The Era of Cultural Optics: Are You Not Entertained?

Digital Performance and the Spectacle of Suffering.

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Abstract

This case study examines the digital dynamics of spectacle, performance, and audience response through a self-directed social experiment conducted in response to institutional dismissal of online harassment. This observational study came into fruition when [REDACTED] stated social media comments, gossip, libel, and overall defamation as "vague" and "unreliable," I staged a deliberate performance of distress, framing my online presence as a form of "Hamlet-like madness," and posted both satirical memes and sincere disclosures of health crises, including leukemia testing and autoimmune panel testing. Drawing on autoethnography, digital ethnography, and performance studies, I observed and documented audience responses across direct messages, text messages, and engagement metrics, including profile views, likes, and shares. I noted when observers decided that my honest disclosure of harassment, medical issues, and retaliation were viewed as 'attention seeking' My findings show blatant disparities in digital attention versus empathy: genuine disclosures elicited minimal engagement; however, performative and dramatic expressions of distress, anger, and general discontent generated dramatic boosts in visibility and gossip, and responses from my University that has previously ignored the severity of the reports.

The positive reinforcement, where I praised peers' work and gave them sincere compliments, received negligible traction compared to direct call-outs that addressed gossip or harmful behavior. The exception was when gossipy comments about my call-outs, combined with my sincere praise and expressions of admiration, led some observers to doubt my mental state even more. These patterns reflect complex social and psychological studies, including mechanisms such as groupthink, the bystander effect, para-social relationships, and the collapse of rational-critical discourse in the public sphere. My analysis positions these findings within pop

culture and media scholarship, noting that audiences consume suffering as entertainment across various scales, from celebrities such as Britney Spears, Amy Winehouse, and Amanda Bynes to reality TV, Twitch, and TikTok content. The study demonstrates that the digital public enjoys spectacles over sincerity, reducing lived experiences to consumable people. Even close peers were influenced by the circulating narrative-enforced gossip and confirmation bias, despite the interpersonal dynamics that had formed beforehand. My lack of acknowledgment to address the issues with others stemmed from the simple fact that nothing circulating was something they experienced with me, and it didn't involve them.

This distancing illustrates how visibility and attention economies reinforce social hierarchies and encourage performative behavior, while marginalizing genuine care and negating preexisting relationships and knowledge of sincere disclosures of physical health issues, and one-on-one relationships. This observation highlights the structural, social, and cultural mechanisms and theories that prioritize online personas over authentic individuals and direct statements from the person in question, raising critical questions about digital citizenship, collective empathy, and institutional interpersonal accountability. Vulnerability is primarily legible when it entertains, and social networks perpetuate Pieter Spierenburg's term "spectacle of suffering" to describe the evolution of public executions. I believe that as contemporary life evolves, the spectacle of suffering has become prominent and is now a fundamental part of digital life.

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This case study arose after the University I attended dismissed my harassment and discrimination report, claiming that social media is too "vague" and "unreliable" to serve as evidence. They proceeded to explain that defamation claims are easy to get around if "they are just telling their personal experience." In response to my complex reports that bled into other polices and academic standards for students, I created a deliberate social experiment: if institutions and communities fail to take online behavior seriously, what happens when I publicly stage distress as performance art? Would people recognize my actions as intentional and calculated, based on my explicit words, or as concerning and reduce them to entertainment, and as confirmation of gossip and rumors? Regardless of whether the contents of the rumors had to do with the performance.

Drawing on theories of media spectacle (Debord), Guy Debord argues in The Society of the Spectacle that the spectacle is not merely a collection of images, but a social relationship mediated by them (Thesis #4). He writes that in advanced capitalist societies, real human life has moved away into representation, creating a pseudo-world that can only be watched (Theses #1–2), we can also observe para-social culture present. (Horton and Wohl) Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl introduce the term para-social in their seminal 1956 paper, Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl define the concept of "para-social interaction" to describe the one-sided relationships that media consumers develop with performers and personalities they see on television or hear on the radio. In these interactions, a viewer experiences an illusion of intimacy and friendship with a media figure, despite having no genuine, mutual relationship with them. Lastly, we see groupthink (Janis). In Irving Janis' 1972 book, Victims of Groupthink, Janis explains how highly cohesive groups can make irrational decisions when the desire for

unanimity overrides critical thinking. According to Janis, this "mode of thinking" can lead to a deterioration of "mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment" as group members suppress dissent to maintain group harmony. I argue that digital audiences now interpret online personas through the lens of pop culture spectacle rather than empathy regardless of social status; the lines have blurred and can encompass anyone online.

My findings highlight a contemporary culture where gossip overshadows genuine care, where performance is privileged over sincerity, and where institutional dismissal amplifies individual alienation. Before staging this performance experiment, I held an established and trusted role within the university community. After transferring to the institution, post-COVID, I quickly prepared to interview for the Resident Assistant (RA) position, learning as much as I could in about seven weeks to prepare myself for the interview. Once hired, my directors communicated that my RA placement in a freshman area was directly correlated to my personality and how well they thought I would resonate with new students. Over time, my evaluations consistently rose, with most scores being perfect, or above average. I was informed by multiple resident directors that I was among the top-rated RAs at [REDACTED]. This recognition occurred during the 2022–2023 academic year, a period when I was also experiencing intense personal stress due to a mishandled case of revenge porn involving my roommate. Guided by trauma-informed practices, I respected his autonomy by allowing him to choose how to proceed, which aligns with psychological best practices in crisis response as taught in the University's crisis training and learned from my own pre-COVID education, experience, and moral belief: survivors regain power and agency when given a choice (Herman, Deci, & Ryan). Judith Herman, Edward Deci, and Richard Ryan researched that for survivors of trauma, a critical component of healing is regaining a sense of agency, which is why allowing

them to make their own decisions is essential. Psychological research indicates that feeling a sense of control and autonomy is a fundamental human need and a key driver of motivation (Deci and Ryan 2000), while clinical work with trauma survivors shows that restoring personal power through choice directly counteracts the helplessness caused by violence (Herman 1992). During the revenge porn incident, I allowed both the school and police to investigate. I maintained composure for my residents; many of whom later told me they had no idea what I was enduring, and I allowed my roommate and once friend to follow through with his decision to move out and go no contact with me, regardless of how irrational I believe his choices we, still I refused to discuss the details, while gossip and institutional investigations these reports contained accusations towards me of sexual harassment, cyberharassment, cyberstalking, Defamation, and talks of a felony offenses such as spoofing both numbers and identity, and revenge porn.

When I left Residence Life, I transitioned to work at the university theater. There, I encountered a hostile work environment, including public humiliation, accusations of flirting with male customers, and micromanagement. The [REDACTED] did not take it seriously, [REDACTED] even told my hostile boss that I not only made reports about him, including inappropriate conversation of my 20 year old coworkers bra, but [REDACTED] also read my formal reports to him, which lead him to have a informal meeting before our formal meeting where he privately disclosed that he was aware of my reports and that that [REDACTED] HR team read it to him verbatim. After relocating to the Atlanta campus, I transferred [REDACTED]'s Atlanta campus theater, with which the boss I reported to offered to me, to my surprise. I then faced ostracism from peers, stereotypes about students from the Savannah campus, and stigmatization when disclosing my ADHD and autism. Despite consistently being

praised by supervisors for strong job performance, humor, and overall adaptability, the collective

narrative among student peers framed me as disruptive and unlikable, and arrogant.

Ultimately, this climate of dismissal, gossip, and institutional inaction shaped the

conditions for my performance experiment. Knowing that my reports were repeatedly minimized

by my peers and, more importantly, the [REDACTED] itself, regardless of explicit health

disclosures and disabilities. (Including testing for leukemia and autoimmune conditions) I was

met with silence and long gaps in communication, only to receive responses that seemed focused

on semantics and curated replies that addressed frivolous contents of my emails, yet the

responses still neglected to acknowledge the outstanding questions and the new ones listed in

bullet points. While I waited for a substantial response, I prepared, leaning into a deliberate

performance of "hamlet-like madness" as both critique and safeguard in case the officials ignored

me, my reports, the harm outlined in my report, and my overall unwillingness to provide support

or acknowledgment to a student, regardless of how many times I voiced severe effects as a

disabled student. I accepted that I would most likely be removed from [REDACTED], Which I

was administratively unenrolled, September 17th according to [REDACTED]'s Dean of Student's

email.

Over the course of two months (July through September), I established and planted seeds

for my online presence. This was a deliberate strategy where I sprinkled it in posts that blurred

the distinction between performance and sincerity, until it was able to adopt that persona at least

half the time, keeping in mind my sincere posts often received nothing more than likes,

regardless of a disclosure of medical issues. My approach was intentionally experimental: I

framed myself simultaneously as subject, performer, and observer. Explicitly, I announced that I

was engaging in a kind of "Hamlet-like madness," and established my actions as a form of

performance art, before acting on my methods. This literary reference and explicit disclaimer underscored the deliberate theatricality of my actions and aligned with traditions of using madness as a metaphorical critique. At the same time, I adopted internet-native strategies, such as posting memes with captions like "I'm going to stay alive as performance art." These posts tested whether audiences could analyze irony, sarcasm, sincerity, and distress when these elements were layered together with preexisting narratives, gossip, juxtaposed by clear statements from me within the same persona. In designing this experiment, I also made a deliberate methodological decision not to pursue legal action against my peers, despite Student Conduct's suggestion that I do so. This was a personal decision made due to who I believe myself to be, for long-term acceptance within myself, and overall, no financial gains. Instead, I chose to engage in digital transparency as a form of social accountability. I began documenting and posting what was happening to me online. At times, this took the form of defiant and playful call-outs, such as re-posting a peer's post announcing them shifting from film and tv to a music focused career, I chose first 15 seconds of the song "GO OFF" by Doja Cat and stated "go support [REDACTED]'s music!" as well as "look how cool she is (<3) miss you diva" and I tagged her, nothing that came off as suspicious or backhanded to the public unless they knew what she was gossiping about me, in fact the last commutation we had was me giving her a pep talk about the set I couldn't return to prioritize my health after a severe incident on that set, [REDACTED] also appeared on my Instagram profile a handful of times since we were becoming friends I assumed. She blocked me immediately. Only after she blocked me for publicly showing support, did I then directly name her bad behavior and ongoing offensive comments, post a screenshot, and post in a sequence that jumped around on the timeline of our interaction holistically.

At other times, I balanced these critiques with genuine praise and re-posting other peers' creative work, offering compliments that I meant. Notably, while my authentic admiration gained little traction and no engagement other than to whom it was directed, the call outs, however, performed significantly better in terms of engagement and visibility, it was, from what I could observe the only engagement that was discussed. This outcome became another layer of the experiment. I had already stated publicly in a post that the individuals in question had received multiple chances and the benefit of the doubt. Yet, my subtle interventions and indirect call-outs were ignored until I escalated to direct exposure. The disproportionate attention to drama rooted posts verse outstanding evaluations and heartfelt confirmation of interactions with me demonstrates a recurring digital pattern: spectacle attracts more engagement than sincerity does.

My process is aligned with what Ellis and Bochner term autoethnography, which, Ellis and Bochner state, involves using personal experience to understand cultural phenomena. Autoethnography can be described as a process of combining autobiography and ethnography to explore the self within a cultural context (733). In this circumstance, the researcher's lived experience (myself) and public narrative (gossip about me that spread within 10 weeks on the Atlanta campus) become the site of inquiry (Ellis; Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis). By treating my online presence as a stage, I adopted the methodology of digital ethnography (Pink et al.) Pink et al discussed in their book *Digital Ethnography* (*2016*). This is method used to study the cultures and communities that form and interact within digital environments, such as online forums or virtual worlds. Christine Hine explores this method in her book *Virtual Ethnography* *(2000)*. I aligned myself with the community and my peers' behavior, which I was both critiquing and performing within.

The foundation of the experiment was both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative side allowed me to observe the tone, content, and language of responses. Whether they communicated genuine care, gossip, stigmatization, or dismissal. I cataloged recurring themes (e.g., hostile jokes, mocking comments, and genuine concern) and the subjective and personal subtext of the comments. I noted how my peers represented broader social stigmas. On the quantitative side, I tracked direct messages, text messages sent to my personal phone, copies of messages I received, and engagement metrics, including profile views, likes, and shares. These categories were selected to capture both private and public modes of audience response, recognizing that social media users often perform empathy differently in private versus public contexts. To strengthen the reliability of the case study, I paid attention to temporal patterns: when sincerity (for example, posting about my physical health concerns and leukemia testing) aligned with disengagement, and when heightened spectacle (erratic, "madness"-coded content) correlated with spikes in visibility. This temporal analysis was critical for identifying patterns of behavior across my audience.

Finally, I adopted a reflexive approach, which is common in ethnographic and performance studies research. I acknowledged my dual role as both participant and analyst. This approach meant recognizing my own subjectivity in the process, as well as how my lived history of institutional dismissal, harassment, health concerns, and even upbringing influenced not only the experiment's blueprint but also my interpretation of audience responses and their response to me. By sitting reflexively, I aimed to demonstrate that the study was not an abstract inquiry but a lived manifestation of the internet's logic of spectacle and a pattern present since the advent of media accessibility. With my findings, I observed these topics as predominant themes occurring.

1. <u>Increased Gossip and Media Illiteracy:</u>

Despite my repeated indications that this was a deliberate performance, framed as "Hamlet-like madness" or "shitposting" as a form of survival and attention, the majority of responses treated the content as chaotic and neurotic realism. Gossip increased as followers speculated about my mental state rather than engaging with the explicitly posted context or messaging me directly as a kind bystander. This finding reveals a broader crisis of media Illiteracy and a reluctance to think critically when the larger group has already formed an opinion. Audiences tend to default to herd interpretations and value rumor and surface-level readings over critical evaluation. Even people I had previously shared positive relationships with and worked with withdrew from me, choosing silence over defending the dominant narrative or even reaching out. Once the story of me as "combative, hostile, and crazy" began circulating even further, it hardened into social truth despite little evidence of the rumor, the only evidence I observed was accessible even in private conversions that was sent, was hearsay and my posts showing explicit texts, emails, and detailed recollections on interactions, that I encouraged not to be taken as fact until the other party chose to acknowledgment it.

2. <u>Direct Messages of Stigmatization and Indifference:</u>

Over the course of this study, excluding messages mentioned before the 'performance' was in effect, I received fewer than six direct messages or texts that genuinely acknowledged any concern. When I disclosed health issues, including leukemia testing, autoimmune panels, and the symptoms I had. The majority of the responses I received were dismissive, short, almost hurried acknowledgments like "Hope you feel better," or "No leukemia allowed!" By contrast, when I leaned into a chaotic persona, I posted screenshots of myself that I had collected, which were offensive. I adopted irregular delivery norms for social media (stories containing long-winded

paragraphs, lacked polished cohesion, the post on my profiles broke the established aesthetic I crafted in the prior months, and was posted outside of my standard posting behavior. That was when more DMs came in, but there were still fewer than ten from six different individuals. The engagement, however, at times was stigmatizing; my peers asked if I was "schizo" or "going crazy." Or they asked if I am "having a mental breakdown." Followed by laughing emojis. This juxtaposition highlights the structural problem: sincerity was minimized as lackluster or burdensome because it lacked the drama and entertainment value now associated with my online presence. The "madness" became enjoyable and consumable content when delivered erratically and scandalously. A month prior, when I voiced the same issues without the lens of scandalous optics and erratic personas, the posts gained more likes. However, that was the only iteration; my profile view, which I checked during the case study, averaged around 150. Post case study, I had around 50,000 profile views.

3. <u>Heightened Visibility as Spectacle</u>

During the height of this experiment, my profile views increased by 340%, averaging 25K views. This increase demonstrates that my performance of distress, anger, or having a nervous breakdown amplified the visibility of concerns I have been raising, again. At the same time, sincere disclosures and reports failed to yield traction. Coupled with dipping into the established narrative of the gossip about me, this aided the engagement. Crucially, this visibility persisted even when I severed ties with my immediate online community. This mass unfollowing was a calculated risk to support my claims: I unfollowed around 500 people I knew personally, keeping only celebrities, and removed all of my 480 followers. Regardless, I maintained high view counts from non-followers. Only in the final week of August (22–30) did I begin following peers back, but the intervening period confirmed that spectacle thrives independently of personal connection.

4.   Call outs: Outperforming praise

The most telling pattern emerged from the contrast between my positive engagement with my peers and my direct call-out. I frequently re-posted others' work and old pictures with found blurbs about them, with genuine compliments and an ample amount of praise about my peers, in ways that were both heartfelt and affirming, and not something new, I've been doing this long before this case study, as well as continuing with my typical interactions such as liking posts, sharing post on my story that had nothing to do with the situation.

However, these posts received far less engagement than my direct call-outs, where I addressed gossip directly, gossipers, and the harmful repercussions of their gossip and the [REDACTED]'s negligence. I balanced, lacked uniform cohesion, and made grammatical errors that I frequently make online. I used dramatic words despite their denotative meaning accurately describing the situation. The visuals were orderly, such as carefully positioning text in a uniform manner, keeping with my established profile aesthetic. Paired with vague statements to 'stop the gossip immediately.' The posts aimed at confronting harmful behavior actually performed better than the supportive ones sandwiched between negative posts and stories. Impression management Sociologist Erving Goffman explained, impression management involves the "guiding and controlling the impression" that others form of us during our daily interactions. This "performance," according to Goffman, is shaped by both the environment and the audience, aiming to provide an impression consistent with our desired outcome.

I adapted Goffman of I stopped going to the cafeteria over the summer, to see how gossip would change. I was not seen for a week or two at most, and the gossip and engagement actually

decreased, and only resurgence was when I was walking around publicly, with new 'jokes' and rumors of DID (dissociative identity disorder) joining the narrative. Similarly, Jürgen Habermas argues that in an ideal public sphere, individuals engage in rational-critical debate, exchanging arguments that respect truth and accountability. Online, however, the digital public often focuses on spectacles rather than discourse. theorizes that the public sphere emerged as a space for critical, rational debate among citizens (Habermas). My media-based call-outs act as "event television," while compliments function as invisible maintenance labor. I believe the lack of my public appearance, even to get food, hindered real-time gossip, preventing new gossip from being created and allowing the old gossip to become 'boring'.

This phenomenon confirms Debord's concept of the spectacle, where attention is drawn to the dramatic, chaotic, and entertaining, regardless of the underlying reality. From a performance studies standpoint, my experiment became a stage where visibility itself was contingent on embodying crisis. It evolved to even when in real life appearing distressed, I was now deduced to having something else wrong with me despite my profile stating, "yeah I'm acting up, so are my profile views." as well as other memes, posts, and personal writings indicating the drama was on purpose. Richard Dyer argues that a star's image is most powerful not when they are stable, but when they reveal contradictions that audiences find fascinating (Dyer 48). My spike in profile views illustrates how digital culture reproduces this logic at the micro level: individuals, not celebrities, are drawn into cycles of visibility through spectacle. The criteria for what qualify as a spectacle of suffering as digital entertainment has now expanded to everyday people. Digital ethnography would further support this finding arguing that online platforms shape cultural practices of seeing and responding; visibility algorithmically rewards when content appears outrageous or entertaining. (Pink et al.) Thus, my sincerity (discussions of

testing, health, and vulnerability, praise, etc.) got diminished by both audience and platform logistics, while my performed distress and erratic combative behavior flourished in circulation.

The results of this case study reiterate a pattern long established in pop culture: audiences consume suffering as entertainment. e.g., Britney Spears's public breakdown in 2007, Amy Winehouse's deterioration before her death, and Amanda Bynes's struggles are all examples where public vulnerability became spectacle. These were not private crises but entertaining events, replayed across tabloids, YouTube clips, and social media feeds. Spears shaving her head became a meme and a pop culture phrase, such as "I'm going to pull a Britney." In response to upsetting events or minor inconveniences that dramatize how annoying a situation is. Media sources replayed Winehouse's relapse footage nightly, and Bynes's erratic tweets and pictures are consumed as comedy and reaction memes. These celebrities' humanity was actively reduced to viral content. The findings demonstrate that the exact mechanisms now apply to ordinary online users: you do not have to be a celebrity for your suffering to become spectacle. Peers and my institution ignored my own disclosures about health issues, harassment, and disabilities, but when I performed "madness," my visibility skyrocketed. This suggests that the digital public perceives vulnerability as significant only when it is performative enough to be entertaining, but still not worthy of help.

This dynamic directly reflects Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle, where "everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation." Illness, sincerity, and pain lose their meaning as lived experience and reappear as consumable media. In my case, genuine disclosure of physical health decline, leukemia testing, and autoimmune issues were received with apathy, while my erratic "Hamlet-like madness" was rewarded with gossip and increased traffic. What mattered was not reality but how consumable this distress was.

The narrative that I am "combative, hostile, and crazy" circulated among peers long before I enacted any performance of breakdown, which was the foundation of my first posts, I went from being 'Matt excels in conflict resolution, mediation, and communication when problems and crisis arise' paraphrased from my official RA evaluations, to "combative, rude, hostile, crazy, schizo, etc." Regardless of any positive connections with many of these individuals and actively complimenting peers with genuine praise, these same people either pulled away once the collective narrative gained traction or started/continued the gossip in groups. To my observation, no one openly defended me or resisted the narrative. Here again, Irving Janis's groupthink applies with precision: individuals abandoned independent judgment to conform to the dominant interpretation of me as unstable. In group contexts, defending sincerity becomes socially costly, and could result in similar treatment, while amplifying the gossip yielded social rewards.

At one point, I unfollowed everyone I knew (around 500 people) and removed all of my 480 followers, something that was premeditate, regardless of knowing the 'right time' execute this action. Nevertheless, my posts continued to average extremely high numbers of views from non-followers. Overall, my content and profile engagement saw a 340% increase, with around 25K profile views. Even when I severed direct ties, the audience for my "performance" remained constant, confirming that the consumption of suffering functions beyond interpersonal interactions or knowledge. My call-outs made me appear almost like a reality TV contestant or a viral TikToker exposing 'drama.' I became a figure to be watched, regardless of whether viewers had a personal connection to me. Despite this, I only averaged six likes on a post. I only began following peers back during the week of August 22–30, yet visibility remained high in the interim, emphasizing that the "spectacle of madness" outlives community bonds.

Many of my peers still refused to follow me back. They still haven't, despite positive personal interactions with them overall, and the overall idea that 'it's just social media, why is he taking it so personally?" it suddenly didn't matter how much I liked their posts and stories, talking face-to-face, and going to the bar with them, among other things, their own words about that social media not being 'personal' suddenly became personal. The confrontational bias that others established allowed them to override any preexisting iterations and bonds. Any interaction past to future now 'confirmed' to them on some level the narrative and gossip was true all along. The collective must have right, with little to no proof or hearsay being the bases.

I didn't take any controversial stances regarding collective ideals, such as human rights or taboo topics that conflicted with my cohort's views, morals, and ideals. I kept my stance solidified and made extra effort to avoid being misinterpreted due to careless wording, I continued re-posting and sharing my views on pro-human rights, and the state of America. One incident was a typo that I missed before sending. This typo which resulted from using speech-to-text, and my own lack of attentiveness to my message in a DM while having a self-proclaimed "MAGA Supporter" directing homophobic rhetoric and insults and stigmatizing mental illness insults directed to me, still chose to share the DM and I dropped the act where I cleared it up. Yet, the refusal to associate with me was solely a campus-exclusive situation that then gained traction at the [REDACTED]-wide level through my call-outs, way before the typo.

From a psychological standpoint, this phenomenon reflects the classic bystander effect. The bystander effect suggests that a person is less likely to help in an emergency if there are others present, due to a diffusion of responsibility (Darley and Latané 379). Health disclosures, which required uncomfortable recognition and support, were ignored. However, my public distress was treated as entertainment because it carried no obligation; viewers and my peers

could consume it without intervening. Most of them only saw me around campus anyway. I only had one on-ground class so far, and a student job. In today's culture, we are overly invested in protecting the collective and holistic ideal (e.g., mental health awareness, anti-stigma rhetoric). Yet, we neglect the smaller, individual practices that would actually sustain those values in our everyday lives with people.

Many publicly support destigmatizing mental illness, but when confronted with a peer in crisis, a peer displaying depression, a peer who is quiet because of anxiety, or a peer who jokes about suicidal ideation, the responsibility to act vanishes. The same disconnect occurs around LGBTQ+ rights: people post affirmations in defense of trans and queer communities yet fail to check in on their own trans or gay friends regularly. What emerges is a performative act. I call it The Era of Cultural Optics, A time when social and moral value is increasingly defined by how things appear in the collective consciousness, rather than by personal integrity, lived ethics, personal morals, or genuine transformation, where the reward lies in visibly adhering to ideals as trends rather than personal ethics, or practicing in interpersonal relationships.

Para-social dynamics add another crucial layer. My peers and distant viewers turned me into a one-note persona, not a person in need of support, mistreatment, or someone to talk it out with. Even people I had once shared a genuine connection with began treating me as though I was only a role in an unfolding drama, rather than someone deserving defense or care. My peers began viewing me as if I was a liability to their future careers, but not their mistreatment that would be the real liability. This gap between lived relationships and mediated persona reveals the grip of para-social logic in everyday digital culture and how it can extend to anyone.

These behaviors again, reflect a breakdown of the public sphere as described by Jürgen Habermas. Silence, withdrawal, or performative engagement with my posts functioned as a form

of participation in the "public" without actual deliberation. Rational discussion, acknowledging my health, questioning gossip, or offering support, was replaced by gossip, mockery, and passive consumption, illustrating how contemporary attention economies undermine Habermas's vision of communicative action. We see this replicated constantly. Reality TV contestants' breakdowns become meme fodder (e.g., Huda's Crash Out on Love Island). Twitch streamers' 'crashing out' are clipped into compilations. TikTok trauma stories are mined for ironic commentary. In each case, audiences engage in what Lilie Chouliaraki calls "ironic spectatorship." This concept introduces audiences of ironic spectatorship who are skeptical of moral appeals, yet still open to taking action to help those who are suffering.

This ambivalent stance is shaped by modern media that often commodifies and spectacularizes humanitarian crises, promoting a "feel-good" activism that rewards the self over genuine solidarity. Sincerity was dismissed, and vulnerability became humor, cringe, and entertaining. My case demonstrates that even among peers and "friends," this same logic dominates, and genuine support is withheld unless suffering can be spectacularized or presented as genuine care. Many confused me with "feel better soon!" or "I'm sorry that's happening." As 'enough' to not include them in the overall cohort that was called out for not caring and absolved them from any guilt they harbored about being a bystander, when in reality it was just as hurtful and seen as a throwaway check-in to feel better about oneself, not the one struggling.

Together these dynamics reveal a disturbing continuity between celebrity culture and ordinary digital life. The "spectacle of suffering" is not limited to Spears, Winehouse, or Bynes; it is a structural feature of online attention economies. Whether at the scale of millions of views or just a few thousand profile hits, distress is legible only when it entertains and only as entertainment. Once the narrative of madness takes hold, not even genuine relationships are safe;

they are reevaluated and adapted around for the collective. This also reinforces that when institutions, schools, and universities dismiss online harassment and general bullying, both explicit and implicit, as "unreliable" or not grounds to intervene, they reinforce the cultural framework in which suffering is consumed as entertainment, free of consequence, rather than something to be addressed with tact and care.

My experiment exposes the stark disparity of sincerity, particularly in discussing severe topics such as health crises, leukemia, autoimmune issues, and mental health, which are ignored or minimized, while performative displays of distress, framed as chaotic or "madness," amplify engagement, entertainment, visibility, and gossip. My findings illuminate the structural forces that shape digital interactions. Platforms and peers value spectacle and easily digestible material over substance and complexity. My personal experience of being ignored, mischaracterized, harassed, socially isolated, and targeted despite any attempts at reaching out or persistent requests for support just spotlights how social norms, para-social logic, and herd mentality converge to amplify entertainment over empathy.

This research doubles down on urgent questions about accountability, empathy, and digital citizenship, and overall discernment online. In a world where online personas are treated as spectacles and sincerity is sidelined, the human cost is profound and often irreversible. Vulnerability is boring, attention becomes currency, care becomes performative, and even those closest to us may participate in the spectacle rather than provide support. The outstanding question that echoes from both Hamlet and contemporary pop culture is both ironic and tragic: Are you not entertained?

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