form in America, exaggeration is the underlying humorous mechanism of much of

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[57] Tall tales could serve multiple purposes for these early settlers: by exaggerating the dangers that they faced in the new world, settlers could defend themselves from outsiders who would otherwise criticize any failures; they allowed frontiersmen to identify with the larger-than-life characters and envision the wilderness as something conquerable; and of course they provided entertainment at a time when there was otherwise very little.

American humour, and it is often found alongside violence, the second major characteristic of American humour.

Crass and comic violence began to appear in humorous literature around the 1830s, and its appearance signaled a major and unprecedented breakaway from English traditions. Similar to exaggeration, this affinity for violence likely stemmed from the physical and social chaos of frontier life, which in the wake of democracy and the absence of a noble ruling class was undergoing rapid social changes (Rubin Jr 1973). Additionally, although modern America largely presents itself as a one of the most advanced and stable countries on the planet, the country's past and present continue to be marked by high rates of violence (Keough 1990). American cultural historian David Bryon Davis has gone so far as to say of American history that "[t]he United States has evidenced a unique tolerance of homicide" (Davis 1957, viii). This affinity and tolerance for violence has leaked into American traditions and popular culture, and thus continues in American joking traditions. It is also heavily utilized by satirists, who play with this violence in an attempt to reveal its unusual nature to their American audience. As Keough puts it, "the jokes come as swift and deadly as bullets, and the laughter is poised a hair's breadth from cosmic grief. This native humour reflects the more menacing aspects of American society" (1990, 139). This goes hand in hand with the third major trait of American humour, the mocking of the American Dream.

This final trait of American humour is slightly more abstract and difficult to spot at first glance, despite being perhaps its most important aspect. Many scholars of American humour have noted that there is a deep undercurrent of mockery and ambivalence towards sacred American ideals and social structures. King among these

ideals is the concept of the American Dream, "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (Adams 2017, 351). The American Dream is closely associated with the concept of American Exceptionalism, which dictates that certain core values of America (specifically, values such as individual liberty, personal responsibility, the rule of law, as well as economic values such as limited government, and a free market economy) explain America's greatness and its prominence in current world events. Notably, American Exceptionalism is not explicitly tied to a specific group of people but is believed to be a result of these core values. Thus, American Exceptionalism places America as a shining beacon to other countries, whose values not only can but *should* be exported (Buder 2017).

Despite being the bedrock of modern American identity, there is a major gap between what the Dream promises of America, and the actual, everyday realities of life within the nation (Dorsey 2008). John Lehr calls the Dream "America's Faustian bargain," and American historian Joseph Boskin calls it a "Janus-faced myth" (Boskin 1997, 16; Lahr 1984, 224). Literary scholar Louis D. Rubin Jr. argues that it is this incongruity that powers a large segment of American humour: "The humour arises out of the gap between the cultural ideal and the everyday fact, with the ideal shown to be somewhat hollow and hypocritical, and the fact crude and disgusting" (Rubin Jr 1973, 12). There are many incongruities between the American ideal and the lived reality of American life, and many citizens are aware of that on some level.

Rubin's assessment is supported by Boskin, who applies it to his study of American sick joke cycles in the post-WWII decades. He specifically ties a number of

smaller joke cycles that collectively center around children, all juxtaposing the innocence of children and the wholesome structure of the family with death, disease, and destruction. The family, of course, is one of the sacred social institutions upheld by the American Dream, with the child at its center, and that makes it a prime target.[58] Boskin argues that these joke cycles were the direct result of adolescent anxieties about the chaotic socioeconomic circumstances they found themselves in (Boskin 1997). In his study of dead baby jokes, Dundes had argued that they resulted from a generation's fear of parenthood in a world that has become largely unlike the world that their own parents grew up in, and the responsibilities that parenthood brought with it (Dundes 1979). In this view, dead baby jokes were a coping mechanism, a way for this generation to metaphorically kill their hypothetical children and preserve their childhood for that much longer. Boskin supports this interpretation, and additionally notes how these jokes read as a rejection and rebellion against the family unit itself, which was revered in society despite increasingly high rates of separation and divorce, unbridled consumerism, and the negative impacts of suburbia (Boskin 1997).

It is clear that exaggeration, violence, and mocking of the American Dream remain a constant in school shooting humour today. If anything, the connections between sick humour and the mocking of the American dream have only become more apparent. These jokes read as a dark and twisted mirror of American life— one in which school shootings happen almost daily, students risk their lives to learn, and they are desensitized to and nonchalant towards death. A crass, violent exaggeration, but one that holds a sliver

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[58] These cycles include dead baby jokes analyzed by Dundes and the shut up and keep digging cycle studied by Sutton-Smith (Sutton-Smith 1960; Dundes 1979).

of truth. In these jokes, we see students questioning the role of the child in the community and the nation, the quiet violence they see around themselves, and what it means to be American.

American Identity in School Shooting Humour

One major theme that frequently turns up in this collection of humour connects the concept of school shootings directly to America itself. 24% of all jokes point out the inherent American-ness of school shootings. In some cases, this may be explicit, and is attached to criticism of the American government with a call for greater gun control measures. In most cases, however, this connection is expressed in a much more subtle manner. The main joke may be decontextualized, with no overt political leanings evident in them. Often, the comment on America will be somewhat offhand, present only in the caption or hashtags of the tiktok (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: A wordplay joke playing with the casual violence of video games transported into the real world. Note the digital sticker in the top left corner.

These jokes emphasize group identity and portray school shootings as an integral part of American identity. Repeated sets of humorous and joking references are found within almost every community (Fine and de Soucey 2005). In small groups, these references often gain a "referential afterlife," as over time past experiences and humorous references become reincorporated into the ongoing humorous discourse of the group (Goffman 1981, 46). This joking culture often strengthens a group's internal bonds, but it can also function to maintain group boundaries. At a national level, this becomes more muddled, but joking about experiences that are unique to American high school students is one way

110

to foster that same sense of belonging and community across a large group. There are many unique aspects of American high school culture that could facilitate group identity, such as prom, football culture, and homecoming dances. However, in these jokes, high schoolers not only acknowledge that school shootings are primarily American events but use school shooting experiences as a boundary marker of American identity. That is, to be a "real" American high school student is to have experienced gun violence at school. Many of these jokes make the point through exaggeration, touching on the high frequencies of school shootings in American schools (

Figure 5.2a-d).
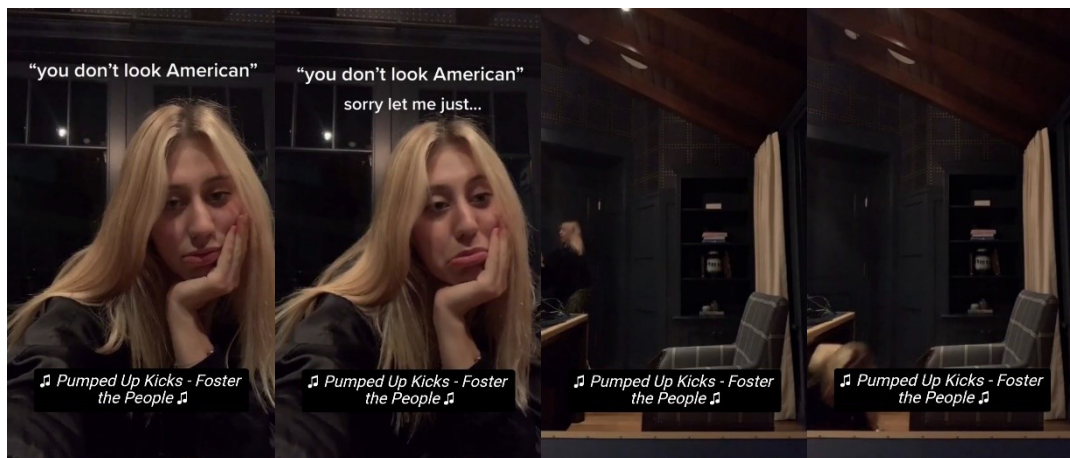
Caption 8: " national anthem at this point"
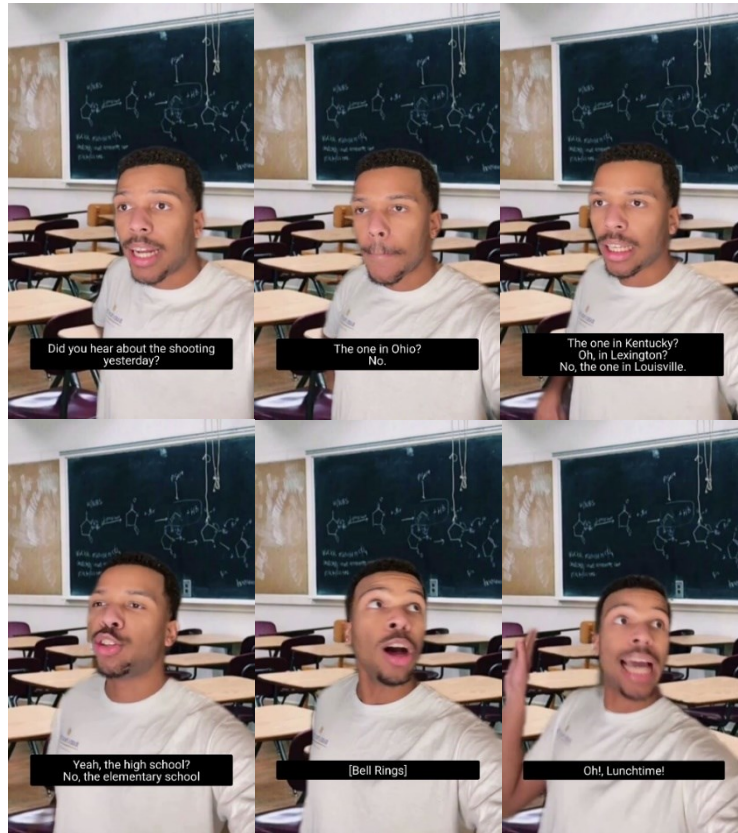
Caption 9: *"We've become so de-sensitized to school sh**tings its sad. #greenscreen #fyp #foryou #school #america"*

I love how Americans are just explaining their relatable stories and other countries are like: 👁️👄👁️ ✦
2020-7-26 ♡ 29.4K **Reply**

If you haven't been on at least one hit list you haven't lived the American public school experience ✨✨✨
2020-7-25 ♡ 37.6K **Reply**

Figure 5.2a-d: Two jokes that highlight the high rates of shootings (and therefore the frequency of lockdown drills and emergency plans) in American schools, and two comments from these tiktoks that highlight the communal nature of these jokes.

The association between America and school shootings appears in jokes made by American students that incorporate their own stories of school shooting experiences, including lockdowns. In a few cases, students have brought up examples of times in their own lives when school shooting experiences have indicated how American a person is.

For example, one student recounts a teacher's unforeseen moment of culture shock after

his return to America from overseas (Figure 5.3).
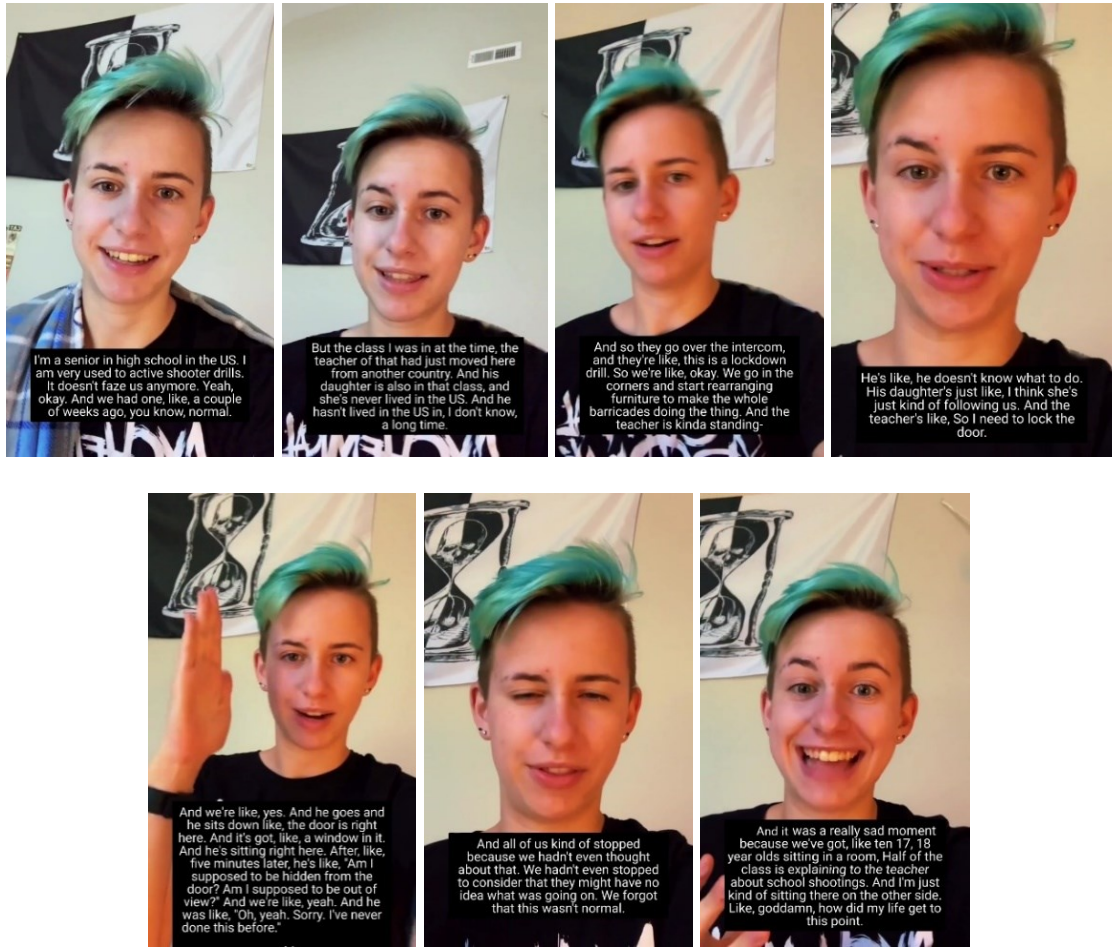
Caption 10: "Most depressing active shooter drill by far #ihateithere #usschoolsystem"
Figure 5.3: A story from a student regarding a teacher returning to America from overseas and the odd, school shooting related culture shock that occurred.

Another student shares a related experience she has had as an

American expat currently living in England, as she has found

that the unintended side effects of repeated lockdown drills

in her youth is what has unexpectedly marked her as an

American in her new country (Figure 5.4). In both cases,

these students found that one of the determinants of

Americanness was school shooting experiences.
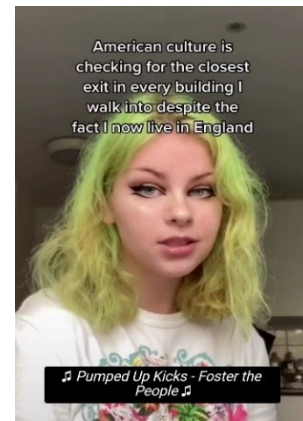
Caption 11: "ALICE drills 😊
Figure 5.4: An American expat highlighting an unexpected element of culture shock they experienced.

On the other side of this, while school shootings do occur in

other countries, the high frequency in the United States is often taken to mean that

Americans are the only ones who have the right to joke about the subject. As will be

discussed later in this chapter, non-American students rarely participate in the more

complex, narrative examples of school shooting humour, likely because they have no

experiences with the scenarios portrayed there. American students have access to lived

experiences that inform the surrounding vernacular culture and can interact with it in

ways that non-American students cannot. In addition to this, many students have almost

begun to claim school shooting experiences as being integral to the American high school

experience, and they mock groups of students who are significantly less likely to

experience an active shooter event. Specifically, recently enrolled international students

and homeschooled students are common targets. A small group of jokes do call attention

to these groups (Figure 5.5).

Here we can see elements of what folklorist William Jansen calls the "esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore" (1959, 205). The majority of these jokes are esoteric in nature, concerning only American students and their experiences. This humour focuses on the minute details of school lockdown drills, inside jokes that only people who have experienced a significant number of these drills would understand. In this sense, these jokes are esoteric in nature, as they are rooted in a sense of belonging to a certain group, and concern only members of that group. However, the addition of the jokes about international and homeschooled students adds an additional exoteric dimension. These students are singled out and othered from the main group of American students because they lack these experiences. Even though the experiences required for belonging are distinctly negative, lacking them is not something to envy, as it also marks you as an outsider. Being able to laugh at and understand school shooting jokes makes you part of the group, even if membership is undesirable.

As can be seen in these jokes, at least some American students are acutely aware of the inherent American-ness of school shootings, and they bond with other students over these negative experiences. At first glance, it may seem that at least some of these students might be participating in a form of anti-nationalist discourse. Many of them are challenging one of America's great national myths, that America is the greatest country in the world. This is the same mockery of the American Dream that undercuts so many of America's previous joke cycles. These students are redrawing the lines of nationality to frame American identity as negative rather than positive.

One batch of jokes exemplifies this theme extremely well. Over the last two years, several users have made prompt videos asking for responses and stories about American high schools.[59] Figure 5.6 is an example of one such prompt video. Notably, the wording here is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive— the prompter is acknowledging the possibility of an international audience, but also excluding non-Americans from responding. They are not looking for responses that are ubiquitous to highschoolers, but specifically for something shared only by Americans.

Figure 5.6: An example of a prompt video.

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[59] One of the results of TikTok's stitch feature has been a trend where one user will specifically solicit and prompt other users who belong to a certain group or have had certain experiences to stitch with their story. Often the prompt will be given in the format "tell me you're a [member of certain demographic] without telling me you're a [member of certain demographic]," with the intent being for other users to reply with video clips or stories that could only be told or shown if the replying user was a member of the specified group. Humorous responses are expected but not always required.

These prompts have proven to be very popular and often gain a large number of responses. In these humorous replies we can get a sense of how students see the entire American school system. Notably, these stories are overwhelmingly negative, despite the prompt being fairly neutral.[60] For example, the girl in Figure 5.7 responds to the prompt by detailing a list of incidents that occurred at her high school during her time there:

Caption 13: "[Redacted] Bed Bugs #americanhighschool #highschool #teenagers #stupid"
Figure 5.7:One #stitch response to the tiktok in Figure 5.6.

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[60] To be clear, although I only collected replies that were relevant to school shootings in some way, *all* the replies to prompts such as these were negative.

Another user follows in a similar manner:

Notably absent from these replies is any semblance of nationalistic rhetoric. Throughout these jokes, students challenge and mock the pristine image that America attempts to cultivate for itself. The America that these students see is violent, corrupt, and incompetent. Collectively, it almost seems like some of these students are participating in or creating an inverted form of American Exceptionalism, in which America is uniquely flawed in comparison to other countries.

It may seem that these jokes are anti-Nationalist in nature, but previous literature on political humour begs to differ. Despite its critical nature, political humour rarely, if ever, brings about real change. Instead, political humour is often seen as a way to reframe unpleasant realities of life in a positive manner, which is a temporary relief at best (Townsend 1997; Mascha 2011; Tsakona 2007). In fact, although these performers appear to rebel against social norms, political jokes are believed to counterintuitively make difficult times easier to endure. Reframing something unpleasant in a pleasurable escapist frame paradoxically makes it easier to live in negative conditions: "Accommodation, however much one peppers it with scorn, remains accommodation" (Speier 1998, 1395).

However, this does not mean that political jokes constructed by teenager are not worth further study, as it is important to remember that children and adolescents are disadvantaged in society, often lacking political representation even in democratic countries. This is doubly true in the case of legislation concerning school shootings and lockdown drills. Students are the primary group affected by these policies and the ones who see how they play out in practice, yet they have virtually no official platforms to voice their issues or concerns with the system. Political humour, however ineffective at bringing change it may be, is one of the only tools at their disposal. Additionally, it is possible that the internet and the increasing connections with non-Americans combined with the jokes told about America in other countries will spur more action in the long term.

The International Element

It seems likely that this acute awareness of the inherent American-ness of school shootings comes from contact with discourse and cultures outside of the country. Young Americans today have much greater access to information from other countries than any of preceding generations

Caption 15: "#dark #funny #darkhumor #fyp #america #olympic #school"
Figure 5.9: A common joke told by non-Americans. This one was told by an English user who does not appear on camera.

thanks to the internet and social media, and thus they seem to be more aware of the major differences between countries. With more exposure to other cultures and viewpoints, it is easier to see the flaws in American culture.

As previously stated, there are a number of non-Americans who create school shooting humour, although they are far fewer in number. These non-Americans tend to be young British people, although Australians and Canadians are also among this group. Jokes that the British tell about school shootings are overwhelmingly insults, with the explicit intention of disparaging Americans. These jokes tend to break away from the form of relatable humour used by Americans and are more likely to resemble traditional oral forms, such as the riddle format (Figure 5.9). Notably, most of the jokes that non-Americans tell are based on wordplay and are fairly empty of deeper themes or meaning. Unlike the jokes made by Americans, which also critique the school system, express anger at the government, and express other issues, these jokes primarily function as amusing word play or as an insult to Americans, and most of them are fairly simple. See Figure 5.10a-b below for more examples.

Caption 16: "#Bulletproof #blackhumor #school #schoolshootingmeme #americanschool #scuolaamericana #america #usa"
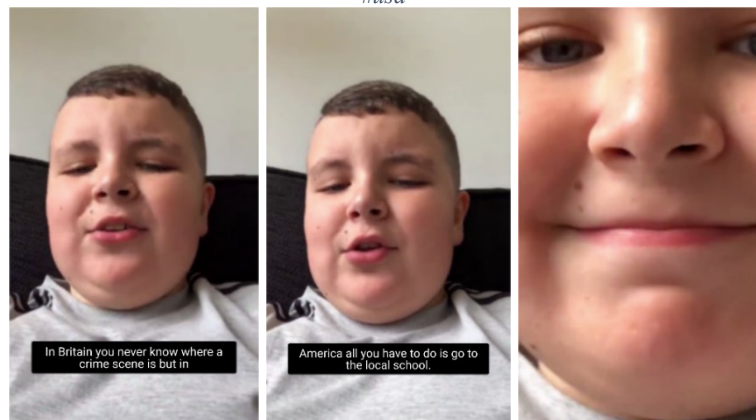
Caption 17: "#darkhumour #schoolshootingmeme"
Figure 5.10a-b: Two jokes told by British teenagers.

Although these jokes generally deviate from the relatable form that Americans use, for obvious reasons, British students do occasionally participate in jokes with the more elaborate plotlines. This is especially true for jokes that allow them to express anger at teachers or school staff. However, British students seem to take great pains to avoid being accidentally associated with Americans, and they will often modify the joke in such a way to signal their nationality. For example, instead of setting a joke in a generic class, they will set it in *maths* class, or they will go out of their way to mention that they are a *Year 12* instead of the North American *12th Grade* (Figure 5.11).
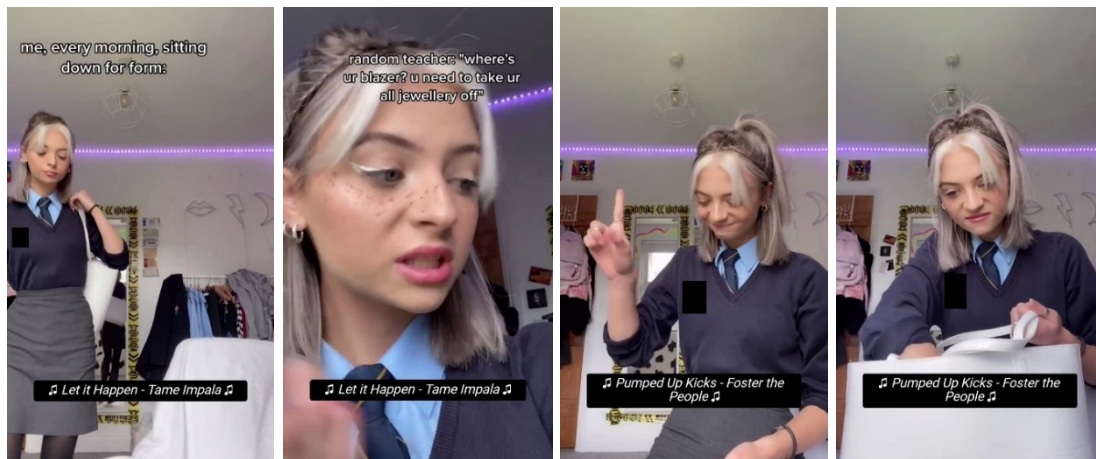
Caption 18: "i'm im yr12 can we just leave it alone now #alevels #pumpedupkicks #fyp"
Figure 5.11: A joke made by an English girl, who is implying she is planning on shooting up her school. Note the school uniform, as well as the use of "year 12" and "#alevels" in the caption.

However, this form of joking is rarer for non-Americans to take part in, and insult humour is the standard. This has caused some strife between American and English students in online spaces, as Americans have accused their peers from across the pond of needlessly escalating arguments and lighthearted banter with wildly inappropriate jokes. British jokesters have defended themselves by accusing Americans of not having a sense of humour, and that if Americans didn't want people to joke about school shootings, they should do something about it. This issue has actually become the subject of jokes in of itself (Figure 5.12).
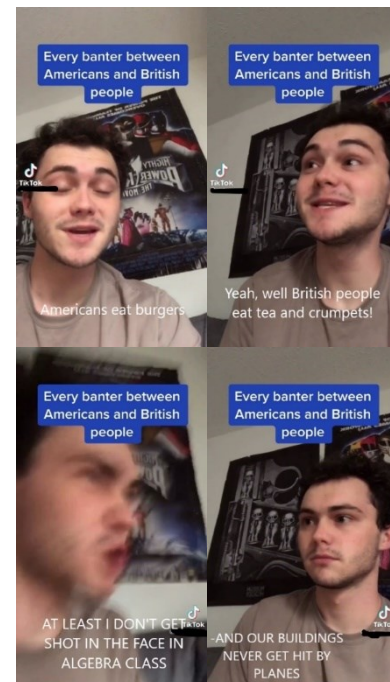
Caption 19: "Escalates so fast #american #british #teaandcrumpets"

Figure 5.12: An American joking about how exchanges with British people tend to go on the internet.

Why this behavior seems to be exclusive to British students is hard to say. It likely has something to do with America and England's entwined past and current cultural

122

statuses. Certainly, there are elements of America's cultural inferiority complex at play here, with Americans again portraying themselves as the underdogs to England.

The responses by Americans to these cruel jokes are interesting. Some students respond with equal amounts of nationalist viciousness: "At least we didn't lose a war to a bunch of untrained farmers," descending further into stereotyping in a way that portrays America as a superior country (Figure 5.13). Others, however, have clarified that they simply do not think it is appropriate for non-Americans to joke about Americans' trauma. In both cases, we can see the boundaries and group identities between the countries come into sharper focus, as students realize that there is a clear "us" and "them." Who is allowed to joke about school shootings? Who is allowed to mock whom, and for what?

Caption 20: "say that to the kids that survived sandy hook"

Figure 5.13: The tail end of an argument between British and American youth, with the American having stitched a British user's joke.

Conclusion

In these jokes, we see students engaging and grappling with elements of American culture and American identity not usually seen. The use of school shootings in connection with America in satire and humorous stories is somewhat expected, as is the political edge to them. However, the framing of school shooting experiences as integral to American identity is troubling and reveals more about how students view America as a country, even beyond school shootings. In many ways, these jokes become a site for nationalist discourse— a place to discuss and draw these messy boundaries around what it

means to be American. They reflect the current state of America and the way that young Americans view themselves and the country, and it will be interesting to see how these jokes change with the country in the future, especially as these teenagers reach an age where they can become politically involved. A political mindset may be further fueled by the interactions and clashes that American students have with their international peers in online spaces.

Chapter 6: Gender and School Shooting Humour

Humour, like any other genre of folklore, is intimately shaped and changed by the societal and cultural context in which it is told. Context can determine not only who gets to tell jokes, but also *who* tells *which* jokes. Despite this, the role of gender has not always been seriously considered by humour scholars. Many humour scholars effectively excluded women from the early research, as it was seen primarily as a masculine genre. This construction of humour was heavily influenced by the prevailing gender concepts of the time that saw men as the active party, the tellers and producers of jokes, and women as limited to being the subjects of jokes or passive listeners (See Kotthoff, 2006 for more on the history of humour research in reference to gender). American humour specifically has often been characterized as a clash between the genteel and the vulgar, a position that made women the caregivers of proper culture while men were free to briefly break from and play with societal norms with a crass joke (Walker 1988).

This discrepancy was furthered because women tend to not favour the forms of humour that were of interest to early humour scholars (Kotthoff 2006), a situation exacerbated by the context of male humour, which was often in settings inaccessible to women. Additionally, male-dominated forms of humour, such as oral jokes, can often be easily extracted from their context, written down and dissected in a paper, while women more prefer conversational forms of humour that are harder to isolate and study (Bryant et al., 1979; Kotthoff, 2006).

Although this discrepancy has slowly diminished over the years, there are still large gaps in scholarship. The connections between gender and sick humour specifically

have been relatively understudied. A close examination of school shooting jokes reveals a series of diverging trends based on the gender of the teller. This study builds on the scholarship on sick humour and gendered differences in humour to reveal a complex relationship between gender, portrayals of violence and aggression, and agency within sick jokes.

Due to its often crass and aggressive nature, women are often assumed to avoid sick and cruel humour (Kotthoff 2006). This is corroborated by early work on the subject, where ethnographers saw these jokes being told mainly by adolescent boys (Fine 1976; 2006; 1987). However, many larger studies of cruel joke cycles lack demographic information of any kind, making it difficult to track how women's perceptions and reception of sick and cruel humour has changed over time.[61] There have been some studies of women's perceptions of sick humour, although these have not been conducted in natural performance environments. These studies have generally revealed that women have a lower tolerance for sick humour than men and often perceive sick jokes as being crueler than male participants do (Herzog & Anderson, 2000; Mundorf et al., 1988).

As previously stated, the data concerning gender of joke tellers in this section is not entirely reliable due to the lack of self-reported data from users themselves. While some gender information was volunteered by users in their accounts' bios, the majority of

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[61] Granted, this is not entirely the fault of older scholars, and this deficit reflects how jokes have been collected in the past. Abrahams collected cruel jokes from his university students, and Sutton-Smith collected his "shut up and keep digging" jokes from local high school students (Abrahams, 1962; Sutton-Smith, 1960). Notably, these collections show relatively limited gender divergences, with both boys and girls *knowing* equal numbers of cruel or sick jokes when prompted. What is unclear is whether there was equal *telling* of these joking cycles across genders.

this information was instead based on observation of the user (physical appearance, manner/style of dress, voice etc.).

Gender discrepancies in school shooting jokes are immediately clear. When looking at all jokes, young women only account for 35.7% of joke tellers, with young men making up 53.5%. The remainder are anonymous accounts. Notably, these divisions do even out when race is considered, with white males and white females making up 27.7% and 28% of all jokesters respectively. In contrast, non-white males account for 25.3% of all jokesters, and non-white females make up only 8%, implying that the discrepancy in gender may actually be a discrepancy between joking rates of non-white boys and non-white girls (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1: Charts demonstrating the gender and racial demographics of school shooting jokes.

However, there are some major distinctions between the genders when it comes to the contents and themes of jokes. For example, male students are significantly more likely to make jokes about real shootings. In fact, jokes of this kind are told almost exclusively by boys or by anonymous users. This is likely due to the highly offensive nature of these jokes, which young women will typically avoid (Kotthoff 2006). On the other hand, girls are much more likely to contribute humorous stories about real life events. For the

127

generic school shooting jokes, young men make up the majority, with young women in the minority. However, there are further divergences in terms of themes.

Gender Divergence in School Shooting Jokes

Gender divergences are particularly noticeable in three key areas: the satirical jokes that criticize structures of power, the presentation of school shooters, and the ways in which acts of violence are approached and presented. When looked at collectively, these divergences seem to speak to feelings of power, control, and agency; they also intersect with gender expectations, especially expectations of masculinity.

Figure 6.2: An example of political satire told by a young woman.

Gender and Critical Jokes

Notably, girls are significantly more likely to tell and create jokes that express anger at and frustration with the American government and their failure to stop school shootings. 38% of the jokes told by young women contain some condemnation of the American government or mention of the inherent American-ness of school shootings. In contrast, young men only do so in 17% of their jokes. These jokes, as explored in Chapter 5, generally emphasize

Figure 6.3: A joke that draws on the events on Jan 6th, 2021, comparing the events that occurred to a school shooting.

the inherent American-ness of school shootings in addition to critiquing the US

government (Figure 6.2). Others refer to recent events, such as event at the Capitol

Building on Jan 6, 2021 (Figure 6.3). In all cases, these students mock elected officials

and the structures that uphold them, drawing attention to their failure to protect American

children. They play with and expose the incongruity that lies at the heart of the school

shooting situation: children are meant to be protected, and yet they are abandoned by the

government. Children are supposed to be safe at school, and yet they are not. American

society has largely grown desensitized to rampant gun violence, and jokes like this aim to

remind that this is not normal.

However, this pattern does not hold when looking at jokes that are critical of the

school system rather than the government. In some cases, these jokes are critical of

lockdown drills and other ways that schools handle shootings (Figure 6.4a). In others, the

school shooting is simply the frame for jokes that express hostility and frustration towards

school staff (Figure 6.4b-c).
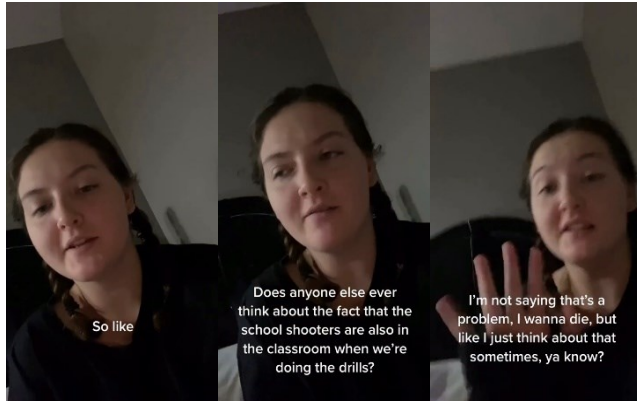
Caption 23: #schoolshooters #publicschoolthings

Caption 23: "Those stars meant everything back than 🌀#fyp #healthheroes #schoolshooting #school #teachers #xyzbca #viral"
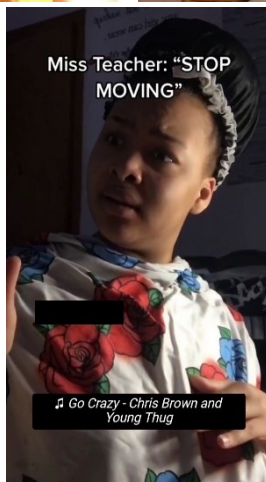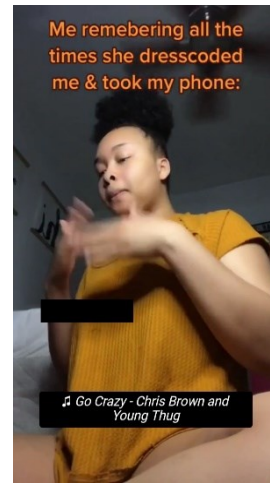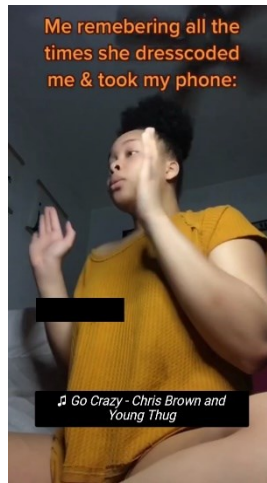
Caption 23: "KaRmA 😣 😫 #fyp #foryou #foryoupage #TwoOptions #schoolshootings #meanteacher #UnitedWeDance #viral #funny"

Figure 6.4a-c: Jokes that point out issues with the education system.

In many cases, the latter jokes *do* usually reveal issues with the school system and its

preventative measures, and the oppositional or confrontational positions it often forces teachers and students into. Specifically, these jokes often make offhand comments about the ways in which some teachers strip students of their agency and personhood (as seen above in Figure 6.4), fail to intervene in bullying, and otherwise neglect to address similar issues that plague the education system. Notably, these types of jokes account for only a slightly larger percentage of those created by girls (17%) create rather than by boys (14%). This leaves us with a situation in which girls are likely to criticize at the local and federal levels, but boys are likely to only criticize at the local level.

Gender and the Portrayal of School Shooters

Another interesting twist comes with the portrayal of school shooter characters in these jokes. Generally speaking, young men seem to be much more concerned with identifying the tell-tale traits of potential shooters than young women. The difference in gendered joking is quite startling here, as nearly 25% of jokes that boys tell contain descriptive traits of possible school shooters, while girls only do so in 3% of jokes.

In one class of jokes, the visual elements mimic the character selection screen of a fighting video game. Instead of a fictional character, the jokester presents himself as a visual representation of what a shooter looks like and puts on the screen a list of traits where a character's fighting stats would be (Figure 6.5). Figure 6.6a-d and Figure 6.7 provide other examples of common traits.
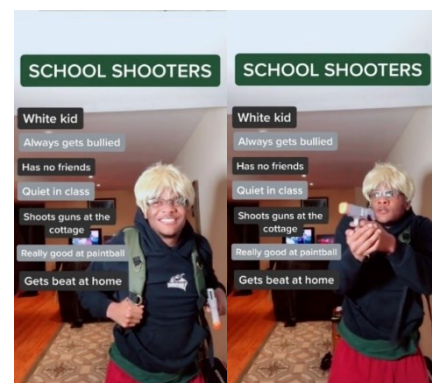
Figure 6.5: Joke listing common traits of a school shooter.

Figure 6.6a-d: A number of stills from tiktoks depicting a school shooter. Note the use of the hoodie, lack of eye contact, bad posture, and the emphasis on being strange, odd, and angry.

Caption 24: "I'm gon 🏃 💨 #foryou #fyp #foryoupage #school #shooting #schoolshooting #trending #polog #poses #tired #FrostedFeelings"

Figure 6.7: Another joke exhibiting the traits of a potential shooter, although it does not explicitly label this character as "the quiet kid."

Many jokes that call attention to the specific traits of a potential shooter follow

one of two major plotlines: a) the protagonist befriends the potential shooter (either by

accident[62] or on purpose) and the shooter subsequently spares the protagonists life, or b)

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[62] These jokes are similar in nature to "The Grateful Stranger" legends that circulated after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in which a Middle Eastern man would warn a young white woman to stay away from certain places on a specific day after she does a small favour for him (see Goldstein 2009). There are several major differences between these narratives and these jokes, most notably the timing and identity of the grateful stranger- in 9/11 narratives it is not clear how this person is involved in the upcoming attack, while the "quiet kid" *is* the sole danger in school shooting humor. Another difference has to do with timing- instead of being an upcoming date, the shooting typically begins almost immediately after the protagonist reaches safety. Additionally, while there were jokes that played on "The Grateful Stranger" after 9/11, I have seen no evidence that there are sincere or non-humorous forms of these plotlines currently in circulation regarding school shootings.

the protagonist survives because he is able to recognize the signs that a shooting is about to take place and seek cover or flee. For example, in the joke told in Figure 6.8, the protagonist is able to combine the double meaning of the potential shooter's words with his cultural knowledge of that student's identity as the Quiet Kid to presumably save himself, although we never receive confirmation that a shooting actually takes place or that the protagonist survives.

Caption 25: "🥴🥴 #full180 #schoolshooting #fyp #xyzbca #blowthisup"

Figure 6.8: Word play joke that allows the student to foresee what is about to happen.

Many of these jokes can be read as disparaging and thus potentially increasing the alienation of students who fit the stereotype. However, another major of element of these jokes is that they often portray the Quiet Kid as being aggressive and unhinged even when other classmates reach out in genuine friendship, implying that some Quiet Kids are responsible for their own alienation from other students. Whether or not this is based on actual experiences or is simply to justify bullying the Quiet Kid is unclear.

Gender and Portrayals of Violence

Although most school shooting jokes recount a shooting happening to the protagonist, in a minority of jokes the protagonist (and thus the joke teller) *is* the shooter. Many of these jokes are used to express anger against other students and school

administration in an exaggerated manner. Despite the aggressive and violent nature of these jokes, they are told in relatively equal measures by girls and boys.[63] However, the approach to these jokes is radically different across genders.

In general, young men, especially younger middle school boys, have no issue embracing and reveling in the potential violence that jokes like this can afford. The incongruity in these jokes is a bit difficult to place; in some jokes there is a motive of revenge, but in many cases, it seems that the very idea of causing violence and harm to others is humorous in and of itself, and many of these jokes lack any kind of punchline. It is possible that some of these jokes are actually power fantasies, or even cases of hero worship for actual shooters delivered in a frame that can be easily disavowed as not to be taken seriously. This potential can be seen in the below examples (Figure 6.9a-d).

Figure 6.9a-d: A series of stills showing the violence used by young men in school shooting jokes.

Young women, however, rarely participate in this overtly aggressive humour, despite being slightly more likely to play the character of a shooter in jokes. Young women's killing jokes differ significantly from those of their male counterparts, in both

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[63] Boys play the role of the shooter in 16% of all jokes, girls do in 24% of all jokes.

content and style. Their jokes have more developed structure and emphasize motive, but generally do not seem to find joy in killing. While young men's violence tends to be reckless and directionless, girls imagine themselves as the shooter only in situations where they are responding to a clearly defined grievance. Notably, unlike young men, young women rarely show themselves actually carrying out acts of violence, or even posing with props like fake guns. Instead, these jokes contain a simple promise of future violence. While they are jokes, or at least are meant to be read as jokes, they seem somewhat more substantial and less playful than the overtly violent jokes that boys tell.

An example of this is a joking trend in which the protagonist experiences some kind of harassment, which is usually implied to be the latest event in a long history of bullying. Typically, the tiktok is filmed in such a way that the viewer sees the instigators laughing about their harassment, then the camera cuts to the protagonist, who usually has the tense, blank expression of a person who is just barely keeping their rage in check. As the video slowly zooms in on their face, the opening bars of "Pumped Up Kicks" play, indicating that they are now actively planning to shoot up their school (See Figure 6.10 below and Figure 5.11 in the previous chapter).

Caption 26: "i thought about it. for maybe 15 seconds but i thought about it #alt "
Figure 6.10: An example of a joke that young women tend to make.

This discrepancy is fairly unexpected. Girls being equally, if not more likely, to tell revenge fantasy jokes than boys stands in stark contrast to early work done on gender and humour, in which we typically see girls avoiding aggressive and offensive joking (Kotthoff 2006). However, these jokes, paradoxically, still conform to these older gender roles. While they are making more aggressive jokes, girls are nonetheless much more restrained that young boys are.

Discussion

There are significant issues with generalizing behaviour and potentially essentializing gender. While certain patterns are clearly observable in the above examples, there are also many instances of users stepping out of the gender paradigms that I have attempted to establish here. For example, I identified several examples of girls engaging in content with displays of violence typically seen in boys' humour (not shown here due to the girls' extremely young age). Additionally, it is important to remember throughout this analysis that gender is constructed and performed; to quote Judith Butler,

it is "the stylized repetition of acts through time," (1999, 179). The observations discussed here are not reflections of some biological determinant of male and female humour, but rather an exploration of how the current cultural climate influenced performance of gender through these jokes.

These patterns are fascinating but seem tangled when viewed as a whole. Why do girls criticize the government and school system while boys only criticize the school system? Why are boys alone so invested in identifying stereotypes and caricatures of school shooters? Why do girls make more threatening and revenge jokes than boys, but show less aggression in their jokes? In my view, the thread that ties these observations together is agency: a need for control. In all of these examples, we see boys consistently putting themselves in positions of power and control, while girls generally refrain.

This tendency is especially common in the jokes that identify school shooter traits with the Quiet Kid. Many of these jokes revolve around the moment of recognition, when a fellow student goes from being the Quiet Kid to the school shooter. These jokes can be read as warnings, as reminders to stay vigilant, primed for that moment of discovery. Hegemonic masculinity in American culture places emphasis on rationality and autonomy, and it dictates that men, even young boys, should be active agents in crisis scenarios (Via 2010). When looking at the lack of hero narratives that emerged in the aftermath of 9/11, Susan Faludi writes, "Superheroes are fantasies for a particular type of reader: someone, typically a prepubescent boy, who feels weak in the world and insufficient to the demands of the day" (2008, 51). She notes that many of the narratives surrounding 9/11 reaffirmed traditional masculine ideals of taking action, especially physical action. However, in these jokes, there are no heroes, only those who have the

foresight to minimize the risk to their own person. In this way, these jokes could be considered a variation of what folklorist Diane Goldstein calls untellable stories, narratives that, regardless of truth, are suppressed in the aftermath of disasters because the context frames the protagonist in a poor light (2009).[64] By virtue of taking place in a play frame, these jokes may provide boys with a refuge from the dominant narratives of heroism and masculinity, a narrative in which it is okay to lose, to be selfish, and to save only yourself.

Alternatively, these jokes may actually play into dominant narratives of heroism. Folklorist Jay Mechling notes that boys often take some pleasure in pretending to die while playfighting with guns. He connects this to the previous work done on fairy tales, which give children narratives with which to contemplate death, abandonment, and other complicated fears. He argues that gunplay provides similar "models of power," and provides formulaic scenes in which boys can play both submissive and dominant roles (Mechling 2008, 206).

Girls may refrain from these jokes because stereotypical gender expectations excuse them from agentive roles, and thus young women may not feel the need to be hypervigilant or responsible for monitoring other students. Since girls' reactions to an active shooter event— whether they take action or cower in the corner— do not throw their femininity into question, they may feel no need to engage in these jokes. Additionally, their lack of identification with a protector/hero role may allow girls to see

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[64] In the aftermath of 9/11, Goldstein found that these were primarily stories about scrapes with death, or delays that prevented people from being in the World Trade Centre towers when they should have been, which might be viewed as insensitive to the families of the people who did not survive.

an active shooter situation more clearly and understand the impossible odds they are faced with.

Gender norms surrounding agency may also explain the differences between the rate of critical jokes told by boys and those told by girls. Jokes that criticize the government typically have a political, satirical, and rhetorical edge. The joke teller's ability to be vulnerable and share their own feelings of helplessness and anxiety, leveraged into humour, makes that rhetoric persuasive. Many of them make note of the fear and anxiety that they feel on a daily basis and acknowledge that school shootings are extremely dangerous situations in which chances of survival are slim. Girls may tell more of these jokes simply because they are allowed to analyze and express these complex emotions in a way that boys are not. Boys are typically discouraged from showing emotions, and certainly from presenting themselves as vulnerable, so they may not have the ability to self-advocate through these jokes in the same way girls do. In American culture, boys are expected to be individuals who overcome challenges on their own and have no need to rely on others (Pacheco Baldó 2020; Hirschman 2003). For boys, vulnerability and emotion are seen as weakness, but girls can use them as persuasive tools (Bird 1996). When boys do criticize, they tend to do so with some level of aggression. This may explain why they typically criticize the school system and teachers, as they can point to specific incidents that have occurred in their past that made them angry, and blame them on their teachers or administration, even if the real causes of those issues may be systemic in nature.

Themes of agency are also visible in the more violent jokes. Violent play in young boys is not unexpected and is generally linked to boys' development of masculinity.

Masculinity is an ongoing performance that is constantly being tested by other men. Boys need a way to prove their masculinity, and in America, cultural references dictate that this is best accomplished through violence and gunplay (Bronner 2011; Mechling 2008). [65] This has resulted in concerns about boys' violence, which has manifested in moral panics like those discussed in Chapter 4, but as both Bronner and Mechling highlight, these actions take place within play frames. Although many of these jokes may appear concerning or even threatening, they are still presented as jokes, and cannot be interpreted as they would be outside of that framework.

Violent jokes made by young women also take advantage of the play frame, although as Mechling points out, girls' play violence does not have the same origins as boys' and thus cannot be read in the same manner (2008). This may explain why girls' use of violence in these jokes is more conservative and constrained than their male counterparts. They are not proving their masculinity, so they do not need to go to the lengths boys do. There are other potential angles to explore here as well. Girls may be less likely to pose with actual weaponry simply because they are less likely to own masculine toys such as play guns. Alternatively, as Mechling outlines briefly in his work, guns also carry a distinctly phallic symbolism that makes them significantly more appealing to young boys attempting to prove their masculinity (2008). Additionally, the older constraints on gender in relation to joking may be at play here. Although we have

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[65] As Bronner and Mechling outline, the framed cultural practices of the United States often express views about collective violence. The defining conflicts of American history, such as the violence of frontier life, the American Civil War, and the Vietnam War, all had significant effects on the contemporary popular and folk culture of the time. Mechling gives the example of films such as Rambo which promote a new masculinity centered on redemptive violence in the wake of the Vietnam war (Bronner 2011; Mechling 2008). It is these cultural frames that young boys call on when looking for ways to perform masculinity in play frames.

come a long way from the strict gender roles that forbade aggression in women, playing the shooter and expressing frustration and anger is still somewhat transgressive for young women. This is only reenforced by the male nature of school shootings (Larkin 2011).

Conclusion

Over the last few decades there have been ample attempts to close the gender gap in the academic study of humour, with much more attention on women's humour. However, little of this work has focused on sick humour. Hopefully this chapter has begun to expand the literature beyond studies of women's taste in sick humour and focus more on the differences in how the genders approach sick and taboo topics in humour. In the school shooting humour corpus, we can see that the gendered differences are closely related to themes of agency, power, and masculinity. However, there is clearly room for further research here, especially in regard to young women's reception of sick and dark humour, and how that has changed over the past decades.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

School shooting humour is a significant element of contemporary American youth culture, a response to the shootings themselves as well as to the institutional reaction and discourse that surrounds them. This thesis has attempted to analyse school shooting humour and examine the themes encompassed by it. It is extremely difficult, and perhaps impossible, to extract any one singular overarching meaning from these jokes. Instead, this thesis ultimately views this humour as a site of discourse where many meanings can be constructed and negotiated. I have examined jokes that criticize the American government or school system, mock adult perspectives on school shootings, act as a form of gallows humour, and act as site for proving masculinity, often all at the same time.

Humour on social media apps such as TikTok heralds something of a new area for scholars. While this humour clearly builds on previous trends of humour, the additions of audio and video into the standard internet vernacular has interesting effects on humorous culture. To understand humour on TikTok, a good grasp on the use of audios, intertext features, and coded language is necessary. Additionally, careful attention must be paid to the algorithm, which may affect the way that audiences interact with humour, affording opportunities not seen in live environments.

School shooting humour is a form of sick humour, one that is centered around death. However, unlike previous joke cycles, there are significant differences present here. Most notably, in terms of death and how death is presented. School shooting humour has a much lower level of abstraction than other similar joke cycles. This has led me to argue that the jokes found in Categories 2 and 3 (about school shootings as a

general phenomenon and about real experiences from the tellers' lives, respectively) may have a primary function of gallows humour, similar to that employed by emergency workers or soldiers in active war zones. This is a theory that seems to be readily accepted by many high school students themselves. It seems that issues within schools and how schools disseminate safety information to students may be influencing these jokes, as many schools create, unintentionally, low-trust environments that heighten fear and decrease perceptions of school safety in students.

School shooting jokes also function as an in-group way to critique adult perspectives of school shootings and the motivations of school shooters. These jokes demonstrate students' disavowal of the typical cultural scripts applied to school shootings, thoroughly rejecting that bullying, mental illness, or violent video games are a root cause of school gun violence. Instead, there is a heavy emphasis on the entitlement of school shooters and, most interestingly, the role that whiteness plays in these violent acts. These latter jokes are especially fascinating given the way that they align with some scholarly work on the subject, despite not drawing on such work at all.

A repeated theme throughout these jokes is the American nature of school shootings, which ranges from jokes that casually note the connection to jokes that directly critique the American government. Many of these jokes are political and have anti-Nationalist undertones. Previous work on the subject dictates that political humour, although somewhat rebellious, rarely promotes tangible change on its own. However, it is important to remember that as adolescents, the American teenagers who tell most of these jokes have very few political tools at their disposal, making their political expressions, no matter their form, all the more meaningful. Additionally, interactions between American

and non-American students shed light on how digital international relationships may be affecting different countries perceptions of one another.

Finally, this thesis took advantage of the ability to collect basic demographic information from those telling jokes on TikTok in order to study gender differences in joke telling. These results show that girls seem to be gaining greater tolerance for sick and dark humour, which is in keeping with previous work. Additionally, these jokes appear to operate as a site for proving masculinity for young boys.

The multivalent and polysemous nature of the humor collected for this project makes me hesitant to pronounce any grand conclusions. If there is one factor of school shooting humour that can be said confidently, it is simply that whatever the meaning, many students are comfortable with school shooting humour, and with joking about death and dying in general. Although jokes that explicitly mock victims of actual shooting events may be frowned upon in certain contexts, most students do not seem to feel the need to pre-emptively defend themselves from criticism. Moreover, they are very comfortable using this humour not only to talk about school shootings themselves, but also as a frame for discussing and displaying other more mundane conflicts. While these jokes are seen as dark, they are not seen as immoral or improper in most cases. The authenticity of this comfortable and causal relationship with death and dying is somewhat questionable and requires further investigation and could be the subject of further study.

Further research in this area would involve more in-depth examination of TikTok and how the user interface and intertextual elements of the app influences humour. Conducting additional offline fieldwork, which was not possible during the bulk of my research, would also help answer questions that arose during this study. Additionally,

audience reactions were somewhat neglected within this thesis, as was exploring the full

potential effects of TikTok's algorithm.

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Appendix 1: Breakdown of tiktoks Used

Figure #	Date Created	Caption/Hashtags	Audio (if any)	Likes	Comments	Shares
Figure 2.3a	2020-10-10	#sandyhook #darkhumour #fyo #foryou #viral #GhostMode #ItBeLikeThat	The Next Episode (San Holo Remix) - San Holo,Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre	95	4	1
Figure 2.3b	2020-10-31	I'm ready for the ❄s and Karen's in the comments :D #sandyhook #darkhumour #viral #kids #punch	The Next Episode (San Holo Remix) - San Holo,Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre	34	10	0
Figure 2.4	2021-05-01	Let's be realistic about this #fyp #viral #funny #creator #ShadowAndBone #SkipTheRinse #america #activeshooterdrill	N/A	31	0	2
Figure 2.5a	2020-05-07	Honestly surprised I'm not banned yet @[Redacted] #familytime #darkhumour #sandyhook		19800	258	2129
Figure 2.5b	2020-09-30	#bullets #sandyhook #foryou #viral #god #darkhumour		29	0	1

Figure 2.6	2020-02-18	Ik ik I'm fucked up😂 🫠 #editing101 #cheersquad #foryou #trending #fyp #viral #memes #school #schoolshooting #broomchallenge #trending #vape		27		
Figure 2.7	2020-06-19	#fyp #foryou #foryoupage #schoolshooting #crying #sad #lifehacks	Emotional - Illiteral			
Figure 2.8a	2020-04-15	#fyp #america #schoolshooting #xyzbca #usa #foryou #quarantine #facts #foryoupage	Fahrradsattel - Pisse	526	10	10
Figure 2.8b	2021-09-20	only american schools 🤭 #fyp #foryou #thisisamerica		49	0	2
Figure 2.8c	2021-03-24	#massshooting #gunviolence #nra #tedcruz #guncontrol #sandyhook #columbine #orlandomagic #stonemandouglas		56	24	2
Figure 2.10	2020-02-09	im so sorry #MyInstaxShoutout #favoritemovies #welovepizza #foryou #fyp		50100	662	1121
Figure 2.11		#greenscreen #publicschool #activeshooter #baseballlife #got2bStyled #justjokes #fy #fyp #foryoupage #xyzbca me under a desk. Joking but true! 😂		177	1	7

Figure 2.12a	2020-08-03	duet me! (my coworkers watched me make this) #hide #lesbian #locker #lgbt #gay #wlw		474	2	6
Figure 2.12b	2021-02-26	@[redacted] @[redacted] @[redacted]		40600	10	250
Figure 2.12c	2020-09-02	#duet with [redacted] #your move		245700		
Figure 2.12d	2020-07-16	#duet with [redacted] I graduated in 2017 but this is accurate!!!		420700	1716	1953
Figure 2.14	2020-11-30	The bully be wildn 😣 #fyp #foryou #foryoupage	Sweet Caroline (With Guns) - Neil Diamond	39900		
Figure 2.15	2021-07-12	Going to school in #america be like... (wish it was a joke) #merica #usa #school #darkhumour	Sweet Caroline (With Guns) - Neil Diamond	116	2	2
Figure 2.13	N/A	😊 #fyp #fy #skit #sketch #skits #sketches		1900000	11100	37200

Figure 2.16a	2019-12-23	Can't Trust Noone😭 #clonesquad #fyp #foryoupage #schoolshooting #schoollife #students #teachers #lockdowndrill #foredrill #schooldrill #skit #comedy	I write Sins Not Tragedies (8 bit Remix) - Panic! At the Disco	3632	15	85
Figure 2.16b	2020-03-17	#xyzbca #schoolshooting	Mr. Saxobeat - Alexandra Stan	26	2	1
Figure 2.17	2019-08-25	It's 2am👀 #foryourpage #foryou #comedy #bulletproof #darkhumor	Bulletproof - La Roux	158300	635	4331
Figure 2.18	2021-05-31	Based on a true story #meme #pumpedupkicks #funny #HoldMyMilk	Pumped Up Kicks - Foster The People	102100	485	1689
Figure 2.19	2020-03-10	#fyp #pumpedupkicks #shooting #drill #shooter #school #foryou	Pumped Up Kicks - Foster the People	73	12	2
Figure 2.20	2021-02-09	#fyp #backtoschool #america #school #funny #comedy #viral #trending #fyp シ #pain #gun #follow #darkhumor #dark #ayo #rip	Pumped Up Kicks - Foster The People	249	12	5
Figure 2.21a	2020-05-18	#adamlanza #gun #fyp #fypシ #skullyto1k2020 #finleygamblesfit #cznburak #gun	Thomas the Dank Engine	224	17	14

		#sandyhook #schoolshooting				
Figure 2.21b	2020-09-27	chs class of 1999 #fyp #school #comedy #darkhumor #blowthisup		56800	415	712
Figure 2.21c	2020-04-17	My best joke I got. I hope I don't get taken down oh lord 😵😵😵 #fyp #badjoke #joke #donthateme	Little Mix-Love Me Like You	94	14	7
Figure 2.22a	2021-02-19	never seen a gym teacher run #fyp #fy #school #shooting		392	2	9
Figure 2.22b	2020-10-27	Imagine seeing someone running but nak€d 💀 😭#school #lockdown #relate #schoolshootings #centerisd #comedy #exprESSIEyourself #MyCostume #xyzbca #fyp		508	10	3
Figure 2.22c	2021-02-03	😂😂😂 don't gotta tell me ✌twice #schoolshootings #funnyvideos #viral		784	9	10
Figure 2.23	2020-04-15	childhood trauma gang wya 😎 #fyp #foryou #foryoupage #keepingbusy #xyzbca #sandyhook	Change It Up - Keke Palmer	8962	56	36

Figure 2.24	2020-12-22	#stitch with kamironx if you go to my school guess who my Apush teacher was #highschool #planning #fyp #foryou		335700	4507	3159
Figure 3.1	2021-07-09	😂Ayy bro #school #schoolshootermeme #memehub #recommeded #foryou #fy #funnymoments #trendy #hilarious #viral #potential		59	0	3
Figure 3.2	2021-04-22	hahaha 😂 #anime #fyp #foryoupage #schoolshooting		287	3	5
Figure 3.3	2020-04-29	Please don't say I'm the only one #schoolshooting	Play Date - Melanie Martinez	59	1	0
Figure 3.4	2020-03-14	Yeah... #piday #treanding #foryou #foryoupage #xyzbca #love #school #shooter #schoolshooting #fyp #famous #duo #cute #loveyou	Make me famous - Freememes			
Figure 3.5	2021-05-25	Quiet kid #comedy #funny #comedyskit #darkhumour #school #gaming #GTA5 #GTA #teacher #student		45500	261	639

Figure 3.6a	2019-09-26	someone help us #schoolshooting #publicschool #callthepopo #foryou	Zelda Fairy Fountain Harp - Dedouze	980	9	19
Figure 3.6b	2021-03-02	#lockdown2020 #schoolshootings #thatslifeforya #fyp #foryou	Моя голова винтом (My head is spinning like a screw) - kostromin	11	0	0
Figure 3.6c	2020-02-04	School went on lockdown because of a shooter😂😂🧖 #fypシ #schoolshooting	Might Cop a Jag - CG Youngsta	36	2	0
Figure 3.7	2020-01-31	😖 #schoolshooting #furry #furryfandom #fyp #4upage	Chinese New Year - SALES	599	49	3
Figure 3.9	2021-03-14	N/A	Jelly - Big Homie Ty.Ni	160000	1406	2031
Caption 4: "When the quiet kid finally talks! 😬 #4you #4youpage #foryou #foryoupage" Figure 3.10	2020-05-13	When the quiet kid finally talks! 😬 #4you #4youpage #foryou #foryoupage		600600	4988	3100
Figure 3.11a	2020-12-18	#stitch with [Redacted]		13	0	2

Figure 3.11b	2021-08-18	#greenscreenvideo if you know the teacher be quiet y'all not gonna get him fired #fyp		21700	114	104
Figure 3.12	2021-01-17	#stitch with [Redacted] my freshman year was filled with stories like this #CleanTok #VisionBoard #fyp		90	10	2
Caption 5: "Americans live the plot of the hunger games daily im convinced #fyp #foryoupage " **Figure 3.13**	2020-12-17	Americans live the plot of the hunger games daily im convinced #fyp #foryoupage		419900	12300	7983
Figure 3.14	2020-12-19	#stitch with [Redacted] I loved mr [Redacted] sm		18000	352	103
Figure 3.15	2020-12-18	#stitch with [Redacted] ah yes,, american public schools		61	2	2
Figure 3.16		here's how my day went #greenscreen #schoolshooting #activeshoota #lc #indiana	Stoner (Remix) - Wale & Jadakiss	451	12	30

Figure 3.17	2021-01-27	#stitch with [Redacted] sigh.....public school		328500	1906	627
Figure 4.1a	2019-08-09	#gamer #hoi4 #meme #ww2 #ironic #fypage #foryoupage #fyp #foryou #schoolshooting		529	20	12
Figure 4.1b	2019-08-12	Proof that videogames cause mass shootings. #whitepeople #duckhunt #schoolshooting #tiktokpartner		25	4	1
Figure 4.2	2021-05-26	Thanks Sergent Foley! I couldn't have done it without you! #darkhumor #joke #modernwarfare2 #americanschool		403	8	4
Figure 4.3a	2020-09-13	When the quiet kid goes ham lol #fyp #quietkid #schoolshootingmeme		8	0	2
Figure 4.3b	2020-10-02	I wonder who is sus now 🫠 #meme #memes #amongus #columbinememe #darkhumor		2	0	3

Figure 4.3c	2020-01-29	#achievementunlocked stayed home sick from school #littledarkhumor #chooseone #photography101 #foryoupage #fyp #foru #darkhumor #schoolshooting #4yp		110	0	1
Figure 4.4	2020-02-23	I'm getting shot then #oneliners #fyp #school #xycba #foryoupage #tiktoktraditions #viral #pumpedupkicks	Pumped Up Kicks - Foster the People	24100	66	1339
Figure 4.5	2019-11-11	Quite kid (school shooter)#funny #schoolshooters #quitekid #run #fyp #follow #like4follow #likeitup #viral #jokes #foruyou #followmeh	Chanel (Remix) - Frank Ocean	65	5	0
Figure 4.6		Reply to @[redacted] sometimes kids shut out other kids for a reason		707100	11900	12200
Figure 4.8a	2020-08-28	and that's on America focusing on a black mans past but a white mans future when it comes to the law	WAP (feat. Megan Thee Stallion) - Cardi B	81500	3449	2500
Figure 4.8b	2020-06-30	For legal reasons this is a joke!🤓 #schoolshooting #foryou #foryoupage #comedy #fup #blm #blacklivesmatter #whiteprivilege #policebrutality #skit	Bookbag - BigKayBeezy	134	1	0

Figure 4.8c	2020-12-19	#fyp #schoolshootings #blackpeople #darkhumourandjokes		364	7	9
Figure 4.9	2020-06-11	somebody just turned off the lights. #imsorry #blacklivesmatter #racism #darkjokes #darkhumor #blm #schoolshooting #foryoupage #fyp #xyzbca	Fitzpleasure - Alt-J	49	5	2
Figure 4.10		I'm whatever you want me to be #standup #comedy #standupcomedy #storytime #darkhumour #fyp #foryou #xyzbca #fyp シ #fy #foryoupage #funny #joke		213100	581	3848
Figure 4.11	2020-04-18	#greenscreen #fyp #meme #schoolshooting		35		
Figure 5.1	2020-02-07	Just a joke 💀us🔫 #school #schoolshootings #jokes #comedy #fyp #foryoupage #tiktokfamous #plz #explore #BestThingSince #america #gunviolence	I write Sins Not Tragedies (8 bit Remix) - Panic! At the Disco	106	4	2
	2020-09-17	national anthem at this point	Pumped Up Kicks – Foster the People	108500	827	1049

Figure 5.2a						
Figure 5.2b	2021-01-19	#stitch with [Redacted] We've become so de-sensitized to school sh**tings its sad. #greenscreen #fyp #foryou #school #america		533900	4708	8407
Figure 5.3		#stitch with [Redacted] Most depressing active shooter drill by far #ihateithere #usschoolsystem		6118	309	82
Figure 5.4	2020-11-17	ALICE drills 😀	Pumped Up Kicks - Foster the People	496		
Figure 5.5	2021-01-25	#greenscreen I'm just going to leave this here hahah #publicschools #codered #fyp		57	2	2
Figure 5.6		#greenscreen thankfully it was a false alarm lol #highschool #storytime #tennessee #publicschool #school		152200	5664	2589
Figure 5.7	2021-02-16	#stitch with [Redacted] [Redacted] Bed Bugs #americanhighschool #highschool #teenagers #stupid		125	11	3

Figure	Date	Caption/Hashtags	Music			
Figure 5.8	2021-03-22	#stitch with [Redacted] #highschool #publicschool #americanhighschool #why #lgbtq #fyp #bisexual #shethey #demigirl #car #pinkhair		165	4	3
Figure 5.9	2021-05-08	#dark #funny #darkhumor #fyp #america #olympic #school	Pumped Up Kicks - Foster The People	115	8	3
Figure 5.10a	2020-09-12	#Bulletproof #blackhumor #school #schoolshootingmeme #americanschool #scuolaamericana #america #usa	Dancin (KRONO Remix) - Aaron Smith	342	6	5
Figure 5.10b	2020-09-02	#darkhumour #schoolshootingmeme ##@[Redacted] @[Redacted]		8	3	0
Figure 5.11	2020-09-25	i'm im yr12 can we just leave it alone now #alevels #pumpedupkicks #fyp #ihateskl	Let it Happen - Tame Impala --- Pumped Up Kicks - Foster the People	33900	115	88
Figure 5.12		Escalates so fast #american #british #teaandcrumpets		1200000	314000	27800

Figure 5.13	2021-04-23	#stitch with [Redacted] say that to the kids that survived sandy hook		16	4	2
Figure 6.2	2020-02-15	N/A		80100	341	3751
Figure 6.3		Idk why I made this #fyp #capitol #us #election		7090	72	402
Figure 6.4a	2020-12-14	#schoolshooters #publicschoolthings		15	3	0
Figure 6.4b	2020-05-07	Those stars meant everything back than 🤣#fyp #healthheroes #schoolshooting #school #teachers #xyzbca #viral				
Figure 6.4c	2020-07-14	KaRmA😣 🤬 #fyp #foryou #foryoupage #TwoOptions #schoolshootings #meanteacher #UnitedWeDance #viral #funny		480	5	3
Figure 6.5	2019-11-03	#characterselect #fyp #foryou #foryourpage #schoolshooters #backtoschool	Chanel (Remix) - Frank Ocean	84	10	4

Figure 6.6a	2021-03-09	doves a bullet... literally #fyp #quietkid #funny	Phuck on Ya Thot [9000 Mix]	107500	171	195
Figure 6.6b	2020-11-27	(Follow for more comedy) damn son #quietkid #memes #quietkidmeme #funny #comedy #fyp #ReadySetShop #foryou #trending #foryoupage #viral #trend	Sweet Caroline (With Guns) - Neil Diamond	73000		
Figure 6.6c	2019-12-25	When being nice to the quiet kid backfires #fyp #foryou #foryoupage	Sweet Caroline - Neil Diamond	724500		
Figure 6.6d	2021-06-16	POV; You're the school shooter #school #comedy #advicefromlouis #lmao #fypシ		139	8	4
Figure 6.7	2020-02-25	I'm gon 🏃‍♂️ 💨 #foryou #fyp #foryoupage #school #shooting #schoolshooting #trending #polog #poses #tired #FrostedFeelings	Go Stupid - Polo G & Stunna 4 Vegas	505	9	16
Figure 6.8	2020-02-07	😵 😵 #full180 #schoolshooting #fyp #xyzbca #blowthisup	Don't Start Now - Dua Lipa	10	0	0

Figure 6.9a	2019-04-22	Sorry, had to #meme #ironic #plzlike #schoolshooting #joke #triggered				
Figure 6.9b	2020-06-11	#greenscreen someone always gotta ruin the fun 🙇 #fyp #viral #schoolshooters #shootuptheschool #propgun #greenhairdontcare	Poles - Quin NFN feat NLE Choppa	158	12	16
Figure 6.9c	2019-03-13	Ahora sí corran #pumpedupkicks #foryou #comedia #foryoupage #meme #argentina #dankmeme #columbine	Pumped Up Kicks - Foster the People	500	12	6
Figure 6.9d	2021-07-08	I had a friend that did this one time and live to tell it 😄 #comedy #fypシ #meme #schoolshootermeme	Free My Thugs - EBK Young Joc	33	3	2
Figure 6.10	2020-09-16	i thought about it. for maybe 15 seconds but i thought about it #alt	Let it Happen - Tame Impala --- Pumped Up Kicks - Foster the People	121800		