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YouTube pranking across cultures

by Renee Hobbs and Silke Grafe

Abstract

Online pranking videos are common online and popular among middle-school students, teens and young adults. When we examined 200 YouTube examples of the Scary Maze Game prank, we explored the relationship between perpetrator, victim and witness, finding that while American children under age 12 were commonly featured as victims in Scary Maze Game prank videos, only rarely were German children represented as victims. U.S. videos also lingered on the pain of prank victims, even looping the emotional response of the victim to create an instant replay effect and using post-production techniques, including editing, music and title credits. As an expression of the *schadenfreude* that people experience when both enacting and viewing bad pranks, online pranking is a dimension of the dark side of participatory culture.

Contents

Introduction

Humans have been playing pranks on each other since prehistoric times, when we first learned how to manipulate social power through laughter at the expense of others. Pranking is deeply inflected by cultural norms as well as norms established through broadcast television, radio and the Internet. But when cultural and professional norms collide, pranks can lead to disaster. In December 2012, there was widespread media attention of the case of Jacintha Saldanha, a British nurse who committed suicide after being tricked by a prank phone call performed on the radio by Australian disc jockeys who impersonated the King and Queen of England and led the nurse to reveal medical information about a member of the British royal

family. This news event highlighted important cultural differences in people's emotional responses to pranks as well as the amplifying power of the mass media as public witness.

Online pranking videos are popular all around the world. Often timed to coincide with April Fools' Day, pranking videos from Russia, France and many other countries can be highly amusing or nearly incomprehensible (Mallenbaum and Hurwitz, 2013). The widespread appeal of pranks is undeniable, as Jesse Wellens and his girlfriend Jeana discovered when they created *Prank vs. Prank* (https://www.youtube.com/user/prankvsprank), a YouTube channel series of reality pranking videos, which have attracted over 700 million views and five million subscribers. One important early online prank video began around 2002 when interactive flash videos known as "scare pranks" or "scary mazes" began to emerge across the Internet. Before the advent of social media, scary maze Web sites were shared via e-mail postings, chat rooms or instant messages. Upon clicking a link, the viewer is presented with a puzzle game that requires a high level of concentration, only to be disrupted by an ear-piercing scream and ghastly photos from horror films. Figure 1 provides examples of images from a few scary maze game videos. Some of these prank videos visually depict children crying, whimpering, screaming, and thrashing on the floor.

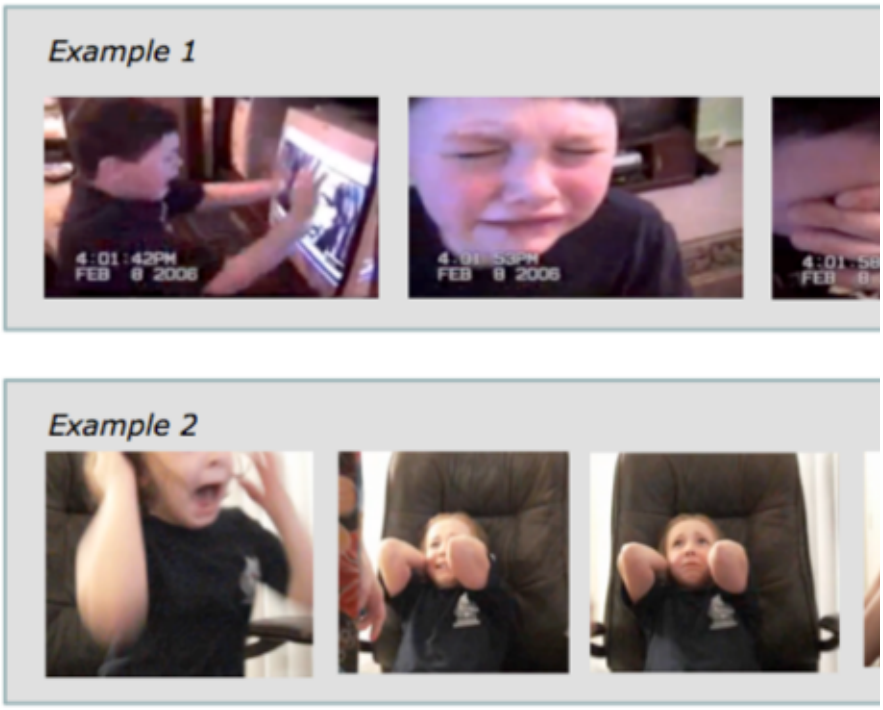

Figure 1: Characteristics of the some of the scary maze game v

Some scary maze game online pranking videos show children as the victim of the prank, as in *Scary Maze Game — The Original*, which has been viewed more than 27 million times as of March 2015. *Scary Maze Prank — The Original* has attracted more than 51,000 comments. Visually, the video features a young boy playing the maze game, seated at a computer. When startled by the sound of screaming and a gruesome face dripping with blood, he screams and runs away from the computer, crying uncontrollably in a deeply visceral fear response. Comments from YouTube viewers demonstrate that online pranks elicit a diverse range of responses, from "Lol this is funny," "The way he cries is sooooo funny" to "Even if it scars him for life it was worth it," and "That is such a mean thing to do to a child. Funny to prank on a grown-up; not funny to do to a kid."

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A culture's values, and the artifacts that reveal them, are evident on the Web and in visual media more generally (O'Connell, 2015). Although "the value of the culture may not be the value of all individuals within the culture," culture shapes and influences our communication behavior in a variety of social contexts [1]. In order to understand the intersections of culture, identity, and power in the context of online prank videos as a new media genre, we conducted a content analysis of YouTube videos from Germany and the United States to examine cultural differences in a sample of online pranking videos circulating on YouTube as part of the "scary maze game" meme.

Video pranking as transgression

Thomas Hobbes was among the earliest philosophers to acknowledge that one of the many functions of laughter is to secure self-interest through disrupting social power hierarchies. Theoretically, superiority theories of humor can be understood in relation to the psychology and sociology of conflict and power relationships. The philosopher Henri Bergson wrote about the relationship between laughter, violence and social power, recognizing that media, art and aesthetic forms activate a wide variety of complex psychological states that inflect interpersonal relationships (Mish'alani, 1984).

Scholars acknowledge that across cultures, jokes and pranks are often used "to justify violence and to dehumanize targets of joking" [2]. But to our knowledge, there has been no empirical inquiry on cultural differences in pranks and pranking in either the psychological or sociological literature. Scholars who study cultural diversity and global media do claim that the ambiguous nature of comedic material is differentially "filled in" by listeners as they use their cultural, ethnic, racial and gendered identities to engage in sense-making and experience psychic release (Siapera, 2010). This study represents an effort to examine cultural differences in pranking by looking at a particular online media form of it.

But video pranking is not a new phenomenon. It has a significant heritage, having long been popular as a staple of professional entertainment media. In the 1950s, the television program *Candid Camera* featured ordinary people being pranked by small crises and other unexpected events which host Allan Funt noted could occasionally veer into the realm of cruelty. He once explained to an interviewer, "If you want to know what holds the man together ... you apply a real jolt and see where the cracks appear" [3]. As this remark suggests, the entertainment value of pranks may be embedded in their transgressive nature. Critics have argued that the prominence of public humiliation as depicted in celebrity culture, social media, and reality TV competition programs like *American Idol* and other shows has contributed to desensitization. Koestenbaum [4] notes that, when it comes to contemporary culture, "the road to stardom is paved with shame." Indeed, people may enjoy feeling a little bit ashamed and guilty for watching visual depictions of human behavior that are socially unacceptable in real life. Nabi, *et al.* (2003) found that voyeuristic motivations for watching reality TV shows are modified by viewer awareness of performers' complicity. Pranking videos, by their very nature however, display evidence of performers' lack of complicity. As evidence of this, we must consider *America's Funniest Home Videos*, launched in 1990, which is the longest running prime-time entertainment program on ABC. It features a number of practical jokes and pranks. Because the program is very inexpensive to produce, the format has been duplicated in many nations around the world.

But the ambiguous nature of prank videos can be unnerving; perhaps such ambiguity is part of the appeal. In 2009, MTV created *Pranked*, a 30-minute program that showcased online video pranks posted on YouTube. On this show, Streeter Seidell and Amir Blumenfeld from the *College Humor Show* offered snarky comments on a variety of online videos of people pulling pranks on each other. Wiggins (2014) demonstrated how this show had been enabled by Hollywood's structures of risk management, as curating pranking videos is highly cost-effective in comparison to "ambush" shows where paid performers enact pranks. Wiggins also acknowledged the sadistic masculinity embodied in the program, noting that the planning and premeditation "heightens the sadistic pleasure for the prankster and the parasocial pleasure for the viewer" [5]. In a review of *Pranked*, one critic

noted the "inherent unpleasantness" of the featured clips, where viewers were invited to laugh at those who attempted unimaginative pranks, as in the case of the teen who sprayed a living room with a stink bomb. Although pranksters and victims were compensated with fame, as Wiggins noted, viewers were merely titillated by the uneasy tension between representation and reality. Chiu wrote, "When the dad starts swearing and vowing to 'beat the shit' out of his son, it's hard to know whether to laugh or call child services" [6].

Pranking, identity, culture and power

Because pranks are a form of interpersonal humiliation involving a three-way relationship between the one who humiliates, the victim, and the witnesses, typically, pranks involve people in unequal power relationships. Some scholars conceptualize pranks as developmentally normal form of "dirty play," a dimension of preadolescent and adolescent boys' gendered identity that questions adult authority through a metaphor of playful terrorism (Fine, 1986). In any case, the most intense forms of humiliation involve a low-status person humiliating a person of higher rank. Humiliation has been implicated in workplace stress and in a variety of forms of clinically recognized emotional and social disorders, including depression, paranoia, violence, generalized and social anxiety and suicide (Fisk, 2001). Undoubtedly, "the emotions of humiliation and shame construct, destroy and recreate volatile hierarchies of moral and social rank" [7].

In pranks performed for broadcast television, radio or online media, power roles are also embedded in the relationship between subject, author and actual witnesses as well as the anonymous viewing audience. In comparison to a face-to-face prank performed among a small group, the presence of a large audience (with or without mediation) may serve to amplify the powerlessness of the victim of a prank while supporting the prankster's emotional needs for attention-seeking. Similarly, creating an imitation of a popular pranking video may make people feel more socially connected, because "users simultaneously indicate and construct their individuality and their affiliation with the YouTube community" [8], blurring the boundaries between amateur and professional, private and public, and market- and non-market driven activities.

Harmful or harmless?

Pranks are a type of trick that temporarily distorts or warps reality, bringing people into an unreal world for a short period of time; most of the time this form of play does not cause harm (McEntire, 2003). The moment at which the deception is revealed to the victim is crucial to its dramatic effect and often directly plays upon the inversion of cultural norms, gender expectations or status hierarchies. McEntire notes that "[i]n times of seasonal unrest, our pranks function to release pent-up tensions as we construct deliberate mockeries of standard social, professional, and gender-derived behaviors. We learn about ourselves and our victims through our engagement in carefully-constructed pranks" [9].

But in other cases, pranks may be an opportunity to take pleasure in creating another's misfortune. The German term *schadenfreude* is often used in the English language without translation to describe the emotional response generated in feeling pleasure at another person's suffering (Smith, *et al.*, 2009). *Schadenfreude* is associated with the concept of ridicule, which has an important impact on interpersonal relations within peer groups. Zillmann (1983) concluded that some forms of comic malice are directed at individuals who are perceived in a negative way. The victim, or target of ridicule, fulfils an important task in the dynamics of the group (Ziv, 1984), being assigned all the weaknesses and illnesses of the group. By making the target the victim of disparaging humor, other group members can gain a feeling of group solidarity and cultural superiority.

There is considerable emotional ambiguity that exists as people choose to interpret a prank as potentially harmful or harmless. In Harold's (2004)

examination of culture jamming pranks, she explains how the meaning of the word 'prank,' in Middle English, was to add a stylistic flourish to one's dress, or a fold, pleat or wrinkle. For media pranksters, pranks are a form of stylistic exaggeration. But comic malice, as a dimension of some pranks, may protect both the perpetrator and the witness and serve as an alternative to empathy. Portmann (2000) claims that *schadenfreude* most often appears in minor situations of suffering when it tends to be of a comic nature, "helping us withstand the difficulties of living" [10]. But when comedy and malice are linked, it's possible that re-articulations of social power through humiliation serve to represent and share complex emotions through online circulation, giving voice to the most transgressive dimensions of interpersonal power relationships.

Culture and gender may intersect to create differential levels of online participation in creating online pranking videos. In the United States, racial, gender and social background all contribute to disparities between young adults in the practice of creating video and films (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008). Online video creative activity is associated with skills in using the Internet, as expected, but it is also associated with gender, cultural identity and socioeconomic status. Jenkins, *et al.* (2006) described a differential "participation gap" that exists among people who are more or less involved in online cultural practices like watching or creating videos. As described in KnowYourMeme.com, an online Web site that documents Internet culture, "Scare prank reactions are yet another classic example of Internet users gunning for the lulz at the expense of close relatives and friends." Lulz is the terms used to express the emotional satisfaction and enjoyment experienced when posting offensive or disgusting content.

In this study, we use content analysis of pranking videos in Germany and the United States to explore how YouTube pranking videos using the Scary Maze game meme might embody particular sociocultural or ethical values of its creators to reflect the dialectic relationship between the perpetrator, the victim and the witness. We want to better understand how power relations are depicted visually, through the form and content of the videos themselves, and we are curious about potential cultural differences that may be evidence of how social power is depicted.

If video pranking reflects behavior that is a basically universal power need, baked into the fabric of humanity, we would expect to see very few visual differences between YouTube videos produced in Germany and those in the United States because these countries are both first-world nations with deep similarities in culture, values and lifestyle. Differences between videos produced in the two countries may shed insight on how culture shapes people's choices in constructing pranking videos. Thus, our research question is: Are there differences in visual form and content between Scary Maze Game prank videos produced in the United States and those produced in Germany?

Research process

To better understand the phenomenon on online pranking videos, we conducted a visual content analysis of 194 YouTube videos in online pranking videos originating from Germany and the United States.

Sampling and coding process

To identify a sample of videos, we searched under the phrase "maze game" and "erschrocken maze game" on YouTube (www.youtube.com) between 5 April — 25 April 2010. We excluded videos which showed only the maze game on screen but did not include visual evidence of a victim being filmed. Animations of a fictional character playing the game were also excluded. To identify the filmmaker's country of origin, we searched for information about hometown and country in the profile information of the user who posted the video. We made the assumption that the filmmaker is the YouTube user. We ignored videos that were clearly re-posted from other sources. Our sample includes only those videos which provided explicit or implicit information about German or American origin in the profile, *e.g.*, evidence shown identifying hometown and/or country. In the very small number of cases where country of origin was not explicitly provided in the profile, we looked for implicit evidence of English or German language in

the description of the video and the language spoken by the individuals visually depicted in the video. Content analysis of our sample of YouTube videos was conducted by two coders. One was a native English speaker who spoke German as a second language and another was a native German speaker who spoke English as a second language. We used a practice sample of 20 videos to develop and refine our codebook. After this, a sample of 20 videos (representing 10 percent of the sample) were coded by both coders to determine interrater reliability for all variables [11]. After viewing the videos and reading the comment threads, and after examining descriptive statistics, we performed t-tests and Chi-square tests to examine differences in the form and content of scare prank videos produced in the United States and Germany.

Visual depiction of victim

We looked for people depicted in the video and defined the *victim identity* by coding for gender (male, female) and age (birth — 12, 13–19, and 20+). We were unable to develop a reliable way to identify the demographic characteristics of the perpetrator of the prank; only rarely was a perpetrator visually depicted. Sometimes we could infer the identity of the perpetrator as a result of visual or verbal evidence, but we did not feel confident about these interpretations in many cases.

Anticipatory set

Some videos revealed that victims were clearly anticipating or expecting a prank so we coded for visual or verbal evidence that the victim was aware of the nature of the prank. For example, some videos verbally show that the victim is aware of an upcoming thrill (as when a victim says to the perpetrator, "When is it going to happen?"). Other videos offer visual clues, as when a victim appears to be repeatedly looking directly at the camera, as if they were performing for the camera. Here we used a dichotomous variable to indicate the presence or absence of *positive anticipation*, which provided indirect evidence that the victim had assented to participate in the filming of the prank.

Depiction of emotional response

Victims of the scary maze game reacted in different ways. Some displayed fear, while others responded with laughter, and a few displayed anger towards the prankster. In order to identify the emotional response of victims, we first distinguished between mild and extreme emotional reaction to the scare. We initially coded for different types of reactions including body movements that indicated verbal responses of anxiety (scream, cry, gasp and facial fear) and physical responses of anxiety (hand and arm movements, small and large body movements, trying to escape). Coders then rated the overall intensity of the emotional state of the victim on a three-point scale for each of three variables: fear, laughter, and anger. Because some videos ended within a few seconds of the prank's culmination (so that the victim's fear, laughter or anger was not visually depicted) and other videos displayed more of the victim's response and recovery from the prank, we also counted the *length of the scare* reaction by measuring the number of seconds or minutes of time immediately following the scare response to the end of the video.

Post-production editing

While many videos appeared to simply be one-shot documentary videos of the scare prank, taken with a mobile phone, other videos show evidence of post-production. We coded for the presence or absence of *editing techniques* including slow motion, sound or music that was not captured on the scene but added later, scenes which were looped and repeated, and even author/producer credits. All these elements offer evidence regarding authorial intent, because a more highly-produced video suggests that the author was manipulating the video's form and content and considering the potential audience before uploading the video to YouTube.

Audience

We measured the number of viewers of the online pranking videos using the following features: *days since publication*, defined as the number of days since the video was uploaded, and views, defined as the number of times the video had been viewed. These were used to create a *popularity* index by dividing the number of views by the days since publication. Taking

advantage of the data available from YouTube viewers who watch and respond to these videos, we also created a *viewer engagement* index by creating a scale using evidence from the number of viewer ratings on YouTube, the number of video comments, and the number of written comments.

How pranking victims are depicted

In examining the identity of the victims of the Scary Maze game prank, men are slightly more likely than women to be victims of pranks (57 percent male) but there were no cultural differences in the gender of the victim when comparing German and U.S. videos.

However, striking cultural differences were evident when looking at the age of the victim. More than one-fourth (26 percent) of the U.S. videos feature children under age 12 as victims. By contrast, only seven percent of German videos featured children 12 or under as victims. In many of U.S. videos, the child depicted is completely unaware of the set-up and the humor seems to be generated by observing the surprise, fear, distress, shock or angry reaction of the fearful or humiliated child. By contrast, a large majority of German videos feature teenagers ages 13–19 as both victims (and perpetrators) of the prank. As Table 1 shows, 73 percent of German videos featured teens as victims as compared with 45.5 percent of U.S. videos. In most German videos, teens are shown as pranking their peers, with evidence of positive anticipation suggesting the playful, performance-oriented nature of this activity. Among the German videos, 17 percent feature positive anticipation as compared with only eight percent in U.S. videos. In many of the German videos in particular, older teens seem to be amusing themselves by creating pretend-play imitations and performances, offering self-conscious performances of the role of victim and perpetrator. This is primarily depicted visually through a sustained gaze towards the camera.

Table 1

Scary Maze Game Victims: Comparison of U.S. and German Online Pran

	UNITED STATES	GERMANY
Victim Gender		
Male	57%	57%
Female	43%	43%
Victim Age		
Child	26%	7%***
Teen	45%	73%***
Adult	29%	20%
N		n = 194

Chi-square: * p >.05, **p>.01, ***p>.001

How did victims react to the prank? For most, it was a mix of fear, laughter and anger. We found some cultural differences in the way that the victim's emotional reaction was depicted with German prank victims displaying more intense *fear* as compared with U.S. prank victims. German prank victims also displayed more intense *anger* than U.S. prank victims.

However, American scare prank videos are significantly more likely to keep the camera running after the laughter/fear/anger response as compared with German scare prank videos. For example, the post-scare reaction (measured in seconds) ranged from two seconds to 456 seconds in the U.S. videos, while the range for German videos was 0–124 seconds. Statistically significant differences were found when comparing the mean number of seconds of post-scare reaction. Table 2 displays these results. The filmmaker's decision to linger on the emotional response is likely an embodiment of cultural values that reflect visual, creative and ethical choices involved in creating prank videos that depict the pain and distress of others in a comic light.

Table 2

Comparison of U.S. and German Online Pranking Videos

	UNITED STATES		
	Range	Mean (SD)	Range
Depiction of Emotional Response			
Positive Anticipation		7%	
Fear Intensity	1 – 3	2.58 (.65)	1 – 3
Laughter Intensity	1 – 3	2.46 (.64)	1 – 3
Anger Intensity	1 – 3	2.63 (.64)	1 – 3
Post-Scare Reaction (in secs)	2 – 456	28 (49)	0 – 124
Structural Features			
Length of Video (in secs)	13 – 185	125 (110)	9 – 2358
Post Production Editing		49.5	
Intro and/or Titles		31.7	
Music		12.9	
Slow Motion		14.9	
Looping of Emotional Response		17.8	
Popularity			
Days Published	18 - 1389	684 (327)	1 – 1308
Views	287 – 15,833,988	369,608 (1,769,904)	13 – 339,627
Viewer Engagement			
Number of Comments	0 – 39,801	886 (47,160)	0 – 523
Number of Favorites	0 – 26,396	404 (2725)	0 – 591
Number of Ratings	0 – 15,287	315 (1743)	0 – 709
Viewer Engagement Index	0 – 5	4.51 (.71)	0 – 5

Chi-square: * p >.05, **p>.01, ***p>.001

Note: Larger version of table available here.

Editing techniques, popularity and YouTube viewer response

While some videos were low-quality productions shot with a mobile phone, others were highly produced amateur productions. Table 2 shows a statistically significant difference in the length of the productions, with U.S. videos being twice as long as German videos. Thirty-two percent of U.S. scare prank videos use some kind of introduction or title credits, as compared to only 8.6 percent of German videos. American scare prank producers are more likely to create an edited instant replay loop of the emotional reaction of the victim of the prank so that viewers can witness again (sometimes in slow motion or with a laugh track) the fear, shock, or distress of the victim. Eighteen percent of U.S. scare prank videos included the instant replay technique as compared to only five percent of the German scare prank videos.

American scare prank videos also tend to be more likely to use editing, sound or music that has been added in post-production, titles, slow motion, and other post-production techniques as compared with German videos. Most German videos were not so highly produced — they were short one-shot productions where the camera is in a fixed position. While it may be possible that some German amateur producers lack technology proficiency, it's also possible that the American producers of scare prank videos perceive their purpose in posting the video to YouTube as a means to get feedback on their work (Jenkins, *et al.*, 2006) or attract fame or attention as future professional producers (Walker, 2012).

Since the scare prank phenomenon began in the United States, it has become a global phenomenon, with YouTube viewers from more than 50 countries viewing scary maze game videos at the time of our sampling. Naturally, differences in audience size reflect differences between populations. The most popular video in the U.S. sample achieved viral status by receiving more than 15 million views as of April 2010, while the most popular German video received 339,627 views. It is likely that many German YouTube viewers participated in creating a scare prank video as a result of the inspiration provided by the U.S. produced *Scary Maze Game — The Original*. Similar differences of scale in popularity were evident in the number of comments and ratings. Not surprisingly given the population differences, the most popular scare prank videos were produced in the United States. Although the scary maze game is a global phenomenon, few of the German videos reached the popularity of those produced in the United States. As Table 2 shows, YouTube users were far more engaged in viewing and responding to U.S. scary maze game prank videos than those produced in Germany. The number of comments, favorites and ratings signals the popularity of U.S. scary maze game videos. The viewer engagement index shows statistically significant differences between U.S. videos as compared with German videos.

Although we did not conduct a comprehensive content analysis of the many thousands of comments generated by viewers of the Scary Maze video pranks, a review of comments does reveal wide disparity among viewers concerning the social acceptability of pranking young children. Comments reveal that the potentially transgressive nature of videos that feature children as victims is clearly a source of continuing interest, popularity and appeal. Of the 40,705 comments responding to *Scary Maze Game — The Original*, 17 were less than one month old on 13 July 2014, eight years after the video was first posted to YouTube. Some viewers were quite amused by the video, as in Saltydawg9 who wrote, "THAT WAS SO FUNNY I COULD NOT STOP LAUGHING" and USmasterchief who noted, "Lol thumbs up for laugh." Other viewers were outraged. Some viewers seemed to empathize with the victim, as in Coollegoclone, who wrote, "Dude poor kid I feel sorry for him ... CHILD CRUELTY CHILD CRUELTY CHILD CRUELTY!!!!!!" Others were concerned about the potential impact on the child. Magan07111 mentioned, "feel bad for him oh yeah you think its funny but imagin he is onliy like 7 years hes gonna have permanat nightmares."

Other people were ready to blame the adults who participated in the prank, as when Donaubaar1 wrote, "Have the parents been put to court?" and a comment dripping with sarcasm from Bmzbg who stated, "21th century parenting for you all right there." However, some viewers saw learning to handle scary situations as a normal part of growing up, as when Dogfooda wrote, "Now that's a good scarrin, boy like that needs a lot of scarring to grow up right."

Some viewers felt only a little guilty for enjoying the video, as when Myronminnal stated, "I dont really mean to be RUDE but i think the kid looks CUTE while crying." Other responses seem to revel in the *schadenfreude* of the viewing experience, as when Minimann999 wrote, "Lol, my sister pooped herself when she played that game." Still others seemed to have completely objectified the victim, as in TheJoe971 who noted, "Looks like a kitty when crying at the end."

Conclusion: The pleasures of the prank

In an effort to explore cultural differences in online video pranking, this study examined the form and content of scary maze game videos created

by American and German users of YouTube. Because traditionally the most intense forms of humiliation involve a low-status person humiliating a person of higher rank, it is therefore surprising that U.S. videos feature children under 12 as victims to a far greater extent than German videos. We also found that while German prank victims display somewhat more emotional distress, U.S. videos often lingered on the pain of prank victims, even looping the emotional response of the victim to create an instant replay effect. Prank videos produced by Americans were also far more likely to make use of post-production techniques, including editing, music and title credits, that involved some considerable effort to make the videos seem "professional."

Online pranking is alive and well on YouTube, as part of the dark side of participatory culture. Bad pranks are highly visible online because their transgressive nature makes them popular. The volume and popularity of these pranks may contribute to perceptions of normativity. But a content analysis of pranking videos cannot unpack the motivations of YouTube filmmakers or the interpretive response of viewers. Further research is needed to understand the pleasures of filmmakers who videotape people being pranked and the pleasures of audiences who view such pranks.

Further research will be needed to understand why these cultural differences in the representation of online pranking are evident. We can only speculate that there may be differential levels of investment by German and American YouTube filmmakers who exploit the representation of intense emotional behavior for sheer dramatic appeal. It's possible that Germans YouTube users, while growing up, have received more opportunities to discuss the risks of power inversions that enable people to take pleasure in others' misfortunes, particularly in the context of learning about Nazi oppression during the Holocaust. Perhaps as well, U.S. YouTube filmmakers, steeped in the power messages emanating from Hollywood, recognize the transgressive ethical dimensions of pranking children but also know that representing the transgression will make for a good, emotive, popular video with strong responses from viewers. Because transgressive videos may be more likely to go viral, and hence enhance the filmmaker's reputation and status, the decision to depict the pranking of young children may not be as much about humiliating children as about how the filmmaker weighs and assesses his own need to create an emotionally powerful video, taking advantage of the strength of emotional response that he can get from the audience. The use of children as victims is a well-established trope in television, news, Hollywood cinema and other media (Cavender, *et al.*, 1999). For these reasons, it could be argued that video makers who do not make use of children as victims are simply ignorant of the ways to make a popular and powerful video that challenges people to feel something and respond.

Quite a number of YouTubers have fully embraced the values of the 'attention economy' as a means to exploit the extreme emotional responses of young children as a just another commodity for attracting public attention. Indeed, when it comes to YouTube videos, for many viewers, the whole point of watching such stuff is to cringe in a moment of thinking to oneself, "That's just so wrong." In an intensely competitive culture, this could account for many of the most mean-spirited and malicious of the videos where parents appear to be intentionally and cruelly causing distress to their own children to create eye-popping videos.

One of our concerns, after watching these videos, is that some of these videos are not mere representations of cruelty, fear and potentially humiliating responses, but are likely documents of *real* cruelty, fear, psychic pain, and humiliation. Furthermore, we are documenting a visual aesthetic here that takes pleasure in the possible real suffering of others. Perhaps there is another psychological layer of this aesthetic, as people may want to represent an actual transgression in order to garner strong responses and take delight in transgression. Just as there is delight in seeing the powerful pranked, there may be delight in seeing the taboo on "pranking the innocent" itself transgressed. Such issues deserve further inquiry.

Similarly, little is known about how children experience humiliation in the context of playful pranks conducted informally at home by family and friends, with or without an online viewing audience. When video depictions of such pranks circulate online, it is possible that these videos serve diverse complex emotional needs for viewers. What are the social consequences of bad pranks that feature young children as unwitting victims? Might people

normalize or glamorize the victimization of children? How might children, young people and their families interpret pranking videos? What are the psychological consequences of being featured in a popular YouTube pranking video? More research on these questions is needed. In any case, the high volume of comments on "bad prank" YouTube videos provides evidence that YouTube viewers recognize the need to share diverse interpretations of ambiguous texts. Controversial online videos that activate the need for discussion and opinion-sharing may advance media literacy competencies. Pranking videos may be used as an effective starting point for launching conversations about larger ethical issues concerning the social responsibilities of the filmmaker, the subject, and the witnesses, including and especially the audience members who view these videos. Discussion of cultural differences that exist in how and why people use the Internet for pranking may support the development of digital and media literacy competencies that promote critical thinking about a wide range of humorous but disturbing media content.

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Notes

1. Samovar, *et al.*, 1998, p. 61.

2. Siapera, 2010, p. 160.

3. Taddeo and Dvorak, 2010, p. 179.

4. Koestenbaum, 2011, p. 59.

5. Wiggins, 2014, p. 407.

6. Chiu, 2009, p. 1.

7. Miller, 1995, p. x.

8. Shifman, 2012, p. 200.

9. McEntire, 2003, p. 148.

10. Portmann, 2000, p. 41.

11. Krippendorf's alpha was used to determine interrater reliability and reliability between .77–1.00 was achieved.

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