

A few weeks ago, the Anti-Defamation League added what was once an innocuous internet meme – Pepe the Frog – to its list of hate symbols, which also includes the swastika and the Confederate flag. The cartoon had become an unofficial mascot for the alt-right, a group of internet users that trade in and disperse racist and threatening online messages. But can internet memes – which often mutate as they spread virally on the web — truly be a symbol of any one thing, hateful or otherwise?

Before continuing with the assignments' directions below, please closely read the four attached articles (all published in the *New York Times* on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016). **Use the e-text links at the bottom of each article to explore the links within each text.**

### Article Annotations & One-Sentence Summaries

For *each* article, annotate (circle/mark/underline related information within the text itself along with small written notes) the hardcopies and use the space in the margins to address each of the following elements:

- What is the author's main **argument** (i.e., thesis) in the article? *Highlight it.*
- What **evidence** or **reasoning** does he or she use to support that argument?
- Number** the paragraphs in the article and make marginal notes about *how* each paragraph is related to the one before and after it.
- What is the author's **background** (e.g., education, profession), and *how* might it affect his or her perspective on the issues that he or she addresses in the article? (You'll want to do a bit of informal research on each author.)
- Which of the eight academic **lenses** (i.e., cultural/social, artistic/philosophical, ethical, political/historical, futuristic, environmental, economic, scientific) does this author seem to be primarily coming from?
- Beneath the article, write a *one-sentence summary* of the article's **purpose** (the effect that author would like the article to have on its readers' thoughts or actions).

### Further Research & Discussion Questions

- After annotating and summarizing all four articles, consider which of the eight academic lenses were *not* represented by any of the four authors' arguments. Choose **one** of them through which to conduct further research. Use the **research databases** (e.g., Gale, EBSCO) to find an article that addresses a topic *related to* any of the articles' content, arguments, evidence, or reasoning. **Email** the article to yourself as well as one of your teammates, and be ready to discuss it in class on the due date.
- Lastly, please create *four discussion questions* (that cannot be answered with a simple yes/no) related to any of the issues involved with this assignment (i.e., the articles themselves or your further research); bring those questions to class, written down and headed with your name and period) for our scheduled class discussion.



# A Meme Can Become a Hate Symbol by Social Consensus

*Ryan M. Milner, an assistant professor of communication at the College of Charleston, and Whitney Phillips, a professor of literary studies and writing at Mercer University, are the authors of the forthcoming book, "The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity and Antagonism Online."*

Created by the cartoonist Matt Furie in 2005, the crudely drawn frog now known as Pepe spread on the internet messageboard 4chan as a quick visual stand-in for common emotional states (like when something “feels good man”). Pepe’s popularity (even over-popularity) came from the myriad iterations of his various facial expressions and catch phrases that were woven into online conversation and play.

Pepe has only recently been harnessed by the alt-right as a symbol for white supremacy, and more broadly to express support for the group’s “God Emperor,” Donald Trump. It is highly likely that this appropriation was meant as a joke, one intended to goad mainstream journalists and politicians into, first, panicking over a cartoon frog and, second, providing the alt-right a broader platform — an objective, if that was indeed the objective, that proved highly successful. Even Hillary Clinton’s campaign posted a Pepe alt-right explainer last month after Donald Trump Jr. tweeted out a Pepe photoshop.

With so much publicity, white supremacy (with a tinge of Trumpism) has become the agreed-upon meaning for those choosing to spread the alt-right’s iteration of the Pepe meme. Every journalist and average citizen who amplified this latest iteration of Pepe — even if the meme was shared to express confusion or even dismay that other journalists and other citizens (and certainly Hillary Clinton) had fallen into the alt-right’s trap — strengthened the connection between Pepe and bigotry.

The social processes responsible for Pepe's racist rebranding also apply to the Confederate flag and swastika, two of the most recognizable symbols of racial hatred. As with Pepe, these symbols aren’t inherently racist. Both are, like all abstract symbols, arbitrary; different symbols could have been chosen by the Nazis in the 1920s and by white Southerners in the 1960s eager to rewrite history. And yet, both symbols communicate violent racism; that remains the dominant resonant meaning. An individual might declare that *his or her personal use* of the swastika or Confederate flag isn’t racist, but individual protestation can’t overturn social consensus, or obviate the experiences of those who read the symbols as synonymous with hate.

Similarly, until Pepe casts off this iteration of his meme — an outcome the cartoonist who created him, for one, is hopeful for — he will remain intertwined with white supremacist ideology. So as the Anti-Defamation League suggests, think before you retweet.



# Internet Memes are Value Neutral, But Do Reflect Cultural Moments

*Brian Feldman writes about internet culture for New York magazine's Select All.*

I don't see Pepe as a hate symbol. I'm phrasing that very deliberately, because I wouldn't state unequivocally that Pepe is *not* a hate symbol.

The thing about internet memes is that they take on whatever meaning the people wielding them prefer. They are not controlled by any one entity, but are templates for a certain kind of online communication into which people insert their own values. There can be continuity in the tone of a meme, but the subject matter it is applied to is entirely up to the user. For example, the condescending attitude of Condescending Wonka, or the supportive tone of "Damn, Daniel!" can be applied to anything. And memes only gather steam when they change and transform and get passed around. In other words, memes can be used for hateful purposes (and often are), but they are not inherently hateful.

It's worth examining what sorts of Pepe images are being decried. The ones being shared by the alt-right often feature Pepe dressed up in Nazi regalia or in a white supremacist outfit, or even a "Make America Great Again" hat. When this is the case, is Pepe the frog the racist, or is it the symbols placed on him — which are already established as discriminatory — that signify the racism? An imperfect hypothetical: Does a Barbie doll dressed in a Ku Klux Klan hood make all other Barbie dolls members of the KKK?

I follow internet culture closely for my job, so I've seen Pepe in a myriad of contexts throughout the year, and the alt-right's use, at first glance, appears to be yet another appropriation in a long line of them. The inclusion of Pepe in the Anti-Defamation League's list of hate symbols is, in my opinion, an arbitrary demarcation.

But I also know that first impressions matter. It is not my place to say who should and shouldn't be offended by Pepe. If someone's first encounter with Pepe is a depiction of him with a swastika armband, standing in front of a gas chamber, that's going to color every future Pepe spotting.

As of now, it is impossible to deny that the most active Pepe meme makers are racist, misogynistic and anti-Semitic. But that doesn't automatically render the entirety of the Pepe meme a hate symbol. Internet memes are value-neutral. They reflect the people who create their individual instances. In our current cultural moment, Pepe is a bigot. But he doesn't have to be, and in the future, he might not be.



# Alas, Poor Pepe: The Sad Descent to Hate Symbol

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In one of New York City's Supreme Court buildings, there's an intricate wood inlay design in the ceiling that looks like a bunch of swastikas. The courthouse was built before the rise of Germany's Nazi party, and the ceiling pattern is almost certainly a meaningless design choice. But the fact that this hall of justice is decorated with a symbol of the Worst Thing Ever is just, well, awkward.

Awkwardness is also the fate of young Ethan, whose bar mitzvah was meme-themed. He had T-shirts made with Pepe the Frog's face on them, and now no one can responsibly wear them.

No, if the Anti-Defamation League says that Pepe the Frog is a symbol of anti-Semitism and racism, there's really no bouncing back from that. It's no use arguing that Pepe is also just a funny frog. Once a symbol is officially lumped in with neo-Nazis and racists — whether it appears on the ceiling pattern of a courthouse, or is a white hood, square black mustache or cartoon frog — it's over. You can dutifully explain to friends that there was a time when that symbol didn't mean anything bad, but let's be honest, even though there's no use in tearing down an old ceiling, you'd never in good conscience inlay it with swastikas today. It's over.

As far as meme cycles go, the journey of Pepe the Frog has been perhaps the weirdest. Usually memes get rejected by the people who started them once they get too mainstream — typically this happens when they appear on Ellen Degeneres (“Damn, Daniel”), get co-opted by advertisers (Brands Saying Bae), or when moms start to post them on Facebook (Grumpy Cat).

Those who are hip to internet culture know that a brand adoption of a meme is the ultimate death knell. Now we know — because of Pepe — it turns out the one thing more toxic to a meme's cool factor than brands is adoption by anti-Semites and racists.

And it's very sad because before Pepe was labeled a hate symbol, it used to be a really, really good meme. There was a whole absurdist play-acting bit that played out online in which various Pepe drawings were presented as “rare” and valuable, with memelords ironically insisting there was a market for these memes that adhered to the rules of real world capitalism. (I swear it's funnier than it sounds.)

Like Ethan, whose bar mitzvah swag is now paradoxically branded with anti-Semitic frogs, I too have been burned by Pepe. Last year, I wrote about the Pepe meme for BuzzFeed. Now that Pepe's reputation is solidified as a neo-Nazi symbol, I'm conflicted about this old post. Will people read it and think I'm a Nazi, or that BuzzFeed endorses the current meaning? Do I need to add a disclaimer? What's the editorial protocol here?

Truthfully, the Anti-Defamation League's recent lambasting of Pepe may have created a bit of a Streisand effect — when publicity around a bad thing makes the phenomenon larger, or more visible, than if it had been left alone. Most fans of the meme frog have probably never encountered the Pepe-as-Hitler meme. Katy Perry has tweeted a Pepe, for example, and as far as I know, Katy Perry is not a neo-Nazi. The harmless version of Pepe was hugely popular; the numbers and scope of those alt-righters using Pepe in sinister contexts is much smaller. But now Pepe is forever tied to the worst elements of the internet, and there's no hope in getting him back.

Feels bad, man.



# The Hate Symbol Designation Gives Too Much Power to Trolls

*Cooper Fleishman is an editorial director at Mic. He is on Twitter (@\_Cooper).*

In June, Anthony Smith and I investigated the alt-right's use of the (((echoes))) symbol to target Jews on Twitter. After our story was published, the Anti-Defamation League added the triple parentheses to its online database of hate symbols, Hate on Display. At the same time, Jewish writers were reclaiming the symbol, putting parentheses around their Twitter handles en masse. White-supremacist trolls could no longer use the symbol to covertly identify Semitic names. The threat was identified, criticized, mocked and finally neutralized. It was a victory.

It feels strange to see Pepe, a cartoon frog, on the same list of hate symbols. Whereas (((echoes))) was a code with a distinct purpose — it was created by white supremacists to identify people with Semitic names and subject them to harassment — Pepe still has broad, universal appeal.

The frog began life in 2005, according to Know Your Meme, and for the next 10 years, it was a harmless cartoon character subject to frequent remixes. Its groggy expression was a blank slate on which the internet could project anything that simply felt good, man. This is how the most popular memes spread: Just look at the rise of Minions on Facebook.

Pepe was popular with trolls on 4chan, but it had mainstream appeal, too.

This year, the alt-right allegedly held a "campaign to reclaim Pepe from normies" by flooding the internet with Nazi-themed Pepe fan art. The Anti-Defamation League's designation means they succeeded. It's a victory they don't deserve: Pepe belongs to all of us.

Alt-right trolls have a history of adopting cultural figures and turning them into white supremacist idols. 4chan's obsession with Taylor Swift and Elsa from "Frozen" is primarily due to their blond hair, blue eyes and other Aryan traits. Swift and Elsa have become Nazi icons for a certain sector of the alt-right. But it'd be ridiculous to call them hate symbols.

The Anti-Defamation League's mission to document modern-day hate speech is noble and practical, especially while chaotic, rebellious right-wing ideologies continue to gain influence. But I believe this designation gives a group of trolls too much power to co-opt harmless imagery.