**When Ordinary People Go Viral, Where’s the Line between Comedy and Cruelty?**

By Rebecca Jennings

Louisa Melcher had just graduated with a theater degree from Columbia University when she wrote the song that would get her mercilessly roasted on the internet. It wasn’t because of the lyrics — “New York Summer” tells a thoughtful story of a young romance that’s doomed once September rolls around — and it wasn’t exactly because of her singing voice, either. It was because she recorded a song that had fallen into the loosely defined and ever-expanding category of digital artifacts that make us feel slightly embarrassed for the person who created them. Or, to use internet speak, she posted cringe.

“Once I came up with the chorus, I was like, ‘Oh, this is so catchy,’” she tells me over the phone. “I played it for my parents and they were like, ‘You have to record this. It’s so good.’” So she did, and uploaded it to Spotify.

Within minutes, Louisa decided to make a self-deprecating TikTok video that followed a popular trend at the time. “You think you can hurt my feelings? I released this song and it got 9 streams,” she wrote, without noting that it had only been listened to nine times because it had just debuted.

Her fellow TikTokers were not so forgiving. A sampling of the most-liked comments: “Well this song is definitely a song!” “At least you got the 9,” and “There’s a reason lmfao.” And yet from the dogpile, she ended up getting exactly what she wanted, though perhaps not in the way she meant to: views, millions of them, all within the span of just a few days.

Louisa is one of the hundreds, if not thousands, of people to go viral on TikTok not because people enjoyed their videos but because they were embarrassed by them. They’re a part of the internet largely grouped as “cringe,” used as both adjective and noun: content deemed humiliating on account of the poster’s looks, behavior, or talent, and the lack of apparent self-awareness about those things. The top tier of digital cringe is created by people who not only lack self-awareness but lack it enough to share themselves in the hope that other people will be impressed, then fail to realize when the general response is laughter.

Yes, people get bullied online for posting cringe. They can become memes whose virality spirals out of their control and end up as the face of something they never intended to promote. They can also become viral superstars who build huge networks of supportive fans and translate it into a successful entertainment career. Little of that matters to the people who watch them. On TikTok, the line between privately grimacing at a cringe worthy post and contributing to a cruel barrage of comments twisting the knife can be all too tempting to cross.

As a certain segment of TikTok continues to dominate the mainstream consciousness — beautiful young people dancing and lip-syncing together, sometimes in the form of content houses in Los Angeles, also known as “straight TikTok” — many of its users long for what they consider more authentic or “rare” forms of content.

Cringe TikTok, then, is its own subcategory, and it’s suddenly everywhere. Some examples: “Acting challenges” from people who are not particularly talented actors. A MAGA teen pretends to weep in his bedroom covered by a Trump 2020 flag after the election. A man sits in his car with unsettlingly bright eyes and claims he’s never seen two pretty best friends. A girl films herself posing sexily in an unflattering outfit.

Then come the commenters. On TikTok, the comment section is half the fun; because the most-liked comments automatically populate at the top of the screen, the best (or most brutal) joke wins. On cringey videos, it’s a race to see who can get the top spot.

Louisa remembers how among the thousands of comments on the two “New York Summer” videos that went viral; the vast majorities were rehashes of the same easy joke. But they didn’t really hurt her feelings, she says, because in reality, everything was going to plan.

She maintains that “New York Summer” was written in earnest. But Louisa, who commenters quickly discovered had studied comedy and accused her of creating the whole song as a stunt, used the familiar cycle of cringey video plus eager rude commenters to her advantage. “I was kind of like, ‘If this gets to the right side of TikTok, then I think we have something that is super useful for me there,” she says. “I was like, ‘How can I make this blow up even bigger, even if it requires getting more hate? How can I get it out to 300,000 people so that even if 200,000 hate it, I’ll have 100,000 fans?’ It was so devious. No one thought I could possibly be doing it on purpose because there was so much hate directly at me.”

Melissa Dahl, a senior editor at *The Cut* and author of *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, posits that watching cringe content for fun actually functions similarly to how nightmares do. “It’s our brains giving us a dose of exposure therapy. Maybe the same thing is happening for people who are drawn to cringey content, [maybe they’re] people whose deepest fear is being ostracized or made to look like a fool.” (This might also explain why so many people can’t bear watching these sorts of videos — as popular as horror movies and true crime podcasts are, plenty of folks can’t stand them.)

Perhaps that’s also why cringe content is so popular among young people. Dahl recalls being in her early 20s and watching cringey YouTube content that was mostly consumed by fellow 20-somethings and teenagers, a time in life devoted to figuring out one’s place in the world. “I think [cringe content] is a controlled way of facing this really deep fear,” she says. “It’s funny to talk about being embarrassed during the year 2020 when there’s such scary things going on. But, like, there’s nothing scarier than being cast out on your own and laughed out of the group!”

Louisa has given the concept of cringe plenty of thought after “New York Summer” went viral. “TikTok gives us kind of unprecedented access to other people that we would never meet before,” she says.

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As she scrolls through the app, she says she’s often struck by the diversity of the human experience. “I’m wondering, like, ‘Wow, I can’t believe people are actually like that. Have I met this person on the street that behaves like this?’ Or, ‘Oh, my god, I can’t believe people are so brash and hurtful in the comments.’” Or, she adds, “Is it all a joke?” It’s never been more difficult to tell. But perhaps that’s the fun of it.

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