Politics as Fun: Laughter, Relief, and Bonding through Memes

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Introduction

In February of 2016, I joined the "UofT Memes for Edgy Teens" (UTMET) Facebook group, a meme group mostly catered to students at the University of Toronto (U of T). This is not the only meme group at the U of T but it is the largest, with over 21,000 members as of writing this article, and highly active, with around a dozen (or more) posts being made every day. Although all UTMET members may not be U of T students, nor students at all, the memes posted to this group generally center around student life and current events or issues specific to the U of T. The content of memes in the UTMET group describes the mental health struggles of being a student, financial anxieties, and the challenges to keeping up in school. Considering the often serious topics being discussed through memes, even before this group became a site of research for me, I often wondered why memes had never sparked a mass uprising or mobilization against the university amongst the students participating in meme groups.

However, uprising and mobilization are not the only ways politics takes form. More often than not, politics is expressed through everyday practices of critique (Li 2018). As a manifestation of politics, then, memes promote bonding and create a shared identity through which students can express anxieties and frustrations about their experiences as students. Through ethnographic observations, collecting and coding memes, as well as interviews with members of the UTMET Facebook group, I explored the meaning memes can take on for the university student experience. During the course of my research, I came to see politics as "fun," incorporating elements of sociality and playfulness (Ludtke 1999). Several elements, including the exaggeration, relatability, and diverse interests contained in memes, contribute to the expression of politics in this form rather than another. While politics has manifested in the UTMET group as mobilized action, such instances are rare and do not represent the bulk of the activity which occurs in the group.

It should be noted that this project does not intend to argue for a particular definition of memes or provide an exhaustive account of meme culture, either in general or even for the UTMET group as a whole. Rather, my methods focussed on understanding the individual motivations and group-level interactions as they related to the student identity. I asked: what do memes add to, or how do they alter, the university experience? Why do students engage with memes? How can memes contribute to an understanding of politics in the everyday, as it

manifests in online spaces? And how can a reading of politics as fun contribute to a greater understanding of the role memes play in socialization processes during university life?

Are memes political?

In the UTMET Facebook group, there are several memes which deal directly with politics. For example, in September, one student shared a video (see Appendix, Figure 1) mocking the United States President, Donald Trump, after he commented, "This is a tough hurricane, one of the wettest we've ever seen from the standpoint of water" (Dracott 2018). The meme compared President Trump to a student who had run out of ideas on a paper and began using unnecessary language to fulfill a word count. There are also memes which do not directly relate to politics, but contain political messages. One meme (see Appendix, Figure 2) points to the lack of health and wellness services (both physical and mental) available at the University of Toronto. Another meme (see Appendix, Figure 3) addresses the frustration students may have when, instead of explaining a concept, a professor or teacher might say, "You should remember it from last year."

These latter two memes can be read as forms of critique against the university and, as such, are practices of politics in the everyday. In describing politics, Tania Li (2018) writes how politics rarely manifests in mass movements for social change. "More often, critique remains embedded in the practices of everyday life, in quiet stubbornness, and small acts of refusal" (Li 2018, 2). Memes are a practice through which these critiques are embedded, but they are not acts of stubbornness or refusal. In fact, the memes in the UTMET group are used as a social instrument, creating a shared student identity through which individuals can poke fun at their experiences and bond with other students. Even so, I will use politics in the sense that Li (2018) has described it, as my observations have demonstrated clearly how memes fall on a spectrum ranging from incipient critique to physical demonstrations.

Insofar as memes serve to craft a shared student identity, the resulting image of the average student is quite grim. A large number of the memes posted to this group, and especially ones which receive hundreds of reactions and large amounts of engagement in the comments, relate to themes of academic struggles and mental health (see Appendix, Table 1). The memes in UTMET depict U of T students as sleep deprived, struggling and/or failing academically, depressed and borderline suicidal, and yet still having a superiority complex towards other universities. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to actually assess the degree of truth contained in these memes, considering the vast majority of memes also contain elements of exaggeration. A reading of memes requires an understanding of this balance between exaggeration and reality, one which the members of UTMET seem to understand well. In seven different interviews I conducted with members of UTMET, six of my interlocutors did not believe that the ideas and thoughts expressed through memes were entirely truthful, if truthful at all.

For example, Rohit, a masters student in engineering, and Annie*, a third-year undergraduate biology student at UTSC, both used the example of bad grades: neither believe

that most students actually get an F in every class or a 1.7 cGPA; rather, they understand these memes to convey the feeling that one is underperforming in school. Another interviewee, Dan*, who graduated in 2017 from UTSC where he studied political science, said that memes "do not represent who people are and what they are thinking about most of the time." As someone who frequently makes memes himself, Dan acknowledges that the content he includes in his memes are not necessarily ideas that he would express in real life to his friends. He and other interviewees note how individuals are able to adopt a darker sense of humour online, one that they may or may not share with those they interact with offline.

Exaggerated feelings of hopelessness, despair, but also confidence, though, are all instrumental to crafting the "student sense of humour" which is central to the bonding experience. This sense of humour requires an acceptance of a dichotomy in which the student is downtrodden while the University of Toronto is all-powerful. Memes situate the university as a "hopes and dreams eraser" (see Appendix, Figure 4), portraying the university in a dominant position, and reinforce the lowly status of the student through self-deprecating humour (see Appendix, Figure 5). At the same time, many memes boast a sense of unearned self-confidence (see Appendix, Figure 6). In this paradoxical way, then, memes serve to both render "a form of power visible and contestable" as well as "reproduce and consolidate existing formations of power" (Li 2018, 3). That is, by revealing the ways the University of Toronto, and the actors within it, create unpleasant experiences, often based on unbalanced distributions of power and resources, students come to a greater acceptance of this reality and lend it credit as the norm. If the university was meeting every student's needs and expectations, these memes would cease to have their charm.

Unlaughter, silliness, and mobilization

It would be interesting to investigate the contradictions often seen in memes further, but it is not necessary to the topic at hand. An understanding of the role of memes in the politics of the everyday is not hinged on teasing apart the "relation to truth" (Rose 1999, 281) established through memes. It is more useful to frame memes in the context of humour and laughter which, understood politically, play a "role in the making of the citizen" (Dodds and Kirby 2013, 50). This is reflected in the way that laughing at memes informs students' understanding of what it means to be a student (and specifically a student at U of T) and what to expect out of the student experience. When Annie described her process of making or sharing memes to the group, she remarks how she only posts memes if they comment on experiences that she herself has gone through. These memes that she can relate to are the funniest and when she receives a large number of reactions and engagements, she feels satisfied that another student is able to understand how "all of us are struggling."

Laughter, however, does not always serve this purpose. In particular, the presence of unlaughter in situations which are intended to be funny signals critique. Unlaughter describes situations in which "audiences might not laugh because they actually wish to register their

disapproval" (Dodds and Kirby 2013, 54). Disapproval, which is synonymous to critique, has the potential to lead to political mobilization. The presence of laughter can be measured to a certain extent on Facebook by looking at the number and kinds of reactions a meme gets. For example, on October 19, 2018, a UTMET member made a meme (see Appendix, Figure 8) with the caption, "Please come to Russel and Spadina and help us transport these books out of the recycling!" It appears that someone at U of T had decided to throw hundreds of old books into the recycling rather than, as the meme points out, donating it to a charity or some other cause. This meme is one of the only posts I have come across which has not received any "Haha" reacts, but instead has a large number of "Wow" and "Angry" reacts, which is unusual for most memes in the UTMET group. In this case of unlaughter, it appears that throwing out several hundred books for no discernable reason crossed a boundary for UTMET members.

As Dodds and Kirby (2013) describe, then, a meme does not have to be unfunny in order to induce unlaughter. In the case of the discarded books incident, unlaughter was also able to provide a bonding experience; the absence of "Haha" reacts on this post signals how members of the UTMET group do not believe that discarding several hundred books is not a matter to laugh at. In response, many members did actually go out to find the original poster and take home some books, evidenced by many comments and other posts made in UTMET in the hours following the original meme. Inducing unlaughter through memes—coupled with a clear, actionable goal—thus has the potential to rally individuals together to mobilize against a perceived wrongdoing. To my knowledge, though, aside from the discarded books incident, there has been no other case in which the mobilizing potential of unlaughter has been demonstrated.

Indeed, there are few other times where members of meme groups at U of T (belonging to UTMET or otherwise) have physically gathered in general. In fact, two weeks after the discarded books incident, there was a get-together which demonstrated the exact opposite effect: how a humorous, silly incident could inspire individuals to organize around a singular goal. On October 31, 2018, what appears to be over a hundred people gathered on the front campus of U of T and screamed for one minute, for an event called the "1-minute scream but at UofT" (https://www.facebook.com/events/1896804147072801/?active_tab=discussion). The event was created by Chris, a third year undergraduate student studying computer science and linguistics. In an interview, he told me how the event started as a joke between he and his friends. It was the Wednesday before the November reading week, and Chris had just finished all his exams. He thought it would be a funny way to relieve stress now that his exams were over. Chris never expected that the event would receive thousands of "interested" and "going" responses within just a few days. The "1-minute scream" is by all measures a silly event, one that did not induce unlaughter and was highly entertaining, evidence by all the cheers and laughter heard from the crowd in the videos of the event posted afterwards.

Politics as fun

In a reimagining of the nature of politics and political activity between online interlocutors, I returned to Alf Ludtke's argument regarding German factory workers in the late 20th century: "The re-appropriation of time during work was not . . . always an individual refusal . . . An essential element was social exchange, playfulness, and physical contact at least with one's mates who worked within sight and earshot" (Ludtke 1982, 47). Under the conditions Ludtke describes, German factory masters employed many strategies to prevent workers from taking unnecessary breaks, thus disrupting the flow and efficiency of production. Facing a strict working environment, workers often found ways to insert fun and sociality through "informal breaks" (Ludtke 1982, 46). These informal breaks were not an explicit act of disobedience against the factory masters, but Ludtke understands their value as a means of survival.

Similarly, memes rely on these elements of social exchange and playfulness in their creation of the caricatures of the downtrodden student and burdensome university. As mentioned in the first section, such a re-appropriation of the identities of the student and the university are not individual acts of refusal or stubbornness; more important is the question of relatability and how memes allow students to connect to one another, providing comfort during tumultuous times. Understanding memes in this way, it is then unhelpful to imagine why students are not constantly up in arms attempting to correct the flaws they perceive in the university. "In the everyday politics of the workers, physical survival could not be wholly separated from social prestige, nor could the one be traded off against the other" (Ludtke 1982, 48). Comparably, in the everyday politics of U of T students, transforming mental health services and resisting academic policies cannot be separated from or traded for personal gain and economic success (through the completion of a degree). Within the UTMET group, members are able to gain their momentary reprieve from the oppressive atmosphere they feel at the university. Politics manifests, then, neither as resistance nor desire, but as fun.

Following thus, I found it difficult to apply traditional theories of politics online to the activities of the UTMET group. For example, networked political movements stress the role that technology plays in creating communities around which to mobilize, and ultimately situate the activities online as a precursor to an organized offline movement (Miller 2004; Flew and Smith 2014). Such theories do highlight the role that social bonding plays in the beginning stages of a political movement, but do not suggest that meaningful movements can stop at this stage. Although such theories of politics as it manifests online cannot be applied to the meme group, theories originating from media studies can be useful in understanding the insistence of members that memes are a lighthearted practice. During my interview with Annie, she seemed to discourage those who read "too deep" into the message of memes. When individuals in UTMET attempt to do this, she feels that it takes the fun out of the situation by turning the topic into a serious discussion which is usually unwarranted considering that the intended purpose of memes is to make people laugh.

Part of this desire to keep engagement with memes lighthearted likely stems from the interpersonal boundary process being negotiated with online. The degree of privacy versus association with others online moderates the extent to which netizens connect to virtual others (Humphreys 2016, 94). The members of UTMET engage with the group using their personal Facebook accounts, but most of the information on these accounts is only visible to the user's Facebook friends, meaning that users are able to remain somewhat anonymous. At the least, it is infrequent that online activities in UTMET are related to the corresponding users offline (with the exception of my research project, which involved meeting several members in-person). Many members prefer it to stay this way, that their actions remain unable to follow them into the offline world. I previously quoted Dan as saying that thoughts expressed online through memes do not always align with the individual's "real-world" thoughts. Chris, too, brought up a similar idea, referencing the fleeting nature of memes. He remarked that memes are "just something that people make up on the spot." If the same person was asked to come up with a comment on the same issue as a meme in real-life, this person would most likely give a different answer. Put another way, expressions of ideas online and the online persona that one crafts are not necessarily representative of one's real-life beliefs and actions. This online persona is often able to be more carefree, laughing at topics one may not be able to in real life.

Why this politics?

The desire for partial anonymity relates to the question of why politics in the UTMET group mainly manifests in this form, as playfulness and fun, rather than as a mobilized movement. Students have a vested interest in keeping their online activities online. More so than anonymity, though, the answer may have to do with the nature of memes, which rely on relatability in order to be funny and to fulfill their social purpose. In his online ethnography, Timothy Recuber comments on the use of *micro-narratives of suffering*, which are "brief, biographical narratives about personal hardship and suffering in the service of larger political goals" (Recuber 2015, 63). These narratives are similar to memes, and both are intended to inspire *empathy* among viewers. Counter-intuitively, Recuber makes the argument that empathy is not an effective tool for political mobilization. Rather, *sympathy* is more useful since it raises our "awareness of the suffering of another person as something to be alleviated" (Recuber 2015, 68), framing suffering as a problem that can be solved. Empathy, on the other hand, involves taking on another person's problems as if they were your own and trying to understand how these problems might feel, without an action-orientation.

Memes face a similar challenge to micro-narratives of suffering in their potential to be instigators for collective political mobilization. As my interviewees have pointed out, and as the method of tagging or making other comments expressing relatability suggest, memes are largely meant to inspire empathy in order to serve their purpose of entertainment. It is infrequent that a meme presents clear, actionable responses to the object of its critique (such as the call to action during the discarded book incident). More often, memes act to reveal "the lies, falsehoods,

deceptions and self-deceptions which are inherent within these attempts to govern us for our own good" (Rose 1999, 282), serving to provide social critiques. The *techne of struggle* (Rose 1999, 281), though, deploying empathy to elicit humorous responses, often inhibits these critiques from branching out into action. What complicates memes further in this context is the frequent employment of self-critiques—ironically, not only do memes point to the shortcomings of the university, but also to the failure of students to properly "govern" themselves. It remains unclear whether the content of memes suggest an ideal world or alternative structure that both the university and individual students should be striving towards, considering that messages are masked under layers of irony and exaggeration. Future studies may find it fruitful to attempt to tease apart these dynamics.

Beyond the potential barriers that memes face as objects of mobilization through their reliance on generating empathy, the nature of interaction within the group suggests that UTMET is actually a rather fragmented group without clear interests that all members can organize around. My initial observations of the group had suggested to me early on that it would be difficult for politics to take shape in the form of mobilization. During the first week of my observations, I gathered and coded all of the memes posted in one day, September 19, 2018. These fourteen memes alone revealed to me six broad categories which they span (see Appendix, Table 1): economic anxieties, academic struggles, dissatisfaction with the university, university life, culture, and current events/news/politics (global and local). In the following months, as I continued my observations, all the memes seemed to fall under at least one of these six broad categories, which also contain many subcategories. While I do not believe this is an exhaustive list of every single meme that can be found in the UTMET group, these categories are representative of meme-posting trends within this group.

Even when UTMET members generally post memes related to student issues (the first five categories), there is a large variety of topics. As such, despite the existence of a shared student *identity*, there is no unifying *cause* for students to mobilize under the banner of. For example, some students may find the topic of unfairness in grading (Category 2.3) to be the most important "student issue," while another student might identify with the affordability of university (Category 1.3) to be most pressing. Students who identify more strongly with one type of memes than others do not have to pay much attention to the memes being posted in another subcategory. Category 6, current events, news, and politics, do not even engage with the university or student experience at all. Clearly, then, students have diverse and fragmented interests. This idea reflects a pattern similar to one in theories of the metropolis; for example, Robert Park argues that "the people who under one rubric might be considered a coherent social segment would not uniformly remain as a group defined by another measure" (Sennett 1969, 15). Thus, asking all the members to rally together for one unified cause is difficult as there is not necessarily one cohesive element, a "glue," that would hold a movement regarding student issues together.

Despite the fact that memes largely to not lead to mobilized movements, as I have been arguing in the previous sections of this paper, their value (both political and otherwise) is not decreased. These barriers to mobilization are also speculative, as I have not investigated other meme groups which are able to attract and organize large numbers of people for offline demonstrations (if such groups exist). Still, empathy and fragmented interests are two theoretical frameworks which could be fruitful in orienting future research dealing specifically with the question of the potential for memes to be used in political movements, and how the interactions revolving around memes differ from interactions seen in networked political campaigns. Such an understanding may prove useful to advertisers or any other individuals and organizations seeking to generate action through using memes.

Conclusion

While memes do not have to be read through the lens of politics, doing so leads to a greater understanding of the role memes serve in students' social lives. Through looking at memes, students are able to experience a feeling of relief that their struggles and shortcomings are not experienced alone. In a time of great uncertainty and constant change, such as being a university student (The Edu-factory Collective 2009), it is comforting for students to be able to hold onto memes, which can act as anchors in the confusion. Looking at memes allows many students to make fun of the situations they find frustrating, providing an outlet for such frustration as a coping mechanism for their time at the university. Reading memes as a practice in the politics of the everyday, rather than using a definition of politics which necessarily includes political mobilization, provides a new way of understanding online communities which has not been deeply explored before. Seeing how memes can serve a political purpose also opens a door into a world beyond the virality or communicative abilities of memes. As memes become more popular in the day-to-day lives of netizens, it is valuable to understand their role in normative socialization processes. Beyond comfort, memes also allow students to engage in bonding experiences and provide a space to express ideas or feelings that cannot be found elsewhere within university spaces. These processes, while generative, still contain critiques, and although they cannot be understood as refusals or stubbornness, sociality and fun are nonetheless political to the extent they promote activities deviating from institutional expectations.

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*Note: Names marked with an asterisk are pseudonyms, used to protect the identity of interviewees, as per their request.

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Appendix

The Appendix contains all figures (i.e. images of memes in the UTMET group) referenced throughout the paper, as well as a table of coding categories at the end.
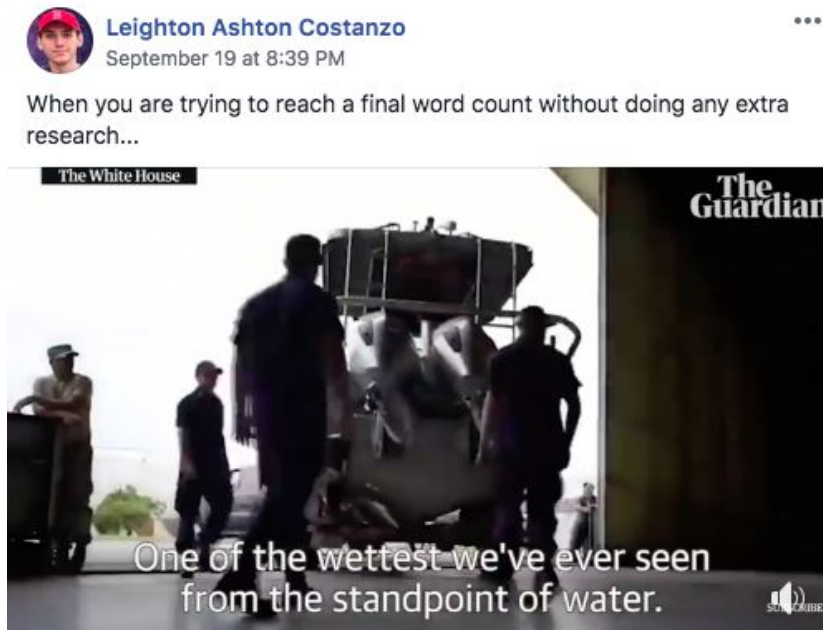

Figure 1. *The caption of the meme pokes fun at Donald Trump by comparing him to a student who is slacking on an essay by not conducting enough research.*

Figure 2. *The underlying message of this meme is a critique of the University of Toronto's health services, which includes doctors as well as mental health providers. The second panel of the meme suggests that such services at the university are nonexistent, and the shock expressed is slightly sarcastic and meant for comedic effect.*

Figure 3. *In this meme format, a hand, belonging to an individual that is drowning, is reaching out for help. Another hand reaches out, seemingly to provide help, but simply gives the drowning individual a high-five, and the drowning hand then sinks. Based on the text imposed over the hands, this meme expresses critique against professors who do not help students who have questions about course materials, but instead "lets them drown."*
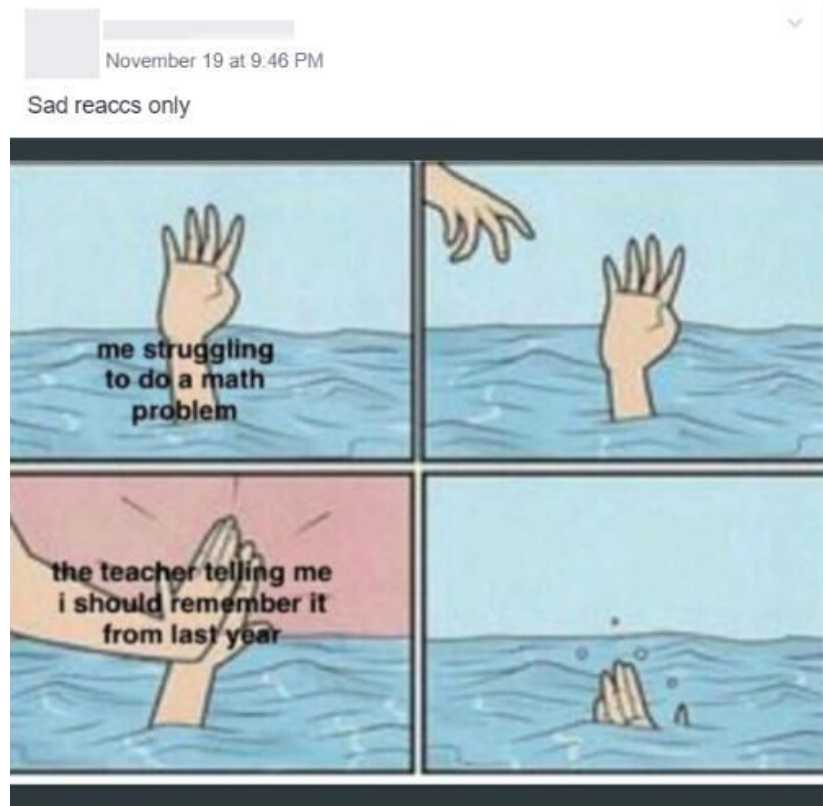
Figure 4. *In comparing the University of Toronto to other types of erasers, this meme makes light of how the university can serve as a "hopes and dreams eraser" because of how difficult students find the experience to be.*

Figure 5. *In the waiter bringing "productivity" as something the student has "never had before," this meme is self-deprecating in its depiction of a student who is often unproductive and does not complete all of their schoolwork on time.*

Figure 6. *This meme is an example of memes related to unearned self-confidence. The meme suggests that the student barely performed above average and yet is bragging about their superior status. Their confidence, then, is unearned.*

Figure 7. *This is the original meme belonging to the event which I termed the "discarded books incident." The meme format critiques the University of Toronto, an educational institution, for discarding several hundred books, and the chosen meme format suggests that the university is content in this decision to some degree (but this suggestion is most likely ironic and used for comedic effect, not to suggest that the university is actually proud of their decision to discard several hundred books).*

Table 1. *The six broad categories, and subcategories, I implemented while coding the memes in the UTMET group, with brief and general descriptions of what is included in each category.*

Category	Name	Description
1	Economic anxieties	Memes expressing worry about the state of the economy or one's own personal finance situation
1.1	Worthlessness of degree	Memes regarding the feeling that a university degree was a waste of time/money, and that it will not actually help students find a job after graduation
1.2	Post-graduation job anxieties	Similar to the previous category, except these memes recognize the value of a degree but lament on how said degree may not lead to job prospects anyways
1.3	Affording school	Memes jokingly describing different situations people have gone through/tactics they have used in order to get money to pay for school, or poking fun at the unaffordability of school
2	Academic struggles	Memes related to the difficulty in academic endeavours of students, involving tests/assignments, grades, lectures, and professors

2.1	Grades/exam woes	Either describing receiving a low/high grade in general; or describing getting low grades on exams specifically and the difficulty of preparing for/writing exams
2.2	Unpreparedness/ struggling to keep up	Usually referring to being in lecture or being a student in general; deals with not having enough background knowledge, not enough time to prepare properly for classes, etc.
2.3	(Un)fairness	Discussing either how marks/extensions/comments given to students are done in a fair or unfair manner
2.4	Lack of effort	Generally self-deprecating memes about how students do not try hard enough in school, expressing understanding that they should be doing work, and often giving humorous reasons why little effort is being made
3	Dissatisfaction with university	Relates to many different subjects, and expresses critiques of university practices either subtly or, more often, explicitly
3.1	POSt cutoffs	Often made by students in the sciences or computer science about how high the POSt cutoffs for their programs are
3.2	Printing services	A niche category of memes relating to the printers, usually Robarts, and their inefficacy
3.3	Marks/portal	Unlike category 2, dissatisfaction with marking in this category has to do with the speed of marking, comments on Quercus, or other systemic issues/problems with practices, rather than the marks themselves
3.4	Hopes and dreams	Can be similar to memes from category 1 regarding job prospects, but deals with the experience of becoming jaded, in general, as a result of attending U of T/being a student
4	Mental health	Memes relating either to mental health services at U of T or the mental health of students
4.1	Depression/suicide	Memes which suggest that students have depression and/or are contemplating suicide
4.2	Self-sabotage	Related to category 2.4, but differs in its direct expressions of how students' lack of productivity is related to specific behaviours they may have which lead to direct negative results/consequences
4.3	Burn-out/productivity	Expresses either that the student is burned out/needs to take a break, or suggests humorously impractical/extreme solutions to become more productive even when one is burned out
5	University life	Dealing with "campus culture" whether related specifically to being a student at U of T or experiences only had by students in general
5.1	Tri-campus "disputes"	Students from UTSG, UTM, and UTSC all take part in this Facebook group, and often make fun of the other campuses as being worse than one's own
5.2	"Brown Food Truck"	There is a brown food truck, usually parked outside of Sidney Smith, which serves poutine; the owner of the truck, who takes customers' orders, often asks, "Anything to drink for you?" and students make many memes about this food truck in particular

5.3	Annoyed by other people	Experiences involving other students, whether passing by on the street, in group projects, or any other scenario in which the other people are acting in an annoying manner
5.4	Superiority towards other institutions	Memes expressing a feeling of superiority towards other postsecondary institutions, often by putting the other institution down
5.5	Behaviours in lecture	Usually to do with not wanting to attend lectures, skipping lectures for certain reasons, not being able/wanting to pay attention in class, etc.
5.6	First years	Memes creating a caricature of the first year student, often poking fun at their innocence or lack of knowledge about the university itself/experience
5.7	TAs	Not related to marking, but more having to do with the way TAs dress or act, how TAs of a certain ethnicity are overrepresented in some disciplines, etc.
6	Current events/politics	Memes about pop culture and global/local news/politics
6.1	Political correctness	Comments on the culture of political correctness and/or direct violations of what is being recommended by PC culture
6.2	USA	Memes related to political/news events in the USA