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Don't fear the nobodies: A critical youth study of the Columbiner Instagram community

By

Brianna L. Wright

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in Sociology
in the College of Arts and Sciences

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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2019

Don't fear the nobodies: A critical youth study of the Columbiner Instagram community

By

Brianna L. Wright

Approved:

Margaret Ann Hagerman
(Major Professor/Graduate Coordinator)

Nicole E. Rader
(Committee Member)

Rachel Allison
(Committee Member)

Rick Travis
Dean
College of Arts & Sciences

Name: Brianna L. Wright

Date of Degree: December 13, 2019

Institution: Mississippi State University

Major Field: Sociology

Major Professor: Margaret A. Hagerman

Title of Study: Don't fear the nobodies: A critical youth study of the Columbiner Instagram community

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Candidate for Degree of Master of Arts

This research sheds light on how one particular group of young people, Columbiners, use social media to build and maintain a sense of community. Through a content analysis of 200 Instagram posts containing a school shooting fandom hashtag, or #Columbiner, and drawing on both Critical Youth Studies and Sense of Community Theory, this research demonstrates how Columbiners use their hashtag to create a sense of community on Instagram, to explore what it means to be young and cool, and to make sense of the problems that shape their social world, including school shootings. Exploring how this particular group of young people engage with each other on social media provides researchers an opportunity to listen to young people as they develop their understandings of topics as seemingly mundane as homework to those as serious as school shootings.

DEDICATION

To my “boys”, my mom and dad, Eric, Devin, and Kaitlyn; to Nana, Gammy, and Pop; to my soul-mutt; I couldn’t have done this without your unwavering support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my major professor, Dr. Hagerman, thank you for your unwavering support and commitment to my work. To my committee members, Dr. Rader and Dr. Allison, thank you for not giving up on this work. Dr. Newmahr, thank you for the original inspiration and subsequent inspiration over the course of this journey. To my core friend group, the greatest colleagues I could ask for, thank you for everything. To my boss and friend, Jamie Rottmann, thank you for making me finish.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When you click the image, an audio clip from the popular television show *American Horror Story* begins. A song, “Twisted Nerve” by Bernard Hermann, plays in the background, eerie music with a single person whistling. Tate Langdon, a main character of the show, is speaking. He describes his recent visions of a school shooting to his therapist. Tate mutters, “I prepare for the noble war. I am calm. I know the secret. I know what’s coming, and I know no one can stop me, including myself.” His therapist replies, “Do you target people who have been mean to you?” While the audio is playing, the video shows a compilation of images, flashing one after another. The video begins with a picture of Eric; he is smiling, wearing a white t-shirt with a plaid flannel. His ball cap is turned backwards, and he is looking to the right side of the camera frame with a smirk on his face. The image quickly changes while words flash above the image. The words are snapshots from the journals of Eric and Dylan. They flash up, one at a time, but very quickly. The words say things like, “Hate. I am full of hate and I love it,” “Reb,” “Kill Mankind.” “Guns!,” “Doom,” “KDFDM,” “Natural Selection,” and “Death. (Afraid?).” Images also appear, including a few drawings from the journals that are difficult to interpret. One appears to be a heart; another appears to be a gun. The image changes again. This time it is a video of Eric riding in the backseat of a car, wearing a backwards ball cap, sunglasses, and a dark jacket. He is looking around and talking but the audio from the original video is not included. The image switches again to show a picture of Dylan. The words are in the

background and he is wearing sunglasses and a black coat. He is looking away, smiling, toward the right side of the camera frame. The image again changes to a video of Dylan retrieving an object from the trunk of a car. Dylan is wearing the same dark coat from the previous image; it is a trench coat. The next image is a clip from a show called, *Zero Hour* in which the actor who plays Eric comes down a flight of stairs and walks into a library; shelves of books can be seen in the background. He is wearing a shirt that says, “Natural Selection” and he has a holster for a gun strapped to his body. The image changes again. This video clip is seemingly filmed from the trunk of a car and it shows Eric and Dylan. Eric is wearing his backward hat and sunglasses; both boys are looking at the camera; they are both wearing trench coats. Eric smiles at the camera. The video then cuts to a short clip of one of the boys firing a gun in the woods. The entire video compilation ends with a short video clip of Dylan. He is riding in the back seat of a car with the window behind him. He smiles at the camera and gives a quick wave.

The video lasts 15 seconds but the imagery is overwhelming in the complexity and sheer volume of the content. This video, created by an Instagram user and posted to the site, receives 32 “likes.” The video is captioned, “Thanks for the 100 followers <3. Sorry for not posting. Been hella busy with shit lol.” The post contains 27 hashtags, including the shooters’ names, their nicknames, #godlike, #naturalselection, #fearthenobodies, #massshootings, and most importantly, #columbiner. This post is one example of over 1,100 posts on Instagram that use the hashtag, ‘Columbiner.’ School shootings captured mass media focus and national attention following the Columbine shooting in 1999 and have grown more violent in the decades that followed (May, 2015). The person responsible for posting this video compilation on Instagram describes himself as a Columbiner. ‘Columbiners,’ a self-proclaimed identity label, are

individuals who use social media accounts like Instagram to share their fascination of school shooters, specifically the 1999 Columbine shooters.¹

Indeed, when one does a quick search for the Columbine hashtag on Instagram, they will find a community of posts filled with violent and disturbing content. And in fact, Columbiners have gained the attention of several news agencies who point out the horrors of their online content in an attempt to understand why school shootings continue to occur.² However, as this sociological study illustrates, Columbiners interact in ways that are not so different from other young communities of the generations that came before them or that exist offline today. In some ways, then, Columbiners, as disturbing as their behavior may be perceived to be on the surface, use social media to connect with others who share the identity and interests—and do so in ways that can be understood to be about building a sense of community.

In the following pages, I present research findings from a qualitative, critical youth study of 200 Instagram posts including the Columbiner hashtag. The central research questions I pose in this study are: How do youth who participate in the online community of Columbiners understand school shootings? How do they make sense of their youth status and other social structures that shape that status? And what can we learn from their posts about how these young people build and participate in their own community? I demonstrate that Columbiners share an understanding of Columbine to navigate their own social worlds. Columbiners seek to find answers about what it means to be young, gendered, and sexual while also considering larger social problems like mental health, bullying, school violence, and more. The research concludes

¹ Instagram is particularly popular among young people. According to Pew Research Center, 71% of Americans age 18-24 use Instagram (Smith and Anderson, 2018). The report states that 71% of users in this age group use Instagram on a daily basis (Smith and Anderson, 2018).

² This research explores how Columbiners make sense of school shootings but does not draw conclusions about motivations behind shootings.

that 1.) Columbiners create a sense of community through the use of the Columbiner hashtag; 2.) On Instagram, Columbiners are a community of young people who use their platform to figure out how to be young and cool; and 3.) Columbiners use their community to help make sense of the issues they face daily, those that are seemingly mundane (love, family, and homework) and those that are heavy (sex, depression, and school shootings).

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the most recent literature pertaining to this research and includes the following topics: Critical Youth Studies, Sense of Community theory, deviance, and Columbiners. In Chapter 3, I outline the methods of this project. Chapter 4 outlines the findings of this research in three sections: Community building through #Columbiner; Being young and figuring out cool; and Making sense of confusion. In the final chapter, I provide a conclusion and discuss considerations for further inquiry into Columbiner social media communities.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Sociologists often fail to listen to kids' own voices and consider young people's perspectives when studying youth and youth-related social problems (Best, 2007; Best and Bogle, 2014; Buckingham, 2000; Hagerman, 2010; Johnson, 2001; Mintz, 2004; Woodhouse, 2008; Zenkov, 2010). Ironically, youth are often thought of as "the future" while their experiences as youth in the present are often overlooked (Best, 2007; Best and Bogle, 2014; Buckingham, 2000; Hagerman, 2010; Johnson, 2001; Mintz, 2004; Woodhouse, 2008; Zenkov, 2010). In order to understand how young people make sense of the social world around them, scholars in more recent years have worked to center the experiences and perspectives of youth. This work allows scholars to, for example, explore how structures like gender and sexuality are understood, reinforced, and challenged by youth within their peer culture (Best and Bogle, 2014; Boero and Pascoe, 2012; Garcia, 2012; Pascoe, 2006; Thorne, 1994). These new approaches also allow scholars to examine specific communities of youth and to access how particular groups of young people make sense of aspects of the social world (Boero and Pascoe, 2012; Evans, 2007; Larkin, 2007; Moinian, 2006; Paton and Figeac, 2015; Paton, 2013; Raitanen and Oksanen, 2018).

Part of including perspectives of young people in social research involves drawing on youth-centered research methods. While much of previous youth-centered research accessed young people through the education system (i.e. conducting interviews at schools) or through

face-to-face interviews with young people in their homes, the Internet, and more recently smartphones and social media, provide unprecedented access to young people's voices and perspectives (Best and Bogle, 2014). Indeed, a number of researchers argue for the importance of social media research to extend how we understand society as a whole – and how young people in particular make sense of the world around them (Flick, 2015; Gunter, et al., 2002; Holloway and Valentine, 2003; Heath et al., 2009; Heins, 2002; Hine, 2000; Mann and Stewart, 2000; Mitchell and Walsh, 2004; Pascoe, 2012; Richman, 2007).³ Social media gives the researcher a chance to reach a population that he/she may not have been able to access otherwise. And, when it comes to young people, as Pascoe (2012) argues, social media does not offer another “virtual reality”, but rather an extension of their actual reality. Additionally, Pascoe (2012) argues that youth often use informal online resources, like chatrooms and social networking sites, to navigate their identities and to form communities with one another.

Young people often use social media to create and/or participate in small communities to meet others with similar interests and values; in some cases, young people use those communities to investigate and debate controversial, complex social issues (Bennett, 1999; Boero and Pascoe, 2012; Daggett, 2015; Downing, 2013; Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008; Larkin, 2009; Moinian, 2006; Oksanen et al., 2013; Pascoe, 2012; Paton, 2013; Raitanen and Oksanen, 2018; Rico, 2015; Sumiala and Tikka, 2011). For example, in 2018, students led the largest

³ Pascoe (2012) argues that the use of social media in research offers several benefits: (1) transcending geographic boundaries; (2) facilitating access to population that are not easily accessible; (3) saving costs; (4) allowing researchers to investigate sensitive topics that might be difficult to uncover using offline environments. Several scholars outline how the Internet provides a new arena for ethnographic research. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) and Williams (2011) recognizes the availability of research potential within social media, specifically as it concerns young people and their communities. These studies demonstrate how the Internet, while it provides mostly for textual analysis, also provides visual, audio, and kinetic components; they provide a new reality for researchers to examine. These studies argue for the need for researchers to recognize the different environment that the Internet provides for research and to take advantage of information available for research of online communities.

global protest in history against gun violence following a school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in February 2018 (Kellner, 2014; March for Our Lives, 2019). And much of this protest was orchestrated through social media. Youth lead many social media movements that are extensively covered by public media. Young people are responsible for some significantly influential movements of social activism, like Black Lives Matter⁴ and the Women's March⁵, in recent history that were almost entirely dependent on social media as a platform.

This study is rooted in Critical Youth Studies. As such, in this literature review, I will first establish the importance of Critical Youth Studies in the field of sociology and the study of Internet communities. I then explain the history of the sociology of childhood and the emergence of Critical Youth Studies. Next, I provide context for this research with consideration of recent critical youth studies of Internet communities. Then, I outline Sense of Community theory, provide relevant examples of recent studies on youth online communities, and discuss the importance of this theory in the current project. Finally, I define Columbiners and give an overview of existing literature on the Columbiner community. In this final section, I also outline the existing literature on school shootings and the importance of understanding school shootings through the structures of gender and sexuality.

⁴ A core belief of the Black Lives Matter movement is the belief in intergenerational activism; "We cultivate an intergenerational and communal network free from ageism. We believe that all people, regardless of age, show up with the capacity to lead and learn." More information can be found here: www.blacklivesmatter.com/about/what-we-believe/.

⁵ More information on the Women's March can be found at: www.womensmarch.com/mission-and-principles. A belief outlined states, "We believe Civil Rights are our birthright, including voting rights, freedom to worship without fear of intimidation or harassment, freedom of speech, and protections of all citizens regardless of race, gender, age, or disability."

Critical youth studies

Critical Youth Studies (CYS) is a fairly new field in youth studies which argues for the necessity of considering youth voices, youth agency, and youth experiences when studying issues that directly affect young people (Ibrahim and Steinberg, 2014). This field emerged in response to, and in criticism of, the previously stated shortcomings in the research on young people. As stated above, academia has historically failed to examine children's perspectives; of those, many studies neglect to listen to the actual voices of youth when considering their perspectives. In contrast, CYS focuses on young voices; these studies allow for researchers to study youth *with* youth and, in some cases, allow for youth to conduct these studies themselves, such as in Youth Participatory Action Research projects (Ibrahim and Steinberg, 2014).

Youth status is socially constructed, meaning it can have different meaning across various times and spaces (Aries, 1962; Best, 2007; Corsaro, 1997; Hagerman, 2010; Johnson, 2001; Kellner, 2014; Thorne, 1994; Waksler, 1991). Social constructionism is based on the understanding that "the terms by which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people" (Gergen, 1985: 267).⁶ The entirety of this research project comes from a social constructionist perspective. I approach every element of this research, including social structures of gender⁷, sexuality⁸, race⁹, and age, as well as,

⁶ A constructionist perspective argues that almost everything (if not everything) in our social world is socially constructed. The process of meaning making, identity work, value systems, definitions and understandings of social structures vary between individuals, between cultures, between time periods, between regions, between age groups, etc.

⁷ For more on gender as a social construct, see: Connell, 1995; 2000; 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2009; 2012; 2016; Messner, 2000; Pascoe, 2006; Risman, 2004; Thorne, 1996; among others.

⁸ For more on sexuality as a social construct, see: Connell, 2014; Foucault, 1976; Garcia, 2012; Pascoe, 2006; among others.

⁹ For more on race as a social construct, see: Bonilla-Silva, 1997; 2010; 2012; Collins 1990; Hughey, 2014; 2015; Kimmel, 2013; Omi and Winant, 1994; Winkler, 2010; among others.

conventional understandings of what is “normal” and what is “deviant”¹⁰,” through the lens of a social constructionist.

Socially constructed definitions of childhood and youth have evolved from children as less than adults (Piaget, 1896), to childhood as a continuum of growth (Erikson, 1964), to children being understood through their relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), to children as being necessary of protection (Bazelon and Greenspaw, 2000; Woodhouse, 2008). In contemporary understandings, young people are considered a protected and vulnerable population (Johnson, 2001). This particular construction of youth stems from industrialization in the twentieth-century when laws were established to protect children from exploitative labor; as a result, youth and childhood has become viewed as a life stage defined by one’s age range (Ibrahim, 2014). Furthermore, expectations for certain age groups are also based on social structures like race, gender, and sexuality. For example, childhood is racialized and thus, in the U.S. context, black kids do not experience the same protections as white kids; this is evident especially in the school-to-prison pipeline.¹¹

Youth scholars also argue that elevating young voices can result in higher levels of involvement in all areas of society, from social activism to civic engagement (Adler and Adler, 1998; Best, 2007; Buckingham, 2000; Corsaro, 1997; Hagerman, 2010; Johnson, 2001; Mintz, 2004; Qvortrup, 1994; Woodhouse, 2008; Zenkov, 2010). Kids’ meanings are important because young people are not just “the future”; youth are an active part of contemporary society who have their own agency to reproduce, challenge, or reject existing social structures around them.

¹⁰ This research uses Becker’s understanding of deviance as created by social groups that make “the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance” (1963:9). Becker argues, “we must recognize that we cannot know whether a given act will be categorized as deviant until the response of others has occurred” (1963:14).

¹¹ Students of color are much more likely than their white peers to go to prison rather than finishing high school (Alexander, 2010; Hirschild, 2008; May, 2014; Wald and Losen, 2003).

Youth researchers, particularly those taking a critical approach, are more interested in children's being than their becoming (Qvortrup, 1994).

When trying to understand dynamics within contemporary society at large, it is important to listen to the voices of young people who are actively engaging in social institutions. CYS researchers aim to push contemporary youth studies further. CYS “understands youth as action; a performative category; as an identity that is both produced through and is producing our bodies and sense of self; as an agentive, ambiguous, fluid, shifting, multiple, complex, stylized, and forever becoming category (Ibrahim, 2014:xvi). According to Best (2007:9), CYS has four methodological elements: (1) must have concern and consideration for elements of power and exploitation in research; (2) must acknowledge the relationship between power and knowledge; (3) must attempt to empower young people, elevate youth voices, and improve social conditions for youth; and (4) radical reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Ibrahim describes youth as, “an organic process of acquiring knowledge about themselves and the world around them, thus making sense of who they are” (2014:xvii).

Because adults hold a certain amount of power and authority over kids, adults researching kids must pay particular attention to how that power status can influence their findings (Johnson, 2001). Many researchers have attempted to find methodological solutions to this power structure that they designate as “child-centered” (Best, 2007; Best and Bogle, 2014; Hagerman, 2010; Zenkov, 2010).¹²

For example, Milner (2004) conducted two years of field work in a high school and drew upon data from 300 interviews to study high school youth culture. In his work, he argues that

¹² Not all Critical Youth Studies have been labeled as such, but we can look to critical studies conducted with young people where the elements of CYS were used.

young people, particularly high schoolers, act in contradiction to adult ideals and values due to their lack of power in schools; he argues that although school is a central part of young people's lives, they have little say over the institution, their curriculum, and their time. Milner's work importantly focuses on the idea of "conformity" and fitting in. He examines how youth create subcultures and cliques in high school, and how in order for kids to conform to a certain group, they must ultimately distance themselves from the norms of other groups (Milner, 2004). In any group or clique in high school, members must do this regardless of how "cool" or "rebellious" the group is. Milner explains that the more alternative a clique is, the more pride and panache members hold in their outsider status. Each group and clique use tools, like language, style, and music, to determine who the insiders and outsiders are. And although Milner does not label the research as a "critical youth study," it is certainly the case that he examines how power plays a central role in how youth construct status hierarchies among themselves.

In her study of masculinity in a California high school, Pascoe takes a similar approach to attempt to understand how young people make sense of social structures like gender, sexuality, and race (Pascoe, 2006). She finds that youth can both challenge and reinforce the adult, or normative, understandings of these social structures. Pascoe observes how these high schoolers police on another's sexuality through hyper-masculine, homophobic behaviors and language, which she refers to as *fag discourse*. In her study, Pascoe finds that these high schoolers use their agency to decide when to reinforce adult understandings of norms and when to challenge and redefine those understandings.

Finally, in Moinian's ethnographic study of children and youth's online diaries, Moinian demonstrates how children use the Internet to provide their own accounts of their lives, their

families, their friends, and their schools (2006). Moinian argues that these online diaries can provide researchers with an opportunity to fully access the voices and perspectives of youth.

Overall, CYS span a number of disciplines and include a range of different methodological approaches. However, what all of this work shares in common is the intentional focus on how young people understand and engage the world around them. Sometimes youth use this agency to form communities both on- and offline; and, this formation of communities provides a platform for youth to discuss and debate adult ideals and values.

Sense of community theory: Boundaries and belonging

Studies of communities in general have often not focused on young people. Instead, much of this scholarship examines how adults build communities and how adults use those communities to create a place in their social world (Frank, 2013; Newmahr, 2011). However, young people, too, build communities in order to find a place where they feel like they belong, where their voices are heard, and where their perspectives are validated. In order to understand youth communities, I draw on “Sense of Community” theory (SOC). This theory originated in McMillan and Chavis’s 1986 work. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define SOC as: “sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). According to this work, a community consists of four elements: (1) Membership; (2) Influence; (3) Integration and fulfillment of needs; and (4) Shared emotional connections. Sense of Community theory allows researchers to identify and define communities according to these criteria.

McMillan and Chavis outline five attributes of the first element, membership: (1) Boundaries; (2) Emotional safety; (3) Sense of belonging and identity; (4) Personal investment;

and (5) Common symbol system(s). In later works, McMillan describes boundaries as barriers marking who belongs and who does not; eventually, symbols come to denote membership (McMillan, 1996). Newmahr (2011:44) describes, “As much as community membership is derived from identification, it is defined by drawing boundaries between people who belong in a group and those who do not.” In a community, the members feel safe to speak honestly and to be vulnerable. They join a community expecting to belong; they have an awareness of being welcome. Finally, members must personally invest in the community and, sometimes, must pay dues in order to have membership.

In a 2014 TedTalk, McMillan argues that influence is reciprocal between members and the community. The community benefits from the members as much as members benefit from the community (McMillan, 2014). Members of a community will sacrifice whatever is necessary to gain membership of the community because of the rewards from being a member. Members are influenced by norms in the community and are expected to conform to those norms. By conforming to norms, members validate their membership and form a cohesive unit within their community. The more influence members have over or within a group, the more attractive the group is to potential members (McMillan, 2014).

Members receive status, competence, connections, influence, and other tools as reinforcement for their membership in the community; McMillan refers to these exchanges as trading and describes four different types: (1) Consensual trading; (2) Complementary trading; (3) Transformative trading, and; (4) Generative trading (McMillan, 2014). Through shared history and shared memories, community members create and sustain shared emotional connections. McMillan (2014) argues that members must share quality time and members must feel honored by the value or closure that comes from the shared time. Over time, shared time

between members evolves into shared memories, rituals, knowledge, traditions, and symbols that come to define membership.

Calhoun defines community as a set of relationships that produces collective action (1980). In her participant observation of a sadomasochism community over four years, Newmahr argues that groups do not have to be explicitly activist in nature in order to be considered a community (Newmahr, 2011). Newmahr outlines how Caeden, the SM community in the study, is in fact a community because it, “through discourse, interaction, and shared space, gives voice to [an activist contingent among its members] and hence constitutes a structure of social relations that produces collective action in the conventional sense” (2011: 7-8). Newmahr argues this group can be considered a community through members’ shared knowledge, space, experiences, and memories; members create identity through establishment of a common enemy, through marginality, and through group boundaries.

While SOC is helpful for understanding how people form and become members of a community, with few but important exceptions, much of the application of this theory has failed to listen to the voices and experiences of youth and their communities (Boero and Pascoe, 2012; Edwards, et al., 2001; Evans, 2007; McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Putnam, 2000; Sarason, 1974). “Community” is commonly understood as an adult concept. Using CYS and the understanding of SOC in conjunction, one can easily argue that if communities exist for adults then they must also exist for young people. And this is precisely what some scholars suggest (Chipuer and Pretty, 1999; Pretty, et al., 1996). In a two-part study of young people and their understandings of community, Evans (2007) conducted in-depth interviews with young people to establish how they determine sense of community. Evans suggests, “It is important to understand that adolescents may perceive community in quite different ways than adults” (2007:694). Like

Evans argues, youth form communities in a way that differs from adults and thus, use the tools outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986) and later scholars in different ways than adults. He finds, specifically, that young people feel the strongest sense of community when three things happen: (1) Their voices are elevated and resonate with others; (2) Members experience influence and power; and (3) Adults both support and challenge the community and its members (2007:699).

With the emergence of social media and the constant availability of interaction through smartphones, young people are able to create, maintain, and interact with communities constantly—and this includes the formation of the pro-anorexic (pro-ana) communities.¹³ Boero and Pascoe (2012) study pro-ana communities and argue that the Internet provides a place for communities with more disturbing interests to exist in a way they never would offline. In their research, Boero and Pascoe examine a pro-anorexic (pro-ana) community online; they find that community members use tools like group boundaries, rituals, and shared knowledge to create community and to understand who belongs and who does not. What is unique about the pro-ana community is its effort to make bodies physical in a virtual space; although the pro-ana communities are based on bodies, members have to use the aforementioned tools to build a social, interactional, and performative community where body types are not physically present. For example, members of the pro-ana community participate in the community by sharing photos of their bodies, taking measurements and weighing themselves to share on the discussion boards, and participate in group activities like fasts or surveys (Boero and Pascoe, 2012:42-45). These tools are used to build authenticity and trust among members and to prove that members, in fact,

¹³ Boero and Pascoe argue the following definition: “In general, a pro-ana community is one that is non-recovery oriented, offers weight-loss tips, generates support, and provides non-judgmental community that does not take a negative attitude toward eating disorders” (2012: 29).

belong to the community. Members of the pro-anorexic community observed by Boero and Pascoe use the community as a place to be overt about their interests and to find others who share that interest (2012). Although these interactions take place online, the community must not be categorized as a virtual community; instead, Boero and Pascoe argue these are real interaction between real humans that make up real communities that exist in a virtual space (2012:34). This study of the pro-ana online community is not the only to seek to examine a “deviant online subculture” only to find the group is formed in a systematic way (Ashford, 2009; Huey, 2015; Moinian, 2006; Tanner, 2015). In most ways, online community formation does not differ much from the formation of youth groups offline.

To defend this point, I turn to Murray Milner, Jr.’s analysis of middle-class schools in *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (2004). This particular examination of youth in schools provides a critical examination of youth culture formation, in particular the ways in which young people create cliques in their schools. One particular chapter focuses on conformity and fitting in. Milner argues that in order for kids to conform to a certain group, they ultimately have to distance themselves or deviate from the norms of other groups. He argues that all groups do this including the popular kids, the jocks, the nerds, and the “alternatives” (including goths, freaks, or weirdos). He states the more alternative these youth groups are, the more they flaunt that difference and consider it a point of pride.

These alternative groups, as described by Milner, largely reflect the characteristics of the community in this thesis; instead of the alternative clique existing on school grounds, they operate on the social media platform of Instagram. Milner argues all cliques use the same tools to establish a sense of belonging and acceptance within the clique and a distance between members of a clique and outsiders. Milner outlines many tools that these youth use in schools to develop

and maintain cliques. These tools include: clothing and style, speech, collective memories, humor, rituals, music, and space/territory. As such, this thesis argues that Columbiners use the same tools as other youth in order to ultimately conform to normative youth community formations. Many scholars have used a critical approach to examine how communities are formed in a similar way regardless of the shared interests of the community (Becker, 1963; Frank, 2013; Newmahr, 2011; Young, 2011).

CYS and SOC provide crucial frameworks for the current research project. It is important to understand youth agency when considering youth community formation in virtual spaces. As discussed, social media offers researchers unprecedented levels of access to young people's voices and to their own unique perspectives. This research focuses on a small youth community that exists on Instagram known as Columbiners.

Columbiners

Much like the pro-ana community, Columbiners can also be described as an online youth community with disturbing shared interests. A quick Internet search for Columbiners will surface several popular media articles on Columbiners as well as evidence that Columbiners are present on multiple social media websites like Tumblr, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and others. The Columbiner community first garnered attention from media coverage of the discovery and prevention of a mass shooting in Halifax, Canada on Valentine's Day 2015. The suspect, James Gamble, participated in an online Columbiner community on Tumblr. Police who investigated the case found that Gamble's Tumblr account was filled with media associated with the Columbine shooters as well as images of Nazi propaganda and other violent images.

As the Columbiner identity was revealed, several news agencies, including Vice News and National Public Radio, conducted interviews with other Columbiners to discover more about

the community (Bambury, 2015). On February 20, 2015, Brent Bambury, a radio host for CBC Radio, featured this emerging community on social media (Bambury, 2015). He described the Columbiner subculture as follows: "...In a dark subculture known as Columbiners: people who are fascinated by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two Columbine High School seniors who killed 13 people in a shooting rampage and then killed themselves. Online, some Columbiners post disturbing images of bloody crime scenes, dead bodies and body parts, weapons, and violent sexual images." As described, Columbiners are individuals who are fascinated by the Columbine shooting.

On April 20th, 1999, two teenagers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, opened fire at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The attack resulted in 15 deaths, including the two shooters, a teacher, and 12 other students (Cullen, 2009). The initial plan was to use two large propane bombs and nearly one hundred explosive devices known as pipe bombs, which would have resulted in "hundreds of deaths" (Cullen, 2009). When the bombs failed to detonate, Eric and Dylan resorted to the use of two shotguns and one 9mm handgun. The attack lasted a total of 16 minutes. Since April 20th, 1999, over 200 school shootings have occurred in the United States (Washington Post, 2019) and over 50 of those are classified as mass murders according to the FBI definition (UCR).¹⁴ Extensive media coverage usually follows school

¹⁴ These numbers, however, are difficult to determine. Many in both academia and public media have debated inconsistencies in conceptualizations of the term "school shooting" (Fattal, 2018; Kimmel, 2013; Larkin, 2007; Newman, et al., 2014). They argue that definitions of mass shootings vary widely in journalism, academia, government agencies, and even official databases. Fattal argues that these definitions also vary over time, pointing to a 2008 FBI definition for "mass shootings" changing in 2013 to a definition of "active shooters." The variation in concepts and data collection makes historical analysis of school shootings using official crime statistics even more difficult. These conceptualizations don't begin to include the nuances associated with location (in our case, schools) or age of shooter (in our case, young people). In the case of school shootings, Newman et al. offers a largely accepted—in scholarship—definition of rampage school shootings arguing that they must include the following criteria: (1) must take place on a school-related public stage before an audience; (2) must involve multiple victims, some of whom are shot simply for their symbolic significance, or at random; and (3) involve one or more shooters who are students or former students of the school.

shootings; journalists quickly scramble to uncover details about the shootings, about the victims, about the shooters, about the school, and about the motive. As such, and as demonstrated in the days following Columbine, the media play a large part in determining cultural understandings of school violence (Cullen, 2010). Historically, media coverage, public commentary, and academic literature have all focused on several possible contributing factors to motive: mental illness, family problems, bullying, peer support, communities, culture of violence, gun availability, violent media, rock & roll, parents, subcultures, and recently, white masculinity (Cullen, 2010; Larkin, 2007; 2009; Newman, 2004).

Cullen (2010) describes the role of the media in spreading several myths about Columbine in the immediate days following the shooting. He argues the media's portrayal of the shooters themselves perpetuated many of the myths that still surround them, two decades later.¹⁵ Many who lived through the media coverage of Columbine or who have spent time reading about the event are exposed to these myths and in some cases, still perpetuate them. A quick glance at social media outlets like Twitter or Facebook following a school shooting will demonstrate the visibility of such myths; many immediately ask about the families of the shooter(s), the history of bullying, the interest in violent media, or a possible "loner" status. Some of these myths have developed because of media left behind by shooters.

¹⁵ The biggest myths outlined by Cullen include: (1) The shooters were loners; (2) The shooters "just snapped;" (3) Jocks were targeted in the shooting; (4) The original plan was to carry out a shooting; (5) The martyrdom of Cassie Bernall covered extensively in Christian-centered media following the shooting; (6) The role of the Trench Coat Mafia in the shooting; (7) The shooting itself going on for hours; (8) Any intentional connections with Marilyn Manson, Hitler's birthday, goths, or planes flying into buildings in New York City; and (9) Eric killed Dylan (Cullen, 2019). Cullen attempts to put these myths to rest using extensive evidence provided by the Jefferson County Police Department. The shooters had friends. The shooting took months to plan. Victims were chosen at random. The boys planned to have large bombs detonate, and when those failed, resorted to their guns. Cassie Bernall did not die because of her religious beliefs (as extensively outline in Cullen's 2010 work and Larkin's 2004 work). Although the boys wore trench coats, they were not members of a trench coat mafia. The shooting lasted less than a half hour. Both boys committed suicide at the end of the rampage. More information on these myths can be found in Cullen's book (Cullen, 2010).

As technology becomes more sophisticated, so too does the media left behind by shooters. Harris and Klebold left behind video tapes and journals demonstrating their motive; Seung-Hui Cho, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooter, mailed a DVD manifesto to the New York NBC headquarters intending it to be received the day after the shooting; following the 2014 University of California, Santa Barbara shooting, YouTube videos of the shooter, Elliot Rodger, were discovered and discussed extensively among the public; the 2018 Parkland shooter recorded videos on his cellphone in the days before the attack and made repeated threats on social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube (Follman, Aronsen, and Pan, 2019). Several scholars, and many journalists, have noticed that these media left behind by the shooters indicate grievances with women, sexuality, and in some cases, with other men for their perceived success with women and sexuality (Connell, 1995; 2000; Garbarino, 1999; Kalish and Kimmel, 2010; Kimmel and Mahler, 2003; Kimmel, 2000; 2013; Leary, et al., 2003; Poteat, et al., 2011; Reuter-Rice, 2008; Tonso, 2009; White Watson, 2008). As such, academics have turned to the one commonality between the majority of school shooters: gender. Almost all school shooters are boys (and on college campuses, men); further, the majority of shooters are white boys.

Scholars now examine how structures like gender, race, and sexuality influence instances of school shootings. The existing literature on school shootings, and the evolving amount of attention paid to whiteness, masculinity, and internalized homophobia, raise more questions as to why school shootings happen and what motivated shooters to commit these acts of violence. As a result, scholars continue to look for more ways to access answers to these questions. One such approach to do so has involved exploring Internet communities, like the Columbiner community, to look at what attracts other young people to such violent interests and individuals.

Columbiners, while only a small subset of the young population in the world, are part of a larger culture of youth that use social media on a daily basis.

Overall, Columbiners have been given a substantial amount of attention by popular mass media outlets, particularly over the course of the past several years. This is likely due to the fear that these individuals could be the next school shooters, resulting in “the next Columbine.” To the best of my knowledge, only a few academic studies, however, have examined the Columbiner community. Sumiala and Tikka (2011) use YouTube to examine media images, videos, and compilations of images from recent school shootings including Columbine, Virginia Tech, Jokela, and Kauhajoki (Sumiala and Tikka, 2011). They find that those participating in the circulation of the visual media make up three groups: (1) the shooters; (2) professional news actors; and (3) amateurs/prosumers, those who create content. They argue for the need to examine these communities because they create a reality for members involved.

In a similar study, Oksanen, Hawdon, and Rasarn explore the ways a school shooting fan network operates on YouTube. They define the school shooting fans as, “networks of individuals who admire and glorify school shootings and shooters on YouTube” (2013:55). Although they do not explicitly use the term Columbiner to describe those they are studying, their analysis shows that Columbine-shooting fans make up the core group of this particular fan network. Through a thematic analysis of 113 pro-school shooting profiles, they argue school shooting fan networks resemble similar offline communities with disturbing interests. Oksanen, et al. conclude with the argument that the existence of such communities online increases the possibility that “potential perpetrators will find support and justification for their ideas or plans for future attacks” (2013:65). Oksanen, et al.’s 2013 research was in response to a 2012 ethnographic study of fans of school shooters on YouTube by Nathalie E. Paton. Over the course

of three years, Paton found fans' media practices highlight a "trait of contemporary society" in which participants search for individuality and autonomy in the modern era of the Internet. She argues the fan subculture was eliminated by the end of her study because of the emergence of stricter Internet regulation. As Oksanen et al., other scholars, and this research show, Paton was wrong in this finding. More recent research explores the Columbiner community even more specifically.

In 2015, Rico examined the use of social media to participate in the online community of Columbiners. Rico is primarily concerned with fandom and the implications of the meanings associated with membership in the Columbiner community. This research, however, does not specifically explore any social structures, like gender or age, within the community or the implications of social media use on larger structures. Dagget (2015) also explores Columbiners but uses the social media platform Tumblr. Her research uses in-depth interviews with participants to understand how the participants maintain boundaries between insiders and outsiders in the community. Dagget finds most Columbiners are interested in Columbine as a historical event; "fan-girls" were viewed as "wannabes" in the community; "[Fan-girls] condone the shooting and are primarily interested in the case because they find Eric and Dylan attractive" (2015:60). In her research, Daggett explores and deconstructs the stereotypes of Columbiners. In doing so, she focuses more on her conceptualization of "true" Columbiners and disregards individuals who participate in the community and are understood as "wannabes." The current research project, however, sheds light on why these "fan-girls," as termed by Dagget, are also crucial to the community. An examination of fangirls, as well as Columbiners more broadly, offers a greater understanding into how structures of gender and sexuality influence understandings of school shootings in this community.

In 2018, Raitanen and Oksanen published an article using data from online ethnographic field work and interviews with individuals with deep interests in school shootings. Their research yields information on an online subculture consisting of four sub-groups: (1) researchers; (2) fan girls; (3) Columbiners; and (4) copy-cats. They argue that copy-cats make up the only sub-group explicitly interested in carrying out school shootings. Raintanen and Oksanen argue, “We have found out that people who are deeply interested in school shootings share similar perceptions and that they consider many of the same cultural objects to be important” (2018:11). The idea that Columbiners connect with one another through shared cultural objects, memories, and knowledge is central to community formation and to the current research project.

Based on the limited research that does exist, questions remain. How do youth who participate in the online community of Columbiners understand school shootings? How do they make sense of their youth status and other social structures that shape that status? And what can we learn from their posts about how these young people build and participate in their own community? By examining this particular community of young people on Instagram through a CYS framework and by drawing on SOC theory, this research offers new insights into how young people, especially in the Columbiner community, appear to understand school shootings, gender and sexuality, and community formation, itself.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The research questions that guide this project are: How do youth who participate in the online community of Columbiners understand school shootings? How do they make sense of their youth status and other social structures that shape that status? And what can we learn from their posts about how these young people build and participate in their own community? Through a critical youth study of 200 Instagram posts containing #Columbiner, this analysis provides exploratory data regarding the formation and maintenance of a Columbiner Instagram community. I use feminist methodologies, as well as youth-centered methodologies to determine how Columbiners form and maintain the community, make sense of school shootings, and understand social structures like sexuality and gender in the context of their fascination with school shootings.

Feminist methodology: Reflexivity and standpoint

As discussed earlier, the fourth methodological element necessary for CYS as outlined by Best, is radical reflexivity “that interrogates the varied points of difference that intersect in our own lives and those we study” (2007:9). Best explains that the researcher, especially when studying youth, occupies several positions of power; they have power through researcher status through their adult state. Standpoint epistemology allows the researcher to examine their power in the researcher process; Sprague (2005) explains this best:

Standpoint epistemology increases the salience of the questions about how power interacts with authority to influence who is a legitimate creator of knowledge and what kind of knowledge is created. Feminist social science researchers who find standpoint epistemology persuasive have been centrally concerned with how to respond to the distortions created by power imbalances due to gender, race/ethnicity, class, and nation (Sprague, 2005:53).

As feminist methodologists have argued, what is deemed “normal” or legitimate in a society is determined in large part by those in positions of power (Sprague, 2005). Thus, legitimate or normative values align neatly with the concerns of straight, white, elite, adult men. Institutions such as the legal system, the political system, and the education system are also rooted in the value systems of those in power (i.e. straight, white, elite, adult men). My research takes into account not only my own positionality, but also of the gendered, classed, aged, and racialized context in which my research operates. It is important to understand age and gender in this research as social constructions because as understandings of concepts shift over time and space, they also shift between age groups. As Sprague argues, “Most of the dualisms we use to describe everyday life are not logical dichotomies, but rather refer to points on some form of continuum” (2005:13). This research aims to deconstruct existing notions of gender and sexuality to expose the ways in which power, privilege, and authority dominate normative understandings.

My research is rooted in standpoint epistemology and as such, it is important to describe myself and provide context. I am a white, cisgender woman who is married to a man and who grew up in a middle-class family; I am a millennial who grew up through the technology boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Because of this, I have a comprehensive understanding of

social media and personal experience with the ways people of all ages interact with social media. With that being said, it is important to recognize a lack of youth status; this is not solely because of my age, but because of my social status as someone who is economically independent from my parents.¹⁶ It is important to note that as a sociologist, I have received extensive training and education in criminology. Because of this, I am particularly familiar with criminological understandings of school shootings.¹⁷ Thus, I approach this research from the perspective of a critical sociologist and with the understanding that gender and age are social constructs that are crucial to sociological examinations of youth and their perspectives on school shootings.

Qualitative research methods

In order to understand how Columbiners operate within and make sense of structures of gender and sexuality, I adopt a qualitative research method. I first considered following a traditional content analysis model, but traditional content analyses are often quantitative and would not have captured the analysis of meaning making that I was hoping to achieve. As Hughey (2014) argues, traditional content analysis, while efficient for quantitatively analyzing large amounts of data categorically, does not necessarily allow researchers to capture all of the elusive and subversive meanings in text and images. Scholars use qualitative content analysis in order to access broader meanings in images and text (Elo and Klygas, 2007; Hughey, 2014). The data pulled for this research includes visual, textual, and audio content from a social media

¹⁶ The distinction of economic independence from one's parent is important when considering millennials and adulthood because of the phenomenon of extended adolescence. Extended adolescence, also known as second adolescence, refers to the social environment that millennials experience where they are unable economically support living away from home and are required to move back in with their parents after completing a college degree (Kellner, 2014).

¹⁷ As a sociologist, I argue that criminological understandings of school shootings have not, historically, paid enough attention to the ways that social structures, and in particular youth understandings of social structures, influence this social phenomenon.

platform and the methods outlined by previous qualitative content analysis scholars were not adequate for this study. Instead, I needed to adopt an innovative method that draws together strategies used by previous researchers in various fields to truly access the unique perspectives of these young people as they operate on the platform of Instagram.

As stated, Instagram posts include visual, textual, and audio components. The content shared on Instagram is sometimes created by the user posting it; other times, users share content that was created by others. Because of this, it is important to consider not only the meanings contextualized through text in the captions, but meanings in the visual and audio components. All three of these components were considered individually and in relation to one another; as folks post to accounts like Instagram, choosing to pair an image, with a caption, and sometimes with audio content, they do so with intentions that are meaningful to them.

Most traditional content analyses involve textual analysis. Altheide (1997) argues that textual analysis is an interactive process through which the researchers interacts with the document he/she is analyzing. This process involves, “extensive reading, sorting, and searching through your materials; comparing within categories, coding, and adding key words and concepts; then writing minisummaries of categories” (1997:43). Because Instagram posts include visual and sometimes audio content, a traditional textual content analysis would miss valuable content in these posts.

Visual analysis is beneficial for many reasons; an entire methodological field is dedicated to analyzing visual content. Collier (2014:59) argues that visual analysis is a science and an art; “It is both necessary and legitimate to allow ourselves to respond artistically or intuitively to visual images...However, while creative processes are essential to discovery, artistic processes may produce only fictitious statements if not combined with systematic and detailed analysis.”

Visual analysis refers to a research method used by sociologists and anthropologists who analyze imagery to understand larger cultural aspects of society. Thus, when used systematically, particularly when using social media data, visual analysis offers insightful information on how young people are making sense of the world, through their own voices.

While sociological audio analysis techniques are more difficult to find, several scholars have paid attention to the ways that audio and visual components are combined in contemporary media (Altheide, 2012; Figuero, 2008; Kiilakoski and Oksanen, 2011). In an analysis of the music in 46 videos left behind by Pekka-Eric Auvinen¹⁸, Kiilakoski and Oksanen conduct an audio analysis in the content of cultural scripts. In the following quote, the authors demonstrate how the shooter used those videos to create a script: “He tried to actively modify and elaborate the meanings inherent in school shootings. These included a statement on school shootings as political radical action. The videos also glorify male rage and domination and include violent sexual fantasies” (Kiilakoski and Oksanen, 2011:264). Figueroa (2008) also analyzed audio-visual data using grounded theory. Grounded theory requires the researcher to develop a hypothesis based on the interpretation of an outsider, then deepens the analysis through a process of moving back and forth between emerging themes and the data. The process is similar to those used by researchers who conduct visual analyses.

In some instances, Columbiners will use several different pieces of audio, of video, and of text to create compilation videos. These videos are shared with and between members of the Columbiner community. Often times, they will even move from one platform to another, like Tumblr to Instagram. Because of the detailed nature of these posts, the assumed time and intention it takes to create such a complex piece of media, and the willingness to share the

¹⁸ Jokela High School shooter

content with other Columbiners, it is important to take into consideration the combined meanings behind every piece of a compilation video.

Methods of this project

The idea for this research project came from a particular experience of mine. After “losing myself” over a considerable amount of time in the world of Instagram, I stumbled across a post about a book I had read several years prior, *Columbine* by Dave Cullen. In this post, there was a hashtag that read “Columbiner” and I decided to click on it. The page I was redirected to included hundreds of posts concerning school shooters, particularly those involved with Columbine. My initial reactions included: horror, disgust, discomfort, and confusion, among others. A few days later, a friend of mine, aware of my academic interests in masculinity and school violence, shared a link to an NPR audio clip. The story was about Columbiners and described the foiled Halifax plan mentioned earlier. My discovery of this online community on a familiar social media platform, combined with popular media attention for this group of individuals, piqued a research interest.

Considering standpoint methodology, it is important to note that I stumbled upon the community as an outsider, pulled data as an outsider, conducted analysis as an outsider, and present findings as an outsider. I was never a member of the community nor did I ever make my presence known to those whose content I analyzed. To gather these data, I used an online research technique known as lurking. Lurking refers to the method of research in which the researcher remains invisible to those being researched while they are observed (Cavanagh, 1999). The technique allows for the researcher to gather, in this case young folks’, perspectives that have not been altered by researcher inquiry. As this is one of the first studies of this community from a sociological perspective, exploratory data collected through the technique of

lurking provides depth for analysis. Thus, interviewing, while useful in its own right, was largely unnecessary for this project. With careful consideration of the elements of CYS, extracting young people's actual voices and analyzing their own words, removes one component of the adult/youth and researcher/subject power relationship. The most important element of this research project is the deliberate use of young voices and the conservation of youth meaning-making processes to truly get at the ways Columbiners use this Instagram community to make sense of some controversial elements of their world; this was done while remaining hyper-aware of my own subjectivity due to the statuses I occupy. There are many important ethical considerations for the technique of lurking that will be discussed later.

At the time of this study, Columbiners were active and seemed to be most active on Reddit, Tumblr, and Instagram; they are still active today. While Columbiners existed on Twitter, this social media platform at the time of the data pull appeared to be the most effective at policing Columbiner activity by deleting posts and banning users (this is in line with the findings from Paton, 2012). I used Instagram instead of Tumblr or Reddit because of my familiarity with the social media application. To provide methodological structure, I used the entire population of Instagram posts that used #Columbiner (n=1143 as of August 2, 2016). By using this particular hashtag, I was able to access a population of Instagram users that self-identify as a member of the Columbine community.¹⁹ In order to find all (public²⁰) Instagram posts that used this hashtag, I used Instagram's search feature on the website for "#Columbiner."

¹⁹ Some Instagram posts by members of this community also include #Columbine. I chose to use #Columbiner to determine those users who identified as members of the Columbine community. This gave me information about the specific group I was interested in studying. By using this hashtag, the user chose to affiliate the post, and consequently the user, with the Columbiner community and Columbiner identity.

²⁰ On Instagram, users have the opportunity to make their profiles, and therefore their posts, private or public. If a profile is private, only accepted followers can see posts made by the user. If the profile is public, all Instagram users can access, view, and like/comment on the user's post.

I also deliberately chose to analyze posts instead of profiles. It was the most efficient way to determine how the users interact with one another in the community—in a public setting—because posts include comment sections and the ability for one user to convey interest in another user’s content. It also gave an extra level of identity protection to the young people included in my research; I did not want to accidentally find any identifying information about the users. By using posts with the hashtag, I was able to draw down search criteria and determine a population for the analysis. As mentioned above, a search for this hashtag returned 1,143 posts as of August 2, 2016.

In order to narrow down the number of posts for my research, I limited the sample by timeframe; I included only the most recent (at the time) 200 posts in the search results. From this sample, I had originally planned to narrow down the sample by excluding any duplicates and any irrelevant posts; the sample of 200 did not include any duplicate posts and none of the posts could be considered irrelevant. Each post had an important narrative to examine. In order to extract each post from Instagram, I used the screenshot feature on my computer. During this process, I took a screenshot of every post to include the visual data, comments, number of likes, captions, and any other hashtags used in the post. I then put each screen shot into a file in a folder on my computer. The screenshots were also pasted into a Word document where a new page was used to for each specific case (each specific Instagram post). This allowed me to compile every case into a single Word document and enabled me to analyze the cases more easily than on a web browser; this is especially because posts on Instagram are sometimes deleted by the platform or the users. This method ensured that my data remained the same from the point of collection through the analysis. For video posts, I was able to extract the video from the Instagram post and embed the video into the Word document.

I then analyzed the data compiled in the Word document. For guidance, I used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) model for grounded theory coding. I analyze the visual, audio, and textual content of each post. To move through the process of coding and interpreting the data, I used this process outlined by Marshall and Rossman,

As the researcher develops categories and themes, with her use of coding well under way, with numerous analytic memos written that summarize key chunks of the findings, she is constantly evaluating the plausibility of her developing understandings. She is constantly searching through the data. She is constantly challenging the very explanations and interpretations she is putting forward (2010:220).

I first used an open coding technique in which I identified and developed concepts based on properties and dimensions; I then moved into axial coding, in which I looked for ways the concepts related to one another until the concepts emerged into categories; finally, I used selective coding to move my concepts and categories into themes. At this point in the process, I created a number of analytic memos to summarize emergent themes as they surfaced and evolved. Throughout the entire analysis and, then, through the writeup of the findings, I moved back and forth through the different types of coding. As more ideas and narratives emerged, more codes, categories, and themes developed. Through the analysis and the writeup of the findings, I constantly used memos to figure out how the coding and analysis was evolving.

I was also required to use both inductive and deductive approaches when analyzing the data. I analyzed the compiled data and looked for any emergent themes that related to the Columbiner community. I also paid attention for data relating to social structures like age, gender, sexuality, and race, as well as social institutions like school and family. To code these data, I first looked at the visual content of the post, specifically the image or video used in the

post. I paid most attention to the meanings associated with the visual content; in other words, I focused on understanding why a photo was used or why images were compiled with one another. I was primarily concerned with how these images were created (for instance, how was the post created? Is this an image from the Columbine shooters? Is the image one that was recreated from popular Internet images? Was this image reposted from another Columbiner or did the user posting the image create the image?). I also examined the textual data on the Instagram post. (For this analysis, I asked the following questions, among others: Is there any text included in the visual image? How are participants interacting on the comments under the post? Why was this caption chosen for this image?). Finally, if the visual content of the post was a video, rather than a photo, I would analyze the audio component of the video. (I asked, what meanings are embedded in the audio for the video? Is the audio original audio from the shooters' home videos? Is the audio from a song? Does the audio include song lyrics? What do these lyrics mean? What feelings does the music provoke? Is the audio from other popular media, like a TV show or movie?)

Throughout the coding process, I was primarily concerned with how young people use Instagram to create meanings associated with their use of #Columbiner.²¹ It was important to consider what these meanings say about how young people participating in this community use the social media platform to interact with one another, to debate youth-centered issues (like school shootings, the age status, what it means to be cool, the bore of homework and school,

²¹ Over the course of this research, the research questions were continually reshaped and reworded as I moved between inductive and deductive approaches of the grounded coding process. As such, I moved between several ideas when considering how to organize the findings of this research. One previous draft of this research outlined the findings through the dichotomy of deviance and conformance. Upon further investigation into the deviance literature, I realized that Sense of Community Theory, as described by Newmahr (2011) and originally by McMillan and Chavis (1986) provided a framework for my findings. Upon revisiting and reorganizing these findings, I decided on the three broad findings outlined in the results section of this thesis.

etc.). As mentioned, a crucial methodological component to this research project is the consideration for ethical concerns.

Gatekeeping and the ethics of studying youth online

While looking at the demographic data on Instagram use around the time of data collection, I found that a considerable proportion of Instagram users are youth.²² Additionally, the cultural references made by Columbiners (choice in music, use of memes, and use of slang in Columbiner Instagram posts) show that many of the individuals included in my sample are most likely young people.

Experiences of youth are often difficult for adults to access in a world where young people are viewed as necessary of protection or considered to be a vulnerable population (Johnson, 2001). However, the ways young folks interact with one another is important for researchers to understand. Research on young communities and the culture developed between peers is especially important to examine because youth create their own realities involving their own values, ideals, and perspectives; these communities, while stemming from adult values and ideals tend to differ from adult communities (Corsaro, 1997). Many scholars in CYS, and other youth studies, argue communities of young people are an important component to social science research (Adler and Adler, 1998; Best, 2007; Corsaro, 1997; Fine, 1995; Hagerman, 2010; Ibrahim, 2014; Johnson, 2001; Mandell, 1988; Milner, 2004; Qvortrup, 1993; Pascoe, 2003; 2012; Thorne, 1993; Waksler, 1991). Many researchers use their research to find methodological

²² More than 90% of Instagram users are under the age of 35 (Pennsylvania State University, 2015) and approximately 11.4 million Instagram users are under the age of 18 (Monteiro, 2015). Girls (61%) are more likely than boys (44%) to use Instagram (Lenhart, 2015). In terms of race, black teens (64%) are more likely than white or Hispanic teens (50% and 52% respectively) to use Instagram (Lenhart, 2015). Although these statistics cannot be directly attributed to the Columbiner community at the time of data collection, they are useful to consider when looking at the findings in this project.

solutions to the power structure between adult researchers and young participants (Best, 2007; Best and Bogle, 2014; Hagerman, 2010; 2018; Zenkov, 2010). One way to address that power structure and to access unaltered young voices is through social media.

Studying young people on social media involves many ethical considerations. In my project, it is first important to remove any indicators of identity to protect the identities of Columbiners. Not only am I studying young people, I am doing so through a medium that is still highly contested in ethics. I do not know the identity of these individuals and I never looked to find out any identifying information about them. There are several unique ethical considerations that must be accounted for when conducting research with young folks on the Internet, a public domain.

Young people use the Internet on a daily basis, as mentioned above. The Internet, from an adult perspective, is often considered a dangerous space for youth (Pascoe, 2012; Richman, 2007). Because of this, it is important for adult researchers in online communities to consider the concerns of adults and to address specific ethical considerations of studying youth online. The Internet has only existed for a few decades, and Internet research is still a recent emergence in scholarly literature. Thus, Institutional Review Boards across universities are sometimes unequipped to deal with the ethical considerations of this research platform. It is the responsibility of the researcher to consider ethical implications of their research (Pascoe, 2012; Richman, 2007).

Several researchers have provided literature and expertise on how to manage and address these ethical concerns.²³ There are three broad categories of ethical considerations for this

²³ Richman (2007) explores the navigation of insider and outsider status in the ethics of youth online research. An adult researcher, she argues, cannot go unnoticed when emerged in a culture of youth. She argues that this may offer more rich data collection. This is because the researcher must understand the norms and rules of the community to

research project: (1) lurking as a research method, (2) social media as public domain, and (3) consent. As mentioned above, the research technique I use is called “lurking”. Although this is deemed a legitimate research technique, it highlights the fears of parents concerning youth Internet involvement.²⁴

A second ethical consideration is that of consent. Because I used the lurking technique for this research, I did not obtain consent from the users. Although this is common when using the lurking method, it is still necessary to address the ethical considerations of not obtaining consent and to mitigate the risk of damage to the users (Pascoe, 2012). I was also unable to obtain any consent from parents for youth participation in this study, because it is difficult, if not impossible to do so (Moinian, 2006). CYS argues the importance of considering youth agency when posting on the Internet. When the information has been posted, regardless of the age of the user, it becomes public data. Some users, regardless of age, may not realize that this data is considered public. Because of this, it is necessary to protect the identity of the users included in my research. To ensure privacy of the individual, usernames are not included in quotes of images; any images that included a photo, or selfie, of a Columbiner were altered or omitted from the findings section (in reference to suggestions made by Kozinets, 2015). Because the material I use has the potential to be accessible to readers, it is important to take as many precautions as possible to ensure the identity of the user remains as private as possible. There are

fit in with members. Because of this outsider status, the researcher may be able to better convey the meanings of the community members than she would have been able to if she had not considered herself an outsider. Further, because online communities are text-only and mediated through computers, the ability for young people to enact their agency is even higher, they can express themselves in ways that are perhaps less likely to be misinterpreted by adult researchers.

²⁴ Adults are often afraid that their children will be the target of adults with inappropriate intentions if left unsupervised on the Internet (Pascoe, 2012; Richman, 2007). Wang et al. (2005) highlight how parents wish to protect their children from the Internet and how those methods contradict their wish for their children to take advantage of online resources. The examination of parents’ rules allows for researchers to understand the conflict between children’s Internet use and parental monitoring.

two built-in safe guards to the ways Columbiners use social media that help them to remain anonymous: (1) The majority of those posting in this community do not reveal their identity in their own Instagram posts; and (2) Most, if not all of the posts, are no longer accessible through a search for the hashtag on Instagram because they have been removed since the time of data collection. Any Columbiners who exposed their identity received all necessary precautions to make it more difficult for anyone reading this study to access that identity.

The third ethical consideration addressed in this section is the idea of social media as public domain (Kozinets, 2015; Moinian, 2006). This means that it is easily accessible and, in a legal sense, publicly available. However, just because the user knows that the information he/she posts on social media is public does not automatically mean that the user consents to being researched (Kozinets, 2015). Therefore, and in order to protect user anonymity, I did not visit the profiles of any Columbiners; I only accessed the posts including the hashtag. I did not participate in the community, solicit conversation, or make any friend requests during the research. This project is meant to explore the community from an outsider's perspective so interviews were unnecessary and were not conducted. Because of this, all data analyzed in this project is considered public domain.

As mentioned, Pascoe argues the Internet provides an extension to day-to-day reality but is not an alternative reality (2012); youth use the Internet so frequently that they can often forget they are engaging with a virtual platform. Because of this, Internet users may not realize the information they post on social media can be accessed by researchers, then published for others to see. Thus, this project takes every precaution available to ensure that the privacy of the individual is protected to the best of my ability and that the individual's own voice is heard.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

As mentioned, I entered this study with quite limited familiarity with the Columbiner Instagram community. My initial response to the content was one of repulsion, disgust, and horror. I understood the group of individuals to be quite different from my understanding of how other communities of young people use the Internet; call it naivety or ignorance, but I had never been exposed to this side of social media. While conducting this research, I came to the realization that Columbiners formed their community in a way that was not dissimilar from the ways young people form other communities. The content itself is disturbing, but the ways Columbiners use social media to understand their place in the world is not dissimilar from the ways young people use communities both on- and offline to understand their place in their social world or the social issues that exist within it. Columbiners seem different because they challenge normative, or adult, conventions of what “appropriate” behavior is; they just do so in a way that outsiders deem unacceptable. Columbiners stand out for their content and its gore and celebration of violence but in more important ways, the Columbiner community is typical of other young communities, especially in the age of social media.

On Instagram, Columbiners exist as a community meeting all of McMillan and Chavis’s (1989) criteria including: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections. These findings yield evidence of all four of these criteria. This research also shows that this community consists of young people (or in other terms: those from the

Millennial Generation and Generation Z) and as such, the community operates in many of the same ways as other sects of young people.²⁵ Using this online community, Columbiners discuss and sometimes debate social issues that uniquely affect their age demographic: school shootings. They debate this heavy topic while also discussing sexuality and romance, family, peers, parents, and homework. This research offers insight not only into how these particular young people make sense of school shootings but also how young people use the Internet to form communities and how those communities shape their perception of the social world.

This results section is organized by three themes: (1) Community building through #Columbiner; (2) Being young and figuring out cool; and (3) Making sense of the confusion. The first section will provide insight to how #Columbiner connects individuals over social media and how those individuals form and maintain a community on Instagram. The second theme offers evidence of the youth status of Columbiners while demonstrating the similarities with other young people online. The final theme exposes the ways Columbiners make sense of school shootings but also, how Columbiners make sense of other issues that uniquely affect their age demographic: like their gender identity, their sexual attractions, adult institutions, and growing up. Each section will explore how Columbiners use their community to form social connections, to understand what it means to be young, and to confront difficult issues that specifically affect young people. Each section will demonstrate how Columbiners use their platform on social media to exercise their own agency and use their own voices to weigh in on their social world.

²⁵ Without definitive information on the demographics of the people included in this project, it is not possible to conclusively prove that these are young people; however, this research will demonstrate the ways members of this community seem to be young.

Community building through #Columbiner

As discussed extensively already, McMillan and Chavis (1986) outline four largely undisputed components to a community: (1) membership; (2) influence; (3) integration and fulfillment of needs; and (4) shared emotional connections. McMillan (1996) argues that membership is understood through boundaries, safety, identities, personal investments, and symbols; influence involves norms and sacrifice; needs are fulfilled and integrated through value trading between members; and emotional connections are created and sustained through many of the elements of membership itself: memories, rituals, symbols, language, and humor.

Columbiners use various tools to develop and maintain membership, establish group boundaries and insider status, and to build and sustain relationships and trust. Columbiners establish community-specific norms and sustain these norms by policing member and non-member behavior. The Columbiner community shares content that is largely perceived as gory and crude but Columbiners use social media to form community. Other youth also use social media to form communities. Community formation, in the Columbiner community, looks like normative or mainstream community formation, both on- and offline, among adults and youth. The following sections will provide evidence for Columbiner community formation and maintenance.

Membership

In order for a community to exist, it must have members. McMillan and Chavis outline five components of membership: (1) boundaries; (2) safety; (3) belonging or identity; (4) personal investments; and (5) a symbol system (1986). The following section will provide brief of each component of membership in the Columbiner community. Some of these components are crucial to other themes in these findings; as such, their significance will be discussed again in the second two themes.

Boundaries

In order for membership to exist as a concept in a community, the group must have boundaries between insiders and outsiders. These boundaries are intended to keep outsiders out and to confirm an identity within the community (Boero and Pascoe, 2012; Milner, 2004; Newmahr, 2011). There are clear group boundaries around the Columbiner Instagram community. In fact, Columbiners often poke fun at outsiders while simultaneously making sure insiders feel included. One post in the sample, a screenshot of a Tumblr post, says the following:

Me: Yeah I don't know all that much about Columbine. Person: I mean really, who cares about Dylan Harris and his friend he followed Me: ok first of all its Dylan Klebold, born September 11, 1981 origami master younger brother of Byron and son of Sue Klebold and secondly he was NOT A FOLLOWER—

In this example, a Columbiner writes out a fictional interaction between a Columbiner and an “other.” The fictional Columbiner tries to play it off as if he/she does not have any intimate knowledge of the shooting. When the “other” makes a mistake in the shooter’s name and role, the Columbiner is quick to respond with his/her knowledge of the shooter and his personal life, revealing that they are in fact a Columbiner.²⁶

Columbiners enforce and reinforce boundaries in several different ways, some of which will be discussed at a later point in the findings. One of the ways they do so is through the act of othering the other. In the example above, the Columbiner makes a joke about a fictional interaction that only other Columbiners will find humorous. One must have intimate knowledge of the shooter (Dylan’s origami habits, birthday, and family members’ names) and must be

²⁶ Throughout the findings section, the pronouns “they/them” is used for Columbiners. In most cases, the gender of the Columbiner is unknown and they/them are the most appropriate gender-neutral pronouns. In cases where gender is known, “he/him” or “she/her” are used, instead.

passionate about that knowledge and in their opinions of the shooters (i.e. Dylan was “NOT A FOLLOWER”). In this same post, the Columbiner simultaneously makes other Columbiners feel included while poking fun at someone on the outside of the community. Columbiners find it unacceptable that others would not be as interested in the Columbine shootings and the shooters as themselves. Thus, the most appropriate response to someone stating their disinterest in Dylan is to throw facts their way, immediately and with passion.

In order for membership to exist in a community, members must feel safe within the boundaries of that community. They must feel safe to be themselves and to be protected from the judgement of outsiders.

Safety

To genuinely feel like a member in a community, McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that members must feel safe within the community. This feeling of safety in the Columbiner community is expressed often in this sample. Columbiners talk about their interest in the shootings and how they Columbiner community makes them feel comfortable enough to “be themselves” or to openly express their interest in the presence of others with shared interest. They often compare their online Columbiner friends with their peers at school. In one example, the Columbiner states:

I wish I had friends nearby that were interested in true crime and Columbine. I don't know anybody in real life that doesn't think my interests are super weird and get annoyed when I talk about this stuff.

The comments under the post highlight how safe Columbiners feel with one another:

Commenter 1: SAME

Commenter 2: it's such a struggle and makes me so sad sometimes. Like, I love my Internet friends but they are all so far away!

Commenter 3: Ugh same. Can somebody come visit me in Georgia?

Commenter 4: I have family in Georgia but I never have money to go see them

Commenter 5: You are so right! Exactly!

Commenter 6: I'm actually pretty lucky that I have a friend who is interested in Columbine but he isn't as into it as I am but at least it's something

Commenter 7: Same, I live in LA so you can imagine what that's like, the only person I have that is interested in it is my brother, but he doesn't really know a lot about it, he just gets excited when I talk about Columbine²⁷

In this example, a Columbiner writes about the difference between their Internet friends, specifically Columbiners, and their peers in "real life" or offline. The Columbiner complains that they don't have any offline friends who are interested in Columbine while complaining that their Columbiner friends live far away from them. There are seven comments on the post where other Columbiners agree with the original poster. Two Columbiners say that they have one person in their lives that are interested in Columbine but that each is not nearly as interested in the shooting as they are.

This post is one example of the level of comfortability between Columbiners. When using the hashtag, Columbiners understand that the post will be seen by other Columbiners and hope that they will comment on or like the posts. Sharing their interest in Columbine, without fear of negative repercussions and with the expectation of relatability to other Columbiners, is one of the most important parts of their friendships. This is a part that they more regularly

²⁷ Locations in this quote have been changed to protect the identities of the users.

experience with their friends online, whom they may never have a chance to meet in person. These Columbiners trust each other enough to share their personal details, like what state they reside in, with one another. This demonstrates that Columbiners feel safe with those who share their identity markers simply because of the community membership they share.

Another crucial element to membership, once boundaries and trust are established, is belonging or identity. Community members must gain a sense of belonging through the interaction with the community.

Belonging/identity

Sense of belonging or membership is an important component of membership in a community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue a sense of identity is necessary for membership. The most obvious way that Columbiners express their identity and belonging in the community is the use of #Columbiner. In most instances, Columbiners make a social media account exclusively dedicated to Columbiner content and use hashtags to connect with other Columbiners. In one post, the caption reads, “I’m obsessed with Columbine, more specifically Eric Harris. New account to vent, talk about Columbine, and just be myself.”

The caption accompanies an image of Eric; it is black and white. Eric is posing, sitting with his arms draped over the back of a couch. In the caption, the Columbiner discusses their intent in creating their new account, establishes their interest in Columbine, and revels in being able to be themselves on the new account; they do all of this in one quick statement.

This sentiment shows up several times throughout the sample. Columbiners sometimes express interest in anonymity in their Columbiner accounts; in these cases, they refrain from posting images of themselves and exclude their names. Columbiners, while feeling largely safe in Columbiner community posts, still recognize that their interest others them in mainstream

society and thus, make accounts for the specific reason of sharing Columbiner content. Part of the process of establishing membership, belonging, and identity among Columbiners on Instagram is the creation of an account where they feel safe enough to share their content, to express their interests, and to “be themselves”. Making a Columbiner Instagram profile is a very explicit way for Columbiners to feel and demonstrate belonging and identity.

So far, boundaries, safety, and belonging have been discussed as crucial elements of membership in the Columbiner community. Members must also personally invest in the community.

Personal investments

A component of membership, as outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986), involves personal investments on the part of community members. In order to truly be a member of a community, individuals must be required to personally invest in the community. In some cases, this includes investing time, energy, and social capital. In the case of the Columbiner community, members participate and invest in the community through the generation of original content. In the Columbiner community, original content is used like currency; Columbiners spend time and energy designing compilation videos, memes, and collages to convey their interest in the shooting. If a Columbiner does not have the ability to create content themselves, they will share other’s content. Columbiners look to the community, not only to make friends, but to consume content they enjoy, content about Columbine. Below is an example of original content produced by a Columbiner.

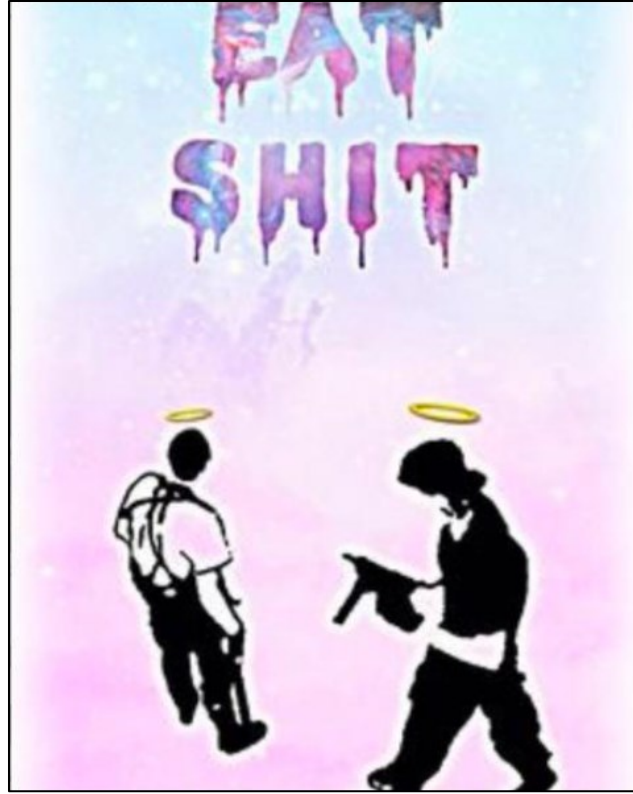


Figure 1 Eat Shit

In Figure 1, there is a shadow image of the shooters. There are halos above the heads of each. The shooter that represents Dylan is holding a gun at the ready. The one representing Eric has his back to the audience and appears to be wearing a gun harness. The photo has a pink and blue background and the words above the shooter read, “EAT SHIT”. The font is bold, also pink and blue, and looks like blood; the letters are dripping.

This image, created by the Columbiner who posted it, required personal investment. The Columbiner likely spent both time and energy making an aesthetically pleasing image that only other Columbiners would be able to admire. The colors make the image pretty. The images of the shooters with bloody profanity hanging above them make the image gory. As discussed, original content appears often in the data. Columbiners invest time and energy into the creation and distribution of the content. Once a Columbiner spends time and energy creating the content,

he/she shares the content expecting other Columbiners to admire their work through “likes” or comments.

The final component to membership is a shared symbol system. In a community where members feel safe and a sense of belonging inside the boundaries where they personally invest their time, members also share symbols that can only be understood through their membership in the community.

Symbol system

McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that membership in a community must also include a shared symbol system. The symbols shared in the Columbiner community are extensive. Many of the symbols are inspired by intimate knowledge of the shooters and extensive familiarity with the conditions of and surrounding the shooting itself. Some of these symbols include: trench coats, combat boots, words like rebel, vodka, natural selection, and wrath, the music by KDFDM, and Dr. Pepper. These symbols, especially when paired together, usually do not hold much meaning for others outside of the Columbiner community but for Columbiners they are significant. Below is an example of some of these symbols used by Columbiners.



Figure 2 Natural Selection and Wrath

Figure 2 consists of two edits created by one user. One is a picture of Eric; the other is a picture of Dylan. Each image is a collage of many smaller pictures; those smaller pictures mirror one another on each side of the shooter. Each image included mirrored shadow-like black images of the shooters in what looks to be the apparel from the day of the shooting. Eric's picture has the words "natural selection"; Dylan's says "wrath". Eric's image has the logo from the video game Doom and a black image of a gun along the bottom. Dylan's image includes photos of Dr. Pepper cans and Absolut Vodka bottles and a white image of a gun along the bottom. Both photos have generic desktop wallpapers for their backgrounds. In both photos, the boys are smiling.

These collages are complex and include several symbols shared in the Columbiner community. The words "natural selection" and "wrath" hold significance among Columbiners for several reasons. First, during the shooting, Eric wore a shirt with the phrase, "natural selection" and Dylan wore a shirt with the word "wrath" (Larkin, 2007). Additionally, Eric often wrote about the concept of natural selection in his journal entries; as argued by Larkin (2007), Eric's understanding of natural selection closely resembled the concept of Social Darwinism. In this sample, Columbiners often reference each term; they usually will use each term as a hashtag (#naturalselection, #wrath) at the end of a post alongside the Columbiner hashtag.

As mentioned, the Dr. Pepper cans are significant to Columbiners because they understand this to be Dylan's favorite soda. Although this significance hasn't been documented in earlier literature on Columbine, an image of two boys, found in the darker areas of the Internet and discussed later in the project, dead on the library floor after the attack shows a Dr. Pepper can located close to Dylan. There is also a photo that circulates the Columbiner community from

Dylan's childhood where he is drinking a Dr. Pepper. In her 20/20 interview, Susan Klebold (Dylan's mom), told Diane Sawyer about Dr. Pepper being Dylan's favorite drink. Columbiners all tend to agree this soda represents Dylan and thus, the Columbiner community.

The shooters often played Doom, a popular video game of the 1990's; Eric even used a school assignment to depict a scenario based on the video game (Larkin, 2007). The video game and references to it are popular among Columbiners. The video game represents Eric and his interests throughout the community. Dylan's nickname, according to his journals and home videos, was VoDKa. The "D" and the "K" are capitalized to represent Dylan's initials. Each of these symbols hold strong significance in the Columbiner community. The symbols not only represent the shooters, but they have come to represent the intimate knowledge of the shooters that one must possess in order to be a member of the Columbiner community. In order to be considered an insider, one must recognize, appreciate, and utilize these symbols in their Instagram posts.

Membership is only one component of SOC theory. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that there are four components necessary for a group to be considered a community. The second component is influence. The next section will address the influence of the Columbiner community and the members.

Influence

For a community to be understood as such, it must involve all four elements to be outlined in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) SOC theory. These findings have already demonstrated the existence of membership in the Columbiner community on Instagram. The second element outlines in the theory is influence. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue the following about influence in a community:

- (1) Members are more attracted to a community in which they feel that they are influential;
- (2) There is a significant positive relationship between cohesiveness and a community's influence on its members to conform. Thus, both conformity and community influence on members indicate the strength of the bond.
- (3) The pressure for conformity and uniformity comes from the needs of the individual and the community for consensual validation. Thus, conformity serves as a force for closeness as well as an indicator of cohesiveness.
- (4) Influence of a member on a community and influence of the community on a member operate concurrently, and one might expect to see the force of both operating simultaneously in a tightly knit community (1986:12).

Thus, influence in a community refers largely to the cohesiveness of the community and how validated members feel by the community. Columbiners exemplify this influence on and by the Columbiner community in various ways. One way that is especially stark in this sample takes place in the comment sections on Columbiner posts. Columbiners actively validate one another's content and viewpoints in a couple different ways: by "liking" posts, by commenting on the posts expressing approval, and by sharing one another's content. There are few examples in the sample of instances where outsiders attempt to criticize Columbiner interests. However, in those few examples the positive comments far outnumber the negative ones. This is evident in one example:



Figure 3 Columfine

In Figure 3, there are two women dressed up as Eric and Dylan. They are covered in fake blood; they are wearing backwards ballcaps and sunglasses. One Columbiner wears a black shirt with “WRATH” written in red on it; she is holding a cigarette. The other wears a white shirt with “NATURAL SELECTION” written in black on it; she is holding up her middle finger. The caption explains the Columbiners dressed up as Eric and Dylan for the second day of Abunai Con.²⁸ The caption makes a joke asking, “Are you a school shooter? Because you look Columfiiiine! ;) #columbine #ericharris #dylanklebold #columbinecosplay #abunai #abunaicon #abunai2016 #abunaicon2016 #ericharriscosplay #dylankleboldcosplay #columbiner”. The post was evidently popular in that it received 109 likes. There are several comments below the post:

Commenter 1: IT’S PERFECTTTT [two cat with heart eyes emojis]

²⁸ Shorthand for Abunai Convention, a convention in the Netherlands that highlights and promotes Japanese pop-culture and more traditional Japanese culture. Without interview data, I am unclear why the Columbiners chose to dress this way for the convention.

Commenter 2: it's lit

Commenter 3: Awesome i love it [black heart emoji]

Commenter 4: Columfiiiiine are you fuckin kidding me [four smile emojis]

Commenter 5: Don't you think that dressing up as mass shooters is really fucked seeing as how we live in a day and age where people are dying from mass shootings all of the time? I'm sorry but this is so wrong and the fact that your followers condone this makes me sick.

In this example, four Columbiners comment with their support for the convention costumes. One commenter, an outsider, comments with their disapproval. Although the critical comment is the longest, it has the least exclamative type/language. Three of the four supportive comments include emojis, two of those have more than one of the same emoji (usually used to emphasize emotion), and one is written in all capital letters (often used to express yelling and therefore, passion). The Columbiners show not only support for the original post but are actively enthusiastic in their admiration for the content. At the time of data collection, nobody had replied to the critical comment under the post; however, based on the cohesiveness demonstrated through the positive comments and the number of likes, it is possible that another Columbiner would have come to the defense of the original poster.

This post not only demonstrates the support that Columbiners receive from their community, it also exemplifies a way in which Columbiners contribute to their own sense of community. These two Columbiners went to a convention dressed as the shooters; in doing so, they very publicly demonstrated their membership in the Columbiner community. This demonstration provides visibility to the Columbiner community and can arguably provide other members of the community security in their identity. This post is also an interesting example

because is a clear depiction of the kind of humor used by Columbiners. Humor is one of the many tools used by Columbiners to create shared emotional connections; humorous content is often traded among Columbiners in order to strengthen the SOC. The idea of trading values to strengthen SOC is addressed in the process of fulfillment and integration of needs.

Fulfillment and integration of needs

In order for SOC to exist, members must feel that their needs are fulfilled by the community and integrated into the community. McMillan (2010) argues this component of SOC includes the following principles:

- (1) Communities meet member needs
- (2) Strong reinforcements to belong include status, success, competencies of other members
- (3) Shared values – or consensual trading
- (4) Integrating needs and resources – or complementary trading
- (5) Transformative trading – teaching skills
- (6) Generative trading – handing off responsibilities and roles from one generation to the next (2010)

Columbiners demonstrate the integration and fulfillment of needs in each of the ways outlined by McMillan (2010). The Columbiner community meets the needs of members by providing an environment for relationship formation, for debate on social issues, and for a platform to discuss issues that directly affect young people. Columbiners receive reinforcements through success demonstrated by the number of likes on a post, the quality of the comments on a post, and when other Columbiners share their original content. Consensual, complimentary, and transformative trading all take place in the Columbiner community through Instagram posts.

Generative trading also occurs; generations, in this sense of the term, does not refer to conventional constructions of generation (i.e. Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennial, or Gen Z) rather, it refers to changes in groups of individuals who participate in the Columbiner community across social media platforms where participation is measured through time spent creating content and engaging with others' content. Some Columbiners in the community exist as Columbiners on Tumblr and Reddit in addition to Instagram while others only exist on Instagram. One specific example demonstrates these different types of trading as they play out in the Columbiner community.

The post is a video compilation with 258 views (at the time of data collection) and 19 comments. The Columbiner who posted the video notes that she is posting on her birthday. Some of the comments are just wishing her a happy birthday, others include “thank you” comments from the original poster; those are excluded in this description. The other comments are stated for their significance. The caption reads,

When you spent two days on an edit, trying to do it best, but it turned out as usual, by the way today is my birthday. I'm just saying. #ericanddylan, #ericharris #ericharrisanddylanklebold #dylanklebold #dylankleboldandericharris #dylananderic #columbinehighschool #columbine #columbinemassacre #columbiner #schoolshooters #rebandvodka #vodkaandreb #truecrime #tcc

The comments read:

Commenter 1: No problem²⁹ [two smile face emojis] You're one of my favorite editors, and you're just so damn sweet! [two red heart emojis]

²⁹ This comment is likely in response to another comment that had been removed prior to the time of data collection.

Original Poster: Jesus girl, what the hell you doing with my heart? Love you
[heart eye emoji]

Commenter 2: ...I love your edits so much and all the other stuff. You are
amazing. [two smile face emojis]

Commenter 3: ...I love your edits so muchh
[...]

Commenter 14: Oh my gosssh im so sorry im late but I love your edits and I
hope you had an amazing birthday [smile emoji; celebration emoji; two heart
emojis]
[...]

Commenter 16: i met your account recently and already is one of my favorites
columbine edits accounts [black heart emoji] happy birthday bby (sorry im late
and sorry too my bad English)

In this example, Columbiners demonstrate the amount of love and support in the community among members. In the event of the original poster's birthday, other Columbiners take time to wish her a happy birthday. While wishing her a happy birthday, they also offer her praise on her compilation video and even on previous edits and posts made by her.³⁰ Her posts receive high numbers of likes, views, and comments compared to others in the sample. This is demonstrated by the 258 views on this one post. The Columbiner who posted this edit has status in the community and her posts are successful because of the admiration and attention they receive; her needs are met by the community and she participates in each type of trading outlined

³⁰ This particular Columbiner posted numerous edits in this data sample. Unlike some other Columbiners, she revealed her gender to her followers; thus, the pronouns "she/her" are used in the descriptions.

in SOC theory (Chavis, 2010). As stated previously, Columbiners look to their Instagram community to build relationships, to discuss social issues, to create and share content, and generally, to be young people and to use the Internet in a way that is similar to peers. In this sense, the needs of Columbiners include: (1) feeling a sense of belonging; (2) freedom and safety to be themselves; (3) to make friends; (4) to participate in important debates about youth-centric issues, in this case school shootings; and (5) to have a creative outlet. In this post, we see how one user receives fulfillment of each of these needs from community members; in her replies we also see other Columbiners' needs validated. We see how her needs and the community's needs are integrated in these posts.

This research has thus far demonstrated the first three components of McMillan and Chavis's SOC theory. The final component to SOC involves shared emotional connections. As already demonstrated and to be discussed extensively, Columbiners use their online community to create and maintain these shared emotional connections through every single post and interaction.

Shared emotional connections

McMillan and Chavis (1986) outline many ways that communities create and maintain emotional connections shared between members. They provide several examples: shared memories, group rituals, traditions, shared knowledge, and shared symbols. While the discussion of membership already touches on shared symbols, there are many different symbols that are used by communities to create emotional connections, many of which are used by Columbiners. Boero and Pascoe (2012) argue, "In using rituals and tools, members are building and maintaining a community as well as crafting individual online identities. Members create, sustain, and defend the contours of the pro-ana world and the identities of members of it through

group rituals and the deployment of individual tools” (2012:49). Much like the pro-ana community examined by Boero and Pascoe, Columbiners use shared emotional connections to sustain their SOC, to police group boundaries, and to create a sense of belonging among members. This section will provide a brief example for each of the following: (1) shared memories; (2) group rituals; (3) traditions; (4) shared knowledge; and (5) another example of symbols shared among Columbiners. Each of these types of shared emotional connections contribute to an overall sense of belonging and solidarity among Columbiner community members.

Shared memories

Columbiners have many shared memories including: the number of victims in the shooting, memories of events that occurred on home videos left behind by the shooters, and memories of the shooters’ experiences with bullying and depression. Each of these will be discussed in this research but this section will focus on the number of victims in the shooting. Columbiners are very passionate about including the shooters in the total number of victims from the Columbine shooting. Columbiners argue that in media coverage of shootings, headlines sometimes fail to include the attackers who commit suicide in their tally of fatalities; for example, “13 Killed in Columbine Massacre.” Columbiners strongly believe it is important to include Eric and Dylan because of their understanding of the boys as victims. Here is an example:



Figure 4 13 Victims

In Figure 4, a Columbiner alters a popular meme shared among young people across social media.³¹ In this meme, the main person is seen with veins popping from his forehead and neck. He is sitting in what appears to be a classroom at a desk next to a girl. Above the image, the text reads: “When someone says there were only 13 victims at Columbine.” Across social media platforms, young people often use this same image and alter the text according to the context of the post. This meme is often used to convey frustration and is always meant to invoke laughter.

³¹ This meme is known on social media as the “Trying to Hold a Fart Next to a Cute Girl in Class” meme. More information can be found here: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trying-to-hold-a-fart-next-to-a-cute-girl-in-class>.

As mentioned, Columbiners argue there were 15 victims of the Columbine shooting, including the shooters. Columbiners understand the shooting as a suicide and thus, find it unacceptable for the shooters to be excluded from the number of victims. Columbiners argue the shooters were victims of bullying and that they suffered from depression. As such, they can't be held solely responsible for the shootings; Columbiners believe the alleged bullies are just as responsible for the shooting as Eric and Dylan. Columbiners are passionate about the victim-status of the shooters. In the community, this understanding of the shooters is necessary for individuals to be considered Columbiners. According to Columbiners, it is truly unacceptable to say there were only 13 victims in the shooting. This is a fact in the community but remembering the shooters as victims of the attack is a significant shared memory among Columbiners. This shared memory is a critical component in the sense of community among Columbiners on Instagram. In addition to sharing specific memories, Columbiners have rituals that community members are expected to participate in.

Group rituals

Members in any community are expected to partake in certain rituals to demonstrate membership in the community. Through these rituals, Columbiners develop a discourse that facilitates SOC. Shared rituals allow Columbiners to connect with one another and lay claim to a Columbiner identity. One such ritual involves the content of posts. Columbiners, like other Instagram users, are expected to post content that will be consumed by others. Instagram provides a stage for performances for users. By using #columbiner, members hope to create content that will appeal very specifically to other Columbiners. The rituals for Columbiners goes as follows: (1) Create or find unique content that other Columbiners on Instagram will want to consume; (2) Upload the content to Instagram and add a caption with hashtags and, sometimes,

emojis; then, (3) If the content was created by another user, give credit to that user for their work. As evidenced by the sample data, those who run Columbiner accounts are expected to post content regularly.

Columbiner content is considered legitimate on Instagram if other Columbiners find it appealing, either because it is funny, cute, relatable, unique, or pretty. To make content more unique, Columbiners will search the Internet for less-known facts about the shooters. They do this by watching home videos of the shooters, by reading the shooters' journals, or by searching for less popular images of the shooters. An example of this is below:

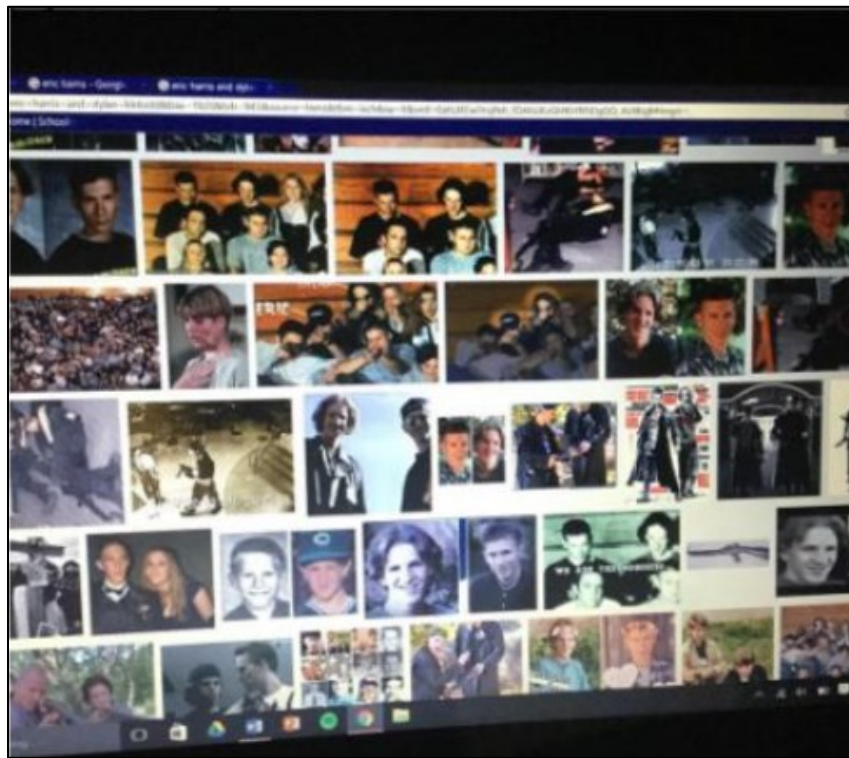


Figure 5 Image Search

Figure 5 is a photograph of the Columbiner's computer screen. The screen shows an image search for Eric and Dylan. It consists of approximately 30 different images, some of just

Dylan, others of just Eric, and some of both shooters. Some images are edits, presumably made by other Columbiners, others are images from their yearbook or from surveillance of the shooting itself. Some images are of Eric and Dylan when they were children. The caption reads, “im supposed to be doing homework but instead im looking at pictures of eric and dylan #ericanddylan #4201999 #ericharrisanddylanklebold #dylanklebold #ericharris #thecolumbinekillers #columbiner #rebandvodka #truecrime #eric #dylan #columbine1999 #wrath #naturalselection” and it has 12 likes. This image demonstrates one of the ways Columbiners look for original content to include in their next Instagram post.

Sometimes Columbiners will use humor to create content that other Columbiners will be interested in. Like in the example of Columbiners using an image search to find unique content, Columbiners will use the structure of popular jokes found among young people on social media and alter those jokes to appeal to other Columbiners. In many cases, Columbiners will alter a popular, mainstream meme with the intent to make other Columbiners laugh. Figure 5 above shows an example of this. In these cases, Columbiners use these alterations of mainstream Internet jokes to create that unique content that brings value to the community. Creating unique content through Internet searches or through meme alterations is step one of the most common ritual in the Columbiner community.

In other cases, Columbiners will combine these two tactics to create original content. They will reference specific instances from Columbiner content that only insiders are familiar with and combine that reference with a meme alteration. In these posts, Columbiners are expecting other community members to have the intimate knowledge from the videos and as a result, to find their joke humorous. For example, Columbiners sometimes reference a home video created by the boys that is meant to be a fake television commercial for car wax. In this example,

the Columbiner again alters a popular meme to make a very specific joke from the home video of the mock commercial:

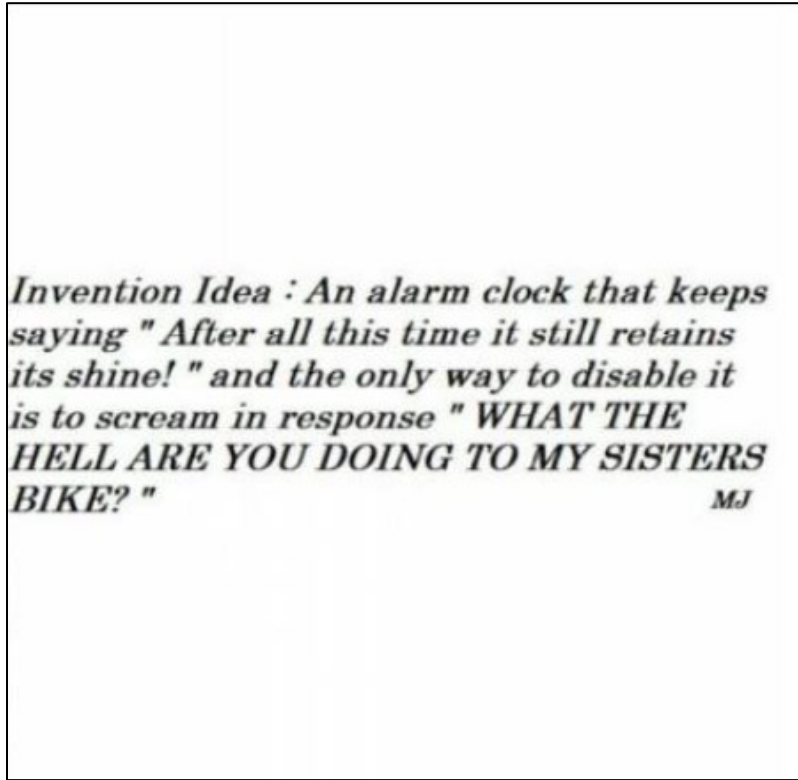


Figure 6 Invention Idea

Figure 6 only includes text that reads, “Invention Idea: An alarm clock that keeps saying, ‘After all this time it still retains its shine!’ and the only way to disable it is to scream in response “WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING TO MY SISTERS BIKE?” The text is black, and the background is white.

In this example, a Columbiner takes a popular, high-visibility meme from Tumblr and alters it to appear to a Columbiner specific humor. The Columbiner plays with a Tumblr post that

originally received over 200,000 “notes.”³² The original Tumblr post reads, “Invention Idea: An alarm clock that keeps screaming “WHAT TEAM!?” and the only way to turn it off is to scream “WILDCATS!!” in response.” The original Tumblr posts references a popular film from 2006 entitled *High School Musical*.

This Columbiner post uses the original meme as inspiration and alters it to reference the car wash home video left behind by the shooters. In the video frame, a bike is leaning against a shed; Dylan, standing next to the bike, looks at it and exclaims, “After all this time, it still retains its shine!” From behind the camera, Eric yells, “What the hell are you doing to my sister’s bike?” By referencing this home video, the Columbiner demonstrates familiarity with what is considered conventionally cool and funny on social media (the fake alarm clock invention meme) and alters it to poke fun at conventional humor by making a joke about Columbine shooters instead. This Columbiner shows other community members their necessary knowledge about Columbine; they do so in a way intending to make other Columbiners laugh. By referencing a Columbiner inside joke while using a popular meme, the Columbiner is able to poke fun at “others” that find the original post humorous but do not understand the Columbine reference. This exemplifies an instance where Columbiners use humor to relate to one another, to share an emotional connection through the ritual of creating original content.

After a Columbiner creates and uploads the original content to Instagram, they are expected to add a caption with relevant Columbiner hashtags. Part of the ritual of sharing content in the Columbiner community involves adding multiple hashtags to the post and each hashtag should reference Columbine. Many examples of these hashtags and the way they appear in posts

³² On Tumblr, a note refers to an instance when another user interacts with a post either by liking it, commenting on it, or sharing it. The number of notes denotes the popularity of the post. With 200,000 notes, the original meme is very popular among Tumblr users.

on Instagram can be seen in previous examples. Columbiners expect one another to use #columbiner and based on this sample should use hashtags with the shooters' names (#ericharris, #dylanklebold), the name of the shooting (#columbine, #columbineshooting, #columbinemassacre), hashtags that include the shooters nicknames (#rebel, #vodka, #reb), and hashtags with shared knowledge about Columbine (#15victims, #naturalselection, #wrath). Columbiners in this sample usually use as many Columbine-related hashtags as they can think of. This way, other community members will be able to easily locate the other posts on the hashtag topic.

Finally, this ritual concludes with giving credit for edits created by other Columbiners. As mentioned, Columbiners sometimes choose to share others' edits especially when they find the post funny or well-made. This is usually acceptable among Columbiners as long as the Columbiner gives credit to the original creator of the content. If the Columbiner doesn't know who created the content, it is also acceptable to say something like, "Credits to the original," acknowledging that they themselves did not create the content. However, it is not acceptable in the community to deviate from the ritual by neglecting to give credit for the work of the original creator of the content; it results in even more conflict if the Columbiner attempts to pass off the content as their own. In one of the posts from the sample, a Columbiner shares a video compilation complete with many images, video, text, and a soundtrack. In the original post, the Columbiner did not give credit to the user who had originally created the content. The creator saw the post and confronted the user who posted it:

Creator: If you take my edits, you must give credit, dude, what the hell?

User: oh I'm so sorry, you have your watermark on there so it's not like everyone's gonna think I made it or something

Creator: ok, it's nothing. Only next time let me know please

User: alright no problem, sorry again

This edit is especially demonstrative of the amount of time and intimate knowledge needed in order to be a “true” Columbiner who is respected in the community. The video compilation is intricate. It begins with an audio clip from one of the basement tapes; in this clip, Eric says, “Dylan can yell real good.” When Eric is done speaking, a fast-paced electronic song called Exostomp (Diskord Remix) by Flux Pavilion begins the play. The video switches through 21 different clips of the shooters and the images change at a pace that matches the beat of the music. The Columbiner who created this compilation edit is well-known in the Instagram Columbiner community. Because of the credibility this user has achieved in the community, they are able to show authority within the group and police rituals on posts containing the Columbiner hashtag (Boero and Pascoe, 2012). In addition to shared memories and group rituals, Columbiners also have traditions expected to be honored and celebrated across the community.

Traditions

As mentioned above, this data collection took place shortly after Dylan’s birthday. Although the timing was not intentional for the data pull, it provides for unique insight into one of the Columbiner traditions. Columbiners expect community members to remember several key dates: the birthdays of the shooters and the anniversary of the shooting. On those three days of the year, Columbiners making social media posts are sure to mention the significance of the date in their posts. Additionally, Columbiners will make edits or posts that are very specific to that date. Because the data collection took place shortly after Dylan’s 35th birthday, almost all of the first 30 posts in the data pull referred to Dylan’s birthday. Columbiners each wished him a happy

birthday, sometimes by commenting on another Columbiner's post instead of creating their own content for the occasion. Here is an example of one birthday post:

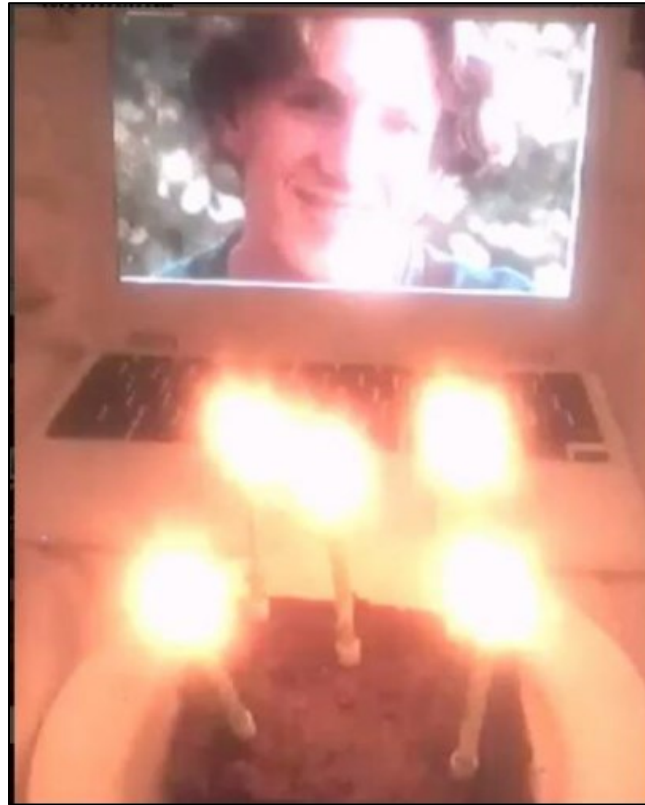


Figure 7 Dylan's Birthday Cake

Figure 7 is a picture of the Columbiner's computer screen. There is an image of Dylan smiling for the camera on the computer screen. It appears to be a yearbook photograph; he is smiling. Sitting in front of the computer's keyboard is a plate with a brownie or a slice of cake with five lit candles. The caption only includes hashtags, but one is #happybirthday. There are six comments and 73 likes. The comments read:

Commenter 1: THIS IS SO CUTE

Commenter 2: AWWW

Commenter 3: Awww this is so fucking sweet [double heart emoji]

Commenter 4: Am mad what he did to these young kids but happy birthday [celebration emoji, angry face]

Commenter 5: THATS SO NICE

Commenter 6: So cute

The other birthday posts in the sample are similar. They demonstrate the importance of these traditions in reinforcing SOC among Columbiners, specifically the significance of this shooter's birthday. The celebration of this birthday through the regular ritual of creating and posting content in the community helps Columbiners to feel like members of the community, to feel as though their needs are fulfilled and integrated, to feel influential within the community, and to share emotional connections with other Columbiners. As mentioned above, Columbiners also use shared symbols to help facilitate SOC membership. The next section will provide evidence of some other symbols are used by Columbiners to facilitate shared emotional connections.

Shared symbols – revisited

Symbols help Columbiners understand their membership in their community but also help them to feel connected to one another. The Columbiner community is discreet and largely anonymous, but through the use of a shared symbol system, Columbiners can determine who truly belongs. Once insider and outsider status are established, Columbiners can forge relationships and create trust within the community. The earlier discussion explains the significance of some symbols associated with the shooters. This section will focus on the clothing worn by the shooters and the significance of that clothing to Columbiners now. Eric and Dylan are infamously known for wearing trench coats and combat boots before and during the

shooting (Cullen, 2010; Larkin, 2007). Columbiners are also very familiar with the clothing of the shooters, like the t-shirts mentioned above and Dylan’s Boston Red Sox hat. Here is an example of the significance of clothing in the Columbiner community:



Figure 8 Best Friend Goals

In Figure 8, there are two image posts. The first includes three pictures: a trench coat, a Boston Red Sox cap, and a black t-shirt with the word “WRATH” in red text. There is text above the image that reads, “Freshman, wear these on the first day of school and you will have ladies lining up to meet you [three exasperated emojis] I can not stress this enough.” The second image is of two women’s torsos. The one on the left is wearing a white shirt with the phrase “NATURAL SELECTION” in black font. The woman on the right wears a black shirt with the word “WRATH” in red font, similar to the shirt in the picture on the left. Above the image is text that reads, “OMG this is best friend goals!! [heart eye emoji].”

Both images show the significance of the outfits Eric and Dylan wore. Columbiners are very interested in the clothing worn by the boys. In the image on the left, the Columbiner suggests that the clothing will make freshmen more attractive to “ladies” if they wear it on the

first day of school. Columbiners find the shooters attractive throughout the dataset. Eric is often sexualized while Dylan is often romanticized. Eric is often thought of as the more outwardly violent of the two; his violent masculinity is hyper-sexualized by Columbiners. Dylan is often thought of as sweet and cute; Columbiners understand him as someone who suffered from depression and who had a hard time loving himself. As such, they often express interest in sharing their love with him. Thus, this Columbiner suggests that freshmen will gain sexual and/or romantic attention from their girl classmates if they wear an outfit that is reminiscent of the two shooters.

In the image on the right, the friendship between Eric and Dylan is highlighted and admired. Often in this dataset, Columbiners reference how close the boys' friendship was. They spend time and energy admiring that friendship and sometimes yearning for it. This image is a playful spin on a popular social media meme in where an image of two people is accompanied by the text, "Best friend goals." Often times, these images depict feminine individuals with matching clothing or doing enjoyable activities; other times, the images reference a popular clip or image from a show or movie. In this example, Columbiners play with conventional understandings of femininity. School shooters are usually boys and as such, carrying out a school shooting is usually considered a masculine act (Kimmel, 2013). The image, however, shows two women in the shirts, the same shirts that two murderous boys wore during their masculine act. While this does not negate the masculine framing of school shootings, it does temporarily disrupt masculine undertones of school violence. In the image, the Columbiner idealizes a friendship where two girls wear shirts to match two male shooters in one of the deadliest mass shootings in the history of the United States.

In a similar vein, Columbiners reference other popular feminine memes while altering them in a way that challenges conventional understandings of the gender dichotomy (masculinity and femininity). One example of these memes is the “Just Girly Things” meme.³³ Here are two examples:



Figure 9 Just Girly Things

Figure 9 shows two meme images side-by-side. Both images have the original “Just girly things” meme at the top with a picture of Eric and Dylan below. In the image on the left, the text for the meme reads, “wearing combat boots.” The boots are on an individual with floral leggings, the shoelaces are untied, and the feet are posed for the photo. The picture paired with this meme and added by a Columbiner is from the surveillance camera during the shooting. They are walking through the school cafeteria. Dylan is holding the gun up and walking away from Eric who is standing with his hands by his side looking toward empty tables and chairs. Eric and

³³ According to www.knowyourmeme.com, the “Just Girly Things” meme was created on Tumblr in November 2011 and typically includes a personal favorite thing like makeup or clothing and an inspirational photo quote.

Dylan wore combat boots during the shooting and those combat boots can be seen in the surveillance images. Combat boots are now a trendy and popular footwear choice among feminine women, hence the significance of the “just girly things” meme.

In the second meme, the text accompanying the image states, “having the perfect first day of school outfit.” The image behind the text is a girl dressed in jeans, boots, and a patterned tank top. The viewer can’t see her face; the image shows the individual from her neck down. The image inserted below the meme is a picture of Eric and Dylan walking through their school hallway; there are lockers in the background. The boys are wearing sunglasses and trench coats.

In both memes, the Columbiners make fun of feminine individuals who wear combat boots to be cute without realizing the significance of combat boots to the Columbiner community. Outsiders to the community would relate to the femininity of wearing combat boots and share the just girly things meme. By adding the Columbine reference to the meme, the Columbiner pokes fun at wearing combat boots without realizing the same style of shoes were worn during a deadly massacre. The second image makes fun of feminine individuals who perceive an outfit of a tank top and jeans to be a better first day of school outfit than trench coats and sunglasses. In both cases, Columbiners show admiration for the boys’ style while also poking fun at conventional understandings of “appropriately” feminine things. Additionally, and as demonstrated in the two previous examples, the Columbiners play with conventional understandings of masculinity and femininity by pairing popular feminine meme images with hyper-masculine images of violent individuals.

These examples of symbology through fashion begin a discussion about how these young people in the Columbiner Instagram community and make sense of their social worlds. They demonstrate how Columbiners use their agency on social media to create discussions about

gender and sexuality in the context of their interest in school shootings. When understanding how young people make sense of social issues and influential social structures, it is first important to understand how, without demographic information, we know Columbiners are, in fact, young people.

Being young and figuring out cool

Ultimately, Columbiners use their online social media community platform to be kids. The concept of cool is one of the single-most distinct signifiers of youth that differentiates youth status from adulthood. The idea of cool, to describe the younger population, first emerged in the 1950's following the release of a jazz album *The Birth of Cool* by Miles Davis and alongside the conceptualization of teenagers in the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Danesi, 2014; Goiiia, 2009; Laughey, 2006; MacAdamns, 2001). Following the Industrial Revolution, child-labor laws, and school attendance mandates, culture shifted identifying youth-status as desirable and in need of preservation (Danesi, 2014).

As previously outlined, Instagram users are often young people. The data in this sample show through qualitative analysis that the Columbiners in this sample are presumably young people. The goal of this section is to show how members of this community participate in youth culture and use tools that other youth use in order to actively participate in an online community that consists of young people. Many of the tools that Columbiners use to interact with one another are also elements of Sense of Community Theory: a shared symbol system, shared language, and other norms developed in the community. Columbiners use memes, emojis, and online or social media language in ways that convey their youth status to each other and to outsiders. In this sense, Columbiners resemble other young people both on and off-line; they use the same tools that other youth uniquely use online. Columbiners use these tools to convey

coolness to one another. Like other young people, Columbiners use some elements of language that can be understood by anyone on social media, but they also use symbolic language that only holds significance because of the norms that exist in their community. When navigating adult structures, young people often find ways to challenge or reinforce adult understandings of these structures. One way they do so is through their interaction with the idea of what is cool or uncool.

Often times over the course of history, young people have navigated “coolness” in order to make sense of their social world. With the access to technology and social media that today’s young people have, young people have opportunities for self-expression that previous generations couldn’t have imagined (Kahn and Kellner, 2008; Kellner, 2014; Turkle, 1995). As Danesi writes,

The concept of cool emerged as a part of a display of social rebellion – a placid and tacit form of rebellion. The rebellion was, in part, against alienation. Being cool allowed young people to connect with each other, and thus to combat the sense of angst that the modern world generated...Cool is no longer an expression of rebellion. It is now simply a way of describing appearance and sociability. As we venture more deeply into the Age of the Internet, the synergy between youth culture, social chance, and economics is taking on a new modality... (2014:45).

In other words, while young people of previous generations would use in-person interactions to figure out what was cool and what was not, young people today use social media and the Internet to share those meaning making processes publicly and in text. Danesi (2014) argues that young people originally used coolness to create culture, through language, music, and

clothing, that was explicitly theirs and separate from adult culture while also participating in adult institutions.

In addition to addressing the central research questions of this thesis, this section of the findings will address several key questions that emerged during the course of this research. First, how do young people interact with adult institutions and broad social structures, keeping in mind CYS understandings of youth agency? And how do they use their own understandings of what is cool and uncool to reinforce or challenge the structures that exist across adult institutions as well as youth cultures? Each section will address how Columbiners use tools, like language and music, and how their use of those tools is similar to or dissimilar from communities with seemingly mainstream interests social media. It will address how they use the tools to challenge or reinforce adult understandings of what the tools “should” look like. Lastly, it will explain what the use of the tools can tell us about how Columbiners create dialogue about their broader social world.

Cool language

Columbiners, like many young people on the Internet, have unique language that can be unfamiliar for outsiders, or adults. Often this language is used to convey humor or to be relatable to those consuming the content, and in simpler terms, other young people. There are many examples of the ways that Columbiners use language to participate in broader youth culture online. Columbiners use the same language to convey humor as other young people do online. One example of this is expressing emotion through the use of emojis. People online use emojis in order to further convey an emotion that they don't necessarily think the text alone can convey. It is used for emphasis of that emotion. Here are some examples of emojis used by Columbiners:



Figure 10 Emoji Examples

Figure 10 shows a compilation of some of the emojis that appeared most often in the sample. Often times, Columbiners accompany their text with emojis to emphasize the emotions they were feeling when they were writing. Most youth use similar emojis on social media in an identical way. Using emojis, correctly, is an important way for young people to show other young people how cool they are. In an online community, using the wrong emoji at the wrong time can cause one to lose social capital; contrastingly, the correct use of emojis can help a user to gain credibility among their community members. The first two rows of emojis are used often by individuals on social media, regardless of age. The bottom row of emojis are used often by young people and, seemingly, more often by Columbiners.³⁴

The heart emojis and the kiss and heart eyes emojis are often used to convey love and affection. This is true for this sample; Columbiners use these emojis when they talk about their attraction to the shooters or their admiration towards one another. As discussed above, these emojis were used in posts about Dylan's birthday or when one Columbiner was admiring the

³⁴ My understanding of emoji use on social media is through anecdotal evidence in my own use of the platform.

work of another Columbiner. Columbiners who wanted to convey strong feelings of admiration would sometimes use several of the same emoji in order to convey an overwhelming amount of admiration.

In this sample, the skull, pistol, and bomb emojis are used more often by Columbiners than one would perhaps see with more mainstream youth. This is due to the fact that Columbiners likely talk about guns and bombs more often than other communities online. The skull emoji, however, is used often across social media platforms particular among young people. It is used to convey the phrase “I’m dead” which is shorthand for the idea of laughing so hard one dies. Although it may seem morbid or unconventional to adults, it is used so often among young people that it doesn’t hold morbid significance to them; instead, it is understood as something appropriate to say when something is extremely funny.

Another example is text alteration and the use of text symbols to convey emotion or hilarity. Young people on social media will sometimes alter text to depict yelling or losing control. When they do so, they capitalize entire sentences or the backend of a sentence. Sometimes a young person will start the sentence in lower-case but shift to uppercase toward the end in order to convey loss of control because of anger, excitement, or laughter. Here is an example:



Figure 11 Dylan's Ponytail

Figure 11 shows four pictures of Dylan. In each picture Dylan is wearing a dark colored shirt and sunglasses. Each picture shows Dylan from the side so that the viewer can see his hairstyle, and, in each photo, his hair is pulled back into a ponytail. The text above the images reads, "loOK AT THAT PONYTAIL." At first glance, an outsider or someone unfamiliar with Internet language and culture may think the capitalization is a result of a typo or that it is unintentional. Whereas, a young person who is frequently on social media would understand that the style of typing, that text language, is completely intentional. Young people, including Columbiners, use this style of typing to indicate emotion. In this example, the emotion is excitement. The creator means to capitalize the sentence part of the way through to signify, in text, not being about to contain their excitement any longer.

The use of this text manipulation is completely intentional and is the first example of how Columbiners use language in a way that symbolizes their youth status. Additionally, this is an example of Columbiners using language in a “cool” way; using this text alteration to convey emotion is something that all cool young people on social media use. Young people use capitalization in a way that is not normative among adults or within adult structures. While it would be unprofessional or illiterate for an adult to use this capitalization, young people disregard those adult conventions in favor of conveying emotion during a technological era. Sometimes Columbiners use certain phrases that are understood in online youth culture to convey humor. Young people online, in memes and in posts more generally, will use certain phrases to introduce an upcoming joke. As an example, young people often will start a post with “When...” and end the post with punctuation. Usually the scenario that follows the word “when” is a humorous one. This phrase is used often in the sample data and is demonstrative of language used online more broadly. Each time a Columbiner sets up a meme or a post with this word, it is meant to be humorous to others in their community. Here is an example of a meme created by a Columbiner:



Figure 12 School Shooting at 11

Figure 12 is an image of Dylan running towards what seems to be a road. He has on his sunglasses and hat with a dark shirt and khakis. The text above the image says, “WHEN THERE’S A SCHOOL SHOOTING AT 11.” The post has 13 likes and one user commented: “dat ass.” The Columbiner who created the meme intends for it to be read as humorous. It is implied that if there were a school shooting at 11, one could see Dylan running hurriedly toward it. The image isn’t very clear implying that he is either running very fast or the time is close to 11 and he is in a hurry. Memes like this are meant to be relatable; thus, a Columbiner would be able to relate to the depicted image of Dylan. A Columbiner could also be seen running quickly toward the school shooting. Other Columbiners likely laugh at the image because it is funny and, simultaneously, relatable. Another component of the humor is its inherent darkness. Others,

adults and other youth alike, would likely feel uncomfortable seeing this image and wouldn't respond with laughter. Additionally, a comment like, "dat ass" would almost certainly not be made by someone outside of the Columbiner community.

Here is another example of the phrase, "When..." being used in the Columbiner community:



Figure 13 Doom and Chill

Figure 13 depicts Eric Harris staring at a camera with a dumbstruck facial expression. He appears to be sitting in a room in a school, either the cafeteria or a classroom. He is wearing a KMFDM band t-shirt and his mouth is gaping. The text above the image reads, "When she hits u with that 'can we do something else' 7 hours, 20 mins & 40 seconds into doom n chill". In this

meme, the Columbiner takes a phrase, “Netflix and chill,” that other young people understand but alters it to appeal to a Columbiner audience. The phrase “Netflix and chill” is often used by young people on the Internet and it has a sexual connotation. The phrase first gained popularity in 2015. It is commonly understood that “Netflix and Chill” actually means participating sexual activity while Netflix plays in the background.

In this meme, the Columbiner replaces Netflix with Doom. Doom is a previously mentioned 1993 video game that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were avid fans of. In 2016, a newer version of Doom was released and became popular among young people once again. By replacing Netflix with Doom, the meme plays with the ideas of violence and sexuality. This is a meme that outsiders, in this case other young people, understand and may even find funny if the image wasn’t paired with a picture of Eric. Adding the picture of Eric intentionally others outsiders while making Columbiners feel included. Older individuals likely wouldn’t understand the various components of the joke. In this example, the Columbiner is rejecting adultist humor and adult understandings of what “should” be funny. It also, in referencing sex like the original phrase insinuates, rejects adult understandings of what sexuality “should” look like. Conventional adults do not agree with young people having sex, never mind young people taking breaks from sex to play violent video games.

Columbiners, and young people more generally, use memes to emphasize language. On some other social media platforms like Facebook or Tumblr, young people can have entire conversations communicating solely through memes, with little to no additional text. In several instances in this data set, Columbiners post a meme without a caption, communicating solely through the language of memes. Members of the Columbiner community are expected to

understand those memes and to find them humorous without a need for additional text. Here is an example:



Figure 14 Chanel v. Walmart

Figure 14 includes two separate posts made by the same Columbiner. In the image on the left, there are two book covers: one is *No Easy Answers: The Truth Behind Death at Columbine* by Brooks Brown and Rob Merritt, and the other is *Columbine* by Dave Cullen. The text above the side-by-side book covers reads, “Chanel vs. Walmart.”

Young people attempt to convey emotion in many ways on the Internet where much interpersonal communication is limited to text rather than facial expressions and voice inflections. Thus, their language has adapted to reflect those emotions even when they are not physically in the other person’s presence. Emoji-use and text alterations make up only a few of the ways Columbiners alter language in a cool way. Additionally, language is only one way that we can determine Columbiners are young people. Another way is through their use of music to convey meaning.

Cool music

Music plays a crucial role in helping young people make sense of their place in their own social world and the complex social issues that impact their everyday lives. Post-industrialization, child labor laws were created resulting in a desire to preserve youth and thus, a meaningful distinction of youth status from adulthood. With this new distinction, young people began to create their own culture including style, interests, language, and hobbies; youth culture during the 1960s and 1970s was heavily influenced by music like hip-hop, punk rock, and jazz (Ibrahim and Steinberg, 2014). These genres of music were created and consumed by young people; the music and the lyrics reflect the conflicts youth have with adult institutions and values systems; the music gives young people a chance to be critical of their social world and the social issues that surround them. In response to the political movements of the 1960s, adults began to view adults as a threat to their lives; punk and hip-hop were deemed “devil’s music” and thus, the youth culture centered around this music was considered dangerous and different from adult norms (Ibrahim and Steinberg, 2014). Since the emergence of this music and therefore, of youth culture, adults have been quick to label youth cultures and youth communities as deviant. Critical youth scholars have used a critical approach to determine how deviant youth communities actually are.

Music, the consumption of and the replication of, has been studied by youth scholars to determine how young people make sense of their world and the issues surrounding them. CYS scholars use music to make pedagogical arguments about the best ways that youth learn (Lin, 2013; Malott and Porfilio, 2014) CYS studies have used music to allow kids to have critical discussions of complex social issues like racial inequality and income-based inequality (Lin, 2014; Malott and Porfilio, 2014). Once such CYS study examines the “soundtracks” of school

shooting fandom communities online; the researchers take a critical look at the music used in the content of school shooting fandom communities (like Columbiners) and the role of music in the formation of a cultural script of school shootings (Kiilakoski and Oksanen, 2011). Music is a cultural product that is embedded in and informing of the cultural script.

Some shooters who left behind media prior to a shooting have included music in that media. Eric and Dylan were huge fans of German Industrial Metal and used lyrics from bands like KFD FM and Rammstein (Kiilakoski and Oksanen, 2011). Shooters and fans of shooters since 1999 have referenced this same music in the school shooting fandom communities examined by Kiilakoski and Oksanen (2011); Some shooters have used other music genres and bands in their media which are then recirculated by fans of those shooters. In these cases, shooters and fans of shootings “actively searched for lyrics that enforce the idea of revolutionary violence” (Killakoski and Oksanen, 2011:246) and enforce the cultural script of school shootings.

The cultural script is meaningful in a life form that views violence as a solution, combines manly behavior with violent acts and views school shootings as a way to reverse intra-generational power relations in schools (Killakoski and Oksanen, 2011:250).

In this sample, Columbiners are no different. They actively use lyrics, songs, and music genres that speak to the cultural scripts examined in Killakoski and Oksanen’s 2011 study. Below, Figure 15 outlines some of the music found in Columbiner Instagram posts.

Table 1 Columbiner Music Use

#	Artist	Song Title	Genre	Year	Lyrics of Significance
1	Exostomp	Flux Pavilion	Dance/Electronic	2014	“You got to pick yourself up/You got to jump up high”
2	Zephyr	Gas Pedal	Hip Hop/Rap	2016	“Slow down, grab the wall/Wiggle like you tryna make your ass fall off”

Table 1 (continued)

3	Grace	You Don't Own Me	Pop	2016	"You don't own me/I'm not just one of your many toys...Don't put me on display...Don't tell me what to do/Don't tell me what to say"
4	Hugo	99 Problems	Bluegrass	2011	"I got 99 problems but a bitch ain't one...Make the devil change his mind/It's a pound of flesh/But it's really a ton"
5	Black Coast ft. Maggie M.	Trndstr (Lucian Remix)	Dance/Electronic	2014	"Hey you can I learn your flavor...Bulletproof on another level"
6	Kali Uchis ft. Tory Lanez	Ridin' Round (Oshi Redo)	R&B/Soul	2015	"What the fuck you waitin' for...You and all your friends can open wide/Go on bite me...Fuck me over/I'll fuck you over worst than takeover to Japan"
7	A Flock of Seagulls	I Ran	New Wave/Synth Pop	1982	"I ran so far away/I just ran/I ran all day night and day/I couldn't get away"
8	Twenty-One Pilots	Fairly Local	Indie/Alternative	2015	"I'm evil to the core...What I want to save I'll kill...The world around us is burning/But we're so cold"
9	Muse	Super Massive Black Hole	Progressive Metal/Alternative/Indie	2006	"Ooh baby/Don't you know I suffer"
10	Joel Adams	Please Don't Go	Pop	2015	"I left my soul back there...Most nights I hardly sleep when I'm alone"
11	Halsey	Strange Love	Electropop	2015	"Everyone wants to know if we fucked on the bathroom sink...They think I'm insane, they think my lover is strange"
12	Eminem	Superman	Hip Hop/Rap	2002	"Till then just sit your drunk ass on that fucking runway ho...Don't put out, I'll put you out...End up with two back hands/Put anthrax on a Tampax and slap you till you can't stand"
13	Halsey	Coming Down	Alternative/Indie	2015	"I've got a lover I love like religion, I'm such a fool for sacrifice"
14	Noah Plause	Runnin	Electronic	2016	"I'm known for runnin' my mouth"
15	AWOLNATION	Sail (Unlimited Gravity Remix)	Alternative/Indie /Goth/Industrial	2011	"Maybe I should kill myself"
16	Childish Gambino	Camp Bonfire	Hip Hop/Rap	2011	"Move white girls like there's coke up my ass crack...I love pussy, I love bitches...I'm burnin' everything you mothafuckas talk about"
17	Petit Biscuit	Sunset Lover	Electronica/House/Dance	2014	"Don't you ever let me go, cause I will surely lose my mind...You drive me crazy"
18	DJ Zebo	Melanie (Remix)	Electronic/House	2014	"You're dangerous/I'm lovin' it...I took a hit from my devil's cup"
19	Noisa	Mundus Theme	Dance/Electronic	2013	"You don't fuck with a god"

Table 1 (continued)

20	Tujamo and Plastik Funk	Dr. Who!	Dance/Electronic	2013	“When the beat drops, you’ll be like Rambo”
21	EXGF	We are the Hearts	Alternative/Indie	2015	“We put our weapons down... We are the hearts and the future runs through our bones”
22	Birdy	Skinny Love (Vanic Remix)	Dance/Electronic	2014	“Staring at the sink of blood and crushed veneer”
23	G-Eazy	Fried Rice	Hip Hop/Rap	2010	“I’m a dog, I’m a hound... It’s a disaster, to her I’m a drug... I give in to every groupie with a fat butt... What that bitch say?”
24	Ke\$ha	Warrior	Electropop	2012	“We were born to break the doors down... We are the misfits, we are the bad kids/The degenerates... We’re the ones who flirt with disaster... Cut the bullshit out with a dagger... Till we die we all gonna stay young/Shoot the lights out with a machine gun... Fight for the fuckups... Live like it’s our last night alive”

The majority of the music used in Columbiner Instagram posts aligns with the Electronic Dance Music (EDM) genre. In a 2012 *Culture* piece for the *Atlantic*, Bogart argues, “The emergence of EDM—the youth music movement of the moment—resembles the arrivals of jazz, rock, and hip-hop in a few key ways, from its backlash to its lineage to its mass appeal.” EDM has been around for decades but became hugely popular among young people in the 2010’s with the re-emergence of underground raves and dance scenes (Bogart, 2012). Similar to the Hip Hop and Rock and Roll movements of the 1970’s, adults experienced moral panics surrounding EDM youth culture and drug use, sex, and illegal activities (Bogart, 2012). The other two genres we see most often in these data are Hip Hop/Rap and Rock (including Alternative/Indie and Industrial). All three of these genres align neatly with previous literature on youth cultures and the influence of music on the process of growing up (Danesi, 2014). This further contributes to the argument that Columbiners, like other kids, use social media to be young and to participate in popular culture through their consumption and creative reproduction of music in popular genres

among mainstream youth. In a unique way, Columbiners use these same specific genres of music to contribute to the cultural script of school shootings. Like the Jokela shooter and other shooters before him, the lyrics in the songs chosen for Columbiners' cultural products have meaning that contributes to the cultural script of shootings (Kiilakoski and Oksanen, 2011).

Using song lyrics to convey meaning in social media posts is not unique to the Columbiner Instagram community. Young people often add music to video posts on Instagram and other social media posts and in doing so, convey visual and audial layers of meaning to a text-based media platform. Columbiners used music for all of the video compilations in this sample. Some of those songs have lyrics while others do not. A list of significant lyrics can be found in Table 1. Some of the songs with the most disturbing lyrics are those that are most well-known among young people, regardless of their involvement in the “dark” corners of the Internet. For example, “Superman” by Eminem, “Sail” by AWOLNATION, and “Warrior” by Ke\$ha were each popular among the millennial generation during the past two decades. An affinity for these songs does not necessarily hold a deviant or disturbing meaning. The meaning in these posts, the meanings that contribute to the overall cultural scripts of school shootings come from pairing the song lyrics with the violent imagery in video content and violent language in the captions and comment sections. One shortcoming of this results section is the inability to share video content in visual form, however, a textual description of a specific video compilation for one case in the sample will provide more context for this argument.

Eminem's “Superman” ranked in Billboard's Top 100 in 2003.³⁵ It was a popular song among young people and continues to be referenced on social media. The lyrics are explicit and easily criticized. The use of this song in an Instagram post does not hold much meaning and in

³⁵ The 2003 top 100 billboard chart can be found here: www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/2003-04-12.

particular, does not add much to the cultural scripts of school shootings or the cultural script of Columbiner social media activity. This post is a video with a caption that reads, “Explicit Content [Hazard Emoji] it’s been a while since i made explicit edits #massacre #Columbiner #dylanklebold #ericharris #sex #explicit” and the warning accurately describes the content. The Columbiner created an edit that quickly switches between images of the shooters, pictures from the day of the shooting, and video clips from a pornographic video. While the use of the song and/or lyrics alone may mean nothing to Columbiners, pairing the music with these images is significantly meaningful. This particular cultural product creates a complex dialogue about sex, violence, masculinity, sexiness, sexual violence, and violence against women simply through adding music to a video and several photos. The video has 209 views at the time of data pull and can be assumed to be popular in the Columbiner Instagram community. The dialogue created through this post closely mimics the meanings behind the music choices of the Jokela shooter in Kiilakoski and Oksanen’s study (2011). Here the authors summarize those meanings, “What is important here is that videos clearly referring to school shootings contain music that is part of the cultural script of school shootings. The musical choices emphasize the masculine character and display feelings of rage and anger...Some of the videos edited by [Auvinen] include pornographic video clips and fantasies of near-rape” (Kiilakoski and Oksanen, 2011:262-263). The description provided by Kiilakoski and Oksanen closely matches the description of this video posted by a Columbiner.

This post is not the only of its kind, but it is one of the starkest example of violence being linked to sexual fantasies through the use of audial, visual, and textual data. In each case throughout this sample, Columbiners contribute to the cultural scripts of school shooting through the deliberate creating of media scripts. Although we operate under the assumption that these

Columbiners never went on to carry out an attack on their schools, they still contribute to the cultural script that informs future school shooters. As Kiilakoski and Oksanen argue, shooters and fans, or Columbiners, use media left behind by previous shooters to contribute to the media scripts that inform the cultural scripts of school shootings (2011).

Columbiners use music, specifically “cool music,” to figure out some complexities in their youth status. Transitioning from childhood to adulthood presents many challenges including navigating puberty, identity formation, and completing an education. Young people today experience added confusion from issues like bullying, depression, politics, violence, sex, and school shootings. Young people use social media, their communities, and unlimited access to the Internet to help navigate this confusion and find their identities in a complex world.

Making sense of confusion

All young people eventually navigate their own identity separate from the imposed understandings of self through adult institutions like school, family, church, and censored media. The process of negotiating identity, coming of age, seeking knowledge, and developing autonomy from adults sometimes results in confusion and chaos in the minds of young people. Scholars have examined this shift from childhood to adulthood and the confusion that results (Ambert, 1997; Brazelton and Greenspaw, 2000; Best and Bogle, 2014; Buckingham, 2000; Downing, 2013; Garcia, 2009; Hagerman, 2016; Holloway and Valentine, 2003; Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008; Ibrahim and Steinberg, 2014; Johnson, 2001; Masanet and Buckingham, 2014; Messerschmidt, 2012; Messner, 2000; Mintz, 2004; Moinian, 2006; Pascoe, 2003; Qvortrup, 1993; Woodhouse, 2008). As young people move toward adulthood, they are concerned about their emergent identities, their evolving romantic and sexual interests, their schoolwork, and their home life; in today’s age, these young people are also concerned about politics, race, violence,

and mental health. The Internet and smartphones offer an endless supply of information on these topics. Young people are able to find answers to any of their questions while simultaneously posting selfies on Instagram and sending messages to their family members. While they make sense of the usual, more mundane tribulations of growing into an adult they also use the platform to make sense of the more complex social issues that adults are also trying to understand but are doing so through their unique experience as youth.

This final section of the findings outlines how Columbiners use their online community to negotiate the complex issues that confuse all members of society. The first section explores how Columbiners navigate some of the more mundane aspects of being young: love and attraction; homework and school; and family and friends. Columbiners often use their platform to simply complain about the same issues other young people do on social media. The second section addresses how Columbiners use their platform to discuss the more complex, broad, and perplexing issues that face society. Columbiners, like other youth on social media, are using their community to ask difficult questions and to start dialogue on complex social issues. This section outlines Columbiner use of Instagram posts to address these issues: depression and bullying; sex and violence; and school shootings. These two sections address the primary research question: How do youth who participate in the online community of Columbiners understand school shootings?

The mundane, the everyday

As many scholars argue, social media offer young people an extension to their physical reality (Best, 2007; Boero and Pascoe, 2012; Hine, 2000; Pascoe, 2012). Online, young people participate in the same practices as offline. They use social media to create and maintain friendships, to explore sexual and romantic interests, to discuss their qualms with school and

homework, and to complain about parents or annoying siblings. Young people often use online resources to connect with their “real world” friends and family members when face-to-face communication is unavailable or when social media simply presents the simpler option. Oftentimes, social media offer an enhancement to face-to-face relationships, another avenue to communicate and share content with one another.

Because social media offer another outlet for young people, many of the conversations in online communities mirror what one would hear on school playgrounds. Just like during recess, young people online can be found chatting about their crushes, their friends and enemies, their parents, and their homework. As previously mentioned, many young people have multiple social media accounts and sometimes have multiple accounts on the same social media platform. In these cases, these youth create accounts to fit in to their various online niches, but they do not simply remove their day-to-day identity on these accounts. Thus, even in the darkest corners of the Internet, like the Columbiner community on Instagram, young people post about annoyance with homework assignments and gripes with siblings. This section will explore how Columbiners use their Instagram community to negotiate the more mundane struggles of young people: love and attraction; homework and school; and family and friends. The next section will discuss how Columbiners use the same community, and sometimes the same posts, to navigate the issues that plague our society.

Love and attraction

When young people begin to question the world around them and to make sense of their place within it, they are also making sense of their relationships with others based on how they see people closest with them interacting with others or how they see people in the media interacting with others (Ambert, 1997; Brazelton and Greenspaw, 2000; Boero and Pascoe,

2012; Buckingham, 2000; Downing, 2013; Holloway and Valentine, 2003). In adolescence, there is an increased amount of attention paid to romantic interests; kids start to pay attention to who “likes” whom and whom they are interested in dating. Navigating romantic interests and falling in love takes up time and effort among young people; it also helps youth find a place in their social world. One of the ways kids make sense of love interests is through romantic attraction to celebrities; in the case of Columbiners online, they explore romance and love as the concepts apply to romantic feelings toward Dylan and/or Eric. In this way, Columbiners look like any other young person on the Internet gushing over the famous people they are attracted to. They post images of Eric and Dylan with edits or captions that other young people would use for their significant other.



Figure 15 Sexy Eric

Figure 15 is a photograph of Eric where he is leaning against a structure with one arm while his other hand rests on his hip. He is posing for a picture and is smiling. The Columbiner who posted the content edited the photo with several “stickers” or images that can be overlaid on a photo. The images include hearts, stars, lips, and an arrow. The stickers with words read, “sexy,” “my love,” and “perfection.” A watermark in the bottom right corner of the image tells the viewer that the content was made through a service called “Blingee.” The caption on the post includes many hashtags and no additional words, “#ericharris #dylanklebold #schoolshootings #vodka #columbiner #reb #wrath #naturalselection #murder #guns #love #perfect #blood #drama #death #rip #columbinemassacre.” The juxtaposition of topics in the choice in hashtags is one that we see often in this sample, one between violence and love/romance. The image displays the same stark comparison. A person responsible for killing classmates overlaid with images of love and romance.

At the time of this data pull, Blingee was often used for similar posts involving stickers. The difference: non-Columbiners used these stickers to overlay images of a boyfriend, girlfriend, or significant other, or to overlay images of someone famous like an actor or a musician. This Columbiner is using a popular tool, Blingee, to create an image that conveys popular topics among young people: romance and love. Like other young people, Columbiners are trying to make sense of feelings of love and romantic attraction and are doing so through their fandom. Columbiners differ from others because their love and romance surround the Columbine shooters. Below is another example:



Figure 16 Fan Art

In Figure 16, a Columbiner uses a picture of herself to manipulate a cartoon depiction of Eric and Dylan. The original drawing shows Eric and Dylan kissing one another. The Columbiner edits the cartoon by photo shopping her own face over Eric's and depicted, instead, kissing Dylan herself. The caption on the post reads, "Oh Dylan (٠٣٠)". The caption includes an emoticon of a face smirking. This emoticon is typically used by social media users to depict flirtation or suggest something sexual.³⁶ The original artist of the cartoon depicted Eric and Dylan as kissing one another.

³⁶ Due to my age and my own familiarity with social media, I had a vague understanding of the use of this emoticon. However, I was able to find more information on the origin of the popularity of its use here: <http://www.dailydot.com/culture/lenny-face-4chan-israel-palestine/> and here: [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=\(%20%CD%A1%C2%B0%20%CD%9C%CA%96%20%CD%A1%C2%B0\)](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=(%20%CD%A1%C2%B0%20%CD%9C%CA%96%20%CD%A1%C2%B0)).

This Columbiner uses the post to follow a similar process as the previous example. The Columbiner is exploring love and romantic attraction to Dylan, instead. This image differs slightly in that the original cartoon depicts gay attraction between Eric and Dylan; the Columbiner alters it to convey hetero-romanticism between herself and the shooter. The original cartoon was also likely created by a Columbiner. Both the original and the edit convey how Columbiners use their social media community to explore what love and romance mean to them. Columbiners often use this community to express their romantic interest in one or both of the shooters. On Dylan's birthday, many Columbiners wrote notes in the caption expressing love and admiration for Dylan. In this way, Columbiners portray the shooters on social media the way that other young people portray their significant other or celebrity crush.

Young people have more to worry about than emerging feelings of romantic attraction and love. Family and peer groups provide other adult institutions that young people must navigate in order to transition from childhood to adulthood. Like other young people, Columbiners experience feelings of conflict with these institutions.

Family and friends

Moving from childhood to adulthood entails a shift from appointed social relationships through adult institutions like family and school to chosen social relationships through youth agency such as peer- and friend-relationships (Austin and Willard, 1998; Bettie, 2003; Eckert, 1998; Pascoe, 2007; Perry, 2002; Snow, 1987; Thorne, 1993). Columbiners use this social media platform to explore what friendship means to them. They compare their online friendships to those with peers in schools or in "real life". Columbiners explore what they think friendships should look like and sometimes base those expectations on their perceptions of Eric and Dylan's

friendship. Because of the community they maintain, Columbiners experience more significant friendships online than those they have in their schools.



Figure 17 Drinking Vodka Alone

Figure 17 shows Eric standing in a room wearing a white t-shirt, dark pants, a dark ball cap on backwards, and sunglasses. He is holding a shotgun and may be wearing a handgun holster across his back. In the image, Dylan faces away from the camera. He is wearing a black shirt and we can only see his back and right arm. In the caption, the Columbiner states, “A lot of people don’t like me.”

In this post, the Columbiner uses both the image and the caption to relate to other Columbiners while also drawing attention to the fact that making friends is difficult for someone with these interests. Columbiners often complain in their posts about people disliking them because of their interests and discuss difficulty making in-person friends that understand them the way online friends do. In doing so, Columbiners hope to relate to one another, to maintain their current online friendships by conveying appreciation for them, and to create new

friendships through relatability to their content. In a post with a simple sentence, the Columbiner is able to convey meaning to the community while also navigating and making sense of what friendship means to them.

In another post, a video compilation is captioned with the following, “It’s my birthday on Tuesday. I know I’m going to spend it drinking vodka alone again #columbiner #columbine #massacre #suicide #murder #ericharris #dylanklebold #ericharrisanddylanklebold.” Someone comments to say, “You should just talk to people online then” and the Columbiner replies, “online people are better than people [in real life] :).” The commenter replies, “Haha you got that right (even tho I talk to a lot of [people in real life]) but online people are more interesting.” The video compilation shows a few videos of the shooters left behind prior to the shooting. In this example, the text in the caption and the comments truly convey the significance to the community. Again, a Columbiner uses their Instagram community to talk about loneliness in their offline world, in this case talking about drinking alone on their birthday. Another user tells the Columbiner to talk to their online friends instead. The Columbiner again replies to the comment by stating that their online friends are better than their in-person friends, anyway. This exchange demonstrates the significance of friendships created and maintained online in the Columbiner Instagram community. It also conveys the same difficulty experienced by many young people that involves finding one’s place in a “youth culture” that is truly many groups and cliques of individuals with specific interests.

Homework and school

Since the emergence of formal schooling post-industrialization, kids have had the responsibility of completing homework and schoolwork per the expectations of school (Talbert and Lesko, 2014). School is an institution that is shaped by and consistent with adult value

systems (Talbert and Lesko, 2014). As such, young people have always countered conflict between their own values and those imposed on them through the education system. This conflict has been observed in the school environment through ethnographic methods, surveys, student-centric methodologies, and most recently, through online research (MacDonald, 2014; Janesick, 2014; De Lissovoy, 2014). Columbiners, like other young people both on and offline use their communities to discuss these exact conflicts with educational expectations.



Figure 18 Flipping the Birds

Figure 18 is a picture of Eric sitting in what appears to be the cafeteria in his school. His mouth is open like he may be speaking. He is wearing a black shirt. His hands are in the air and he appears to be giving the middle finger to someone outside of the camera frame. The caption of this post reads, “Not feeling it today, don’t want to go to school, can I just stay in bed all day? #EricHarris #Columbine #ColumbineMassacre #Columbiner #42099 #Murder #MassMurder #SchoolShooters #April201999 #Reb #Rebel #ColumbineShooters #15Victims #Massacre.”

This post, without the hashtags or the visual, seems like a nonchalant post from a young person who doesn't want to go to school this day. The Columbiner pairs this normative complaint with a photograph of a school shooter making a vulgar hand gesture and tags the image with violent words and references to the Columbine shooting. In doing so, the normative complaint about school becomes laced with violent undertones. Columbiners often use their social media communities to complain about the things that bother them on a daily basis and don't differ greatly from the bothers of other young people: school and homework. Below is another example:



Figure 19 Scool is Gei

Figure 19, a meme, includes photos of Eric and of Dylan. Both pictures are school photographs, the kind one would see in a yearbook. Each picture has stick figure bodies drawn

on to them from the head down. The title of the meme says: “Leaked Basement tapes.” Above the drawing of Dylan, the text reads, “scool is gei”. The Columbiner references the basement tapes to make a Columbiner-specific joke. The Columbiner argues that Eric and Dylan did not like school, as the text in the meme is meant to represent the dialogue of the people included in the image. By misspelling “school” and “gay”, the Columbiner references cool language used on social media platforms, like Tumblr, by other young people.

The Columbiner who posted this image is doing several things to convey meaning. First, they are reinforcing group boundaries by making a joke that references The Basement Tapes. The creator conveys that the overall gist of The Basement Tapes is Eric and Dylan discussing their dislike for school. The image is meant to provide humor for insiders in the community. Further, the image makes the indirect argument that Columbine happened because the boys disliked their school. This argument is only obvious to those who understand the reference and who participate in the shared knowledge in the community. Finally, the Columbiner who posts this image assumes it will be relatable because Columbiners, like other young people, also commonly use social media to convey dislike for their schools.

Both examples display how Columbiners use social media to complain about school and their conflicts with adult expectations surrounding education and do so in a way that is similar to other young people. Columbiners, like other young people, struggle to maintain interest in their schoolwork while doing everything that they have to do to transition from childhood to adulthood.

Columbiners must navigate the same, seemingly mundane issues that other young people face each and every day. Navigating things like family, friends, school, homework, love, and romance is not easy nor stress-free; thus, young people often take to social media to discuss their

frustrations, to vent, and to relate to one another. Unfortunately, these mundane cross-generational issues are not the only problems stressing out Columbiners and other youth. They often face even more complex, serious, and controversial issues like bullying, depression, sex, violence, and school shootings.

The heavy, the everyday

Hence, while post-boomer youth faced a life that was more complex, insecure, risky, and unpredictable than boomer youth, today's youth face even more dangerous and anxious times, with threats of terrorism, war, and large-scale apocalypse on the horizon, as the global economy sputters, possibilities for a better life diminish, and climate change and the dangers of ecological collapse increase to an alarming extent (Kellner, 2014:5).

Young people have always had to bear the weight of adult societal problems, although adults attempt to protect their kids from those stressors. Kellner (2014) argues that millennial youth face greater hardships than generations prior due to the economic climate, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the job and housing markets, and political division. Young people today have access to social media and constant use of the Internet, a point argued throughout this research, and that access comes with additional pressures and stress (Kellner, 2014). Kellner argues, "On the downside, youth today have always increasing pressure to participate in new media and social networking, producing anxieties and pressures on youth and often isolation even when they are connected with multiple 'friends'" (2014: 9). As discussed before, social media offer young people an extension to their everyday reality. Thus, young people can be insiders and outsiders in various communities across the Internet. Columbiners use their community to connect with others who share their interests.

In her research, Boyd argues, “Some teens – especially marginalized or ostracized ones – often relish the opportunity to find connections beyond their schools” (2013:89). She states these young people often have specific interests that are not encouraged in other social institutions like school and family. Social media and online interaction offer a layer of protection that is absent in face-to-face interactions; through interactions with strangers online, young people have privacy to discuss sensitive or intimate topics that may be embarrassing in the local context.

Young people have always struggled with identity formation during the transition from childhood to adulthood and with the formation of their identity, struggle with their own understandings of sex, violence, depression, bullying, and most recently, school shootings. Young people today have the ability to connect with strangers worldwide in order to find others who make sense of these phenomena in similar ways through the Internet. Columbiners use their online community to make sense of these topics.

Sexual violence

Historically, young people have had to rely on adult institutions and peer groups to navigate their understandings of sex and sexuality (Best and Bogle, 2014; Connell and Elliot, 2009; Foucault, 1976; Garcia, 2009; 2012; Heins, 2002; Masanet and Buckingham, 2014). With the emergence of social media, young people now have access to information on sexuality and can find groups online to discuss sexuality and to determine what sexuality means to them (Downing, 2013; Masanet and Buckingham, 2014). Like other youth, Columbiners use the Instagram community to explore and discuss sex and sexual feelings. Columbiners differ from other online communities in the ways they relate to one another in terms of sexuality. Columbiners openly talk about sexual violence in a way that is lighthearted and disconcerting. They often share memes to play with the conventional understanding of sexuality and to

challenge adultist understandings of acceptable sexuality. Columbiners reject the notion that violence isn't sexy; their posts argue that violence and violent masculinity are attractive.

Columbiners regularly discuss violence in a way that is startling in mainstream culture. In one example, a Columbiner shares a screenshot of a Tumblr post. The original post reads:

“I hate this blog and I hate your sick psychopathic ass. People become murderers because of shit u post. Die bitch”

The Columbiner replies:

“I've seen every episode of Criminal Minds, Dexter, Hannibal and [CSI]. I can kill you in 16 different ways and make it look like Donald Duck did it. DO NOT IRRITATE ME! OKAY?! GOD... #serial killer #Criminal Minds #criminal profiling”

The Columbiner adds this caption, “Dis bitch #columbiner #dahmer #truecrime #ericanddylan #blowme” and replies to a comment that reads, “i wanna fuckin kill myself” with “I started looking at serial killers when I was 8 years old I've wanted to die since.” This post exemplifies many instances of violence in the discussions on Columbiner Instagram posts. The initial Tumblr user tells the Columbiner to die using expletive language. The Columbiner responds with threats of murder. On the Instagram post, the Columbiner uses a hashtag referencing a necrophiliac serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer, and talks about wanting to die from a young age. A fellow Columbiner comments on the post to reference suicidal desire. In one post, homicide is mentioned twice, and suicide is mentioned twice. Columbiners regularly reference homicide and suicide in a way that normalizes violence in conversation. Further, by referencing Jeffrey Dahmer, the Columbiner draws attention to a link between violence and sex. As mentioned, Columbiners reference sexual violence in several ways throughout the sample; the next example is an even more explicit condonation of sexual violence.



Figure 20 My Room

Figure 20 is an image of Eric Harris, posed for a professional photo. In the caption, the author complains about how they do not have any friends nearby who understand their interest. The image is Eric sitting against a wall, leaning on his right hand. He has his left arm casually draped over his knee. He is smirking while staring at the camera. The text reads, “Who Can I Trick Into My Room First?” This particular Instagram post certainly conveys sexual violence—tricking a woman into one’s room is considered non-consensual sexual violence. However, this post is about more than tricking someone into a room. The Columbiner who posted it is drawing on their knowledge of Eric’s journal entries. In the original journal entry dated November 17, 1998, Eric Harris wrote: “[What I] want is [to] be surrounded by the flesh of a woman...I can taste the sweet flesh now—the salty sweet, the animalistic movement...Who can I trick into my

room first? I can sweep someone off their feet, tell them what they want to hear, be all nice and sweet, then “fuck ‘em like an animal”...”³⁷ The entire quote from this journal entry is even more violent; the full text is available in the referenced footnote. In this journal entry, Eric moves quickly from discussing a sexual fantasy to a violent fantasy. As such, by posting a meme with the quote attached, a Columbiner condones sexual violence. In addition, to an outsider, although this image clearly references sexual violence, the gruesome and detailed violence that the Columbiner is conjuring up with this image may not be accessible to those outside the Columbiner community. This is an example of how shared knowledge contributes to boundaries between insiders and outsiders in a community. Columbiners understand the extent of this reference because of their intimate knowledge of the journals left behind by Eric and Dylan. The caption to the photo does not address the sexual violence associated with the content of the post. However, by sharing the post, the Columbiner (whether knowingly or not) is condoning violent sexual behavior.

Columbiners in this sample often state that they do not condone or glorify violence; though their words say as much, the content they post do not align with the assertion.

³⁷ This is the entire quote from the journal entry. TRIGGER WARNING: The words used by Eric Harris are extremely violent, graphic, and jarring. However, this quote puts into context just how quickly Eric moves from sexual fantasy to violent fantasy.

“What I want is to be surrounded by the flesh of a woman, someone like [name blacked out] who I wanted to just fuck like hell, she made me practically come when she wore those shorts to work—instant hard on. I couldn’t stop staring at her and others like [name blacked out], and others who I want to overpower and engulf myself in them. Mmmm. I can taste the sweet flesh now—the salty sweet, the animalistic movement. Iccchhh liebe fleiscchhhh. ... Who can I trick into my room first? I can sweep someone off their feet, tell them what they want to hear, be all nice and sweet, and them “fuck ‘em like an animal, feel them from the inside” as Reznor [NB: an apparent reference to Trent Reznor, vocalist for the rock group Nine Inch Nails] said. Oh—that’s something else, that one. [Describes a video where] a guy is kidnapped and tortured like hell—total hell. I want to do that, too. I want to tear a throat out with my own teeth like a pop can. I want to gut somebody with my hands, to tear a head off and rip out the heart and lungs from the neck, to stab someone in the gut, shove it up to the heart, and yank the fucking blade out of their rib cage! I want to grab some weak freshman and just tear them apart like a fucking wolf. Show them who is God, strangle them, squish their head, bite their temples into the skull, rip off their jaw. Rip of their collar bones, break their arms in half and twist them around, the lovely sounds of bones cracking and flesh ripping, ahhh...so much to do and so little chances” (Larkin, 2007).

Columbiners regularly condone violence by sharing violent content, by laughing at violent content, by showing admiration for others' creations of violent content, and by speaking about sex in a violent way. Like other young people, Columbiners are actively trying to figure out their sexuality and the meaning of sex in their world; the difference in the Columbiner content we see here, and other references to violence and sex in mainstream culture, is the lack of subtlety. Popular media may often have a violent sexual undertone that scholars can pick apart and analyze (Cantor, 2000; Centerwall, 1999; Frymer, 2009; Garbarino, 1999; Schildkraut and Muschart, 2013). Columbiners blatantly link the two when discussing their sexual attraction to individuals who are famous for their violence.

Depression and bullying

Bullying and mental illness are commonly used to justify mass violence by young white boys (Cullen, 2009; Kimmel, 2013; Larkin, 2007; Leary, et al., 2003; Newman, et al., 2004; Reuter-Rice, 2008). There is value in studying these issues as separate phenomena in relation to school violence and as described above, many researchers agree that these phenomena do not cause school shootings. In this project, Columbiners do not separate the two concepts; in fact, Columbiners often interchange the two. As a result, these two concepts are paired together in these findings.

Columbiner understandings of the role of bullying and depression in school shootings are understandable when one considers the mass media coverage of shootings and the script the media follows after a shooting. Public media have perpetuated the aforementioned myths regarding bullying and mental illness as leading motivations behind school shootings (Schildkraut and Muschart, 2013). Shooters themselves have used social media to contribute to the perpetuation of these same myths. Columbiners, using media left behind by shooters,

participate in these same dark corners of the Internet to make sense of their understanding of the role of depression and bullying in shooter motives; Columbiners use this same content to make sense of the influence of bullying and depression on their everyday lives and on their interest in the Columbiner community. Shooters and Columbiners contribute to a cultural scripts of school shootings, one that involves bullied persons becoming depressed and carrying out school shootings to retaliate against bullies.



Figure 21 Wrong, Kiddo

In Figure 21, Dylan's head is photoshopped on top of a cartoon with finger guns. Dylan is wearing sunglasses. The text above the photo reads, "You can't be depressed, you're only a kid!" Under that text, next to Dylan's head is more text, "that's where you're wrong kiddo." The

meme created by the Columbiner is an alteration of a popular meme online, the “You’re Wrong Kiddo” meme.³⁸

This meme argues that kids can, in fact, experience depression. The finger guns and the word “kiddo” convey condescension toward the person assuming kids can’t suffer from depression. By placing Dylan’s face over the cartoon’s face, the post argues Dylan is the one arguing that it is wrong to assume kids can’t have depression. Because the post is generically referencing kids, it implies that the assertion at the top is made by an adult. Columbiners with shared knowledge of the motivations behind the shooting understand that the creator chose Dylan’s face because he has personal experience with being a depressed kid. The following example conveys this shared knowledge further.

³⁸ According to knowyourmeme.com, this meme originated on Tumblr where the original text read, “You can’t just respond to everything with finger guns” to which the cartoon replies, “that’s where you’re wrong kiddo.”

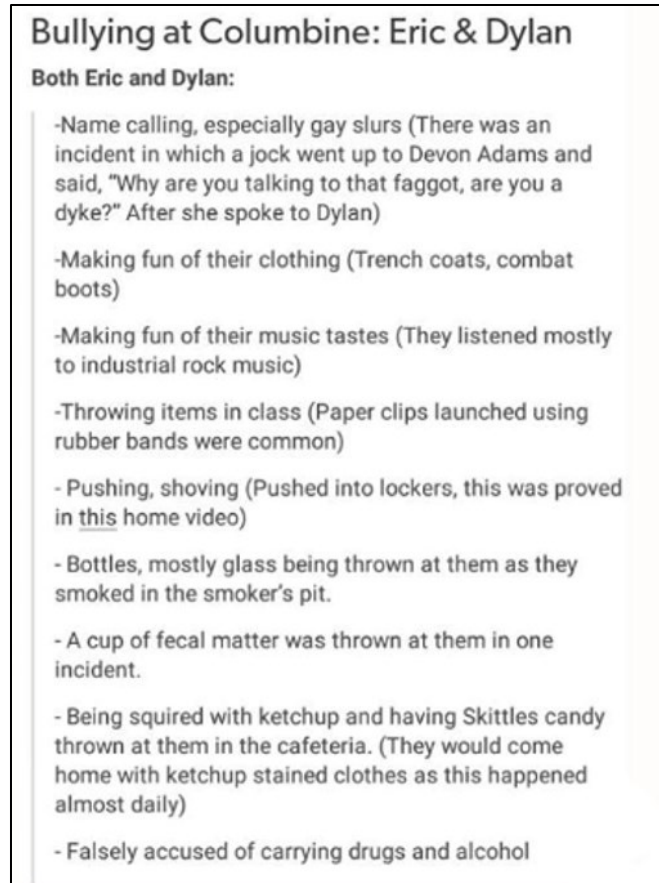


Figure 22 Bullying at Columbine

Figure 22 is a screen shot from Tumblr where a Columbiner outlines their understandings of Eric and Dylan's experiences with bullying at Columbine High School. The caption reads, "Hmph, and people say they weren't harassed at school. [shaking my head] #Columbine #Columbiner."

This post explicitly outlines how one Columbiner, and many other Columbiners, understand Eric and Dylan's experiences in their school with their peers. For my purposes, it does not matter whether these assertions have been proved to be truth or myth in scholarly work; it matters that those participating in this community understand these assertions to be truth. In fact, the understanding that Eric and Dylan experienced bullying is an essential pillar in the overall Columbiner understandings of why Columbine and other school shootings happened and

continue to happen. Columbiner understandings of school shootings will be discussed at a later point in these findings. However, the shared understanding that Eric and Dylan experienced bullying creates a point of relatability for Columbiners who also experienced bullying. This gives Columbiners another way to feel close to the shooters and to one another. These shared experiences allow community bonds to grow stronger. Sometimes Columbiners discuss their own experiences with bullying.

In one caption, on a post with a photo edit of Eric and Dylan, the Columbiner writes, “Have any of you ever been bullied? Personally I’ve dealt with it through out high school and being abused by my bullies #columbiner #ericharrisanddylanklebold #dylanklebold #ericharris #massacre #columbine.” Although this post does not receive any comments, it is significant that the Columbiner chose to open a dialogue about personal experiences with bullying among Columbiners. Ten other Columbiners liked the post. The post provides one example of how Columbiners relate to the shooters and relate to one another through their experiences being bullied. It is one of several examples in this data sample where Columbiners discuss similarities with the shooters.

As argued, Columbiners understand that the shooting was largely motivated by the boys’ experiences with bullying and depression. Since 1999, many gender and race scholars have examined why mental illness and bullying become a focal point in media coverage following a rampage school shooting. There are several studies that focus on the racist and sexist undertones of such media foci (Kimmel and Mahler, 2003; Kimmel, 2013; Klein, 2006; Mingus and Zopf, 2010; Poteat, et al., 2011; Tonso, 2009; White Watson, 2007). Columbiners, like other youth, use their community to help make sense of the issues that surround them. When individuals can find others with shared experiences, they are able to begin to tackle the complex feelings that arise

from those experiences. In addition to attempting to figure out bullying and depression, young people spend time online making sense of sex, and issues surrounding sex, like violence.

Schools and shootings

In addition to concerns about school, homework, friends, family, love, sex, depression, bullying, and violence, young people today live in a world where many fears plague their everyday lives. Experiencing a school shooting is one of those primary fears. Kids aren't the only ones who fear this phenomena, parents, politicians, school officials, and other adults also fear the occurrences of school shootings. Unlike some other societal issues of this magnitude, these events very uniquely affect youth: the shooters are young; the victims are young; the folks demanding change after an event are young. As a result, young people are becoming more vocal about their understandings of school shootings and their ideas for possible solutions.

Columbiners are similar to other youth in this: Columbiners use their community to understand school shootings, the motivations behind them, and ways to curtail future instances.

This section outlines how Columbiners make sense of the Columbine attack, how Columbiners use that understanding to make sense of other school shootings since Columbine, and how Columbiners make sense of their role in a community that spends time trying to understand school shootings. Columbiners use Columbine to understand the cultural script of school shootings and use their community to play a role in the cultural script of shootings (Kiilakoski and Oksanen, 2011). These meaning making processes are present throughout the sample, but the following three examples depict some specific instances.



Figure 23 Columbine Created Eric and Dylan

In Figure 23, several images are overlaid on top of one another. One image is a picture of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold wearing trench coats and sunglasses. They are standing next to one another. Another image shows people lined up outside of the high school, an image from the day of the Columbine shooting. This post also includes white text highlighted in black stating, “Eric and Dylan created Columbine/But Columbine created Eric and Dylan.”

This post depicts several understandings of the Columbine shooting. First, it argues that Eric and Dylan were treated poorly at Columbine High School by their peers. Second, the post argues the Columbine attack happened in retaliation to that treatment. In making these two points, the Columbiner argues the boys were justified in carrying out the shooting and that the schoolmates of Eric and Dylan share responsibility for the attack. Columbiners make sense of Columbine through their own experiences with bullying and isolation. Columbiners sympathize with the experiences of Eric and Dylan and therefore understand why the boys attacked those who bullied them. This understanding of the motivations of Columbine permeates the data

sample. Here is an example of how Columbiners use their understanding of Columbine to make sense of other shootings:



Figure 24 I Got a Gun

Figure 24 is a photo of Columbine High School. There are two shadows, one of Eric and the other of Dylan, walking toward the school entrance, wearing their trench coats. The image is black and white. Above the photo, text reads, “All those people who put me down You better get ready to run ‘Cause I’ve got a gun.” The post doesn’t have a caption, only hashtags. The text does not directly reference the Columbine attack; it describes using a gun for retaliation for bullying. The photo depicts Eric and Dylan walking up to Columbine High School. The

combination of the textual and visual components results in a direct reference to Columbine as retaliatory.

In this post, another Columbiner argues Eric and Dylan carried out the Columbine attack because of their treatment in school. This Columbiner also indirectly condones Eric and Dylan retaliating against their schoolmates for the bullying they experienced. The Columbiner using text that does not directly reference Columbine and can be used to describe other instances of retaliation with a gun. This post summarizes how Columbiners use their understanding of Columbine to help them make sense of other school shootings. Columbiners understand that many school shooters since Columbine have carried out attacks that resemble Columbine and conclude that these attacks were also motivated by bullying and retaliation. In a few posts within the sample, Columbiners reference Eric, Dylan, and other school shooters. Throughout the sample, Columbiners make sense of school shootings by drawing connections between their own experiences, Eric and Dylan's experiences, and one another's experiences. In doing so, Columbiners actively participate in the media script and cultural script of school shootings, even if unknowingly so. In the next example, we see how some Columbiners use their role in the community to contribute to this script in a different way:



Figure 25 Goodbye School

Figure 25 is a mirror selfie of the Columbiner who posted it. The viewer can only see from the Columbiner's hips down to their feet. Their left leg faces the mirror. There is a rifle leaning against the front of their thigh. A handgun is strapped to the side of their thigh. The Columbiner wears sneakers, khakis, and a black shirt. The caption only says, "Goodbye school #columbiner #massacre #pumpedupkicks #vintageculture #vSCO #alok #deadshot." The photo has 30 likes. One of the hashtags in this post references a song, "Pumped Up Kicks." The lyrics to this song read, "All the other kids with the pumped up kicks/You'd better run, better run, out run my gun/All the other kids with the pumped up kicks/You'd better run, better run, faster than my bullet." This song is a popular one that is understood to be about a retaliatory school shooting and is used throughout the sample.

In some instances, Columbiners make it seem like they will be the ones to carry out another school shooting.³⁹ This is not to suggest that any Columbiners in my sample have carried out or will carry out a shooting. Posts like this have more to do with the performance. Columbiners use their community to cultivate fear in outsiders while also making fellow Columbiners feel welcome, included, and understood. Columbiners have developed a community on the foundation of their understanding of school shootings and how those understandings are shaped by their shared experiences. To other Columbiners, the significance of this post, that which results in 30 likes, does not lie in whether this individual will carry out a shooting; rather, it holds significance because the Columbiner understands the fear this image will create to outsiders, the same outsiders who are responsible for bullying Columbiners and bullying past shooters. In this post, the Columbiner reinforces these understandings for other Columbiners while actively participating in the cultural script outlined by Kiilakoski and Oksanen (2011).

Columbiners use their social media community to share their understandings of Columbine and other school shootings. They do so to connect with other young people who share these understandings. However, Columbiners use their community for so much more, to be young, to be cool, to figure out society and the issues they face daily.

³⁹ Researcher note: I have never found any evidence that this post was used in coverage after a school shooting since the data pull suggesting that this Columbiner never attacked their school.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This research examined Columbiner Instagram posts in hopes to gain insight into how youth who participate in the online community of Columbiners understand school shootings, how they make sense of their youth status and other social structures that shape that status, and what we can learn from their posts about how these young people build and participate in their own community. As an exploratory study, this research provides insights into central components of Columbiner social media activity that have not been addressed in existing scholarly work. In this research, I find three major patterns: 1) Columbiners create a community through the use of #Columbiner; 2) Columbiners are a community of young people who use their platform to figure out how to be young and cool; 3) Columbiners use their community to help make sense of the issues they face daily, those that are mundane (i.e. romance, family, and homework) and those that are heavy (i.e. sex, depression, and school shootings). Upon first glance, Columbiners appear to be kids using social media to post scary and disturbing images for the sake of being disruptive; however, these findings suggest that Columbiners use social media similarly to other groups of young people on and off the Internet and use their community similarly to the generations before them.

As mentioned above, the content of Columbiner Instagram posts as first glance appears extremely deviant and in no way conforming (Conrad, 2007). The content itself includes blood, dead bodies, weapons, and admiration for individuals who commit mass murders. This in itself is

deviant from normative posts on Instagram. However, after an in-depth look at these Instagram post, I find the youth who make up this Columbiner subculture create a place within larger society in a way that is not as deviant as it appears. As such, I argue Columbiners use the same tools as other youth in order to ultimately conform to normative youth subculture formations (Milner, 2004). Although the specific details of the humor or the language may deviate from normative Instagram users, the process of using clothing, language, shared memories, humor, and music in itself is conforming; all young groups within Milner's study (regardless of where the groups fall on the social hierarchy in school) use these same tools to develop and maintain group boundaries of different groups of young people. Columbiners represent one of these groups.

The first finding determined that Columbiners use their hashtag to build and maintain an online social media community. The sample provides many examples of how Columbiners form each element of a community as outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). The research outlines how Columbiners display membership, influence, fulfillment and integration of needs, and shared emotional connections in order to create a sense of community among members. Groups of people form communities for many reasons, but the primary goal of a community is always to connect with others who share interests, values, and who give members a sense of belonging and identity through their membership. The motivations in the Columbiner community are no different. Columbiners connect with one another through shared knowledge, values, and symbols. They use their community to be youthful. They use the dialogue within their community to make sense of the complex issues that plague their daily life, and in the process, create shared meanings concerning the understandings of motivations behind school shootings. A critical examination of this community yields information on not only how Columbiners make

sense of school shootings from their unique perspectives as young people, but also how this particular group of young people make sense of being young in contemporary society.

One finding in particular tells us more about how Columbiners navigate youthfulness in a society where young people have 24/7 access to the Internet, social media, and their “online” friends. The second finding in this research conveys how Columbiners use their social media community to be young in a way that is not dissimilar from other young people on the Internet. Columbiners have shared language used to convey shared humor and shared understandings; Columbiners use music in their posts like other young people online with similar genres, artists, and lyrical topics. In each of these ways, Columbiners participate in the same “cool” culture that their memes and posts poke fun at other kids for contributing to. Columbiners use popular tools that other kids use to create Columbiner specific content that is meant to reinforce membership among insiders and to strengthen the boundaries that keep outsiders out. Columbiners are not all that different from the communities of young people in generations prior; they use exclusionary humor, language, style, interests, and tastes to reinforce the elements of their community.

In the final finding, I explore how Columbiners use their community to address some of the conflicts they face on a daily basis. Like other groups of young people in generations prior, Columbiners have to make sense of the everyday issues that all individuals face while transitioning from childhood to adulthood. They use the resources available to them, in this case social media, the Internet, and the Columbiner community, to make sense of their conflicts with institutions like school and family and topics like love and romance. Unlike earlier generations, this generation of young people have access to the Internet on their smartphones and thus to more consistent information and a greater variety of people than ever before. Also, unlike some generations before, this generation has to navigate some complex issues that come from the

access to so much information during an era where social issues plague all aspects of society regardless of age. Thus, Columbiners use their community to share the knowledge they acquire through the access to this information, to discuss their opinions on these social issues, and to create a dialogue surrounding ways to address the issues. Specifically, this finding explores how Columbiners make sense of sex, violence, depression, and bullying and how their understanding shape how they make sense of school shootings.

All three of the above findings begin to answer my central research questions.

Columbiners make sense of school shootings in a way that closely mimics the cultural scripts outlined by Kiilakoski and Oksanen (2011). Columbiners relate to one another, to Eric and Dylan, and to other school shooters because of their shared experiences with depression and bullying. They use these experiences to explain the motivations behind school shooters. Columbiners understand school shootings as retaliatory attacks that result from bullying, depression, and isolation during school. They use the context of these understandings to help make sense of some of the complex social issues that young people must make sense of as they transition into adulthood. Columbiners use their community to create dialogues around sexuality, age, friendships, family structures, schoolwork, and more in the context of their shared interest in school shootings. Thus, all conversations that reveal their understandings of gender, sexuality, and age, are all situated in the context of the Columbine shooters and other school shooters since.

After Columbine, the dialogue has largely followed an understanding that these two boys, Eric and Dylan, were monsters. They are understood as exceptions to the norm in their suburban, white, middle-class town. They had been the victims of bullying and depression. Although some of these claims have since been disproved, the narrative remains alive in the Columbiner community. Columbiner understandings of school shootings, particularly the Columbine

shooting, largely reflect common understandings of possible motivations for school shootings. Following other conventional understandings of white masculinity and violence (Heitzig, 2015), Columbiners accept that these boys experienced bullying and suffered from mental illness. Columbiner understandings of white mass violence are largely reflective of the ways in which we attempted to make sense of this phenomenon in larger society. In viewing white mass violence as an illness, rather than misbehavior or an identity marker, Columbiners reflect a normative way of making sense of school shootings (Heitzig, 2015).

Research suggests that when a white man commits an atrocious act of violence, people attempt to explain it as an exception (Heitzig, 2015). When men of color do something similar, their race (or minority status) is more likely to be considered as an explanation for motivation. When a white kid, from a middle-class suburban family commits an act of violence like Columbine, it is assumed that he has always been well-behaved, always earned good grades, and always treated people fairly. As a response to and in order to explain the tragedy, we look for outside indicators; we medicalize the situation; we ask whether the kid had any friends; we try to find any other way to explain away the violence rather than turning to white masculinity (Heitzig, 2015). This meaning making process also appears to happen in the Columbiner Instagram community and this research concludes that Columbiners do not take a critical view on how whiteness and expectations of masculinity contribute to school violence.

In fact, Columbiners further contribute to the expectations of violent masculinity in the content of their posts. Columbiners often reinforce the idea of violent masculinity as sexy by posting explicit content about the shooters. In doing so, Columbiners inadvertently contribute to some of the problematic expectations of masculinity that some scholars argue contribute to the motivations of school shootings and other instances of white mass violence (Connell, 1995;

2000; Garbarino, 1999; Kalish and Kimmel, 2010; Kimmel and Mahler, 2003; Kimmel, 2000; 2013; Leary, et al., 2003; Poteat, et al., 2011; Reuter-Rice, 2008; Tonso, 2009; White Watson, 2008).

Overall, this project answers questions about how Columbiners make sense of Columbine and some other school shootings and how they participate in their own community. The research has several limitations. First, the sample size and content in the sample does not allow for a more critical examination into the ways Columbiners may or may not reinforce other aspects of social structures of gender, sexuality, race, age, and class. A virtual ethnographic study or a participant observation study over a longer period of time would likely yield more findings in these areas. Additionally, this project was largely exploratory. At the point of data collection and analysis, little research existed on the fan groups of school shootings and school shooters. Since then, several studies have been published (all included in the literature review) and more will likely be published in the future. Future research should continue to take into account the findings of other studies of Columbiner communities and fan-groups of a similar nature on social media. Finally, this project was limited in scope. The sample data comes from only one social media platform but at the time of collection, Columbiners were active on several other platforms. Again, a virtual ethnographic study where a researcher was able to spend a significant amount of time observing multiple platforms, interacting with Columbiners, and interacting with the subculture during various times of year would result in more in-depth findings on how Columbiners understand their community and understand the phenomenon of school shootings.

Future research should continue to dive deeply into the “dark corners” of the Internet. Although these findings suggest that Columbiners form communities in a normative way, other studies need to be conducted in order to determine how normative Columbiners are on other

social media platforms and how normative fandom communities with different interests are. Additionally, further inquiries into the Columbiner community should consider conducting interviews with Columbiners whenever possible. This research does its best to get at the meanings of the actual young people behind the Columbiner posts but is still through the perspective of a researcher analyzing those voices. Whenever possible, research on Columbiners should involve conversations with the participants. Finally, future research should continue to be critical of the unique perspective this research offers through the use of young peoples' voices and creative content. CYS scholars remain adamant on the importance of elevating youth voices and this research mimics those arguments. This is particularly important as young people, like the organizers of March for Our Lives, become more and more involved in political movements to demand change in policies that allow for school shootings of this magnitude to keep occurring. Again, school shootings present an issue that uniquely concerns young people, meaning that their voices on this topic are more important than ever.

A final consideration of these findings is the use of agency by the young people who participate in the Columbiner community. Although Columbiners use Instagram in a way that other young people find disturbing and ways that make adults uncomfortable, they are ultimately creating a dialogue around school shootings that cannot be found elsewhere. These particular kids are, at their core, attempting to make sense of a phenomenon that directly affects their age group. Columbiners are frustrated that "others," particularly adults, do not try to understand the shooters in a similar way. Columbiners are ultimately enacting their agency to create a "new" discussion around school shooters; they create a dialogue that they feel is underappreciated. They attempt to humanize the shooters and to find ways to relate to Eric and Dylan through shared experiences with bullying and depression. Not only do Columbiners enact agency in trying to

understand school shootings, they try to make a place for themselves in the larger social world around them. They create and maintain a community that ultimately allows them to connect with one another, make friends, share jokes, and challenge the adult-centric world around them.

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