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09/03/2025

Flipping the Script: Counter Speech and Counter Offensive

While drafting my research on social media and its performative relationship with suffering (e.g., *Spectacle of Suffering: Are You Not Entertained?*), which explores the idea that people care most when care is entertaining to consume, regardless of seriousness, I found myself caught in a live demonstration of another online paradox, one that also reinforces my original observation.

A straight white male peer, someone I had never interacted with before, slid into my messages with mental health slurs like “schizo.” Instead of disengaging, I played my ace of counterspeech, turning our interaction into satire: an “enemies-to-lovers” arc built on absurdist banter and pop culture references. My goal was to undermine the hostility and, ideally, defer further engagement with a person I neither knew nor expected to ever see in real life. When he called me an alien, I agreed and said I was like Roger from *American Dad*. When he refused to stop messaging me hours after I said it was “done” on my end, I escalated by joking that maybe we were “a thing now.” I asked why he felt the need to keep going hours after I thought it was mutually over, and whether he liked talking to me that much. Even when he brought his friends into the exchange, I doubled down with the infamous 21 Jump Street line about “finger popping each other’s assholes.” That reference had circulated widely, yet judging by his reaction, it fell flat. My references, layered with irony, landed in a void of context. What I intended as playful subversion read to him as unhinged. Even my deliberate use of cringe-coded language like

“sowwy,” which, coming from a 27-year-old, is admittedly annoying and bratty, was meant as intentional subversion. To him, though, it was simply unhinged and supported his “schzo” claim.

Despite my explicit statements that I wasn’t serious and my attempts to end the exchange both publicly and privately, I never conceded to the dominance play he was trying to establish. This interaction, in its messy unfolding, actually serves as a supporting example for the observations I discuss in *Spectacle of Suffering*. I even told him we were “done” after I had made my point. However, to him, my insistence that it wasn’t serious became further “evidence” that I was delusional. He doubled down with insults, and as the exchange dragged on, I’ll admit I grew annoyed and kept responding. Looking back, I realize I was operating from my own confirmation bias, shaped by past experiences of this nature: the belief that refusing to bow to dominance starves the aggressor of the positive reinforcement that privileged men often expect —namely, the belief that they can say or do whatever they want to assert masculine authority. In theory, someone who is challenged in this way might be less likely to repeat the behavior. Nevertheless, the tone shifted. He began calling me a “perv,” a “predator,” and even insinuating I was a pedophile. Not only are these homophobic tropes about gay men, but they were absurdly misplaced. He was 18. I’m 27, I have no interest in any sexual interactions, especially not with anyone that young, due to my own ample sexual abuse I’ve survived. My public writing, just a few clicks away from the DMs, clearly states my preference for older men if any sexual parenthood occurs (*damn, mommy AND daddy issues, double homo-icide*). At that point, I began screenshotting and reposting his messages to my story. He escalated by adding me to a group chat with one of his friends, Max, a student at The University of Tampa, hours away from the primary aggressor in Savannah, and even further from me in Atlanta, long after what I thought had been the final exchange.

My goals in posting were simple:

1. To highlight the absurdity of his comments.
2. To show how empty his “cancellable” claims sound when positioned in his nonsense.
3. To challenge his notion that once something is “out there,” anyone has the right to say whatever they want.

While he complained about me posting his DMs, I never signed a contract agreeing not to share private messages, especially not when they’re as offensive as his, and honestly, I’d probably do it again. Traditional online culture emphasizes accountability, but it often harms its own members through weaponized call-outs. This time, though, I leaned into it. His offensive “concern” for things that didn’t even involve him became part of the performance.

It’s important to note that we didn’t exist to each other until he initiated contact by asking if I was “schizo”, a word now widely recognized as a slur, after I shared experiences with the school. I’ve always said I love the school, even when I’m frustrated with it. Nevertheless, I was already annoyed that I had to escalate into public spaces just to get meaningful responses or acknowledgment from [REDACTED] my university. His “jokes” weren’t harmless; the insults Seamus made were designed to insult, perpetuate anti-gay rhetoric, and I matched them. His emojis and half-joking tone, which seemed to downplay how upset he actually was, led me to believe we were engaged in a kind of battle of contemporary wits, even if it was unpleasant. However, instead of burning out, the conflict escalated further once his friends joined in. At that

point, the moment stopped being a tangent to my research and became a direct appendix to it.

The exchange opened up space for theoretical expansions, such as **Performance vs. Perception**, and the way social media thrives on optics. Emojis, memes, and references function as performance cues, signaling tone and intention. When I saw his 😂 emojis and memes, I interpreted them as evidence that we were mutually sparring with rage-baits and wit. He, however, read my references as incoherent or even delusional. The same cues carried entirely different meanings depending on the interpretive frame. This behavior is precisely what Alice Marwick describes as **context collapse**: when audiences don't share the same reference points, irony fails. To me, "finger popping" was a cultural reference, a hilarious, infamous line from *21 Jump Street* that trended during and well after the movie's release. To him, it was nonsense, or worse, a direct attack on his masculinity and sexuality. Without shared ground, humor not only misses; it backfires for both sides in the interaction, and the irony is that this collapse happened between two people in the same generational cohort, showing that it's not simply about age or demographic, but about interpretive literacy itself.

We can also see humor as a form of **counterspeech**. Sociologists and social psychologists note that counterspeech, when used to combat harassment, can destabilize aggressors by challenging their stance. Absurdity undermines dominance, transforming insults into banter. Yet **precarious manhood theory** complicates this: reframing aggression as flirtation or irony threatens masculine status. Rather than defusing tension, it can escalate it. My "Enemies to Lovers arc" joke punctured his authority and also humiliated him in front of his peers, despite his own derogatory remarks. That perceived humiliation heightened the pressure to retaliate, forcing him to reassert dominance. Humor itself carries this double edge; counterspeech points out that irony and absurdity can deflate hostility, but they can also backfire when the target feels mocked

or exposed (Mathew et al. 2019). What I intended as deflection, channeling Roger from American Dad or lovers-to-enemies banter, may have read as ridicule. Saemus most likely deemed me an easy target, and when our interactions got to be more of a struggle, he refused to “bow” to a homosexual man. This explains why he oscillated between sending laughing emojis and escalating with harsher insults. Humor doesn’t erase depth; it redistributes it in unpredictable directions.

The examples thus far connect to **affective feedback loops** (Papacharissi 2015): the more both parties respond, the more hostility reproduces itself. Posting his DMs to my story may have been intended as a critique, but it transformed our exchange into a performance, feeding the loop. The optics shifted. It was no longer just me and him; it became us performing for audiences. He performed for his friends, I performed for mine. Once conflict enters that performative economy, it rarely stays “not that deep.” This idea of affective feedback loop also ties to a broader critique I’ve been developing: the cultural fallacy of “Not That Deep.”

I argue that everything is deep until you can convincingly demonstrate otherwise. You can tell someone a puddle isn’t deep, but unless you walk them through it, they might assume it’s bottomless. I tried to tell Saemus I wasn’t serious, that the spat had ended hours earlier, but I couldn’t prove it, or he wouldn’t accept it, because it wasn’t for him. From his perspective, my insistence that it “wasn’t serious” read not as playfulness but as instability. When I say “everything is that deep,” I mean that nothing is *just* a joke, *just* a meme, or *just* a comment unless it can be walked through, contextualized, and shown to be shallow. Without that process, people project their own meanings onto your words, often drawing from cultural scripts more than from what was actually said. For example, without me providing the actual GIF of the “finger popping” scene, he twisted the phrase into a weapon to paint me as predatory. I

anticipated that possibility, which is why I withheld the meme, suspecting he would weaponize it to reinforce his accusations.

Media theory names this phenomenon **context collapse** (Marwick & boyd 2011): online, audiences with different backgrounds, references, and levels of irony collide. What is satire to one person appears nonsensical, or even hostile, to another. My *21 Jump Street* “finger popping” joke is a case in point: some private DMs I received showed people laughing at the reference, yet he and his friends didn’t find it funny at all. The same phrase became divisive: to one audience, absurdist humor; to another, alleged evidence of harassment. By deliberately leaving out the word “asshole” from the original quote, I also tested whether he would stretch the narrative further, casting me as a harasser of them both in general and sexually, as he had already claimed, despite starting our interaction back up over and over again. Age had nothing to do with it entirely; I had friends, around 22-28, laughing at it as well.

This moment reveals a critical flaw in what I’d call **low-effort interpretation**: people tend to gravitate toward the *most straightforward*, most *pre-established* narrative, regardless of its accuracy. Individuals who do this tend to refer only to their confirmation bias rather than to other contexts and facts. He defaulted to “breakdown” rather than “satire.” I anticipated that most would, and indeed many did, even after my explicit posts about performative “Hamlet-madness.” This disregard for what is said and what is seen supports the idea that the *lowest-energy thought is often the most contagious* within groupthink dynamics. Another crucial layer is *responsibility and reciprocity*. I have to acknowledge my role. I chose to sustain the exchange when I could have walked away, just as he could have. That isn’t to say disengagement is always the “right” choice, but it complicates the narrative. I reposted his messages, which, for me, continued the performative critique I had already outlined in my abstract the day before. For him, however, it

became public shaming. While I agree that Saemus should feel that way, it wasn't an act of emasculation in front of others, whether or not he had the interpretive literacy to frame it that way. His escalation to "predator" rhetoric was cruel and baseless, but my decision to continue engaging blurred the line between **counterplay** and **provocation**. Looking back, I think our interactions backfired for three main reasons:

1. **Context Collapse.** My references required cultural fluency, which Saemus didn't have. While I don't think they were particularly cerebral or obscure in hindsight, the disconnect meant they read to him as incoherence rather than wit. Likewise, his obscure reference to me, such as "67," reportedly didn't mean what I recognized the slang meaning. Whether or not I believe his claims of ignorance is beside the point; what mattered was that our cultural scripts diverged, and that collapse distorted meaning on both sides (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

- a. **Masculinity Threat.** By reframing his aggression as flirtation or infatuation, I challenged his status, which, in turn, provoked greater hostility. Notably, this tactic hasn't triggered such escalation in my 15 years of living openly as a gay man, from age 12 to 27. A helpful framework here is **precarious manhood theory** (Vandello et al., 2008), which argues that masculinity is not a fixed trait but something men feel pressured to constantly prove. My tactic of flipping slurs into flirtation directly undermined that "proof." In queer culture, reframing hostility as homoerotic subtext is camp, a way of disarming by mocking heteromasculine dogma, but in the logic of masculinity, it reads as

emasculated. Instead of dissolving the conflict, it raised the stakes. Once Saemus pulled his friends into the exchange, his aggression wasn't just about me; it was about restoring his masculine status for the audience.

- b. **Sexual Stigma.** His fallback on labeling me “predator,” “perv,” and insinuating pedophilia ties directly into what Gregory Herek (2009) describes as the **sexual stigma against queer men**. These accusations weren't random. They draw from a recycled arsenal of society's hands to those who want to discredit gay men. When reframing his aggression as desire threatened his masculinity, his next move was to weaponize cultural scripts about queer deviance, using tropes that are centuries old yet still culturally effective in delegitimizing gay men's voices.

Seamus' claims didn't align with the readily accessible writing on my profile, which is worth noting, though I acknowledge his angle was that he was “only 18.” Despite that, he bragged about being with an older woman, framing it as an achievement, even though there was no actual relationship with them. Saemus was “showing her how crazy I am,” etc. This reveals the cultural double standard: when a young man is with an older woman, it's coded as accomplishment; when a gay man engages, it's coded as corruption. Even after Trump entered the conversation, sparked by photos on his public profile showing him posing with cutouts of Trump, he doubled down. He explicitly stated he was a MAGA supporter, telling me to “stay mad, liberal 2028.” The irony here is sharp: with the recent coverage of the Epstein files, Trump has been linked, and at minimum, informally confirmed in reporting, to those networks. Yet, to

my aggressor, Trump remains an icon of masculinity and success, while I, a gay man, was the predator.

The cultural script is clear: straight men, even implicated ones, are excused; gay men are scapegoated. We see this script in the broader media as well. When a school shooter turns out to be a white supremacist, coverage in certain circles shifts quickly to whether they were trans. The scapegoat slides easily onto LGBTQ+ identities, reinforcing preexisting narratives of deviance. Saemus, the aggressor, didn't care to tap three times on his phone to view my profile, where my work, my writing, and my preference for older men are explicit. Instead, he reached for the low-hanging fruit of recycled stigma. From calling me "schizo," to accusing me of being a "bum with no work ethic" despite my posts showing the opposite, to finally escalating to "predator" and "perv", the incoherence of his insults only further validated my counter-speech. Especially the cruel pedophilia insinuation, given that I've been open about healing from being molested, groomed, and assaulted. Here, the derogatory and homophobic insults weren't just inaccurate; they weaponized my own history against me, something that would elicit a response from a majority of people. It demanded a response rather than silence, given the current culture and widespread misconduct in the entertainment industry.

A final and major backfire was the perception of **seriousness**. I told him directly that it "wasn't serious," but in the performative space of social media, optics matter more than declarations. My insistence that I wasn't taking it seriously read to him as instability because the optics didn't prove otherwise. This is exactly what I outlined in *Spectacle of Suffering*: online, it isn't truth or intent that matters, it's performance and perception. He defaulted to the lowest-effort narrative "crazy", and I defaulted to reading him as "illiterate and annoying." Both were incomplete, yet both shaped the escalation. This wasn't a random tizzy. It's a lived

confirmation of the limits of humor, optics, and online context. What I intended as absurdity to undercut aggression was translated to delusion and instability. What he meant as banter, laced with hostility, masked genuine anger and insecurity. My insistence that it “wasn’t serious” backfired because online, nothing is ever shallow unless you prove it shallow in a way the other person can accept.

In the end, the interaction circled back to my research: social media hostility, like social media support, thrives on optics. The lowest-energy narrative wins. Unless we take responsibility for guiding interpretation, walking people through the puddle, we can’t claim it “isn’t that deep.” Because for someone else, it always will be. I argue that everything is that deep, or at least, everything has the potential to become that deep when you can’t walk the other person through your intentions in real time. There’s also an antithesis: people sometimes refuse to accept statements from the source as personal fact. Online, depth isn’t measured by what you mean, or even by what you plainly say, but by how the audience interprets it, and what fragments of your words they seize on to create entertainment.

Again, it’s all for the optics.

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