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The Disruptive Power of Memes: The Carnavalesque and Kevin Spacey's Place in the Weinstein Moment



Matthew H. Barton, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Communication
Southern Utah University



*Kevin A. Stein, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Communication
Southern Utah University
351 W. University Blvd., EVT 213B
Cedar City, UT 87420
(435) 586-7874
stein@suu.edu



Scott H. Church, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Communications
Brigham Young University

Touted as the “day it all began,” an October 5, 2017 *New York Times* exposé unleashed a torrent of sexual assault and harassment charges, spanning decades, against A-list Hollywood producer, Harvey Weinstein.¹ That moment described as a “long dark crack in the foundational wall” released a tide of accusations against more than “250 powerful people – celebrities, politicians, [and] CEOs” that continues to swell with charges filed against opera legend Placido Domingo, Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and former NFL star Antonio Brown, in late 2019.² The “post-Weinstein moment” has created a new culture of whistleblowing centering around powerful men who are accused



Photo Credit: "An Insight, An Idea with Kevin Spacey: Kevin Spacey" by World Economic Forum is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

of sexual misconduct.³ In addition to spawning the powerful movements #MeToo and #TimesUp that have “completely reshaped the way we think of men, women, sex, and power,” many people have come forward reporting men who abused their positions of power and sexually harassed, abused, or assaulted them. This zeitgeist was reflected in *Time* magazine’s person of the year in 2017: The Silence Breakers. These were the women who went public with stories and accusations of the men who had engaged in some form of sexual misconduct.

One of the powerful men implicated in the Weinstein movement was actor Kevin Spacey. Known for his roles in films such as *The Usual Suspects*, *American Beauty*, *Se7en*, *L.A. Confidential*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and *Pay it Forward*, as well for his role in the Netflix original series *House of Cards*, Spacey is a highly celebrated and Oscar-winning actor. However, he was accused of making sexual advances toward then 14-year-old actor Anthony Rapp in his apartment. Spacey responded to the allegation on October 29, 2017 with this Tweet:

I have a lot of respect and admiration for Anthony Rapp as an actor. I'm beyond horrified to hear his story. I honestly do not remember the encounter; it would have been over 30 years ago. But if I did behave as he describes, I owe him the sincerest apology for what would have been deeply inappropriate drunken behavior, and I am sorry for the feelings he describes having carried with him all these years. This story has encouraged me to address other things about my life. I know that there are stories out there about me and that some have been fueled by the fact that I have been so protective of my privacy.

As those closest to me know, in my life I have had relationships with both men and women. I have loved and had romantic encounters with men throughout my life, and I choose now to live as a gay man. I want to deal with this honestly and openly and that starts with examining my own behavior.⁴

Within a week of Rapp's accusation of Spacey, over a dozen other men accused Spacey of similar advances and atrocities. Five of those accusers were teens at the time of the assault.⁵

Almost immediately, memes began circulating online about Spacey's allegations and his Tweet/apology. The response was not unusual; memes are often created as a response to events in our culture—every major event spawns memes. The fact that memes are a *de facto* response to these events have led some media theorists to coin it a “hypermeme culture.”⁶ Memes about Kevin Spacey's apology have a threefold function: to respond to the atmosphere of sexual misconduct by men in power, to respond to the accusation against Kevin Spacey that implicated him in the conversation, and to respond to his specific defense against those accusations.

In an age where we have so many channels for communicating and so many different choices for the consumption of those messages, why are memes so frequently used? One reason is they are easy to make and circulate. Applications used to create memes, such as KnowYourMeme, MemeGenerator, Imgur, Troll.me, Make a Meme, and Meme Creator, are all readily available to internet users at no cost. According to MemeGenerator, the only technical skills required of users are the ability to upload an image, to type text, and to share. Apart from being easy to make, memes are also incredibly popular. Semiotics experts argue that most of the viral memes gain traction because they “stick to a three-step blueprint.

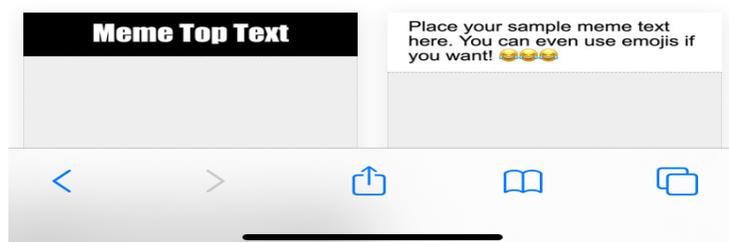


Meme Generator

Kapwing is a free online image, GIF, and video meme maker.

[Get started >](#)

Or, start with a basic meme template:



They're cheeky, they're funny and they're relatable.”⁷ In other words, memes appeal to the widest possible audience because they are easy to understand. Additionally, when meme viewers grasp the multiple levels of meaning present within a meme, it qualifies them to participate in a range of communities dedicated to specific meme types and human connections. This study examines the memetic responses to Kevin Spacey's sexual assault on Anthony Rapp in order to better understand the role memes play in making sense of a complex tragedy through parody.

What is a Meme?

Since the term was coined only a few decades ago, the meme has become one of the most recognizable elements in online culture. The term “meme” was invented by scientist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* to refer to a biological unit that spreads.⁸ Later, the term started being used to describe information widely circulated in the media. Recently, memes have been described by media theorist Limor Shifman as “pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon.”⁹ Although digital meme culture can be dismissed as some sort of elaborate inside joke, memes are becoming a regular part of public discourse. Because of the amount of time users spend navigating online content, and the relative lack of barriers for content creation and sharing, memes resonate among even the most casual of online observers. In fact, memes have been called the *lingua franca* (common language) of online culture, dominating online message boards and social media platforms like Reddit, Tumblr, and Imgur.¹⁰ Memes are important to understand because they are the language of the contemporary online world.

Mememes typically need to have a few characteristics before they can be called a meme. They are a type of bottom-up expression that spreads through copying, imitation, and remix.¹¹ They are not singular events, spread among an audience--that distinction is generally reserved for viral content.¹²



Photo credit: "SAMSUNG LAPTOP NOTEBOOK7" by TheBetterDay is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0

Neither are memes merely pictures with commentary inserted; they are best understood as families, stock characters, and templates duplicated many times by many different people, united by similar content and characteristics.¹³ These templates are still generally recognizable and available to the audience even as the event is unfolding, thanks to popular sites like KnowYourMeme and MemeGenerator. Due to their reliance on remix, memes typically reuse common tropes from popular culture and gaming culture.¹⁴ Still, creators of memes have to constantly negotiate between the familiarity of those tropes and the novelty of generating new content.¹⁵

Every major cultural event spurs numerous memes.¹⁶ This means that memes can often be political in nature. These memes can be used in the service of culture jamming, a subversive means of presenting cultural commentary by using recontextualized images originally used for commercial purposes.¹⁷ When in the service of creating cultural commentary, memes can use humor as a rhetorical weapon, either through benign situational humor or, perhaps, even “biting social commentary.”¹⁸ For example, when U.S. President Donald Trump was impeached by the House of Representatives in late 2019, memes about his impeachment predictably spread “like wildfire” online.¹⁹ The substance of memes—political commentary—was apparent, although it was framed in an intertextual style that drew its humor from references to popular culture. For example, some of the memes commented on the impeachment of Trump by referencing *Star Wars*, *Friends*, and Dos Equis beer advertisements.



Photo credit: <https://makeameme.org/meme>

/i-dont-always-ed3aad450b

Online users make memes that use satire to be funny and/or to call attention to something noteworthy in contemporary culture. These political memes “are about making a point—participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there.”²⁰ The destabilizing objective of such memes parallels the disruptive potential of parody in a democratic society. According to rhetorician Robert Hariman, a function of parody is to uncover troubling issues and put them on display for public contemplation.²¹

Hariman argues that “parodic techniques coalesce in the construction of a carnivalesque spectatorship,” where institutional practices, including power and status, are exposed as disingenuous acts.²²

Memes and the Carnavalesque

Like parody, because of their silliness, snark, and overall comic tone, memes are a modern version of the *carnavalesque*. This concept of the carnival was introduced in 1984 by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin.²³ He came up with the term to describe the lawless pageantry of the carnival custom in many cultures, which aimed to challenge societal hierarchies.²⁴ In the carnival, Bakhtin stated, there is no division between performers and spectators; as such, the carnival opposes conventional behaviors.²⁵ The carnivalesque life is lived in opposition to the non-carnival life, combining the “sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.”²⁶ This dualistic aim of the carnival genre may be facilitated by the carnivalesque category of “profanation,” in which obscenities and blasphemies are paraded about, thus opposing the traditional expectations for a more refined behavior. In other words, the carnivalesque is a possible description of how (and why) people use novelty, shock, and grotesque humor to question the status quo.



Photo credit: "Carnival in Bunde" by Crossroads Magazine is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Although Bakhtin clearly wasn't using the carnivalesque to describe memes, the meme provides a great example of the reach of the carnival in online culture. For this study, we are interested in asking the following questions: What are the memetic responses to the communicative cultural crisis of the Kevin Spacey sexual misconduct? How do memetic form and carnivalesque content come together in the Kevin Spacey memes to create a social commentary on this event?

How Did We Study the Memes?

In simply glancing at some of the Kevin Spacey memes online, one can easily discern that these texts exemplify the silly, snarky, subversive, profane, sexual, and grotesque elements that represent the notion of the carnival. However, Bakhtin's descriptors are too abstract to function as a workable framework for a rhetorical analysis of the content of these memes and thus we have opted to use the method of grounded theory.²⁷ This approach allows us to develop more concrete categories for how the memes function within the unique carnivalesque environment of the Kevin Spacey meme landscape.

When researchers refer to grounded theory, they mean "theory that was derived from data and systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process."²⁸ One specific method of grounded theory is constant comparison since it seeks to inductively develop categories from the ground up. Glaser and Strauss organized the constant comparative method of analysis into four distinct steps.²⁹ First, the critic compares each textual excerpt or incident to the previous ones, ensuring that it has not already been identified. Second, the critic combines the various categories by organizing them into groups based on their similar properties. Third, the critic reduces the size of the theory by taking out extraneous categories. Fourth, the critic defines the categories present in the analytic framework and offers representative examples from the text to illustrate them. Although the Kevin Spacey memes contained both visual and written elements, the four-step process was still the same as we attempted to organize and refine the memes into mutually exclusive categories based on the key themes identified.

The sample of texts included what we hope is an exhaustive collection of the most popular Kevin Spacey memes. We gathered 147 memes from the most popular meme websites. These included *Google Images*, *Imgur*, *Reddit*, *Tumblr*, and *Twitter*. Any new memes from the time the story broke (October 30, 2017) to the time when the Kevin Spacey fervor started to be supplanted by stories of Louis C.K.'s sexual misconduct (November 10, 2017) were downloaded and printed for analysis.



Authors Stein and Barton developing categories of memes using process from Glaser & Strauss.

Although the dates examined are somewhat arbitrary, we feel it represents the “core” time in which people were actively engaging in discussion about Kevin Spacey through meme culture.

Themes in the Memes

Several interesting themes emerged from our analysis of the Kevin Spacey memes. These include: 1) Association with villains; 2) Kevin Spacey movie/TV references; 3) Non-Kevin Spacey movie/TV references; 4) “I’m gay” deflections; 5) Emphasis on innocence of victims; and 6) Pointed cultural critique.

Association with Villains

This category included memes that used certain kinds of historical and celebrity villains as a way off emphasizing guilt by association. These included references to Adolf Hitler, Al-Qaeda, Hillary Clinton, Bill Cosby, Catholic priests, Harvey Weinstein, and Louis C.K. For example, one meme in particular shows two images side by side. One of these images portrays a close-up black and white photo of Adolf Hitler with his mustache removed (Fig.1). The other image shows Kevin Spacey occupying Lincoln’s seat inside his memorial in Washington D.C. Spacey’s face shows a smug confidence as he sits relaxed with his arms at rest and his hands dripping with blood, placing a twist on the familiar cover shot of the television series *House of Cards*. The text of the meme says “Hitler with his mustache removed” and then “Kevin Spacey.” The implication is that Spacey’s behavior puts him in the same company as Adolf Hitler and that the only thing really distinguishing the two men is the presence of a mustache. Another meme depicts Spacey wearing a Middle Eastern style hat and vest while holding a model airplane (Fig. 2). The background shows the twin towers on fire from the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Although no text is present in the meme, it is clear that that the meme creator sees Spacey’s behavior as a game, calculated and orchestrated with little regard for collateral damage.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Other memes make reference to the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal by showing Spacey dressed as a priest or providing meme text that alludes to the scandal. For example, one meme foregrounds Spacey standing defiantly in full Catholic priest attire, including an enormous gold crucifix around his neck. The image features the background of a very ornate cathedral (Fig. 3). Another meme shows a child asking his father “how he will ever get over what Mr. Spacey did” and the father responds, “don’t worry, son. We’ll get you counseling with a nice priest.” The argument here is that villains are often insulated from consequences from their behavior while the innocent are left



Figure 3

picking up the pieces. Other memes associate Spacey with people accused of sexual assault. For example, the Spacey scandal is often compared to the Bill Cosby scandal. In one meme, Kevin Spacey asks Cosby, “Am I doing it right, Mr. Cosby?” Cosby answers him, “No, you gotta razzle ‘em with the frazzle dazzle and the roofieees” (Fig. 4). Discounting drug references, the “frazzle dazzle” alludes to the humorous way that Cosby would often put words together in his stand-up routines. In fact, there is a whole line of memes where Cosby turns phrases like “put the razzle dazzle in the bazzle flazzle.” The basic argument of this meme, humor aside, is that Spacey is looking to Cosby for his behavioral cues and that this is clearly not the best person to model.

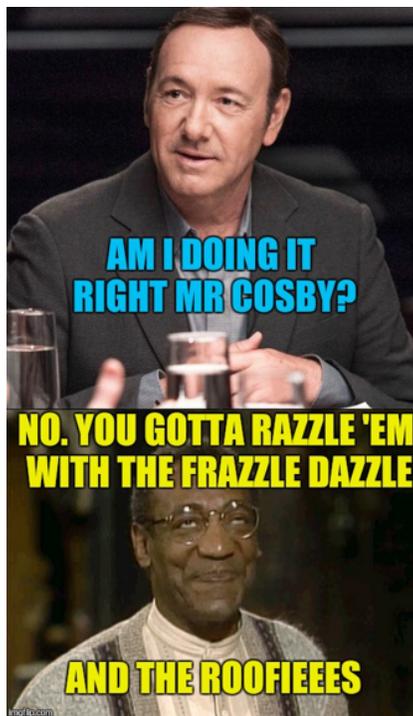


Figure 4

Kevin Spacey Movie/TV References

Another common meme uses movies and television shows that Kevin Spacey has appeared in as a springboard for further arguments about his sexual assaults. The most common references include the films *Se7en*, *Baby Driver*, *American Beauty*, and *All the Money in the World*. The most popular TV reference is *House of Cards*, which Spacey was fired from shortly after the allegations first surfaced. Every meme referencing the film *Se7en* uses the classic scene at the end of the film where Brad Pitt’s character, Detective Mills, asks a serial killer played by Kevin Spacey “What’s in the box?” (Fig. 5). In the film, the serial killer has murdered Mill’s wife and placed her head in a box.

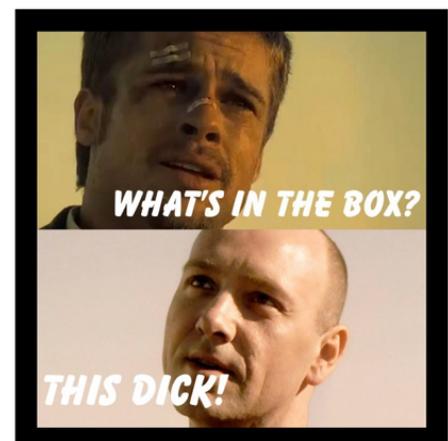


Figure 5

The graphic nature of the film carries over into the meme, wherein the mysterious contents in the box are now Kevin Spacey's genitalia. The Edgar Wright film *Baby Driver* contains a scene in which Spacey is impressed with the driving skills of a young man who he has recruited as a getaway driver for one of his heists. After Spacey's character is betrayed by the driver, he explains how he could have been so careless by saying "I was blinded by the balls on that kid" (Fig. 6). Meme creators quickly jumped on the phrase, arguing the line was prophetic of Spacey's behavior. One meme simply shows a screenshot of Spacey in the film accompanied by the film dialogue and then the text "You know, I just found out that Kevin Spacey confessed to his crime in *Baby Driver* ahead of time." This meme shifts the original meaning of the line from the kid having guts to a literal admiration of the young man's private parts.



Figure 6

Other memes referenced Kevin Spacey's Oscar-



Figure 7

winning performance in the film *American Beauty*. In the film, Spacey is disillusioned with his entire life as he loses his job and his marriage is in turmoil. A young woman in the film represents his deepest fantasies and his character is shown constantly lusting after her. One interesting meme adjusts this desire so that Spacey is no longer yearning for the girl, but instead a young boy. The meme contains an image of Spacey holding his hand up to block an image of a nude girl covered with strategically placed rose petals in favor of an image of a smiling elementary school-aged boy (Fig. 7). The implication here is that Spacey's real life desires are twisted and deviant in comparison to the fantasies portrayed on screen in the film—which could themselves be considered aberrant.

Another *American Beauty* meme shows a scene in the film where Spacey's character is working at the drive-thru of a fast food restaurant (Fig. 8). In the image, he's wearing a typical uniform and holding up two bags of food for the driver. The text of the meme reads "Kevin Spacey's remaining job prospects." Again, the meme takes a fictional scenario and implies that the scene is now representative of his real life.



Figure 8

Netflix replaced Kevin Spacey with Kevin from the Office



Figure 9

Other memes discuss Spacey's firing from the hit Netflix series *House of Cards*. In the show, Spacey plays a ruthless and conniving politician. Most of the memes humorously joke about possible replacements for Spacey, such as O.J. Simpson, Donald Trump Jr., and Dick Sargent. In one meme, the series cover shot replaces Spacey with "Kevin" from TV sitcom's *The Office* (Fig. 9). Another meme takes a screenshot of Spacey in the Oval Office and superimposes actor/comedian Kevin James' head over the top of Spacey (Fig. 10). These memes emphasize the replaceability of Spacey in the show and offer a commentary about the stupidity of Spacey's real-life choices by suggesting comedic actors would best fill his role.



Figure 10

Non-Kevin Spacey Movie References

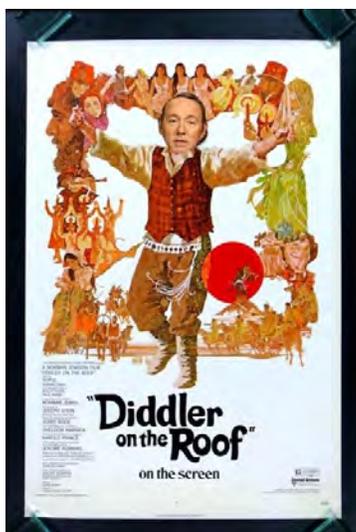


Figure 11

Other memes function in a similar way to the previous category except they include references to films not starring Kevin Spacey. For example, one meme shows the classic cover of Norman Jewison's *Fiddler on the Roof* with Spacey's head digitally placed over the top of the lead character Tevye's head (Fig. 11). The title of the movie has also been changed to "Diddler on the Roof," making reference to the slang term for someone who thinks sexually unlawful things about children. Another meme references the film *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, which is about the young son of a German commandant who develops a forbidden friendship with a Jewish boy in a concentration camp. Again, Spacey's face is superimposed over the face of the boy in the striped pajamas and the title is changed to "The Boy is Ripe" (Fig. 12). This meme repurposes the illogically forbidden relationship caused by war in the film to a context in which the relationship with Kevin Spacey should actually be forbidden. The meme is also interesting as it shows the two characters on opposite sides of a barbed wire fence, with Spacey on the inside of the camp. The positioning implies that the relationship between Spacey and his young victim should be forbidden and that Spacey should be imprisoned for his behavior.

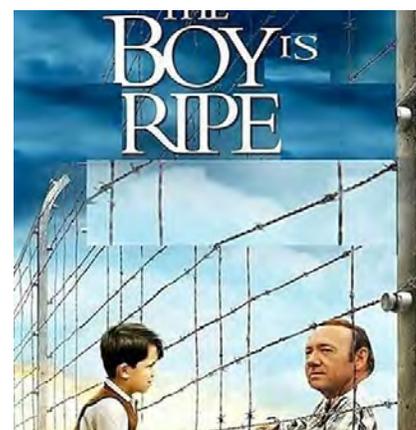


Figure 12

Another meme shows Kevin Spacey as Obi-Wan Kenobi fighting Darth Vader in the original *Star Wars: A New Hope*. The text of the meme states “If you accuse me of sexual assault, I will become more gay than you can possibly imagine” (Fig. 13). Although this meme makes reference to Spacey’s battle to protect his image, it utilizes one of the most popular film franchises in history to make the argument that no matter what society does to try to inhibit Spacey’s sexual tendencies, his behavior and status will persist.



Figure 13

“I’m Gay” Deflection

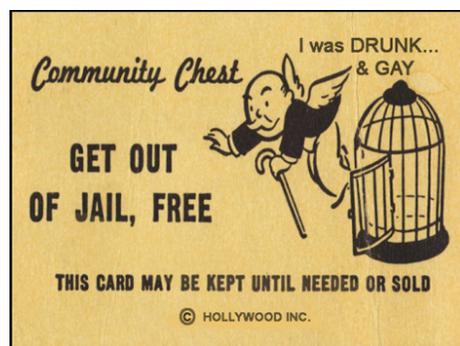


Figure 14

card and recontextualizes it for Spacey’s purposes by saying “I’m Gay. This card may be kept until needed or sold. Get out of jail free” (Fig. 14). Another meme appears to be fashioned after the style of a role-playing game like *Dungeons and Dragons*. The game card shows Kevin Spacey dressed in a futuristic soldier uniform and the title of the card reads “Deflection” (Fig. 15). The character has a force field around him which deflects the sexual

Related to the previous theme is an even more pronounced effort on the part of meme creators to show how Spacey uses the “I’m gay” excuse as a deflection of the criticism against him. For example, two memes use board games as a way of emphasizing Spacey’s strategy. One meme takes Monopoly’s “Get Out of Jail Free”



Figure 15



Kevin Spacey
Figure 16

assault allegation by using the “I’m gay” response. Several memes use the image of a police officer confronting an average citizen (depicted as Spacey). In one meme, a police officer is lying on top of Kevin Spacey as he yells “Stop resisting arrest!!!” Spacey, with a smile on his face, responds, “I’m gay!!!” (Fig. 16). Another meme shows a police officer asking Spacey if he knew how fast he was going while running a stop sign. He again gives the same excuse. Other memes show Spacey using the deflection for more innocuous types of offenses. In one, Spacey is rudely asking someone to move out of his way at the Academy Awards while casually eating a slice of pizza.

Move, I'm gay



Figure 17

He simply says to the other guest, “Move, I’m gay” (Fig. 17). In a more historical reference, one meme attempts to highlight instances in history when people could have used the “I’m gay” deflection to sidestep accusations. It shows one citizen pointing a finger at James Earl Ray, the assassin who killed Martin Luther King, Jr., and yelling “He shot Martin Luther King!”



Figure 18

Another citizen says, “It’s ok, he’s drunk and gay” (Fig. 18). These memes all mock Kevin Spacey’s strategy to evade responsibility.

Emphasis on Innocence of Victims

This type of theme emphasizes to a greater extent the age and innocence of Spacey’s assault victims. For example, one fairly overt meme draws a parallel between playing video games as a kid and Kevin Spacey’s behavior. The meme shows images of old video games and consoles and asks the question, “Who remembers having to blow these as a kid?” (Fig. 19).

Who else remembers having to blow these as a kid 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄



Figure 19

The meme is clearly referencing the old practice of having to blow dust out of the games and their consoles in order to get them to function. The text is followed by several emojis showing children raising their hands. Another meme shows the 1932 Hardy Boys classic book *While the Clock Ticked*. On the cover of the original book, the Hardy boys are bound and gagged while a robber enters the house through a secret passageway in a large grandfather clock. The meme adjusts the cover to show Spacey sneaking through the secret entranceway and the title now reads “Weekend at Kevin Spacey’s House” (Fig. 20).



Figure 20

The implication in the meme is that Spacey is dangerous and deceptive. Another meme shows Kevin Spacey dressed in graduation robes and the text declares “Dear 8th grade graduation class: Take chances, make mistakes, get messy....AND MOST IMPORTANTLY CALL ME!” (Fig. 21). These memes emphasize that the primary target of Spacey’s deviant tendencies is young children.

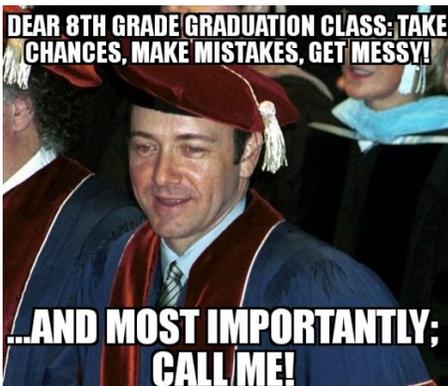


Figure 21

Pointed Cultural Critique

Other memes were more overt in making strong socio-cultural arguments about the Kevin Spacey scandal. These memes also use humor, pop culture references, and interesting visuals, however, they seem to make a deeper argument about the consequences of the behavior and the public reaction to these behaviors. For example, some memes expressed a strong disappointment in Kevin Spacey after being fans of his work for so long. One meme in particular shows a picture of a character from the show *Mad Men* saying “And I know that every artist I like will eventually be a creep” (Fig. 22). Another meme shows a character from the show *Futurama* saying, “I always thought Kevin Spacey was a little too good at acting creepy. He wasn’t acting all along” (Fig. 23). Together, these memes express disappointment over the lack of consistency between Spacey’s on-screen and off-screen behavior.



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24

Other memes seem to offer a suggestion for how to deal with this type of disappointment. One shows the image of Dwight Schrute from *The Office* arguing “You should appreciate his work, regardless [sic] of his personal life. You must have never named a child. You can’t name her Ameer. I dated an Ameer and she was a whore” (Fig. 24). This meme argues that, although we might like to, we cannot separate Spacey’s performances from his off-screen indiscretions.

Other memes provide a strong argument about a political and social hypocrisy in how people have responded to the scandal. One meme shows Kermit the Frog drinking Lipton tea and saying “So Libtards [liberals] bleat about a phony, decades old charge against Trump but are silent when Kevin Spacey admits being a child molester. But that’s none of my business” (Fig. 25). Another



Figure 25

Kermit meme with the same visual says instead “Spacey didn’t avoid being lynched because he came out as gay. It was because the victim isn’t female, but that’s none of my business” (Fig. 26). Both of these memes address a hypocrisy in our culture. One accuses liberals of treating Spacey differently than Donald Trump and the other argues that society has a double standard when it comes to addressing sexual assault against female versus male victims.



Figure 26

Another meme shows a puffin bird casually walking along the grass with the caption “Kevin Spacey should be tried by a court of law, not by the news or social media” (Fig. 27). The sentiment here is clear that as a society, we should reserve judgment on Spacey’s guilt or innocence until after legal proceedings have occurred.



Figure 27

Another meme seeks to capitalize on the scandal by using it as an impetus for advertising. In this meme, Rooney Retail, an online shopping site, uses the Spacey assault as a way to promote its Thanksgiving merchandise. In the meme/ad, they show two cartoon figures of turkeys holding food and an indication of 20% off for Thanksgiving. The more interesting part of the meme is where the creators add the caption, “Kevin Spacey will expose himself to you, but Rooney Retail will only expose great discounts like this at rooneyretail.com” (Fig. 28). This meme provides some pointed social commentary that buying items at discounted prices serves as a desirable alternative to the negative celebrity antics in the news. Moreover, the meme points to the caustic incongruity of human behavior in attempting to fix deeply internal problems (e.g., unlawful thoughts about and/or behavior toward children) with external solutions (e.g. purchasing items), much like the consumer who purchases diet pills in lieu of changing dietary attitudes and behaviors.

What Do Memes Mean?

As evidenced by the findings in this study, memes have a function beyond merely entertaining the online-savvy public. We argue that the memes that circulated after the Spacey mess used carnivalesque tactics as a means of questioning cultural attitudes about celebrity, entertainment, sexuality, and impropriety. In his compelling argument about the role of parody, Robert Hariman suggests that parodies function to create a decided “third space” where issues that would be difficult to discuss are comfortably brought into the open because of their nature as humorous commentary.³⁰ This protected comical arena provides a venue to discuss, even debate, issues without a direct fear of backlash – after all, it is a parody. Such an environment allows for safe, yet meaningful discussion of public dilemmas like the impact and consequences for respected entertainers (e.g., Kevin Spacey) who fall from grace.

Rooney Retail @RooneyRetail · Nov 3
 @KevinSpacey will expose himself to you, but Rooney Retail will only expose great discounts like this at rooneyretail.com



Figure 28

Likewise, parody within the carnival provides the mechanism to hold such actions up for critical inspection by calling into question existing hierarchies within our society.³¹ At their root, the Spacey memes are a potent reminder that personal expectations for celebrities as public figures,



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even if they are actors, are hitched to a set of idealized standards because they represent a physical, financial, social, and emotional investment from the public. Movies and other entertainment draw from life's precious resources of leisure time and disposable income, thus, when an actor wastes these resources people are naturally, yet semi-consciously, outraged. At times perhaps, not even fully grasping the reasons behind various

indiscretions, the public is naturally led to ask the troubling question: "Can you believe what Kevin Spacey did?" Such a question serves as a deeper reminder of the reliance on and emotional investment in, the "down time" the public seeks out to both enjoy and cope with their lives. More importantly, actors like Spacey who take people away from life's pressures through the escape movies and other entertainment mediums offer (even if only temporary) become pinnacle moments of seeing the world the way they would want it to be – tragic at times, but rewarding in the end.

The Spacey memes also represent a violation of the public trust. A celebrity label inherently possesses a mantle of leadership and a unique level of responsibility to maintain a genuine image standing above the fray of a less glamorous life. When despicable behavior surfaces, it is an assault on the contemporary public zeitgeist. In the Spacey case, there is something noticeably amiss concerning the way that villains are allowed to persist in their behavior. Consequently, memes and meme culture become more than a community of like-minded individuals, memes represent a platform for social change by pulling back the comedic, parodic layers the memes describe, while authentically labeling bad behavior as an abhorrent act of commission, rather than dismissing it as unfortunate or unavoidable. Similarly, the carnivalesque nature of those memes reveal disturbing and grotesque responses to an act that was likewise condemned as disturbing and grotesque.

As a collective text, the Spacey memes clearly demonstrate the real depth of the hurt these crimes have caused: private shame, relationship distrust, feelings of powerlessness, and the disturbing quid pro quo requirements for professional success. In fact, these memes even go so far as suggesting judgments that ought to be rendered against him.

An ironically disturbing finding from this analysis uncovers the cultural discomfort with what it means to be labeled or self-label as gay. These memes tug at the dialectical arguments between identity creation/management versus the axiomatic excuses/

protections individuals both use for their own purposes as well as a tool for eliminating that same protection for others. For example, the Spacey memes attack those who identify as gay, making their personal lives seem like a convenient way to protect themselves publicly, suggesting that no matter what happens you always have a free pass with no behavioral limits.

In part, this indictment is due to changes to the law as well as to potential litigious threats of professional or financial

harm for those who dare challenge the ideological meaning of this label. Simultaneously, and conveniently, opponents can point to such “cheap” maneuvers to evade responsibility by using a phrase (e.g., I’m gay) that has legitimate meaning in the gay community’s feelings of historical persecution in the pursuit of equality. Instead of being respected, the “I’m gay” deflection renders a new interpretation for acts of linguistic discrimination suggesting they should function as little more than nonsensical protection against any choice that is considered immoral or illegal. Such a characterization denies the reality of inequality. Stepping back then, the memes become a moral compass for society showing that certain behaviors are inexcusable and should not be devoid of punishment despite attempts to joke them away by using forcible phrases like “I’m gay.”



Photo credit: "Gay Pride Sevilla 01" by carva822 is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

Finally, the Spacey memes showcase the public desire for role models and consistency, even inside the medium of entertainment. On screen portrayals depicting a person trying to make the right decision are expected to be constant regardless of context and by portraying the role, the actor must be as good as the character (in the case of a hero like Spacey's role as the teacher in the film, *Pay it Forward*) or the literal antithesis of the character (e.g., as the serial killer in the film *se7en*). From this perspective, memes show the irony of public discourse and our distracted focus away from those deeply disturbing behaviors and the climate that causes them. The means-end thinking dupes the public into a belief that good actors are always good people and therefore they exist largely unchecked. In Burkean terms, while it is easy to place the blame on the "agent," the public has a responsibility to manage the "scene," because the environment cultivates a misshapen view of celebrity agency. Memes remind the public of their responsibility to change the cultural milieu to cast light into the shadows so repugnant behaviors cannot persist consequence free.



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Conclusion

Understanding a complicated visual, comedic, linguistic text that consists of both original and stock images is a perilous activity. Making accurate interpretations of memes and how they function is even more challenging considering theorists who would argue that memes are really part of individual communities who "get the joke."³² Thus, those outside the community can potentially miss the point entirely, unless they are willing to invest the time to understand the particular subject matter. Without a knowledge of history and pop culture, memes can be difficult to translate.

Our attempt here is not to suggest that there is a singular interpretation for such memes about Kevin Spacey's behavior, nor is it to ignore important theory on memes.³³ What this analysis does help explain is the rhetorical power memes have as tools for the lay public to express their opinion about the way things ought to be.

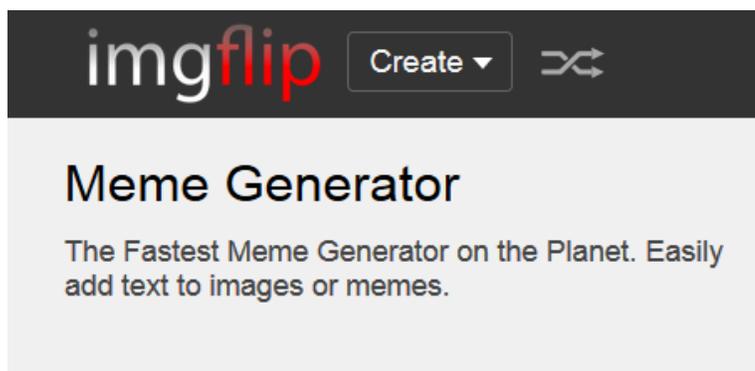
Carnavalesque depictions of Spacey acting inappropriately toward children, misusing legitimate cultural identity characterizations (e.g., I'm gay), and demonstrating how everyday entertainment mediums are being used to think about the way the world really is, make studying memes important *topoi* that ought to be examined more critically. We are left asking questions like: When a tragedy happens, why do people choose to respond with a meme? Why do people choose to connect with others by using a meme as the instrument of interaction? The answers we can provide are notably weak because they are partial at best. Although it may seem like memes have been around long enough to become ordinary, as McLuhan argues, that is why we ought to pay most attention to memes as a communication medium.³⁴ It is the everyday experience with technology which shapes people and their opinions. The repetitive use of memes as a

communication tool then becomes an extension of self and as we continue to participate with this medium the patterns of memes and the meme environment influence the way we create and use the content to make sense of troubling public events. Perhaps losing sight of the rhetorical power of means is the most perilous activity of all.

Meme Generator

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End Notes

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