

## **Playing Dead: TikTok, #Darkhumor Memes, and the Absurdity of School Shootings in the United States**

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This article theorizes the playful memetic body—the embodied, iterative performance through which memes convey meaning—to analyze how Gen Z uses TikTok dark humor memes to navigate school shootings as generational trauma. Based on 280 videos (2019–2023), it examines how youths perform coping, critique, and parody through memetic formats shaped by TikTok’s platform vernacular. These performances transform trauma into stylized play, using repetition, irony, and gestures to mock institutional failure and render fear temporarily manageable. Memes such as the evolving “quiet kid” trope reframe school safety through narratives of self-reliance, reinforcing the burden of individual survival. Rather than depicting trauma directly, these videos use stylized performance and genre conventions to process fear, frustration, and critique through platform logics. By centering the playful memetic body as a site of production, this study shows how young people use humor, imitation, and performance to collectively process violence, critique failed systems, and assert agency through shared sensibilities.

*Keywords: memes, TikTok, school shootings, dark humor, youth media*

Over the past decades, the United States has experienced a troubling increase in school shootings.<sup>2</sup> In response, students navigate an educational environment shaped by heightened security measures such as metal detectors, mandatory identification badges, clear bag policies, locked doors, digital threat assessments (DTAs), and increased closed-circuit TVs (CCTVs). Routine active-shooter drills and campus lockdowns have normalized trauma in American classrooms, embedding latent fear and surveillance in students’ daily lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Though rare for any individual student, the disproportionate frequency of U.S. school shootings continues to shape policy, discourse, and daily student life.

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While school shootings are undoubtedly an intergenerational trauma that affects parents, teachers, and entire communities, they are also a uniquely generationally specific trauma for Gen Z.<sup>3</sup> Coming of age within the post-Columbine cultural landscape, Gen Z has grown up in an era when school shootings are both more frequent and more mediatized. The rapid evolution of digital platforms, hypermediated experiences, and real-time news reporting has altered how younger generations experience and mediate school shootings. The pervasive platformed coverage—including graphic videos often censored by traditional news and firsthand accounts of crises in progress—exposes Gen Z to an unrelenting stream of traumatic imagery. Furthermore, the media-driven debates and discussions surrounding school shootings shape the way this generation perceives these events, their educational environments, and their own identities.

Building on Bolin's (2016) argument that distinctive media experiences shape generational identities, it becomes clear that participatory digital platforms and media saturation define Gen Z's confrontation with school shootings. Here, Gen Z content creators do more than observe trauma; they embody and reperform it, rendering school violence not only visible but also memeable. This interplay among platforms, mediated trauma, and cultural production defines a pervasive and generationally specific form of distress, deeply shaping Gen Z's collective humor, perceptions, and coping practices.

TikTok has become a key site where these generational responses take shape. On the platform, an entire genre of #darkhumor memes has emerged, wherein youths create irreverent short-form videos about school shootings (for examples, see Figures 1, 2, and 3). Consistent with the platform's creative vernacular, these videos often pair satirical performances with trending audio. In one popular 2019 trend, for example, students staged scenes of packing for Canada or buying bulletproof backpacks during back-to-school shopping season. Set to La Roux's (2009) "Bulletproof," participants lip-synced the lyric "This time, baby, I'll be bulletproof" (00:00:48)—originally a metaphor for emotional resilience—but used it humorously to suggest literal protection from bullets.

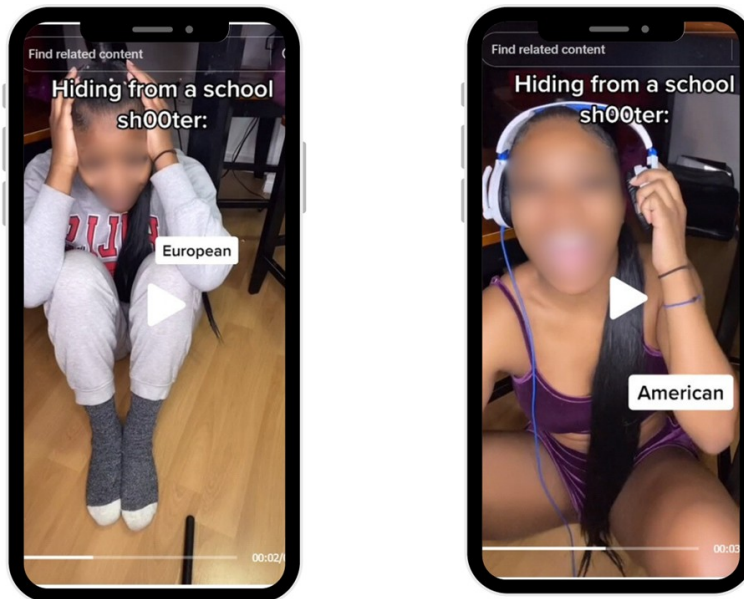
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<sup>3</sup> I use "Gen Z" to describe TikTok creators who appear to be teenagers or young adults since the term—at once a generational label, marketing category, and self-identification—was explicitly invoked in many videos through on-screen text, captions, and hashtags.



**Figure 1. (Left). TikTok satirizing school shooting survival strategies (personal communication, July 1, 2019).**

**Figure 2. (Right). TikTok jokingly portraying "playing dead" as a survival tactic (personal communication, February 13, 2021).**



**Figure 3. TikTok contrasting European fear with American students' playful, relaxed response to a school shooter (personal communication, December 15, 2021).**

This meme exemplifies how school shootings become doubly memetic: first, as real-world phenomena and, second, as digital artifacts. Both operate as what Knobel and Lankshear (2007) describe as “contagious patterns of cultural information” (p. 199), characterized by repetition, replication, malleability, and polysemy. Both actual shootings and memes “directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behavior and actions of a social group” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 199). Joking about school shootings can come across as crass or insensitive—and understandably so. However, the playful platform dynamics of TikTok encourage a humorous way for young people to both cope with and critique institutions’ failure to meaningfully address school violence. In memes such as Figure 2, “playing dead” functions both as a literal memetic format—where students stage their own deaths—and as a figurative expression of how Gen Z uses play to process the specter of school violence. Drawing on Ruha Benjamin’s (2024) assertion that play activates the collective imagination, this gesture becomes a speculative act through which youths confront and reimagine their precarity within an institutionally indifferent system.

This article investigates how TikTok users mobilize memetic and irreverent humor to grapple with the pervasive threat of school shootings in the United States. While scholarship on memes has emphasized their spreadability, intertextuality, and embeddedness within the participatory affordances of remix culture (Milner, 2018; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019), this analysis expands the conversation by examining how TikTok memes rely on embodied performance. On TikTok, creators do not merely circulate a meme; they bring it into being. I theorize the emergence of the *playful memetic body* as a corporeal mode of meme making in which young people use their own bodies as sites of repetition, irreverence, and mediated play. Memes on TikTok derive meaning not just through remix and imitation but also through bodily labor, positioning youths as subjects, consumers, and producers of TikTok’s playful participatory culture. These performances mobilize play as communicative and affective strategies enabling youths to render school violence legible, share collective coping, and subvert institutional narratives through irreverent humor. In doing so, the playful memetic body marks the convergence of trauma, platform vernacular, and generational expression.

### **Theorizing #DarkHumor Memes**

Dark humor juxtaposes serious, taboo, or distressing topics with comedic framing, using incongruity to produce laughter, create emotional distance, and offer psychological relief. It functions as both a coping mechanism and critical tool for navigating discomfort, challenging dominant narratives, and reclaiming agency in the face of vulnerability (Jacob, 2023). While previous generations expressed dark humor through satirical news and irony-laden media, participatory meme culture shapes Gen Z’s sensibilities, with humor iteratively remixed and circulated through platform-specific formats. As a cornerstone of online discourse, memes serve as a medium for play, subversion, and the expression of collective affect. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) argue memes perform discursive boundary work—drawing distinctions between insiders and outsiders, and negotiating what counts as humorous, offensive, acceptable, or transgressive. This positions memetic engagement as a mode of social and cultural negotiation in which youth construct shared identities, humorous sensibilities, and delineate social norms through platformed participation.

Drawing on Morreall's (2009) theory of humor as cognitive play, which frames humor as a way of navigating incongruity by suspending normative emotional responses, #darkhumor memes function as playful mechanisms through which Gen Z confronts the trauma of school shootings. As Morreall (2009) notes, "The enjoyment of cognitive shifts is possible only because we are emotionally disengaged . . . [Humor] block[s] or reduce[s] fear, anger, sadness, etc." (p. 256). On TikTok, this emotional disengagement allows youths to use irony and satire not to trivialize violence, but to render it temporarily manageable.

While cognitive play accounts for humor's psychological and social affordances, feminist media scholars Sundén and Paasonen (2021) extend this understanding by theorizing absurd humor as a tactic of resistance. They argue that absurdity can disrupt hegemonic norms rooted in blame, shame, and moral regulation, not merely by provoking laughter but also by reconfiguring the affective terms of critique. Their approach shifts focus from interpretation to intervention by highlighting how absurd humor can refuse the moral logics imposed on marginalized subjects. In this sense, #darkhumor memes are not only expressive acts of collective coping but are also agentic and tactical interventions that enable young people to mock institutional failures, reject misplaced responsibility, and assert agency in the face of vulnerability.

### **Platform Vernacular of TikTok**

To understand how these acts unfold, we must examine the creative vernaculars of the platforms that shape their creation and circulation. On TikTok, memetic participation unfolds through "imitation publics," that is, digital spaces formed through playful replication rather than ideological consensus or personal connections (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). These publics facilitate collective identity formation through shared performance and remix. Within this ecosystem, humor takes shape through what Highfield (2016) calls the ritualized irreverent Internet, where irony, sarcasm, and subversive play define digital expression. TikTok's "digital-play architecture" (Cervi & Divon, 2023, para. 15) amplifies this dynamic, encouraging rapid iteration and enabling youths to confront traumatic realities with satirical creativity in stylized, embodied, and widely shareable ways.

A growing body of digital media scholarship explores how dark humor on TikTok functions as an affective strategy of coping, identity performance, and sociopolitical critique (Divon & Krutrök, 2024; Krutrök, 2023). These studies highlight how TikTok's participatory logics shape which forms of irreverence gain traction while also foregrounding the emotional stakes and ethical tensions of joking about trauma. My study builds on this work by attending more closely to the embodied performance of memes and the role of the body as a memetic interface between platform vernaculars and cultural critique.

### **The Playful Memetic Body: Embodied Production and Participatory Circulation**

The playful memetic body offers a conceptual framework for understanding how youths engage in embodied meme making through iterative performances shaped by platform vernaculars and memetic conventions. The concept builds on the work of Divon and Krutrök (2024), who, drawing on my earlier research (Vickery, 2014), develop the notion of "playful trauma" to describe how creators employ performative humor to articulate experiences of trauma in response to wartime crises. While similarly attuned to how trauma is enacted through digital performance, the playful memetic body emphasizes a

distinct set of practices: the bodily labor of meme production; the affective and cultural labor embedded in imitation; and the collective circulation of texts that shape meaning through acts of critique, coping, and shared engagement with trauma.

The playful memetic body conceptualizes meme making as an embodied act of production. On TikTok, youths use their bodies to perform and remix familiar formats—lip-syncing to trending sounds, mimicking genre conventions, and adopting recognizable character archetypes—as the platform’s sociotechnical affordances and creative vernacular shape their performances. The meme is not just a joke or text but also a performed relation among the body, the platform, and its memetic logics.

Crucially, this embodied production is situated within a dynamic process of collective circulation. Meaning emerges not only from what creators perform in a single video but also from how others copy, parody, and adapt these performances across TikTok’s participatory infrastructure. Memetic participation depends on shared sensibilities that enable youths to recognize, rework, and circulate memes in ways that create and reinforce collective meaning. Through these iterative performances, youth actively construct a social vocabulary for making sense of violence and negotiate the cultural boundaries of what can be said, shown, and joked about.

Within this process, the body becomes a site of cultural and affective labor. The playful memetic body performs emotional states—fear, detachment, irony, amusement—not through direct verbal expression, but through gesture, repetition, and stylized play. These playful performances often rely on ironic distancing, humorous exaggeration, and familiar templates that render emotional ambivalence legible and shareable. The body becomes not just a tool of memetic expression, but also a stage where Gen Z performs shared trauma, processes fear, and forges connection through platformed play.

By foregrounding embodied production, collective circulation, affective labor, and memetic convention, the playful memetic body offers a framework for analyzing how youths use TikTok to perform and process trauma through collective humor, shared vernaculars, and platform-specific forms of play. The following analysis applies this framework to examine how young people use memetic engagement on TikTok to enact coping, critique, and parody in response to school shootings.

### **Methodology, Data Collection, and Scope**

This study adopts a phased qualitative approach grounded in reflexive ethnographic engagement and memetic discourse analysis. The analysis proceeds on two levels: (1) descriptive coding of memetic form and genre, and (2) discursive analysis of narrative and visual elements. Following Schellewald’s (2021) caution against analyzing TikToks in isolation, I emphasize the embeddedness of each video within broader memetic structures and vernaculars. I define memetic videos as those that engage in intentional mimicry, formulaic narratives, generic characters, or recurring punchlines, forming what Knobel and Lankshear (2007) call “contagious patterns” (p. 199), indicating participation in broader cultural trends. Memes are iterative, performative texts shaped by sociotechnical affordances that, despite individual variation, remain recognizable—to both viewers and TikTok’s algorithm—as part of a memetic format, reinforced by hashtag use and trending audio from the platform’s sound library. I excluded videos lacking

playful elements (e.g., victim memorials, crisis documentation, activist campaigns) and those not recognizable as part of memetic practices.

### ***Phase One: Observational Ethnography and Descriptive Meme Mapping***

The first phase (March–October 2019) consisted of exploratory engagement with TikTok content tagged with #schoolshooting(s), #darkhumor, and #schoolshooter(s).<sup>4</sup> As a researcher embedded in the platform, my For You Page algorithmically adapted to my viewing and interaction patterns, shaping which memes surfaced and recirculated. Rather than imposing a fixed coding schema, I employed open coding to map the broader memetic terrain by identifying recurring sound templates, narrative tropes, visual conventions, and platform features that contributed to a meme’s recognizability and spread. This reflexive immersion allowed me to trace how school shooting humor emerged not as isolated posts, but as iterative and evolving genres.

I also observed that humorous engagement declined during periods of heightened school shooting coverage—such as in the immediate aftermath of nationally publicized events—when content shifted away from play and humor. However, over time, humor resurfaced, often through the return of familiar audio tracks or narrative tropes, reimagined within new meme structures. These patterns emphasized the ways meme participation is both platform-driven and sociopolitically responsive, necessitating an extended window of observation. This foundational stage informed the corpus construction and discursive analysis in Phase Two by establishing the interpretive criteria necessary for identifying and categorizing memes.

### ***Phase Two: Corpus Construction and Discourse Analysis***

The second phase (January 2020–July 2023) involved constructing a corpus of 280 TikTok videos exemplifying recurring memetic structures. Building on patterns first identified during Phase One, I expanded and formalized the corpus by systematically identifying and grouping videos into collections based on shared audiovisual features and memetic logic. I selected videos based on repeated audiovisual elements such as sound templates, punchlines, narrative tropes, or archetypal characters and grouped into 12 collections reflecting shared memetic logic. Collection sizes ranged from 18 to 40 videos, depending on the meme’s circulation and variation. I organized the groupings by form and function—particularly coping, critique, and parody—to reflect iterative cycles shaped by platform logics and sociopolitical context. Sampling continued until saturation, defined as the point at which new examples no longer introduced meaningful variation.

The analytic approach remained inductive and iterative, progressing from open coding to axial coding to explore relationships between memetic form and discursive function. Coding categories were developed alongside emerging trends and variations. By centering both form (e.g., recurring sounds, visual tropes, embodied enactments) and function (e.g., coping, critique, parody), this multimethod framework

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<sup>4</sup> By 2020, creators more frequently used #sh00ting(s) and #sh00ter(s) in response to TikTok’s changing moderation policies and algorithms.

enabled me to rigorously analyze how meaning is performed, negotiated, and circulated through platform-specific memetic logics.

#### Descriptive Overview of Memetic Patterns in the Corpus



**Figure 4. TikTok showing a student nodding along to "Bulletproof" (La Roux, 2009) while displaying a bulletproof backpack (personal communication, August 28, 2019).**

Before turning to close analysis, this section maps prominent memetic forms identified across the dataset. Rather than interpreting individual videos, the goal is to outline recurring formats, tropes, and audiovisual patterns that define the #darkhumor school shooting memetic genre.

#### Sound Templates and Musical Memes

The first major set of collections coalesced around the use of recurring sound templates, which served as sonic anchors for a range of jokes, character performances, and visual structures. These audio clips became the scaffold for playful or parodic engagements with school violence. At their peak, creators used the respective sounds almost exclusively for #darkhumor #schoolshooting memes. Over time, they were repurposed for different meme contexts, only to reappear within this genre.

- "Pumped Up Kicks" (Foster the People, 2011): an upbeat track with explicit lyrics about outrunning bullets, often used to depict either shooter or victim

- “Bulletproof” (La Roux, 2009): originally a metaphor for emotional strength, reinterpreted as literal bullet resistance (see Figure 4)
- Gunshot-embedded and percussive remixes: memes using tracks with gunshot effects or percussion reimagined as gunfire (e.g., “Paper Planes,” M.I.A., 2007; “This Is America,” Childish Gambino, 2018) and original TikTok remixes (e.g., “Sweet Caroline” by Neil Diamond, 1969, adapted for its trumpet “ba ba ba” as a gunfire proxy)

### ***Narrative Skits, POVs, and Visual Tropes***

Another major subset of collections centered on visual formats and scripted narratives structured through embodied performance and TikTok-specific genres, codes, and conventions. These included POVs, reaction videos, and skits staged with in-app green screen editing. Each followed formulaic setups with recurring characters and situations, using shared punchlines to signal participation in a recognizable genre. Despite varied content, these memes maintained a consistent tone and structure, reinforcing their place within dark humor about school violence. The following are examples:

- POV memes simulate first-person perspectives—typically of students, teachers, or shooters—using captions and tight framing to convey reactions in fictional scenarios.
- Skit-based formats stage multicharacter scenes, often with toy props or green screens, using exaggerated action to humorously interpret school shooting scenarios.
- Duets and reaction videos rely on TikTok’s collaborative editing to juxtapose responses to simulated violence or school surveillance.

These memetic formats provide the descriptive foundation for the study’s second phase of analysis, which explores how specific meme structures intersect with affective and narrative functions, revealing how creators use dark humor to engage in practices of critique, coping, and parody.

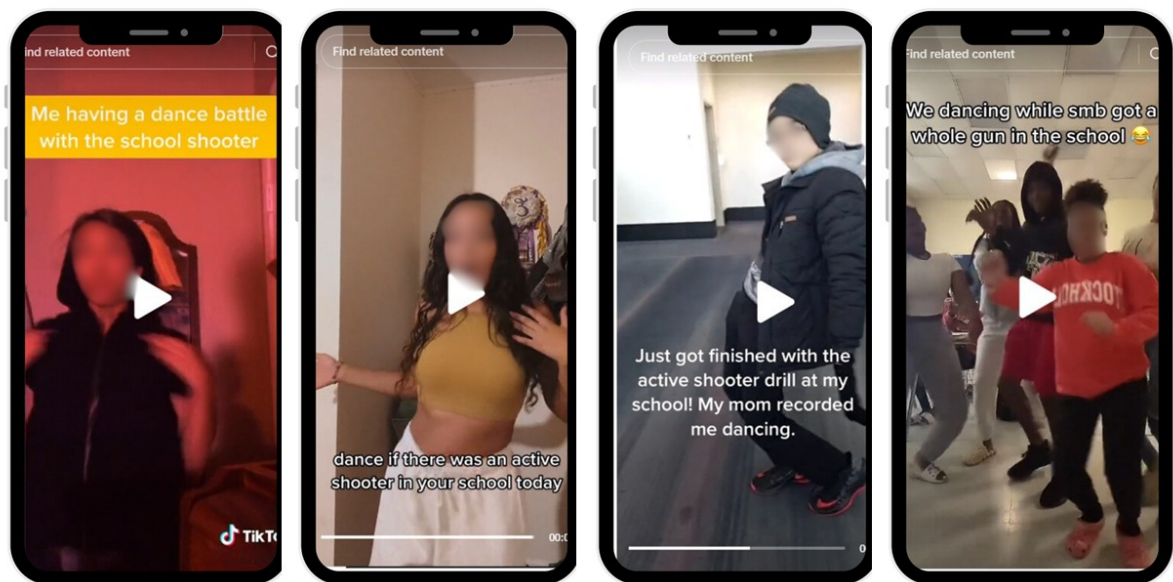
### **Analyzing Playful Memetic Engagement: Coping, Critique, and Parody**

Building on the form-and-function coding framework outlined above, this section analyzes three recurring and intersecting functions of memetic engagement: coping, critique, and parody. While not mutually exclusive, these categories offer a useful framework for deeper analysis, highlighting how TikTok users deploy irreverent, embodied performance to navigate the everyday realities of school violence and surveillance.

- Coping often appears through musical lip-syncs and dance challenges that reframe fear through rhythmic movement, often accompanied by on-screen captions that signal tone and context.
- Critique frequently takes shape through duet formats and skits that satirize institutional responses and neoliberal safety protocols.
- Parody surfaces in POVs and narrative sketches that exaggerate shooter/victim tropes to expose and subvert the logics they reproduce.

Mimicry, repetition, and playful exaggeration function as vernacular strategies for processing and responding to the threat of violence. Through shared genres and bodily performance, creators stage a form of social engagement that blends peer recognition, emotional negotiation, and cultural commentary. These memes operate as affective strategies and public rituals through which youths navigate identity, belonging, and generational experience, reflecting platform logics and positioning the playful memetic body as a key site of expression and circulation.

### ***Playful Coping: Disrupting Fear Through Humor***



***Figure 5. TikToks of students dancing in response to active shooter threats (personal communication, December 2, 2021; December 16, 2021; March 16, 2023; May 22, 2023).***

The playful coping genre features lip-sync and dance challenges where students cheerfully react to school closures due to threats of violence (see Figure 5). Some videos appear to respond to real threats of violence, as indicated by on-screen text such as “Mom tells you 1st period is canceled cuz someone threatened to shoot up the school” (personal communication, October 11, 2019). Others imagine hypothetical scenarios of lockdowns, early dismissals, or school closures. In these videos, students express excitement over the perceived benefits of a threat disrupting their routine.

For instance, several videos celebrate the postponement of assignments, with one stating, “Tfw: your science teacher cancels the exam because someone brought a gun to school” (personal communication, December 16, 2022). In another, a teenager films herself in bed while lip-syncing “Bulletproof” (La Roux, 2009), checking her phone, hitting snooze, and pulling the covers back over her head. The caption reads, “When admin tells you there’s gonna be a sh00ting? Back to bed!” (personal communication, March 4,

2020). Notably, these examples are devoid of fear, trauma, or distress. Instead, creators express relief, pleasure, or excitement through movement, reframing the disruption as an unexpected reprieve from school and responsibilities.

Many of the content creators made their videos in schools, with scenes set in bathrooms, hallways, gymnasiums, courtyards, and classrooms. Some creators appear to have filmed them during actual lockdowns prompted by credible threats. In one example, a TikTok creator records students in a school cafeteria during a lockdown, where they playfully throw wads of paper, bob their heads to music in their headphones, and joke with one another. The video ends with the creator smiling and lip-syncing "Bulletproof," (La Roux, 2009).

The scene resembles what one might expect from a group of teenagers held together for an extended period without structure: boredom, restlessness, and playfulness. The relaxed atmosphere suggests the threat feels mundane, with an implicit assumption that violence is unlikely. This contrasts with nonmemetic school shooting videos (excluded from the corpus), where teens document fear and trauma (e.g., hiding under desks, crying, calling parents, or offering comfort). In the playful, memefied version of lockdowns, however, the focus shifts to coping through movement, dance, and singing, underpinned by an expectation of eventual safety. While I cannot verify whether creators made these videos during active threats or after the danger had passed, their framing as school shooting memes reflects a collective understanding of school violence as routine and reinforces the genre's thematic pattern of playful coping.

By staging these performances for public consumption, creators reaffirm their place within a peer-based interpretive community that understands and participates in the genre's norms. The act of making and sharing such memes signals membership in a collective that treats persistent threats with irreverence, irony, and performative detachment. In doing so, it draws social boundaries between those fluent in the meme's logic—and the normalized experience of lockdowns—and those outside its cultural frame.

### *Subverting School Spaces Through Play*

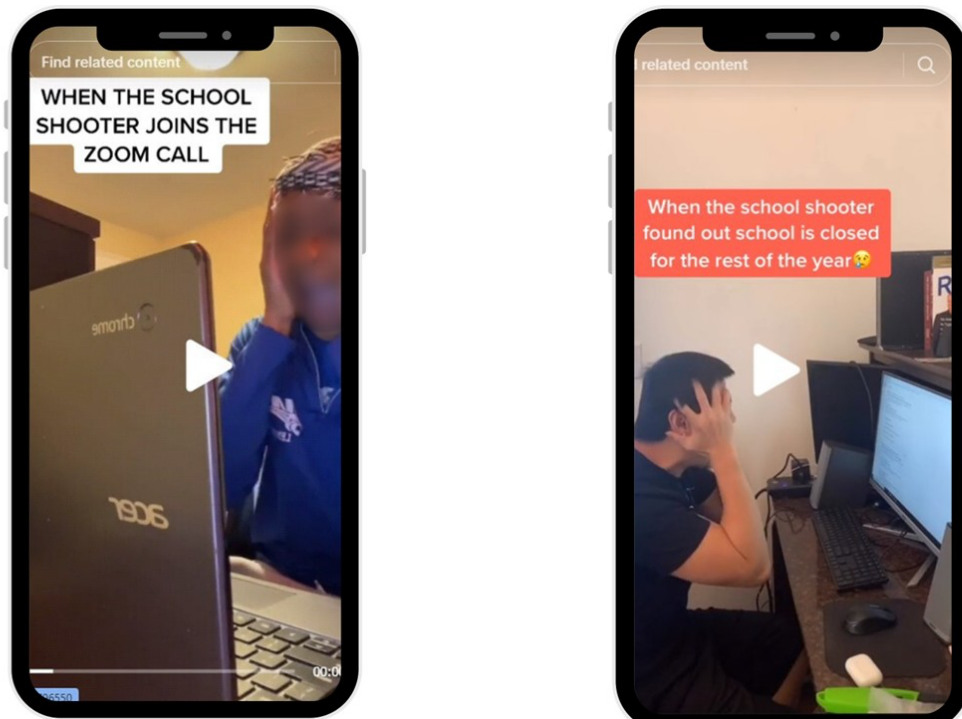
By creating irreverent, playful media within spaces that institutions have constructed as potential sites of trauma—the school—young people reappropriate the space and engage in collective placemaking practices (Halegoua, 2020). Schools are not just sites of learning but also of constant surveillance, where security cameras, DTA tools, predictive analytics, and social media monitoring software track students' behaviors in physical hallways and online spaces to preempt threats of violence. Districts across the United States have invested heavily in AI-driven surveillance tools that scrape social media posts, scan for keywords related to potential threats, and flag students for further monitoring, often without their knowledge or consent (Karthik & Moss, 2024), yet within these regimented environments, students carve out playful, participatory spaces that subvert institutional authority. In staging school shooting memes within classrooms, bathrooms, hallways, and gymnasiums, students momentarily challenge the disciplinary structures that govern their daily lives, disrupting norms of classroom decorum and spatial boundaries. These acts of memetic play mirror the transgressive nature of violence itself, as both school shootings and school safety measures fundamentally reconfigure the boundaries of what a school is meant to be.

Moreover, these performances are not only acts of spatial subversion but also cultural positioning. They demarcate a youth-centered interpretive community that uses platform vernaculars to resist adult narratives of victimhood and fear. By participating in—and embodying—the meme, students signal affiliation with a broader mediated public that both recognizes and mocks the institutional normalization of violence. While such acts of spatial reclamation do not erase the underlying anxieties surrounding school violence, they reframe them through collective imagination and performance. These students are not just dancing; they are recording, stylizing, and circulating their movements within a digital ecosystem that reconfigures physical space as content. TikTok's participatory norms transform everyday locations into performative stages, where schools become sites of playful coping. Through memetic play, students symbolically rewrite their relationship to school space, challenging narratives of fear while acknowledging the ever-present reality of threat. In doing so, they assert a degree of agency—however fleeting—within environments that surveil, discipline, and categorize their movements, interactions, and digital expressions.

#### *The Pandemic as an Unlikely Respite From School Shootings*

Shifts in #darkhumor school shooting memes coincided with major sociopolitical events, including the COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020. These fluctuations suggest that such humor is not isolated but deeply entangled with broader crises. As Zulli and Zulli (2020) note, TikTok's "liveness" and algorithmic feedback loops incentivize rapid, playful participation in unfolding cultural moments. Rather than being spontaneous, creators strategically craft these memes to align with TikTok's logics of visibility, virality, and relevance, extending familiar memetic formats across different moments of instability.

The pandemic inadvertently underscored the institutional refusal to address school shootings—only when schools shut down did the violence stop. Students responded by transforming this dark irony into celebratory memes that contrasted the horror of the pandemic with the temporary relief of being safe from school gun violence (see Figure 6). These videos sustained the grammar of school shooting dark humor, but recontextualized them to comment on the crisis of remote learning and public health. In doing so, they demonstrate how TikTok's memetic structures enable a generational mode of crisis engagement, where repetition and performance make visible the contradictions of youth safety in the United States.



**Figure 6. TikToks from a pandemic meme trend showing a student humorously reacting to a school shooter making an appearance during virtual school (left) and a school shooter humorously frustrated by remote learning (right; personal communication, March 14, 2020; April 27, 2020).**

However, while national conversations about school violence faded as attention shifted to the global pandemic, TikTok creators continued engaging with the issue, using playful humor to highlight the eerie absence of school shootings during remote learning. One popular TikTok meme using the song "Bulletproof" (La Roux, 2009) included creators portraying themselves as students attending virtual school via Zoom. Their performances often featured dancing, lip-syncing, and celebratory gestures that humorously framed staying home to be "bulletproof" against school shootings. The videos combined playfulness with an undercurrent of relief. For some students, the shift to remote learning offered a reprieve from the ever-present threat of school shootings, even amid the stress of the pandemic.

#### *The Playful Memetic Body as a Digital Coping Mechanism*

In these videos, students' bodies serve a dual role, acting as "both the medium of the meme and its message" (Shifman, 2014, p. 200). Their participation in dance challenges and lip-syncs reflects strategic fluency in TikTok's vernacular by aligning with trends favored by the algorithm to ensure visibility and engagement. Simultaneously, these embodied performances function as catharsis, enabling youths to express emotions that may otherwise resist articulation and to build connection through shared affective gestures.

Transforming generational trauma into irreverent memes is both a coping strategy and an act of collective imagination. These performances allow young people to reframe their vulnerability, using humor and play to challenge narratives that cast them as passive subjects of violence. When students dance in response to school shootings, they momentarily disrupt normative expectations about how society believes trauma should be processed, enacting cognitive play in a social and platformed form. Rather than trivializing violence, these memes function as collective coping rituals—publicly shared practices that make sense of a recurring threat through stylized performance. In doing so, they also draw social boundaries: signaling membership in an interpretive community fluent in the meme's vernacular logic. In this context, the playful memetic body is not just a tool for navigating trauma but also a platform-specific strategy for making emotional experience legible through creative, embodied expression.

### ***Playful Critique: Satirizing Institutional Failures***

The second category of videos satirizes school safety policies and capitalist market responses, exposing how institutional responses to school shootings prioritize individual responsibility over systemic reform. These memes reflect young people's neoliberal critique, highlighting the limitations of solutions that shift the burden of safety to students rather than addressing root causes.

#### *Mocking Capitalist Security Solutions*

In these videos, creators expose the commodification of school safety by satirizing products marketed as solutions to gun violence. Some humorously depict a clear backpack foiling a shooter's plans, mocking the idea that a shooter would be unable to hide a weapon or foolish enough to carry it in plain sight. Others stage mock shopping experiences, such as the aforementioned trend of playfully adding bulletproof backpacks or vests to their online carts while lip-syncing lyrics about gun violence. Many content creators pair their videos with Childish Gambino's (2018) "This Is America," a song that explicitly critiques gun violence and systemic oppression. The use of this sound draws attention to young people's awareness of the cultural and political specificity of school shootings in the United States.

These memes illustrate Benjamin's (2024) critique of neoliberal systems, in which society expects individuals to adjust their bodies and behaviors to compensate for structural failures, shifting responsibility onto those most affected. As she argues, neoliberalism not only offloads systemic problems to individuals but also limits the scope of political imagination, making structural change seem unattainable. Clear backpacks and bulletproof gear offer superficial solutions that individualize safety while failing to prevent school violence. These measures normalize the idea that protection is a personal burden rather than an institutional responsibility.

By embedding critique within humor and play, these memes serve as both social commentary and acts of collective sense making. Rather than passively accepting performative security measures, content creators use satire to challenge their legitimacy, exposing how institutions prioritize optics over structural change. By exaggerating school "solutions," these memes reveal institutional neglect, using absurd juxtapositions to underscore the disconnect between the severity of school shootings and the inadequacy of

policy responses. In doing so, they become more than coping mechanisms; they serve as collective acts of critique, challenging structures that demand compliance while offering no meaningful change.

*Satirizing School Policies and the Myth of Preparedness*



**Figure 7. TikTok in which a locked door thwarts a would-be shooter using a video game controller as a gun, and the final scene humorously shows a student surviving by hiding under a desk (personal communication, February 21, 2021).**

Further, this satirical critique targets school safety policies by exposing the gap between institutional assurances and students' lived realities. Rather than mocking consumer responses like bulletproof gear, these memes focus on the performative nature of school protocols that students recognize as ineffective. For example, one video (Figure 7), set to "Pumped Up Kicks" (Foster the People, 2011), humorously shows a would-be shooter giving up after failing to open locked classroom doors. The video satirizes school officials' perceived naivety, suggesting that students see such safety measures as ineffective. Another meme shows students scanning ID badges with the caption "We all know these are just so they can identify our bodies after a massacre" (personal communication, April 8, 2022). In reenactments of lockdown drills, students playfully highlight how these routines offer little real protection against powerful weapons and determined shooters.

These videos highlight how institutional responses focus on mitigating harm only after a threat has materialized rather than preventing violence in the first place. By emphasizing security theater, schools implicitly acknowledge the ever-present reality of danger while failing to address its root causes. This reactionary stance reveals how policies normalize school shootings as an expected risk, placing the burden of survival on students rather than interrogating the conditions that enable and perpetuate violence.

Despite their dark themes, the skits maintain a playful and satirical tone, aligning with the broader category of memes that use humor to expose the gaps between performative safety measures and the lived reality of students navigating the threat of school shootings.

#### *The Pandemic and the Endless Cycle of Crisis*

Much like the celebratory pandemic videos discussed earlier, another subgenre of #schoolshooting #darkhumor memes emerged in response to nationwide lockdowns. These videos humorously depict would-be school shooters frustrated by the absence of in-person targets, using green-screen effects to wander through empty hallways, mope at home, or aim their (toy) guns at a computer screen displaying a Zoom call (see Figure 8). Through satire, these memes highlight the grim irony that an entirely different catastrophe, rather than institutional reform, “solves” the crisis. By portraying school shootings as something merely paused by the pandemic rather than prevented by meaningful change, these videos reflect young people’s deep skepticism about the lack of systemic action to address school violence.

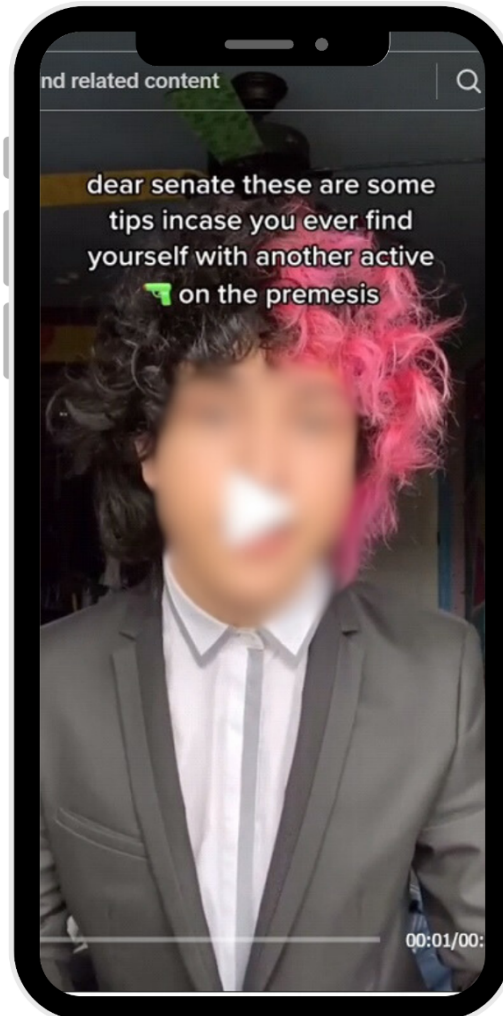


**Figure 8. TikTok skit of a would-be shooter using a hairbrush as a weapon, wandering an empty school confused by pandemic closures (personal communication, April 30, 2020).**

Other videos take this irony further, depicting students celebrating their survival of the pandemic and eagerly anticipating a return to in-person learning, only to immediately die in a school shooting. The evolution of this meme within the subgenre reflects young people’s acute awareness of the political forces

behind the temporary decline in school shootings, emphasizing their frustration that the core issues remain unaddressed. Without structural reform, schools will remain sites of violence, and the conditions that enable these tragedies will persist after the challenges of the pandemic fade from public concern.

*The "Dear Senate" Meme and the Limits of Institutional Safety Protocols*



**Figure 9. TikTok repurposing school lockdown drill instructions as sarcastic advice to lawmakers during the Capitol insurrection (personal communication, January 7, 2021).**

Playful school shooting memes also evolved in response to other sociopolitical crises, as creators repurposed familiar formats to comment on emergent events. One such trend—the “Dear Senate” meme—surfaced immediately after the January 6, 2021, insurrection on the U.S. Capitol. In these videos, TikTok users parroted shooting safety protocols that schools have taught them since childhood—“turn off the lights,”

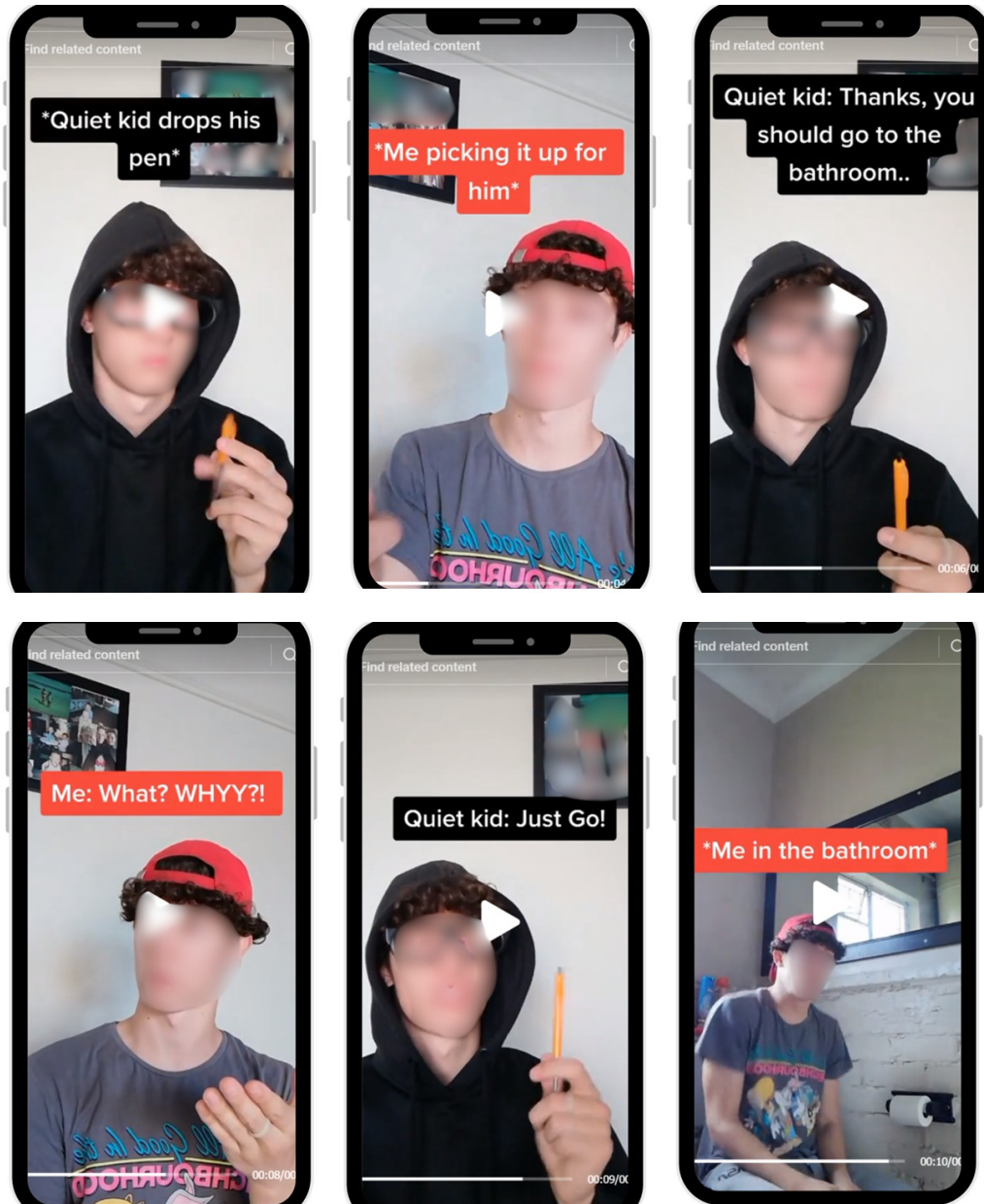
“hide under your desk,” “play dead”—using emotionless, automated screen readers to deliver the lines (see Figure 9). Creators juxtaposed these instructions with jarring footage of lawmakers cowering during the attack. Rather than being insensitive, their detached response highlighted the gap between the ritual of preparedness and the genuine trauma these situations produce. On-screen captions like “Relax, we’ve been training for this since kindergarten” (personal communication, January 7, 2021) and “Just another Monday for school kids across America” (personal communication, January 6, 2021) delivered biting commentary, highlighting the institutional failures that render such drills routine.

Unlike most school shooting #darkhumor memes, which rely on narrative skits and playful performances, the “Dear Senate” trend eschews reenactment in favor of remediation. By layering childhood safety scripts onto real footage of lawmakers facing a similar threat, creators invert the expected roles—positioning students as the absurdly “prepared” experts. This format retains a memetic structure and stance through its ironic juxtaposition and shared punchlines while highlighting the generational divide in how people experience and manage violence. These performances publicly invert generational power dynamics, delineating an “us”—trauma-habituated youth fluent in the memetic script—from a “them”—adults and institutions that have failed to protect them. Humor functions as a boundary-drawing device, legible primarily to those embedded in a shared social imaginary shaped by routine exposure to school violence.

Notably, young creators had been using TikTok to mock school shooting drills well before this incident, subtly critiquing policies that have consistently failed to provide real safety. Their critique does not rely on traditional political discourse or direct action, but emerges through playful, participatory practices that allow youth to engage politically outside institutional norms. The evolution of these practices—especially the direct address to lawmakers in the “Dear Senate” meme—demonstrates how imitation publics mobilize memetic humor to critique adult authority and governmental inaction.

While neither the COVID-19 lockdowns nor the Capitol insurrection directly relates to school shootings, TikTok users responded to both by repurposing memetic formats initially developed to critique school safety policies. This adaptation highlights how memes operate as flexible and improvisational modes of engagement, allowing youths to respond to immediate crises while simultaneously critiquing the systemic failures embedded in institutional responses. By applying familiar audiovisual structures to new sociopolitical contexts, creators make visible the disconnect between official narratives of safety and the lived experiences of young people. These remixes extend the meme genre’s critical lens beyond the school to other sites of systemic contradiction, illustrating how TikTok’s affordances support a form of playful irreverence that communicates shared frustrations. These memetic performances offer a vernacular language through which youths register, process, and momentarily resist the normalization of structural failures.

***Playful Parody: Media Tropes and the Quiet Kid Shooter Meme***



***Figure 10. TikTok playing on the transactional survival trope, where a student's small act of kindness to the "quiet kid" results in a warning before a shooting; in the final scene the protagonist hears gunshots from the bathroom and understands the warning (personal communication, June 16, 2021).***

Building on previous categories of coping and critique, the third genre—playful parody—takes aim at the media’s construction of school shooters and the gendered dynamics of survival. In the aftermath of a shooting, media coverage frequently portrays the perpetrator as a socially ostracized outcast, emphasizing personal grievances and a history of bullying (Engber, 2018). These memes exaggerate the narrative by presenting survival as absurdly contingent on trivial social exchanges, using humor to expose how media portrayals reduce school shooters to vengeful outcasts seeking petty retribution (Williams, 2018).

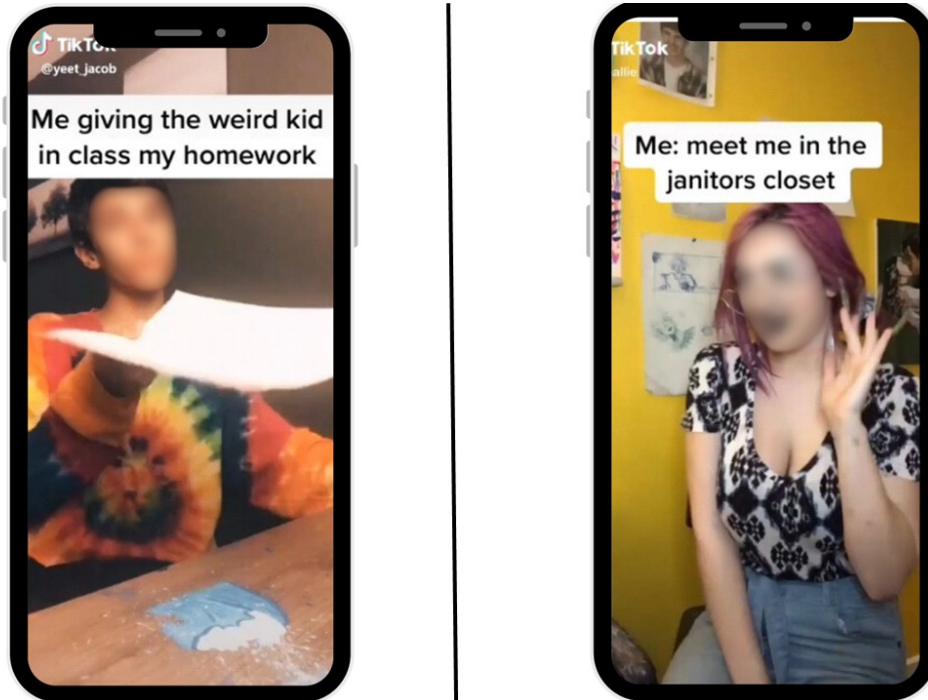
These parodies resemble critique videos, with creators playing both shooter and victim in narrative skits. Creators often depict the shooter as the “weird kid” or “quiet kid,” a label reinforced through on-screen text, exaggerated body language, distinct clothing choices, and other visual or behavioral markers of otherness. In this meme, the final scene shows the quiet kid turning out to be the shooter, but they spare the protagonist because of a previous act of kindness (see Figure 10).

#### *Transactional Relationships and the Absurdity of Survival Strategies*

The acts of kindness that ensure survival are remarkably simple, such as loaning the quiet kid a pencil, complimenting their jacket, or even just exchanging a casual greeting in the hallway. In one example, the on-screen text reads, “Me when everyone else is talking over the quiet kid in class” (personal communication, September 21, 2022) as the protagonist attentively nods while the quiet kid speaks. Across these narratives, the underlying implication casts the quiet kid as a potential threat, someone who could snap at any moment. Thus, the narratives frame kindness not as genuine empathy, but as a strategic act of self-preservation.

In some versions, the shooter leaves a note or text message warning the student not to come to school the next day. In others, they instruct the student to stay in a specific location, such as a bathroom, gym, or hallway, allowing them to avoid the violence altogether. Many of these videos incorporate edited sound effects, synchronizing recorded gunshots with climactic moments. Creators portray the shooter’s gun using toy weapons or exaggerated props that signal an intent to enact violence. The videos typically conclude with a comedic reaction from the spared student, whose emotions range from confusion to understanding, relief, or even triumph, as they recognize that their prior act of kindness secured their survival.

This category of memes critiques media’s stereotypical and formulaic narratives around school shooters, using dark humor and exaggerated skits to expose the simplistic and deterministic ways media frames school shooters in public discourse. Rather than passively absorbing these narratives, young creators subvert them through irony and play, questioning media’s construction of the shooter’s identity and the presumed role of social interactions in their motivations. Further, this meme highlights how cultural portrayal of school shooters as isolated and emasculated reinforces gendered expectations of violence, power, and survival. The transactional nature of these survival strategies mirrors broader gendered scripts that normalize coercion and strategic self-preservation as means of navigating violence. Gendered expectations further shape these patterns, with survival tactics differing based on how creators perform masculinity or femininity in their videos.

*Gendered Dynamics in Survival Tactics*

**Figure 11. TikToks exaggerating transactional survival—left: safety through sharing homework; right: satirical portrayal of self-preservation via sexual favors (personal communication, January 22, 2020; May 2, 2021).**

Beyond simple acts of kindness, survival strategies in these memes often follow rigid gendered scripts. For example, male-presenting creators are more likely to safeguard their survival by trading intellect or social status. That is, “nerds” trade homework, and “cool” kids trade social capital as a means of survival, for example, by extending an invitation to a party. Female-presenting creators engage with a different form of strategic negotiation, using humor to acknowledge (hetero)sexuality as a tool for self-preservation. These videos feature exaggerated exchanges of flirtation or suggestive behavior, with one going so far as to use lotion on the mouth to imply oral sex acts as a playful, over-the-top strategy for survival (Figure 11, right). As with previous examples, these memes are playful in tone, frequently accompanied by hashtags like #joke and #darkhumor. Notably, they are devoid of trauma, introspection, or distress, emphasizing humor, absurdity, and parodic elements over direct engagement with the realities of school violence.

These memes reflect broader mediated sexual scripts, where social norms encourage girls to leverage (hetero)sexuality to access male power and protection. They reinforce compulsory heteronormativity, positioning femininity as transactional and framing sexual exchange not just as social currency but also as a survival strategy. The skits draw from familiar teen media tropes of the emasculated

“weird kid” using sexuality to ascend the social hierarchy, but extend this logic further, suggesting that acts of coercive exchange validate his masculinity, while girls’ survival depends on strategic compliance.

### *Neoliberal Responsibility and the Absurdity of Blame*

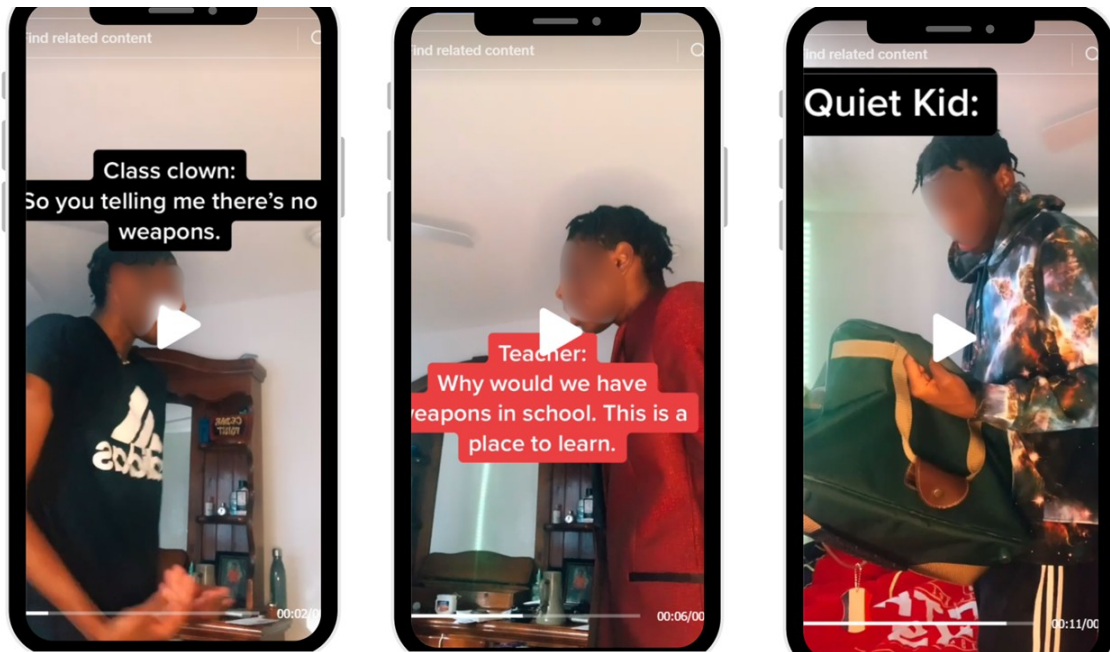
By framing safety as something students can negotiate through social capital, compliance, or transactional negotiations, these memes highlight the inadequacy of policies that place the burden of survival on students rather than institutions. In these memes, absurd humor becomes a method for refusing blame and reclaiming agency, especially in environments saturated with everyday sexism and victim blaming (Sundén & Paasonen, 2021). Through exaggerated portrayals of individualized, gendered responses to school shootings, the memes critique how neoliberal logics obscure systemic accountability behind narratives of personal failure. Humor, in this context, becomes a way to assert autonomy and reject the moral burden imposed on youth by those in power.

This framework of individualized responsibility is especially evident in the aftermath of school shootings, where public discourse frequently turns to victim blaming. For instance, media coverage often scrutinizes how others bullied the shooter, implying a causal link between social exclusion and violence. This framing suggests, however implicitly, that greater kindness from classmates might have prevented the attack. Antibullying programs reinforce this narrative by framing individual behavior as the solution to school violence, further deflecting attention away from systemic failures (Barbieri & Connell, 2015).

Memes in the quiet kid genre reflect how young people grapple with and mock these gendered and moralized expectations. By performing melodramatic skits in which survival depends on appeasing or aligning with the quiet kid, creators expose the internal contradictions of this framework. Through the playful memetic body, creators make the unreasonable terms of student responsibility both visible and laughable. In doing so, these videos refuse the moral burden assigned to youth, satirizing the idea that safety is something they can earn through behavior, status, or transactional relationships.

### ***The Evolution of the Quiet Kid: From Perpetrator to Protector***

By 2022, the portrayal of the quiet kid began shifting from potential shooter to unexpected hero, illustrating how longitudinal analysis makes visible the iterative evolution of memes as creators reshape cultural narratives. Like earlier iterations, these memes feature creators portraying both the shooter and the intended victim and assume the quiet kid still has a gun, but they reframe the weapon as a protective tool rather than a threat. Variations of the skit show students hiding and panicking during a shooting, while others portray them unsuccessfully attempting to barricade a door or run away. Through these videos, creators depict the school and teachers as unprepared and incapable of providing protection. The video typically ends when the quiet kid subtly reveals a gun in their bag, framing their presence—and their weapon—as the only real line of defense (see Figure 12).



**Figure 12. TikTok skit where a panicked classroom looks on as the quiet kid pulls out a toy gun, framing him as the only prepared protector (personal communication, December 22, 2022).**

The shift from quiet kid as shooter to quiet kid as protector reflects a broader cultural logic that validates masculinity only through the capacity for violence, whether as an aggressor or a defender. This reframing, however, does not question the conditions that enable school violence, but simply redirects the gun's aim. These memes offer no alternative vision of safety beyond armed self-defense, reinforcing the idea that protection is an individual responsibility. Rather than addressing the systemic conditions that make schools unsafe, these narratives frame survival as a personal burden, further entrenching a cultural failure to imagine solutions beyond vigilante-style defense.

#### *The Burden of Self-Reliance and the Failure of Institutional Protection*

Notably, these narratives rarely depict the quiet kid directly confronting the shooter; instead, the school shooting is narratively evoked, with the perpetrator's identity conspicuously absent. If students once feared the quiet kid as the assailant, who do they cast as the shooter now? This narrative gap mirrors a cultural shift in how society imagines school violence. Instead of interrogating the root causes of shootings—who commits them and under what conditions—these memes reorient the focus exclusively on survival. Public imagination treats the shooter not as someone to understand or examine, but as an inevitability to endure.

This shift in focus reflects broader institutional failures to safeguard students. The 2022 Uvalde elementary school shooting in Texas made this especially clear, as 376 armed officers failed to intervene for more than an hour while unarmed parents, off-duty officers, and teachers took action to evacuate children. This event reignited public discussions about the effectiveness of armed guards in school. While the meme

does not explicitly advocate for more guns in schools, its timing and humor reflect a reluctant acceptance that safety ultimately falls on individuals, reinforcing armed individualism as the last resort when systemic protection fails.

The evolving portrayal of the quiet kid meme reflects a narrative shift from perceived threat to unexpected protector while maintaining the meme's core structure and punchline. Its recognizability reinforces an interpretive community that shares a cultural grammar for processing school violence and marks fluency within a memetic discourse that blends critique with dark humor. Despite changes in character framing, the meme continues to follow a familiar formula: The narrative implies a school shooting, institutional protection remains absent, and a twist ending reveals the quiet kid's concealed preparedness. This enduring setup reinforces the meme's function as darkly humorous commentary, with its affective tone remaining consistent across iterations. Even as the quiet kid's role transforms, the meme preserves its foundational logic wherein survival is enacted through the body, with creators embodying narratives of preparedness and protection. This evolution illustrates how the playful memetic body enables creators to repurpose familiar forms to iteratively shift cultural scripts.

### **Conclusion: The Limits of Playful Survival**

This article has explored how TikTok creators use playful school shooting memes to grapple with the ever-present threat and reality of school shootings in the United States, transforming trauma into embodied performances of dark humor and critique. These memes are not only visual texts or affective signals; they are embodied enactments, where the gestures, movements, and postures of the playful memetic body produce meaning. By foregrounding the corporeal dimensions of memetic participation, this study expands meme scholarship beyond textual interpretation to account for the embodied, performative, and platform-specific practices that shape youth expression on TikTok.

First, youths make meaning through embodied performance, positioning themselves as the creators and subjects of memetic texts. On TikTok, memes unfold through physical movement, scripted enactments, and stylized behaviors that conform to familiar memetic templates. These performances rely on bodily repetition and visual familiarity to establish memetic coherence and signal belonging within platform-specific genres.

Second, these embodied performances are not spontaneous expressions, but carefully crafted enactments shaped by both affective labor and algorithmic demands. To be legible as participating in practices of the #darkhumor genre, creators must calibrate tone, timing, and irony with precision—shaping trauma into formats that are emotionally resonant and memetically recognizable. This labor makes possible the circulation of these texts across TikTok's discovery systems, revealing how creators engage both their bodies and emotions to sustain participation within a culture of platform-mediated visibility.

Taken together, these contributions illustrate how the playful memetic body enables youths to navigate affective boundaries and engage in shared cultural critique through embodied digital participation. Gen Z's use of irreverent humor demonstrates how performative play restructures trauma, enabling emotional expression, peer connection, and platform legibility. By mapping functions like coping, critique,

and parody onto forms such as POVs, skits, musical memes, and reenactments, this study shows how memetic participation embeds trauma and humor in embodied performances.

Finally, as Benjamin (2024) argues, play is not merely frivolous entertainment but also an act of imagination that shapes how people envision possible futures. She reminds us that play is not equally distributed: Some children “play life,” while others are left only to “play dead.” Dark humor school shooting memes encapsulate this tension. They reveal how systemic failures force students to strategize their own survival, even as those same failures constrain the very ability to imagine a world without violence. Rather than envisioning schools as havens of safety, creativity, or joy, students playfully rehearse their own deaths—a grim reminder that preparing for violence has become more imaginable than preventing it.

### Ethical Consideration

This study analyzes publicly available TikTok videos. Following the Internet Researchers’ ethical guidelines (Franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, & Ess, 2020), I removed usernames and blurred faces to protect minors and sensitive content, prioritizing ethical responsibility over attribution.

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