The memetic molester: Creating and characterising the child sex abuser through digital humour and transgressive media through a close reading analysis of Pedobear
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Abstract

The paper consists of an interdisciplinary close reading analysis of the 4chan character of Pedobear as an example of transgressive humour surrounding traumatic subjects in interactive online media. The character and its various applications, from simple knock-knock style jokes, pranks against an ignorant outsider public, countercultural consumption and even as an accusation of real-world abuse, are examined here. The close reading study locates the subject within a broader context of the insider currency of the shocking and taboo subject for masculinist youth culture communities both online and off.

Contents

Introduction

The paper consists of a close reading analysis of the character of Pedobear as an example of digital humour and transgressive media surrounding representations of CSA (childhood sexual abuse) in interactive online media. This is a comic cartoon teddy bear created on 4chan in the mid-2000s, described as "the characterization of paedophilia on the Web" ('Know Your Meme: Pedo Bear,' 2011), with the study itself located within what digital media theorist Whitney Phillips (2018) described as the "subcultural golden age" of online humour and trolling culture, a time period she estimates as between "2007–2011, which was followed by a slow strange integration into mainstream culture between 2011–2013" [1]. The character and its various applications, from simple knock-knock style jokes, pranks against an ignorant outsider public, and even as an accusation of real-world abuse, are examined here. The responsive and reactive function of this character is reflected in the paper's selection of sources, which range from online comments to panic-ed newspaper write ups around this contentious creation. An interdisciplinary methodology comprising of digital media studies, humour studies, affect theory, subcultural studies and film studies is utilised in order to reflect the multi-purpose and multi-genre nature of this creation.

Pedobear's role as an example of CSA character creation and online insider humour is developed into an analysis of how the character has been misread and repositioned as a creature of moral panic by a confused off-line public. These examples are provided to critique the limits of this online cultural capital, where its insider currency is inherently rooted in engaging with an outside off-line world that does not share its specialist knowledge. The investigation is informed by the twentieth century historical contexts and anxieties surrounding youth culture, building upon the off-line history of countercultural

consumption of corrupted childhood themed material, to explore the character's significance. However, its analysis focusses specifically on narrative based media that has been created within the context of digital spaces, such as meme-making and broader online humour. The selection of this uniquely digital media, though rooted in an off-line history of humour and horror, serves as a participatory space of moveable, often self-defined CSA narration that problematises set definitions of abuser and survivor. Here, the already complex space of CSA survivordom, is developed by considering how these characters may be occupied for cultural credibility within digital communities. This is with the aim of offering an analysis of how digital media-making is subverting the fixed borders between CS abuser and survivor in order to provoke nuanced ethical questions about audience engagement with abuse-themed media. As a result, the analysis extends beyond the literal crime of CSA, using it as a platform from which to interrogate wider questions surrounding technophobia, generational anxieties, transgressive media and digital youth culture.

The study builds upon the work of Meme Factory (2014, 2011), Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman (2017), Lee Knuttila (2011), Jana Herwig (2011), Travis Wall and Teodor Mitew (2018), Whitney Phillips (2018, 2017, 2015, 2012, 2011) and Ryan M. Milner (2016, 2013a, 2013b). These academics and critics, who are pioneering research into digital humour, within the context of folklore, humour studies, subcultural studies and horror theory, form the contextual foundations of this paper. However, with the notable exception of monographs such as Shira Chess and Eric Newsome's (2015) *Folklore, horror studies and the slender man*, and focussed academic papers such as Nissenbaum and Shifman's (2017) research into online meme-making, textual readings of digital media have often limited themselves by favouring a far-reaching breadth of Internet examples over close readings of a select number of texts. Angela Nagle's (2017) *Kill all normies* is a revealing example of this, quickly switching from one online example to another without citation and thus falling short of in-depth examination. The approach can be attributed to the seemingly new nature of the field of digital media studies, with scholars favouring accessible introductions into this supposedly unknown world over more rigorous research. This is a system that I seek to problematise through close analysis and clear historical context, as it has the potential to fall into ahistoricism through a guise of originality. By selecting a single under-researched theme, online humorous representations of CSA, explored through one select textual analysis, the character of Pedobear, I believe I can offer a focussed interrogation which researchers can build upon to explore further subjects related to the topic of digital media studies.

Insider abusers: A close reading of Pedobear as anexample of CSA-themed online comic capital

When exploring questions of comic digital representations of CSA, it is important to understand the humour that surrounds the character of the online child sex predator within Internet subcultures. Specifically, it is necessary to understand Pedobear, who was considered by Meme Factory (2011) as "the characterization of paedophilia on the Web" during the mid 2000s to early 2010s [2]. In this section, Pedobear is first defined and explained, before examining how the character functioned as a tool to demonstrate subcultural capital and insider humour. This is in order to develop an analysis of naming and identifying CS abusers, and the problems this causes when these signs are in flux.

The image of Pedobear originated on the Japanese message board Futaba Channel (a.k.a. 2chan), in the early 2000s as a character created from keyboard symbols to signify an attention-seeking user (Figure 1). This simple image of a cartoon bear took on new meaning when it found its way to the largely unmoderated space of 2chan's American counterpart, 4chan in the mid 2000s. Here it became what we now know as Pedobear and was originally posted as a warning that child abuse images were being, or about to be, posted, and was also used more broadly to mock the concept of paedophiles and paedophilia. In this community, the cartoon figure developed a language, a personality and even a costume. As American Internet academic Whitney Phillips (2012) explains: "Sometimes drooling, sometimes sweating, sometimes featuring a sombrero or the words 'DO WANT', Pedobear is always scrambling towards something. It is not until one realizes precisely what he is chasing after that his form takes on new significance." [3]

Figure 1: Image of the original keyboard character bear originating from Futaba Channel a.k.a. 2chan.

Such provocative power play should be understood and explained within the architecture of 4chan itself, most crucially the seeming contradiction between the mechanics of this "stripped down Web site" and the "infinitely complex culture" that it holds (Knuttila, 2011) [4]. Self-defined as "a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images", unlike many online social spaces, "the entry bars to 4chan.org have been lowered as much as possible", requiring no log in, registrations or identifying personal data (Herwig, 2011) [5]. This cultivates a playful tension between the individual anonymity of the singular 4chan user and the cultural group identity of 4chan as whole, which manifests revealing in anti-social characters such as Pedobear.

Consider the slogan for 4chan's /b/ board, the 'Random' message board which the character was most closely connected with, "The stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood. Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact." [6] This is the dualism between complexity and simplicity, forthright truth telling and shady mythmaking, where an easy to use, openly accessible space may appear wholly inaccessible to the casual explorer due to its antagonistic content, including but not limited to multi-layered, CSA themed humour. Here, seemingly innocent images such as Pedobear read as "a simple drawing, but not necessarily a simple text", when operating in a digital landscape of "intertextual threads that elaborate [into] a memetic tapestry" where "the 'inside joke' grows more complex even as it spreads" (Milner, 2013b) [7].

The fact that the Internet even has a humorously cartoonish incarnation of CSA is revealing in and of itself. This highlights the popularity of what Meme Factory (2014) describes as 'transgressive media' in online spaces, which they define as "acts or situations known by the poster to exceed the comfort level — or emotional, mental, or gastronomical tolerances of the intended audience" [8]. This youthfully masculinist notion of exceeding comfort levels is a revealing one, with Meme Factory explaining that subversive and provocative images are not only intended to "shock and upset" but also "constitute a brag [for] the original poster", as if to say, "look what terribleness I can endure" [9]. This gestures towards 4chan's role as more than an online community or simple message board, but rather its function as "a collective, embodied practice enabled by digital technology" that can be located within a deeper history of "adolescent or post-adolescent ritual" (Herwig, 2011) [10]. In this sense, the claim that "because no one can register [on 4chan], no one may claim a nickname for him or herself" is only partially true [11]. Rather in this landscape of adolescent ritual, a user may playfully adopt the face, name, and even criminal backstory, of any number of existing characters the site has to offer, in order to explore the border work of transgressive, digital humour [12]. This creates a unique model of cultural capital free from many of the traditional social signifiers of either online or off-line subcultures, as explained by digital media researchers Travis Wall and Teodor Mitew:

> Anonymity operates as a flattener of the [4chan] network, with each piece of content valued as is because there is no attachment to an account with a history able to generate social capital.
>
> The only kind of capital demonstrated is cultural capital through the use of subculture-specific communication tropes known to the community ... [the 4chan users] unable to recognize any sort of social capital due to the absence of identity, but it recognizes the absence of cultural capital through the inability of a user to understand forum-specific communication tropes (such users are usually told to "lurk more"). [13]

Figure 2: Pedobear running enthusiastically to a 4chan board from April 2006 which, due to the comments of 'CP' suggest child abuse images have been posted.

Such instant reaction images and bad taste humour hold an attention-grabbing power in an densely packed, online landscape where "every thread vies with others for its existence" [14]. Here a user is free to make as many paedophilic jokes as they please without the potential repercussions of such bad taste rhetoric being connected to an identifying profile picture, GPS location or professional e-mail address. This low stakes environment for experimental joke telling is enhanced further by the fact that the 4chan boards are "an archive that autodestructs after a certain period" [15]. This dual appeal of surface level anonymity (IP addresses are recorded so 4chan cannot be described as wholly anonymous) and supposed unarchivability (archives can still be manually constructed via screenshots) is part of what its creator Christopher Poole credits as its key appeal for meme making, and it can certainly be understood when it comes to the development of humour surrounding a subject as taboo as CSA [16].

The ethically ambiguous nature of such humour is developed further when we understand that the original Pedobear response images were in the face of real images of child abuse being posted on the site (Figure 3). This is a backstory satirically retold on *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, a provocative parodic wiki site, which documents so much of 4chan folklore, as follows:

> At least 100 years ago, Pedobear was forced to flee 4chan, when the 4chan mods made posting jailbait or loli [child abuse images] — or even replying to a thread about them — a bannable offense due to worries about the 4chan Party Van [the FBI]. However, since the mods are complete and utter failures and unable to even go with the rules they themselves set, Pedobear and his fans didn't need to move with the cocksmoking furfags [notes use of homophobic slurs as a gatekeeping device and insult] at 7chan [neighbouring message board site], despite claims to the contrary from the batshit insane fundamentalist 7chan zealots, returning, indeed, to 4chan after the faggot mods decided to stop enforcing the rules that caused /b/-day [2006 conflict that led to harsher enforcement of 4chan's no child abuse image policy] out of sheer faggotry [again note use of homophobic slur as insult]. [17]

The tension between abuse, audience and accusation, and the libertarian principles that underpin their expression, is summarised by technology writer Nick Douglas in his 2009 essay 'A beginner's guide to Pedobear, the Internet's favorite pervert', in which he explains that:

> Pedobear is a shorthand for saying, 'You're being creepy about a kid.' If anyone on 4chan posts a picture of a questionably young looking girl in a sexy pose, someone will inevitably reply with a pic of Pedobear. Many times, Pedobear is added to a picture to point out real-world sexualization of presexual kids, but it's alternately shown as an acknowledgment of being inappropriately attracted to a child.

> This admittedly risqué line of humor shouldn't be seen as condoning paedophila. Child pornography is banned on 4chan, and the site's users have helped authorities track down paedophiles. But the freedom to joke about it, even offensively, is part of 4chan's ethos of absolute free speech, liberty from censorship, and intentional bad behavior. [18]

Pedobear's 'risqué' humour, and the digital libertarian principals that underpin it, should be located within a deeper history of child abuse comic character creation and provocative CSA-themed

countercultural humour. Perhaps the most famous example of a comic cultural character developing from this unspeakable crime can be found in Humbert Humbert, the CS abuser of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (2000). The comparison is raised, not simply for the comical name of the CS abuser, but for the parody-within-a-parody-comic construction of the mock objectivity of 'John Ray Junior, PhD'. This is the fictional psychiatric figure who pens Lolita's introduction. The function of pomp and parody in lampooning the CSA-accusing subject positions him as a precursor to digital humour surrounding moralistic Internet vigilantes who target online CS abusers.

The latter can first be identified in Chris Morris' satire *Paedogeddon!* (2001), which mocked the early 2000s British moral panic against CS abusers, both online and off, and consequently elicited a moral panic of its own [19]. However, perhaps the most famous figure within this field is Chris Hanson, the American NBC network television show host of *To Catch a Predator* (2004–2007). Hanson's television work popularised Internet vigilantism towards suspected online CS abusers, and its sensational style crossed over from network television to digital meme-making, with Hanson often shown trying to catch the character of Pedobear in memetic mythology (Figure 5) [20]. His television series presented a "dangerous Web" filled with "online sexual predators", and was criticised for blurring the "law enforcement business" with "show business" [21]. Hanson typified the exaggerated pseudo-moralism of the paedophile-hunting vigilante both online and off, with the series' controversial style of public humiliation summarised by media critic Charlie Brooker in 2008 as "when a TV show makes you feel sorry for potential child rapists, you know it's doing something wrong" [22].

Hanson's persona continued the work of Nabokov's foaming-at-the-mouth, finger-pointing John Ray Junior, who, speaking of Humbert, declares in lurid terms, akin to the narrator's own verbose writing style, that "he is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy" [23]. He describes Humbert as a "panting maniac", a clear precursor to Pedobear's own dribbling leer, as well as to Hanson's sensational broadcasting style, and identifies him as "not only a vivid character", again eliciting something of the cartoonish, but also a "dangerous trend" [24]. In raising notions of both trends and disease, we find an earlier version of the digital idea of going viral, suggesting that the question of virality is an issue, not just of technology, but of morality. This begs the question of whether the roots of this style of CSA inflected Internet culture can be found, not in the literal history of the wires and Webs that allow us to access such material, but in the cultural archives of comically villainous abusers such as Humbert Humbert and hysterically self-righteous moralisers such as John Ray Junior.

Such cultural representations of CSA should be positioned not simply within the world of the pointing, panicked adult but also alongside the youthful audience that laughs at such hysteria. Within this humorous context, the "newly reconceived paedophile [who] possessed a dangerous criminal intellect, with access to the latest forms of technology, communication and even behavior modification techniques" (Jenkins, 2004) can be appropriated by the young person through online joke-making [25]. The paedophile is transformed from a threat against a young person, to a weapon *by* the technologically literate young person *against* an adult audience, fearful of both the CS abuser and the seemingly sinister medium of the digital itself. Thus, the fear of the harm young people can do online, and the fear of harm that can be done to young people online, twist and tangle.

This is rooted in the 1990s anxiety of a "virtuality without ethics" where "nihlilism [is] central to a virtual class" that is "beyond good and evil" (Croker, 1996) [26]. Or as American journalist Cokie Roberts declared in 1995, "it's as if their mother disappeared and now they're allowed to say just awful things [online]." [27] This destabilisation of the traditional top-down structure of the threatening child abuser to the threatened child was summarised by technology writer Douglas Rushkoff in 1997. In a text aimed at nervous parents, he explained:

Figure 3: Image of reality television presenter Chris Hansen catching Pedobear. He is using his catchphrase 'why don't you have a seat' from his show *To Catch a Predator*; Hansen uses the phrase at the end of each episode when he has 'caught' an online child sex predator.
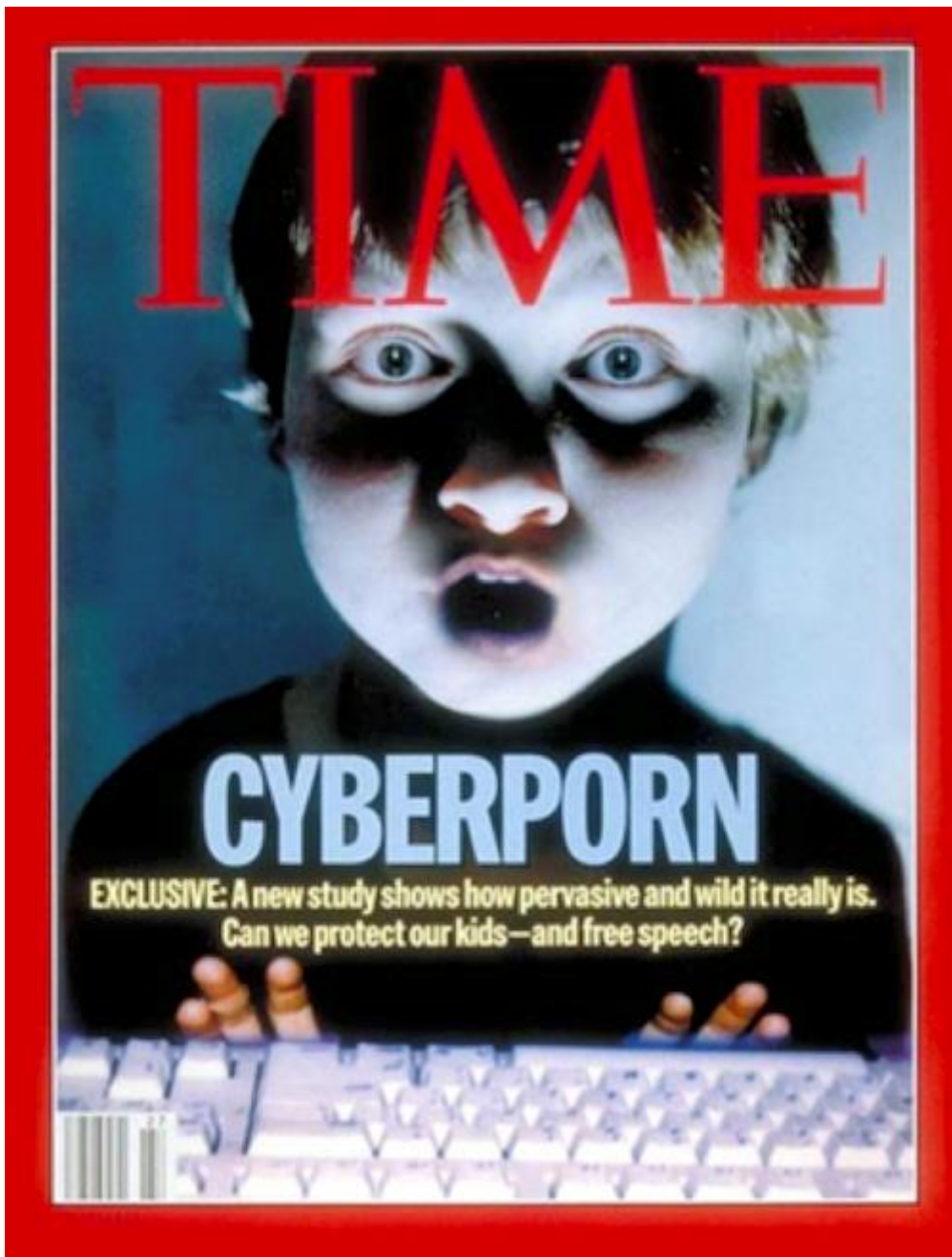
Figure 4: Cover of 3 July 1995 issue of *Time* on the theme of 'cyberporn'.

Figure 5: Home page of Rotten.com, from 14 August 2001, via the Wayback Machine.

The degree of change experienced by the last three generations rivals that of a species undergoing mutation. Children born into our electronically mediated world might best be called 'screenagers'. While members of every generation experience some degree of tension with their own children, today's screenagers have been forced to adapt to such an extent that many of their behaviours feel inscrutable to their elders. We feel threatened by how different they have become. [28]

Such fearful ideas of mutated 'screenagers' relate to the Clinton-era moral panic surrounding minors viewing pornography (Figure 4) and other supposedly indecent images online [29]. This is evidenced in the passing of the Child Online Protection Act (COPA) of 1998, which sought to censor explicit material from the view of children [30]. It should be noted that it especially targeted shock sites such as Rotten.com (Figure 5), which its creator 'Soylent' summarised as a "a shining beacon of what children shouldn't see on the Net" [31]. Describing itself as "the soft white underbelly of the net", the site specialised in gore, fetish pornography and other provocative images "to present the viewer with a truly unpleasant experience" and ran from 1997–2012 [32]. Soylent defended his right to publish such graphic imagery, arguing that "the net is not a babysitter" and "we cannot dumb the Internet down to the level of a playground" [33]. This earlier digital libertarian vision of the obscene should contextualise the lawless mythos of later spaces such as 4chan, the CSA-themed humour it created and the subsequent media panics such work produced.

However, in understanding ambiguously humorous representations of CSA, it is also important to recognise how intentionally comic culture, both mainstream and marginal, has previously interacted with notional ideas of the paedophile. The comedian and CSA survivor advocate, Barry Crimmins, once stated of the pro-paedophile group NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association) that "they would be comical if they weren't so dangerous and horrible" [34]. Yet, the wealth of humour on the subject of CSA, including but not limited to NAMBLA, suggests that the comical and the dangerous exist in parallel. Perhaps what is most relevant to consider here is the use of NAMBLA within comedy routines as a reusable insider joke, with the punchline falling on the innocent outsider, unaware of the abusive undertones those six letters insinuate:

By the mid-2000s, *The Daily Show* had begun using NAMBLA as a kind of insta-joke, where 'NAMBLA' was thrown out any time an innocuous-sounding acronym was needed to fill a gap, and the joke was on anyone who didn't know what it stood for. [35]

Such comedy continues this longer cultural history of repurposing traumatic, violent and upsetting images and signalling for insider amusement. As media theorist and sociologist Dick Hebdige (1991) observed, this is the cultural process where the "signifier [in Hebdige's example, this is the swastika in British punk subcultures] had been willfully detach[ed] from the concept [Nazism and the Holocaust]" and is instead "re-positioned within an alternative subcultural context, [where] its primary value and appeal derived precisely from its lack of meaning: from its potential for deceit" [36]. But this disconnection is itself unconvincing, and Hebdige's claim that "in punk usage, the symbol lost its 'natural' meaning — fascism" and simply operated as meaningless shock value is questionable [37]. Whether in the anti-Semitic, genocidal history of Nazism, or the real world victims of the CS abuser, the emotive impact of these subjects are not extinguished in their subsequent repurposed representations, but rather amplified to encourage outrage for those outside of these subcultural groups. The potential deceit to an outsider audience that Hebdige proposes is certainly present, however the creator's detachment to the significance of the original subject is not.

With this in mind, is there a certain cruelty to the setup of the paedophillic 'insta-jokes'? This humour lies in the exploitation of an innocent audience to publish or present the CS abuser unchecked, inviting them to unwittingly share or even identify with such an abusive figure. Such violent themes within comedy can be understood through arguments of the violent and predatory nature of joke telling itself, with Freud (2001) arguing that such humour "transforms the initially indifferent audience into accomplices in hate or scorn" [38]. This is evidenced by Gershon Legman, in his 2006 study *Rationale of the dirty joke*, which built upon Freud's (2001) theory of hostile and obscene wit in *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. Freud equated joke teller to predator and listener to prey in his own writing

on the smutty joke [39]. Developing on this predator-to-prey structure of humour, Legman then argued that "under the mask of humor our society allows infinite aggression" [40].

Working within this theory, the cultural representation of CSA, in this case the joke and its audience engagement with it, is not separate from the event of CSA, but a part of a larger system of violence. This extends beyond the theoretical study of the performance of joke telling, with comic theorist John Morreall (2009) emphasising that "to be mocked or laughed at can be taken as seriously as a physical attack would be" [41]. This is illustrative of the fact that humour, much like questions of technology, youth culture, childhood and sexuality, can be regarded as a reflection of a joke teller's moral standing, as much as it can demonstrate a suspension of these moral codes [42]. *The Book of Kings* even went as far to position disrespectful jokes towards one's elders as an inherently sinful act, when a group of children are mauled to death by bears as divine punishment for laughing at the Prophet Elisha's bald head [43].

But such power dynamics in a subject as multi-layered as Pedobear are more complex than a top-down system. Therefore, to simplify such engagements within a survivor and abuser structure, with joke telling as a form of trauma transmission, would not do justice to the complexity of digital engagement. What is the context in which the joke teller came to learn about the CSA subject in the first place? Could the platform of 4chan, which transmits the CSA themed content, be the abuser in this case? After all, 4chan's /b/ board is summarised by one poster as exactly that, declaring that "/b/ is the uncle that has touched you several times" [44]. Furthermore, does the fact that the tellers of these jokes occupy the space of youthful boyhood themselves, potentially targeting older and inexperienced adults, place the joke telling more as a parodic survivor's confession than a predator's trap? Such reasoning would position the Pedobear joke genre as a continuation of the "morality play" (Stein and Sheper-Hughes, 1995) struggle between adult and child in CSA debates, a genre that is part of a longer tradition of children and young people using comedy against adults [45]. Legman proposes that this constitutes a "duel between parent and child", with the child, or young person, using humour as a weapon to "punish the parents for their insincerity", a particularly revealing point considering the moral panic surrounding both CSA and young people's use of the Internet itself [46]. This is revelatory of the fact that humorous representations of CSA extends beyond abuser and survivor to questions of generational struggles, traumatic image transmission and technophobia.

This brings us back to Pedobear, where the predator is punch line and parody, an interactive space to ambiguously engage in an imagined, imminent assault. The figure is characterised as a cartoon teddy bear, a child's toy, a potential Disney mascot, something coded as a friendly figure in the space of American capitalist culture. It is hardly the collective image of child molestation, except that, paradoxically, it is, as this is the character who has been described as "the characterization of paedophilia on the Web", making the creature both the antithesis and the embodiment of CSA [47].

Such innocent imagery reflects the position of the cute object as a "site of a surprisingly complex power struggle[s]" [48]. The affect theorist Sianne Ngai (2012) argues that "violence is always implicit in our relationship to the cute object", making its association with a violent subject such as CSA a continuation rather than a diversion from its aesthetic function [49]. Within Ngai's theory "cuteness is an aestheticisation of powerlessness" because a "cute object", such as a soft, fluffy teddy bear you might want to tightly squeeze, has "no edge to speak of" [50]. This power system in which the abuser is cute consumer and the survivor is a cute object is, in turn, subversively developed into a vision of the "anti-cute" (Gn, 2017) [51]. Thus, in an image's "transformation from cute to acute", the "asymmetry as power" may be redistributed to the cute character, so a person may be "cut by cuteness" (Peplin, 2017), a setup that the predatory Pedobear can be located within [52]. In this system, you are not squeezing the teddy, the teddy is squeezing, or somehow scaring, you. Such anti-cute inversions are found within a longer history of youth culture as comically corrupted childhood cuteness. The American cartoon series *Happy Tree Friends* (1999–present) which combines cute cartoon animals with graphic violence, and the Japanese character of *Gloomy Bear*, a pink teddy bear who is often shown attacking children, are two particularly vivid examples of this genre [53]. Here a young person may display their mature status as having outgrown their teddy bears enough to denigrate them entirely, displaying and consuming the anti-cute as evidence that they are no longer cute themselves.

This is a genre of corrupted childhood and suspended boyhood evident in such films as Seth MacFarlane's (2012) *Ted*, which follows the story of the close bond between Mark Wahlberg's John, a mid-thirties white American man, and his foul-mouthed, magically animated, talking teddy bear, Ted. The film degrades childhood innocence and rejects the responsibilities and rigours of adulthood, instead choosing the middle path of male adolescence. As John himself says, "I'm 35 years old and I'm going nowhere. All I do is smoke pot and watch movies with a teddy fucking bear" [54]. This reflects the anti-cute symbol of the obscene teddy as a "semiotic upheaval [of the] fixed categories of youth and old age, the human and the non-human, the sacred and the profound" (McIntyre, 2011) [55]. This aesthetic

system is utilised to "capture and deflect feelings of vulnerability" and comically reflect systems of "anxious" boyhood and the masculine grotesque [56].

The characters of Ted and Pedobear can therefore be located within what media theorist William Paul (1994) identifies as the genre of 'Animal Comedy' [57]. Originally created to identify the screwball films of the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Porky's* (1981) and *Animal House* (1978), Paul proposes that such texts "reminds us of our physical and animal states" because, "much as Animal Comedy celebrates sexual liberation, it also celebrates an anti-authoritarian social liberation", reflecting "an Oedipal battle against adult authority by people who are about to become adults and want to appropriate the authority for themselves" [58].

Paul's Animal Comedy should be considered within a longer history of comedy as social transgression, anarchy and upheaval, that stretches back to classical antiquity and which has been analysed in depth by authors such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) [59]. Comedy, after all, is about power; the comic can gain power through trickery, and assert power through humour within social insider groups. But comedy is also about relinquishing power, by momentarily positioning yourself as the abused child, and disrupting power, by switching roles between adult and child. Thus, the joke teller and listener can be both survivor and abuser, because a joke can travel in multiple directions. The anti-cute Animal Comedy of Ted and Pedobear reflects the struggles of an individual growing up, deciding whether to occupy childhood, adulthood or adolescent, and struggling against the limited meanings of these age categories through play. This play, as Paul theorises, constitutes not just an individual exploration, but a larger struggle against the concept of adulthood, and the symbolic and structural powers these roles possess.

Such powers of play, in regards to the Pedobear character, are explained by Douglas, who emphasises that "the brilliance of the Pedobear mythos is that none of it is apparent in the picture of this innocent picture of a teddy" [60]. The adult meaning of a childhood symbol is therefore only accessible to those who occupy the Animal Comedy space of adolescent boyhood, which in the case of Pedobear is expressed through what Ryan M. Milner (2013b) defines as the "lingua franca", or "shared language" of meme making [61]. This is itself a reflection of the meme's function as a "balance between the familiar and the foreign in Internet memes" where digital joke making may "memetically wreck a multitude of cultural touchstones" [62].

For the CSA theme is not explicitly evident in the image, the wide-eyed bear, but in the text, or rather the second part of the text, as the Pedobear meme structure relies on a paedophilic punch line generated from the subcultural capital of the viewers. This is not a unique model of joke telling, but rather one example of what Milner defines as "macro humour", where existing Internet characters and familiar phrases interact in order to humorously upend expectations [63]. Much like a knock-knock joke relies on a reply of 'who's there', Pedobear's innocent image of a teddy bear alongside a familiar opening line requires a grotesque twist. For instance, line one: "stay in school", line two: "it would be easier for me to find you", and so on (Figures 6 and 7). This supports Walter Benjamin's (1972) argument that the caption is potentially "the most important component of the shot" because it holds the power to "uncover guilt and name the guilty in ... pictures" [64]. This sense of guilt, naming, revelation and projection are developed further by Douglas when he states that "Pedobear's like a curse word: A picture of a teddy bear is only as offensive as the meaning it's given." [65] And it this curse word that only works when executed amongst an understanding peer group.

Douglas' argument finds support in the fact that images of Pedobear were banned from a number of popular online photo sharing sites of the 2000s, such as Imageshack and Photobucket. The image, by association, is rendered obscene, itself a sign of its success for the joke teller. This push-and-pull relationship between the rational and the overblown, the simple and the complicated, the mocking and the affirming, the innocent and the criminal, is revelatory of wider online cultures of transgressive social interaction, most notably the act of trolling. This is the art of wilfully exposing or mocking an unsuspecting user through playfully devious forms of off-topic interaction, and is again associated with 4chan. As Whitney Phillips (2011) explains, online trolling "is simultaneously cruel and amusing and aggressive and playful and real and pretend and hurtful and harmless, as are the trolls themselves. It really is as simple and as complicated as that." [66] Many frustrated Internet users would argue that it is Pedobear himself who is simple and the offline audiences, unaware of online mythmaking and transgressive tastes, who are making it complicated. As Douglas argues, "Pedobear is just a character made to mock paedophilia. And like anything interesting on the Internet, he's often feared and grossly misunderstood." [67]

Figure 6: Example of a Pedobear joke image. Author and date unknown.
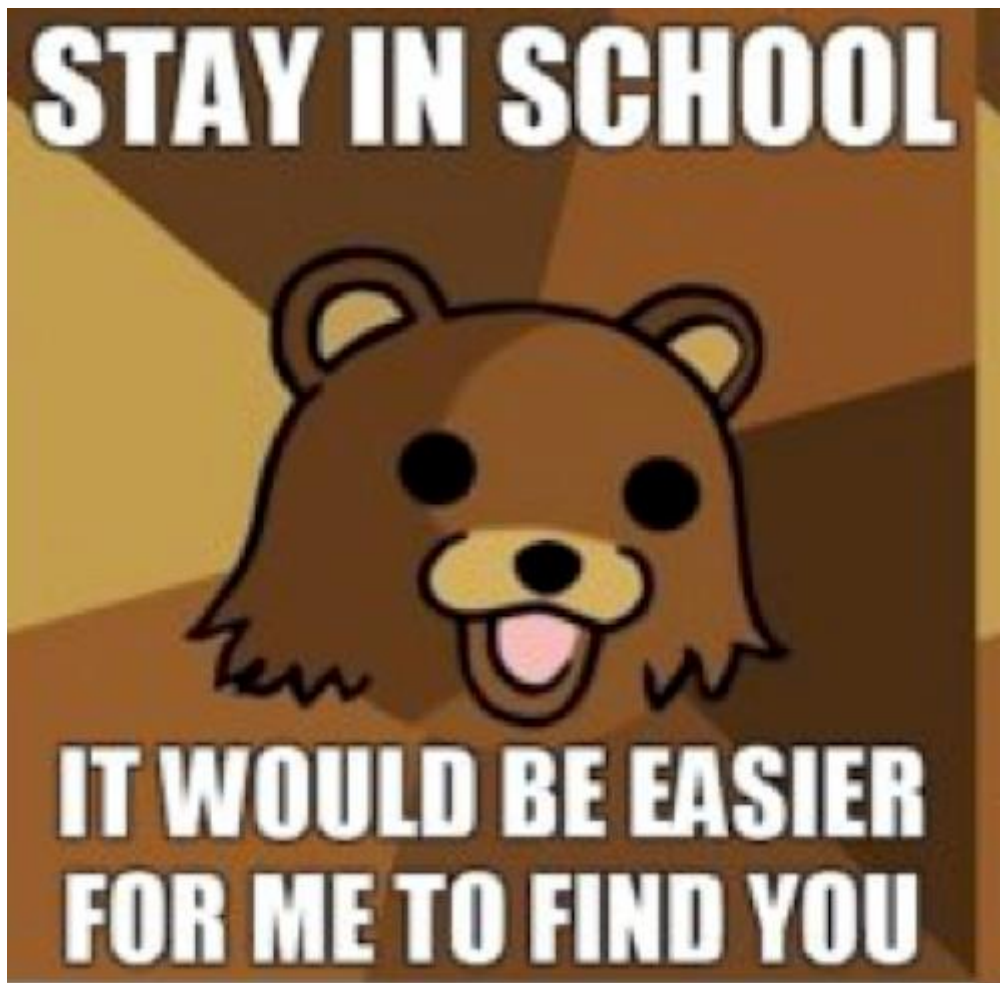
Figure 7: Example of a Pedobear joke image. Image by zelda1fiction1child, 2011.

Figure 8: Polish newspaper *Gazeta Olsztynska's* front-page story on the Vancouver 2010 Olympics, featuring Pedobear, 4 February 2010.

Figure 9: Patrick J. Buchanan's 2009 online article for *Taki* magazine, featuring Pedobear.

Figure 10: Pedobear poster at Riccarton Primary School, Christchurch, New Zealand. Photo: gpforums.co.nz.

Pedobear's comically inconspicuous nature has already been highlighted, and it is this very nature that has resulted in him popping up in unexpected places, the publisher unaware of his meaning, when stripped of the unsavoury text that serves as his revelation. The bear has been unintentionally included in a range of mainstream media, from a front-page cover story on the 2010 Olympics (Figure 8), to a conservative column on U.S. President Barack Obama in 2009 (Figure 9). Speaking on the character's appearance alongside President Obama, the Web site *Wonkette* wryly noted that "it seems possible that whoever decided to combine Pat Buchanan's Nixon column with a picture of Pedobear did not fully understand what that little cartoon character is really 'about'". [68] Another particularly striking example, due to its setting, is when Pedobear found its way into a New Zealand primary school in 2012, displayed on a poster for an extended period of time (Figure 10). "No one on our staff had any idea what this thing represented", declared the school's headmaster, Paul Irving, in a statement to the *New Zealand Herald*, serving as a revealing parallel to the anxiety-inducing idea that real abusers often insidiously position themselves in plain sight as heads of families and pillars of communities [69].

In this setup, each accidental appearance is lauded as a success by those in the know, serving as proof that the predatory Pedobear can infiltrate any respectable situation. This reflects the fact that though "laughter builds social worlds, it also pushes out those unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the world being built" (Phillips and Milner, 2017), or even turns the nave viewer themselves into the object of laughter [70]. The insider figure of the outlaw online humourist cannot exist without the ignorant outsider, who ironically in the off-line world would be considered the insider. These are the 'normies' of the mainstream media and mainstream society, a derogatory designation for those deemed too blandly conventional to understand the nuances of these memetic subcultural codes, and which the provocative rhetoric of spaces such as 4chan are designed to alienate and upset. This is a paradoxical system where a group's outsider status relies on the Othering of supposedly conventional society. In the complex context of a character such as Pedobear, "familiarity with a cultural code is prerequisite for the spontaneous mental restructuring of elements that results in amusement and laughter" (Apte, 1985) [71]. A person cannot laugh at Pedobear without being a part of a community that is predicated on antagonistic image-making, with the group's outsider status encouraging the conservative responses that follow. This is a prank formula which was dismissed in panicked tones by the *Telegraph* in 2010 as a "tasteless Internet trend" and is reflective of the uncertain borders between the criminal, the countercultural and the outraged mainstream [72]. As Douglas explains:

> Users of 4chan and similar sites love to see Pedobear show up in inappropriate places. The freedom of posting offensive pictures in an anything-goes forum can't beat the glee of subverting public standards of decency.
>
> The ultimate coup for a 4chan meme is subversive or accidental use in the real-world, and Pedobear's gotten it. To the initiated, any picture with a bear and a kid will look hauntingly like a Pedobear attack. But thanks to Pedobear's innocent appearance, the actual bear can show up in ads for businesses that didn't know better. [73]

In its rigid demarcation between the out-of-touch off-line and the in-the-know 4chan, ignorance of Internet culture is positioned as an active invitation for targeting [74]. Pedobear serves as a continuation of the meme's subcultural function as an assertion of "superior status and authority", where memes act as "products of digital communities that require subcultural literacy and are often used for gatekeeping practices" (Nisenbaum, Shiffman, 2017) [75]. This reflects the fact that such humour cannot be reduced to an abuser/survivor system, and these jokes cannot be divorced by the powers at play. As digital researcher Kate M. Miltner (2014) explains, "humor is a mechanism through which we erect and maintain symbolic boundaries which are used to execute a number of personal and social functions: asserting tastes, exploring identities and situations, and defining insiders and outsiders." [76] And it is this border-making that is inherent to our understanding of meme-making, with "memetic logics, grammar and vernacular employed in subcultural conversations to differentiate insiders from outsiders and to distinguish members of the collective from the uninitiated" (Milner, 2016) [77]. This digital humour structure, likened by Phillips (2017) to a "subcultural bat signal", is created with the intention of asserting that "I am one of you, that we all comprise an us, and that most importantly, this us exists within the magical world of the play frame" [78]. Therefore, Pedobear is not simply a character made to mock paedophilia but rather the paedophilic subject, and its subsequent destabilisation through

meme-making, operates as an inside joke used to assert one's membership of a digital community dependent on comic cultural capital.

This is evidenced in how *Encyclopedia Dramatica* revelled in such playful destabilisation of the statuses of innocent and abuser, documenting each victory with glee, serving as proof of normie stupidity against the comedic brilliance of their outsider culture [79]. The affirmation of their collective identity is situated in the creation of chaos within the moralistic belief systems of others, through infiltrating their image-making with socially taboo themes such as CSA. Pedobear's humour is inherently reactionary, positioning itself against the so-called mainstream. This is reflected in the 'old media recognition' section of Pedobear's *Encyclopedia Dramatica* wiki page, which sought to gleefully document each infiltration in traditional media. Here 'old media' or 'mainstream media' is defined disparagingly as a humourless and sinister space that both creates and causes moral panic and is at odds with the 'wild Web' mythos of the libertarian-inflected online user:

> Old media, sometimes referred to as mainstream media, is an increasingly irrelevant collection of communication and entertainment techniques and conspiracies that are heavily biased against you and your political viewpoint and philosophical stance. Therefore, everything bad that happens is most likely the fault of old media. As old media is old, it's neither cool nor funny. If you ever meet a member of the old media, be sure to give them AIDS. Old media is constantly screwing with our minds by telling us what to think. Also, parents love to endlessly discuss how the media corrupts our youth. [80]

However, such borders between the mainstream and the marginal are not as clearly defined as these online insiders would like to believe. For, as Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) argue, "memes do not function merely as cultural capital; they are inherently unstable cultural forms" [81]. This is developed by the digital media professor Jean Burgess (2008), who, speaking on video-based online memetic humour, explains that the content relies "on inside jokes that are spoiled by going mainstream, and therefore quickly reach a tipping point and tend to have relatively short shelf lives" [82].

Thus, with this humour style spreading to the mainstream, with each prank revelation causing more normies to be in the know, the very insider currency of Pedobear diminishes, with established users lamenting its newfound popularity with "newfags" [again note use of homophobic slur as gatekeeping insult] and "12-year-olds" [83]. As a result, the reactionary rebel who situated his comic practice at radical odds with the brainwashed masses found themselves subject to the "crass commercialism" of their creation's increasing popularity in the late 2000s and early 2010s [84]. This culminated in the Pedobear image transforming from a bannable offence to a marketable product with accompanying merchandise, a reminder that, despite their anti-cute efforts in regards to corrupting the signs and symbols of childhood, "cuteness is fundamentally a commercial aesthetic" [85] (McIntyre, 2017)(Figure 11). In outrage, the users anything-goes comic ethos is overturned. Instead a sense of moralism is returned to engagements with the CSA subject in order to counteract a capitalist consumption of the transgressive culture they sought to build:

Figure 11: Screenshot of Pedobear Plush advertisement from Pedobear.org, 25 November 2009, via the Wayback Machine.

Pedobear has the distinction of being one of the first Internet memes to ascend to the level of a plush doll available for online purchase.

PROFIT: That's right. Another way to accrue pr0fit has been discovered and its [sic] based on little kids being molested.

LOSERS

Your soul — deriving entertainment tertiarily from child sex abuse is no way to win points with the boss, unless you pray to Satan. In which case Kudos! [86]

During this period, Pedobear was increasingly out of the control of its original insider audience, due to its newfound commercial interest and decreasing cultural credibility. However, the 2011 case of a student posting an image of Pedobear in a college dorm elevator as an in-the-know visual gag (Figure 12) and facing unexpected consequences is perhaps the most vivid testament to this tension between insider and outsider within the Pedobear comic setup. The student, who describes himself as "guy in college (right out of high school)", posted a detailed retelling of the incident titled 'Pedobear image in dorm elevator = possible pedophile? HUH? (Help???)' to the online bulletin board, AskReddit, in the hope of receiving advice on the situation [87]. Campus security had interpreted the printed image of Pedobear as "a symbol of direct support for paedophiles", claiming that "it's as offensive as posting swastikas" and saw the lift prank "as a sign that I [the student who carried out the Pedobear prank] was a danger to the dorms and the RD's [sic] [residential directors] family in particular; even that I might be one myself!" [88] Here we find this user is considered complicit with the crimes of CSA itself.

I understand the fear the RD, husband, and police might have had of a dangerous situation unfolding if I did support that kind of behavior, but I don't; Not even remotely. The people that support child porn and that kind of shit are sick, twisted people, and I don't want to be perceptually thrown in that group by anybody, especially those with authority who could see me as a threat. I saw what I did as a lousy prank, but one that could be misinterpreted easily by those not in the know about stupid shit on the Internet. [90]

The question of misreading "stupid shit on the Internet" as a condemnation of character reflects the limits of Pedobear's usage as a meme "to simultaneously express both [the insiders] uniqueness and their connectivity" (Shifman, 2013), when this CSA-themed image is inherently rooted in playful misunderstandings against ignorant outsiders [91]. This itself is reflective of what Lee Knutilla (2011) defines as the "closing of the gap between online and offline personas" which is connected to "a lived social self" and holds "a connection to singular, persistent and personal identity" [92]. Whilst an anonymous space such as 4chan has the potential to "lower personal responsibility and encourages experimentation", in the online and off-line spaces the character seeks to infiltrate, this is simply not the case [93]. Instead, "there is a level of accountability, traceability, and reputation associated and attributed" which prevents an individual to freely explore the work of a character as socially taboo as Pedobear without consequences [94].

Figure 12: Pedobear lift image from noahhk, 'Pedobear image in dorm elevator = possible pedophile? HUH? (Help???)', AskReddit, Reddit, 7 September 2011.

The writer, contrasts his "stupid", "harmless" prank which was a "case of really dumb judgement" with the "severe tone" of treating him as a "known criminal" and "a possibly dangerous person who was to be monitored closely from now on" by campus security [89]. However, unlike the traditional vision of the antagonistic 4chan user, who flaunts his moral transgression and embraces his 'sick' status, the now named Reddit user sees the Pedobear prank system and the crimes of CSA as inherently separate entities, repeatedly emphasising that:

Here the memetic character as an opportunity for anonymous expression closes. Instead, these characters become attached and embodied by a singular user who is subject to regulation. In this sense, a meme making model of this kind is likely to blow back on the user, when it hinges so heavily on either culturally influencing other spaces to unwittingly adopt these memetic codes or infiltrating these images to mainstream spaces as an act of subversion. Both acts require exiting the anonymous space of 4chan where such joke telling can most likely be told without consequence.

The fact that the student's failed prank story was posted not on 4chan, but on Reddit, lends support to these limits. The alternative platform choice reflecting not only the "environment of radical decentralisation" of this form of meme making, which extends far beyond the space of 4chan itself, but the potential repercussions of transferring this style of humour beyond the supposedly safe space of its original site and into the wider public sphere [95].

In the case of the lift prank, when this secret sign making was discovered, the image then became an accusation, with commenters on the post expressing frustration at the way the Pedobear insider humour had grown out of control. Some commenters on the forum lamented the out-of-touch misunderstanding of this seemingly obvious joke, commiserating that "it's too bad that people took the prank so seriously. Honestly, there's nothing more frustrating than trying to explain Internet culture to middle-aged adults. They just don't get it or they overreact." [96] However, it was clear from other commenters that the increasing self-satisfied currency of CSA meme-making as a public performance was starting to grow tired, with one commenter noting that:

> I figured something like this would happen/has happened somewhere someday. I'll never get these people who think it's cool to wear pedobear shirts or use pedobear as their avatar on a forum. Obviously, these aren't paedophiles announcing their presence in public, so what's the point? Is it just to say 'lol I'm aware of this one Internet meme. Look how in touch I am with Internet culture lol.' [97]

Others, regardless of their opinion on the cultural engagements with this character, argued that any translation of an online joke to an off-line world was doomed to fail due to the insider currency of its content, and the 'Online Disinhibition Effect' necessary for the joke to be appropriately received, interjecting that:

> You should have just said it was a cute picture of a bear you found on the Internet, and thought it would be funny to see it peeking out looking at you. NEVER try to explain Internet memes/concepts to non-Internet savvy people, they just won't understand what the hell you're talking about. [98]

This tension of naming and identifying the abuser through incomprehensible insider humour is an important one. Pedobear both confirms and denies culturally established ideas of the CS abuser, and herein lies the character's power. But its tension between offensive identity and online anonymity proves to be its character's undoing. If a joke requires anonymity to be executed but is dependent on entering places where such anonymity no longer applies how can such a form of humour sustain itself? Such an urgency to name is located within the context of digital culture, where Pedobear emerges as affirmation and exaggeration of existing cultural ideas of the online child predator, so utterly unseeable and cartoonishly present. This is "the virtually white paedophile [who] re-emerged in popular culture as the vanishing point of a technologically crafted public imagination, simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, anyone and no one" (Harkins, 2010) [99].

In this sense, Pedobear, in all his contradictions, misunderstandings and constant movements, serves as a bridge between all manner of online media, linking seemingly unconnected spaces, from

commercialised cute cartoon animals to institutional abuse, thus creating a cultural reworking of existing generational divides, discontent and misunderstandings. This, in turn, inverts the existing power structures of the adult abuser and the youthful victim to create a culture of frustration and fear in older individuals for a CSA-coded, technologically embedded, context-specific youth subculture, that is seen as both baffling and frightening to the adult outsider. This reflects the tense border crossing between old and new media, and old and young people, in analysing and exploring online countercultural consumption and creation, whilst also problematising assumptions of the essential outsider nature of such comic capital for the taboo subject.

Conclusion

The Internet is not just simply a modern medium for the CSA subject to be represented. Instead, it exists as a new incarnation of the CS abuser in and of itself. The paper has made this argument by focussing specifically on humorous digitally embedded CSA-themed representations and audience engagements towards the online character of Pedobear. The study has specifically considered narrative media that were created within the context of their anonymous online audience, such as 4chan memes and trolling culture and has centred online resources, such as Reddit comment threads and *Encylopedia Dramatica* entries, as primary source materials.

The close reading analysis identified a further digital incarnation of the CS abuser, that of the youthfully masculinist Internet insider, whose history of transgressive consumption locates him within a longer history of bad taste humour and countercultural provocation. The anonymous adolescent male antagonist occupies the realm of William Brown's Animal Comedy, both disrupting and affirming the adult order in his obscene chaos. This provides a unique example of the cruelty and violent undertones of the comic that have been historically identified in the humour theory of Freud and Legman. However, in the study of the comic CS abuser character of Pedobear, who is a multi-layered example of the limits of CSA-themed, anonymous, outsider, online humour, such simplistic roles of survivor and abuser are once again complicated. Here, the CS abuser becomes not a signifier of an abusive adult, but rather a substituted symbol for the fears of an insider, online youth culture.

This analysis, complicates the fixed charges of innocent and abuser, and opens up a wider conversation on how the public engage with comic representations of CSA, and what role someone seemingly outside of the category of CS abuser or CSA survivor might occupy in these structures of power. It also directly questions the concept that such transgressive culture can ever be truly detached, either from mainstream media or from the taboo sign's original political symbols and systems of power. Thus, the Pedobear example emphasises the wider questions of ethics behind even the most seemingly harmless example of online, CSA-inflected humorous representation.

Though this paper was limited to a small number of close reading studies within Anglo-American-coded spaces, its findings have the potential to be explored in a range of directions and via a number of methods. Given the right team of researchers, the subject could be developed through an ethnographic lens into a series of interviews into who found the humour of Pedobear funny during the mid 2000s to early 2010s and why. Furthermore, given the many uses of the Pedobear character, the figure still has further close reading potential, particularly in relation to its use in protests surrounding the Catholic church sex abuse scandals. I do, however, recognise that, given my study's specific focus on CSA, within a limited cultural sphere, my findings cannot be crudely generalised to other cultural contexts.

From a historical perspective, the struggle against the 'crass commercialism' of this provocative online mascot serves as an early example of the tension between community and capitalism in meme making cultures that emerged in the 2010s. This is particularly visible in the growth of what technology writer Kate Losse first identified in 2014 as 'weird corporate Twitter', where corporations create and co-opt existing online humour to sell and solidify their brand through social media [100]. This is an issue that will only increase as the original association between digital humour and youth culture of the 1990s and 2000s recedes, and generations of all ages grow up familiar with the comic codes of the digital. ▓

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