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2022

### Feels Bad Man: How One Amphibian Became A Weapon of Mass Disinformation

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#### Recommended Citation

Stiller, Sam, "Feels Bad Man: How One Amphibian Became A Weapon of Mass Disinformation" (2022). *Research Days Posters 2022*. 129.

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# How One Amphibian Became A Weapon of Mass Disinformation



PRESENTER:  
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## Background

As memes become more prevalent as a medium of information with the rise of the internet, it is important to understand how their creation and dissemination differ from that of more traditional mediums of information. “Pepe the frog” is a popular meme format that has been used to spread disinformation by white nationalists through anonymous internet forums like 4chan in recent years and played a role in 2016 US Presidential Election. Researching the case study of Pepe in depth could be invaluable for the disinformation studies field and lead to future research on memes within the field.

## Methodology

I applied Zimbardo’s theory of deindividuation, as well as several other related theories, like adaptive structuration theory, to analyze the impact of anonymity with regards to memes and their ability to spread disinformation. Specifically, I analyzed the case study of Pepe the frog to pinpoint specific instances in which each theory applied to Pepe and then related it back to memes as a medium.

## Results

The initial results of my analysis suggest that anonymity plays a large role in the spread of disinformation through memes and other forms of disinformation. Anonymity enables any person to spread disinformation over the internet, regardless of how influential they are in their everyday life, and actively encourages it in certain spaces that enable deindividuation.

The case study of Pepe the frog reveals that anonymity impacts the creation and dissemination of disinformative memes through equalization, unification, multi-layered deindividualization, and adaptive structuration.



## Equalization

4chan demonstrates the equalization hypothesis at work. The equalization hypothesis states that, without visual or social indicators, people who are typically marginalized in society are more likely to participate in conversations and share their opinions. The equalization hypothesis holds true online, especially on 4chan. Each user can share their opinion on a particular topic, regardless of how much knowledge they have on it, and their opinion will have just as much weight as those with more knowledge (Dubrovsky et al. 1986). **The anonymity encoded into 4chan also makes it impossible to verify a user’s claimed credentials, granting memes with disinformation just as much weight on the board as those without.**

## Unification and the Social Identity Model of Deindividualization Effects

A 4chan board post (pictured above) demonstrates how the social identity model of deindividualization effects (SIDE) applies to the case study of Pepe and how anonymity is essential in propagating disinformation through memes. SIDE has two components – cognitive and strategic. The cognitive component is the component at play with regards to group cohesion. In an environment in which every actor is anonymous, like that of 4chan’s, **group salience increases**, and **members begin identifying more strongly with the group**. Memes as a medium also aid in establishing a group identity. When they are exclusively spread within a group of people, memes, through their innate qualities like templatability and replicability (Harvey & Palese 2018), play upon the heuristics of the members of that group, further reinforcing their loyalty to the group. When combined with related theories and models, it is evident that **memes like Pepe are naturally primed to spread as “in-jokes” and become relevant to specific online cultures, making them ideal for spreading disinformation from both within and outside.**

## Multi-Layered Deindividuation

A deindividuated state is a psychological state in which individuals within a group are not viewed as individuals and granted anonymity. This anonymity frees the deindividuated individual freedom from the criticism, judgement, and punishment that their actions would usually bring. Without these social controls, they, therefore, lack social awareness and are free to exhibit socially taboo behaviors. 4chan, as a platform, enables deindividuation within users through removing usernames. Memes as a medium for disinformation induce a second layer of deindividuation beyond anonymity: the **diffusion of responsibility**. Memes allow people to communicate their feelings, using templates and images as surrogates for their words. In doing so, they diffuse responsibility for their actions among those who have used the meme format in the past, even if those uses were benign. **The demonization of Pepe’s usage in every iteration during the 2016 US Presidential Election is one example of this diffusion of responsibility.**

## Adaptive Structuration and Authorship

Adaptive structuration theory (AST) analyzes how the use of technology changes over time (DeSanctis and Poole 1994). While it has already been broadly applied to the internet to analyze the effects of anonymity, it can also apply, more specifically, to memes, should they be viewed as a form of technology. According to AST, a technology begins with an **intended use**, but over time that use can shift to **something entirely different** beyond its individual purpose. The Pepe meme format began as a mundane way of justifying an absurd reaction, but over time, due to the anonymous nature of memes, it has shifted to become a vessel for the rhetoric of white nationalists. **AST, however, also helps to explain the polymorphic nature of memes, such as Pepe’s usage in Hong Kong in 2019.**

