

# Digital Social Media and Aggression: Memetic Rhetoric in 4chan's Collective Identity

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## Abstract

This article examines online aggression in digital social media. Using threads from 4chan's /b/ board (an anonymous imageboard known for trolling and other aggressive behaviors) as a case study, the author illustrates how some aggressive behaviors online are memetic; that is, they are uncritical recapitulations of previous behaviors or of the way users believe they are “supposed” to behave. First, the author examines /b/'s technical design, ethos, and collective identity to understand the nature of the offensive content posted to the board. Then, she analyzes two threads wherein transwomen (the most vehemently denigrated identity on /b/) self-identified and how the collective identity employed its memetic responses; the first transwoman incited /b/'s memetic wrath, while the second employed identity rhetoric that ruptured the collective identity, thus effectively deterring /b/'s memetic behaviors and opening constructive dialog. This case study emphasizes the pressing need for more teacher-scholars to perform research and develop pedagogy centered on anonymous and pseudonymous social media spaces. It is imperative to disrupt negative memetic behaviors so that we can find, create, and seize more opportunities to open the kinds of productive, democratic discourses that online aggression tends to silence.

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**Keywords:** Identity; Digital rhetoric; Memetic behavior; 4chan; Online aggression

Over the last decade, many composition teacher-scholars have begun using digital social media—such as blogs or Facebook—in first-year composition (FYC) classrooms to further a number of FYC's aims, such as helping students connect with each other and instructors, learn important rhetorical concepts, and become more fully aware of their digital identities (Head, 2016; Shepard, 2015; VanWagenen, 2015; Coad, 2013; Frost, 2011; Vie, 2008). Many have also embraced the notion that one of the main goals of writing courses is to teach students to become ethical and critical global citizens who are fully aware of the implications of their writing (DeLuca, 2015; Duffy, 2014; Frost, 2011; Tryon, 2006; Carlacio & Gillam, 2002). However, more research is needed into how bringing a critical awareness to digital social media use can help users become more ethical digital citizens. The majority of research focuses on “nonymous” spaces like Facebook and Twitter, but more work needs to address anonymous and pseudonymous spaces. Such an incorporation seems important and urgent, especially given the pervasiveness of online aggression that our students encounter—and perhaps even perpetrate—on a regular basis.

Despite efforts to prevent them, cyberbullying, trolling, and other online aggressions remain as prevalent now as ever before. Some research suggests that such hostile interactions may even be increasing. A 2014 McAfee study showed

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that rates of reporting online aggression<sup>1</sup> rose from 27% in 2013 to 87% the following year. [Consumer Reports \(2011\)](#) stated that around one million users were harassed on Facebook alone in 2011. These statistics could point to a couple of different things. The first is that with the rise of anti-cyberbullying sites and movements—and in the aftermath of mass digital harassment events like Gamergate<sup>2</sup>—more victims of online abuse may be willing to step forward and report their harassment. However, such numbers seem to indicate that even if more victims are reporting, more online abusers also seem to be abusing. Another survey in 2014 reported that 28%—over one-quarter—of Americans self-disclose that they have engaged in trolling activities online ([Gammon, 2014](#)).

Anonymity and pseudonymity appear to be major factors in online aggression, with a large portion—45%—happening on chat-, message-, and image-boards and internet forums like Reddit and 4chan ([Gammon, 2014](#)). Further, although 45% of targets of online aggression knew their aggressors before the abusive incident ([Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006](#)), 77% of Americans believe anonymity is the problem ([Gammon, 2014](#)). When users are allowed to post anonymously, they are more likely to engage in cyberbullying or trolling because such behaviors cannot be linked to their real-world identities; they can say and do as they please while experiencing virtually no repercussions. [Joseph M. Reagle \(2015\)](#) posited that the protection afforded by anonymity results in disinhibition, deindividuation (“a loss of a sense of self and social norms,” p. 94), and depersonalization (“a shift from a sense of self toward a group and its norms,” p. 97) online. The most common way these traits manifest is through online aggression.

However, while we know that instances of online aggression appear to be increasing and that anonymity and pseudonymity may play a role in its occurrence, the question that remains to be answered is, why? Why do cyberbullies cyberbully, why do trolls troll, and why do online harassers harass? Either these aggressors are genuinely bigoted and hateful people who take pleasure in harming others, or something else more insidious is happening. In my research of online spaces and digital communities, I have found it to be the latter: users in online collectives often engage in memetic behavior influenced by the interface’s technological design, ethos, and collective identity. Importantly, the behavioral memes I discuss here are distinct from more popular Internet memes. Whereas contemporary usage of the term “meme” usually denotes “a piece of content (e.g., a video, story, song, website, prank, trend, etc.) that achieved popularity primarily through word of mouth on the web” (Stryker 21), I use the term in a different sense that distinguishes content from behavior.

Richard Dawkins coined the term in *The Selfish Gene*—published in 1976, long before the potential for Internet memes could even be conceived of—to denote any cultural entity or thought that replicates itself—like genes do—in the minds of others “by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (1976/1989, p. 192). He explained, “Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” ([Dawkins, 1976/1989, p. 192](#)). [Cole Stryker \(2011\)](#) added, “[R]eligion is a meme. Art is a meme. Every form of human expression is a meme” (p. 18). These memes act as cultural units that spread any idea from person to person. They influence behavior, not only on an individual level but also on a group, or collective, level. [Limor Shifman \(2014\)](#) explained that behavioral “memes shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups.” In particular, these memes are a “shared social phenomenon” upon which all members of a collective identity may draw when deciding how to respond to each other (p. 18).

In this article, I present a case study of two threads on 4chan’s /b/ board to show how behavior in this space appears to be largely a Dawkinsian meme. Although 4chan is known for producing a vast array of memetic content on a regular basis, their behavioral memes are distinctly from these content memes. On /b/, users’ behavior appears to be a memetic recapitulation of how other users have historically behaved; users imitate or present only slightly altered versions of what they think is the appropriate way to act on /b/. Through examining /b/’s memetic responses to two separate instances of self-identifying transwomen, I will show how cyberbullying and other online aggressions are connected to rhetorical identity. This analysis reveals that collective identity ruptures in an otherwise hostilely polarizing environment may lead to the kinds of dialog and democratic debate that we both value in our classrooms and

<sup>1</sup> Online aggression is a broad term that encompasses many kinds of negative digital behaviors, from playful trolling to insidious cyberbullying to outright death threats and sexual harassment.

<sup>2</sup> Gamergate, started in August 2014, purported to be a campaign for video game journalism ethics, but this excuse only served as a thinly-veiled opportunity to harass and threaten top female video game developers and journalists, namely Zoë Quinn (independent developer), Brianna Wu (Giant Spacekat), and Anita Sarkeesian (*Feminist Frequency*). All three were doxxed (which means their personal information, such as addresses and phone numbers, was revealed in a public forum) and received death and rape threats via social media.

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