

Going “Viral”:**What College Student Meme Posts Reveal About Their Sentiments Towards Higher Education Administration Fall 2020 Reopening Plans**

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Abstract

As a result of mandated college and university evacuations in March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, many college students turned to social media as a means of preserving social networks and to express certain concerns and desires associated with the evolving and uncertain future of university education. In this paper, I explore the research question of *what do college students' posts on social media reveal about their sentiments towards higher education (HE) administration, specifically during the transition to their first fully online semester/school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic?* To answer this question, I performed a digital content analysis on posts from August 1st to September 30th, 2020 in a popular “college life”-oriented Facebook meme group, called “Zoom Memes for Self-Quaranteens.” I found that students felt a general sense of mistrust towards HE intuitions and were divided on their sentiments towards residential or remote learning conditions. Additionally, the findings reveal lively debates on how responsibility should be attributed to students and/or HE institutions when enforcing personal and public safety measures.

My name is Claudia Cabral, and I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard honor code.

Introduction

On March 10, 2020, I was one of many college students notified of mandatory departure from campus as a result of the worsening spread of the COVID-19 virus (Reif 2020). I was one of the lucky ones who already had a flight home to my immediate family, the reason being that it was my 20th birthday on that Friday, March the 13th. Though it might have seemed like a favorable experience to have a prolonged spring break to “have my cake and eat it too,” the announcement of mandated physical distancing only exacerbated the academic and social isolation I already was feeling at my university for two years.

I applied to transfer to Harvard College by March 1st of 2020 and fortunately got accepted by the end of that same Spring semester. Though fortunate, this meant that it would still be an entire year of remote learning before I could spend my senior year exploring and making new connections in a fully in-person Harvard College experience. Taking a gap was not an option, otherwise I would have had to reapply to transfer. I spent most of my year of remote learning from the same home I spent my adolescent years in, so one of the most proximate connections I had to campus life, like many other college students, was through social media. I was exposed to hundreds of thousands of posts from my peers expressing various concerns, desires, and uncertainties that I was also feeling and observing. These were conversations I didn't feel I could fully have as neither one of my parents had the opportunity to graduate from high school, thus also did not attend college, nor were any of my younger sisters of age to understand what an in-person college experience could be like. I also didn't have many strong bonds from my previous institution to last through the remote terms, so I heavily relied on the few connections that I did have and on social media groups to remain “connected.” With posts devoted to college life, social justice, politics, and many more issues relevant the times, I felt understood through such tumultuous personal and societal transitions.

My personal interactions with social media as a college student motivate my investigation into what these platforms can reveal about the overall “college experience” directly from the student perspective and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. To pursue this investigation, I decided to perform digital archival research on posts from a popular “college life”-oriented Facebook meme group that originated on March 12, 2020 to share content that “focus[es] on the shared young adult experience during quarantine” (Bakshi and Agarwal 2020a). The name of this group is called, “Zoom Memes for Self-Quaranteens” (ZM4SQ), and it amassed over 150,000

members in less than its first week of creation (Lorenz, Griffith, and Isaac 2020). The group started with about 882K members at the beginning of this semester-long research project and now has over 929K (Bakshi and Agarwal 2020b), demonstrating the sustained, or potentially increasing, relevance of this Facebook group's content to young adult audiences.

Through an inductive research process, my formalized research question (RQ) is: *What do college students' posts on social media reveal about their sentiments towards higher education administration (HE), specifically during the transition to their first fully online semester/school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic?* Answers to this RQ are expected to reveal a potential disconnect contrasting administrative behaviors and student needs and priorities, thus leading students to create meme posts that express related concerns, desires, and/or observations.

Literature Review

Memes offer a window into socio-cultural ideas and practices. In 2018, Bhavna Middha (2018) studied "food selfies" posted on Facebook as a means to better understand the eating habits of university students on- and off- campus. In 2020, Apryl Williams (2020) conducted a visual Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) to visually analyze the content of "Becky" and "Karen" memes on Twitter to unveil themes of racialized surveillance by white women in American society. According to Middha (2018), social media platforms "enable privileged access to people's everyday social practices" and "offer institutions access to real time and archival data that is neither spatially nor temporally constrained" (1). These articles helped from my digital archival research method of utilizing Facebook posts to analyze shared social attitudes among college students during the pandemic via the embedded messages, themes, and sentiments that meme imagery would portray. I would analyze Facebook captions and potentially Facebook group member comments (explained more in the "Methodology" section of this paper) in conjunction with meme imagery to get a better sense of *shared* sentiments among young adults towards their remote college experience.

Most recent research highlights the impacts of meme consumption and composition, without much focus on meme creation. In 2021, Myrick et al. (2021) conducted an online experimental study and found that COVID-related Internet memes indirectly improve pandemic-related stress and coping efficacy through the medium of increasing positive emotions with the condition of meme stimuli. Upon this foundation, I seek to explore young adult creation and

interaction with meme posts, instead of just the consumption (Myrick et al. 2021) and/or composition (Williams 2020) of meme posts, specifically on topics related to HE and the college student experience. ZM4SQ is an especially well-suited group to explore this in, as the group administrators (admins) have written that “original content (OC) is preferred” as part of their eight “Group rules from the admins” that inform their post approval process (Bakshi and Agarwal 2020a). Many posts also have the “OC” denotation to indicate the “original poster” (OP) as its creator.

Research on the use of memes in the education sector centered more on social media as a learning tool than as a tool for self-expression in the past, though this changed with the pandemic. One study explored the use of Facebook as a tool for Mexican University student teaching and learning using a survey-based research method (Pérez, Araiza, and Doerfer 2013). It found that students demonstrated greater use of Facebook than their professors and had more acceptance for this as a model for learning and communication between students and professors (Pérez et al. 2013). Luckily, much time has passed since this study and the COVID-19 pandemic increased the reliance of teacher uses of digital technology to engage students. Another study was conducted in an online Russian language learning class during the COVID-19 pandemic to test the effect that collecting, analyzing, and creating memes in Russian had on university student learning and engagement (Vinokurova 2021). The study found an increase all the following regards: language-learning engagement, intercultural competency, digital literacy, and sense of belonging to the classroom (Vinokurova 2021). One important aspect of this study is that students were able to “express their frustration with distance learning as well as the difficulties of learning the Russian language specifically,” implying the potential for memes to also be tool for self-expression as well (Vinokurova 2021:280). Another study explored the TikTok social media platform as a medium for K-12 students to express their sentiments towards their online-learning platforms (Literat 2021). It found that students felt a perceived increase in their workload, a lack of motivation, mental health challenges, feeling a need for teacher and/or peer-to-peer support, and that family life and socioeconomic contexts became more visible to classrooms (Literat 2021:4–10). My study seeks to address a gap in the literature by exploring Facebook group memes as a medium of self-expression for university-age students during the pandemic.

Though some articles do garner information on university students’ “attitudes” towards higher education in terms of their academic engagement (Abun, Magallanes, and Incarnacion

2019) or towards education technologies in instruction (Davis 2011), this research study more broadly contextualizes student “attitudes,” or “sentiments,” with implications outside of the classroom and towards higher education administration, overall.

Methodology

To answer the RQ, I conducted a digital archival content analysis on posts from the ZM4SQ Facebook group within the timeline of August 1st to September 30th, 2020, using the Zotero reference management computer software and Zotero Connector Google Chrome extension. I chose to investigate the ZM4SQ Facebook group because of its consistently high popularity among young adults during the pandemic and its pertinence to the time and topics explored in this research paper (Bakshi and Agarwal 2020b, 2020a). I opted for an inductive approach to account for potential researcher biases, which will be explained further in the “Limitations and Positionality” section of this paper.

The August 1st to September 30th timeline stands out because of how critical this timespan was for college students in 2020 since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before this period, the spring of 2020 was characterized by students being sent home and abruptly transitioning to a remote semester (Baker, Hartocollis, and Weise 2020). Next, the summer of 2020 was characterized by widespread social activism and the uncertain future of college education, mainly with George Floyd’s murder and the resulting Black Lives Matter protests around the U.S. and the world (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020), in addition to the pending and eventual release of university reopening plans (Hartocollis 2020b). This led into the fall of 2020, which was the first fully online semester/year for many campus-based college students. The timespan of August 1st to September 30th was after a period of major social upheaval, during a time of much uncertainty and prolonged social isolation, and just at the beginning¹ of a more intentional shift to remote learning. By December of 2020, the first COVID-19 vaccine was approved (FDA Office of the Commissioner 2021) and aspirations for a return to fully in-person college became more hopeful. Though other periods would each come with their own benefits and potential insights, I also chose this transitional period because posts expressing sentiments towards HE administrators’ decisions on how to proceed with remote education would be the

¹ Since most colleges in the U.S. begin their Fall semesters in August or September of each year.

most pronounced and more easily contextualized during this time, as compared to the very beginning of the group's conception, for example.

I conducted my analysis through three coding phases: open, axial, and selective coding. The first, open coding, phase consisted of scrolling through the 560 posts² in the ZM4SQ Facebook group from August 1st to September 30th, 2020 and taking initial notes on emerging themes from the photos, captions, and comments by group members. The list in Appendix A details these emerging themes, in order of their applicability to my RQ and grouped together by their overlapping themes, which will be further explained in the "Findings" section of this paper.

The second, axial coding, research phase consisted of scraping and tagging all 560 posts using the Zotero software. To scrape data, I used the Zotero Connector extension to capture a link, screenshot, and the caption of each Facebook post. Though this extension would usually capture other information, like the author of the post or the date, I had input these manually. The benefit of this method is that, once a post has been "scraped" from the internet, it is fully accessible without internet and regardless of whether the post was deleted. Data scraping is a helpful process especially in the event of the ZM4SQ Facebook page being shut down for violating Facebook's guidelines, which happened during the timeline of doing research for this paper (Zoom Memes for Self-Quarantining Teens 2021). The decision was luckily overturned by Facebook moderators in time to complete this project. The privacy concerns with this data scraping process and a discussion on the impermeability of the internet are further discussed in the "Conclusion" section of this paper.

With each post that was "scraped," I also tagged according to the list in Appendix B. This was to ensure that the themes I initially observed in the open coding process still held their prevalence after considering each of the posts individually. Most did, and then a few additional categories (bolded) were included to further operationalize the concept of "student sentiments." All posts could have gotten any combination of tags depending on the topics they cover, but only the posts under the "HE Administration" umbrella would be considered for the third, selective coding phase and discussion in this research paper. For example, there is a post with a meme that looks like a television (T.V.) news report, but is edited with the caption that says "the year 2020 is getting a sequel that is said to replace the year 2021" (Murphy 2020). When making this into a

² This number changed dramatically once I did my official data scraping process because, the old number (754) measured the number of *photos*, not the number of *posts* (which can contain multiple photos), in the same timeline.

Facebook post, the OP wrote that this might be the case “after seeing COVID-19 cases spike with colleges reopening” (Murphy 2020). I would tag this post with the “Reopening Plans (2)” and “Personal/Public Health (~)” tags because those are the two main topics that it addresses. It is considered under the “HE Administration (1)” umbrella for the selective coding phase but not tagged with that specific label because it addresses student sentiments towards *reopening plans*, not HE administration directly. The findings from this data analysis process and Appendix B are explained in more detail in the “Findings” section of this paper.

For the final, selective coding research phase, I choose approximately 20 posts to conduct a more in-depth data analysis of. This number came from a series of narrowing down the posts tagged under the “HE Administration” umbrella, which contained 99 posts. From here, I selected all the posts that could help answer my RQ. This number came out to be 45.³ Next, I analyzed the meme (image), caption, and comments of these posts to select approximately 20 to include in this research paper. After reaching 19 posts, I noticed that the information from each additional post only confirmed my previously-discovered findings, so I felt it was sufficient to stop at this critical mass. In my “Findings” section, I detail the narrative that these posts created to respond to my RQ. Other significant observations are detailed in my “Conclusion” section.

Limitations and Positionality

A benefit of using an inductive method in digital archival research is that there is little-to-no *respondent bias* (Sarniak 2015), as peoples’ natural behavior is publicly online, and it is up to myself, the researcher, to record and observe it. This does mean that I am at risk of *researcher biases* (Sarniak 2015), which I discuss below.

I am a college student whose college experience has been influenced by the coronavirus pandemic, much like of those who I am studying. A potential disadvantage to this positionality would be my own preconceptions informed by my participation in group since its conception. I also I have my own sentiments towards my college experience through first-hand experience and reflection on my study of higher education. To confront the potential *confirmation bias* (Sarniak 2015), I have resorted to utilizing an inductive research method. Such a method would allow me to enter the data collection and analysis processes with a clean slate of mind and no leading question in order to find the most “authentic truth” that I can from the data. A potential benefit to

³ ~40 posts are my present estimate of what’s both feasible and potentially sufficient (5%) for this research paper.

my positionality as a Generation-Z college student would be the proximity and depth of access I have towards understanding the issues of higher education via the internet (Turner 2015) through my own lived experience and studies. I also have the privilege of being “meme”-literate and able to understand the cultural and thematic usage of memes in present-day society. For example, there are certain meme “templates” that already come with an assumed message, theme, sentiment, and/or origin that certain other generations without such exposure might not have the initial depth of understanding without additional research. In the spots where I did not have as much depth of understanding, I referred to KnowYourMeme.com (Literally Media Ltd. 2021), a popular crowd-sourced meme encyclopedia, to fill in the gaps.

Due to my positionality as a white, European, politically progressive, female who has been situated in several Western-centric educational institutions from pre-kindergarten through college, I am at risk of potential *cultural biases* (Sarniak 2015). My own racial/ethnic, political, gender/sexual, national, educational, etc. identities have the potential to influence how I interpret qualitative data. I am also subject to *the halo effect* (Sarniak 2015) due to the potential for data to be interpreted in a positive, negative, or neutral light depending on which how holistically I choose to view it from. I will not only challenge myself to conduct my data analyses through multiple cultural lenses, but I will also take note of arguments that positively, negatively, and/or neutrally represent a certain sentiment towards any of the tags in my selective coding phase, as they arise. By including this in my research process, I am attempting to provide as much of an objective metric to produce and evaluate my results.

There are ethical challenges in conducting Facebook research. An article called “Time, Tastes, and Ties (T3)” (Lewis et al. 2008) was reviewed (Zimmer 2010) to highlight some important issues regarding how easily identifiable Facebook users can be, especially college students, leading to a debate on what constitutes social media research as “public” and users as human research subjects, especially in the “observational research” I am conducting (Moreno et al. 2013:709). Even if I were to make confidential any personally-identifying information, such as a ZM4SQ member’s self-reported name, location, college/university, etc., one could easily look up them up using direct quotes from Facebook captions or group member comments in the ZM4SQ Facebook group. Luckily, the admins of the ZM4SQ Facebook group have provided eight guidelines that must be agreed to before getting accepted into the group—one of which alerts members that this is a “public group” and thus, “any sensitive content, especially of an

academic nature, should be censored to remove personally identifying information” (Bakshi and Agarwal 2020a). This indirectly gives me, the researcher, a consent form to conduct my research under, as each of the potential research participants had to “Agree” to to acknowledge that any posts and comments made in this group are considered in the public domain before being able to join the group in the first place. This information is also posted at the top of this group’s Home *and* About page, restating that the group is “public” (“anyone can see who’s in the group and what they post”) and “visible” (“anyone can find this group”), regardless of them signing into a Facebook account (Bakshi and Agarwal 2020a, 2020b).

Admins have the responsibility to accept or reject any request for a potential member to join the group or make a post and they also can remove and/or report anyone who violates any one of the eight pre-established guidelines. This is important to me as a researcher because it not only assists in my duty to protect the privacy of my human research subjects, but it also informs me about the kinds of posts from young adults that I am *not* being exposed to. The admins value “kindness,” “respect,” “no hate speech or bullying,” and they discourage news articles on “non-college related topics,” but still open the discussion for potential “misinformation,” an issue especially prevalent to digital media platforms in 2020 (Dwoskin 2021). I do not specifically know what I am *not* seeing, but these guidelines help inform me the general themes associated with what was not approved to be posted.

Some remaining limitations to my research include time, scope, and sample size. I chose posts from the specified timeline as my sample population for the reasons outlined in my “Methodology,” but *would I have found starkly different and/or more complexifying results if I chose a different timeline?* That question remains unanswered. There are *thousands* of meme posts in this group and it would be tedious to sanely analyze every single post within a semester, especially due to the partially manual nature of the Zotero software. I am not yet aware of a better software to do the job, yet this comes with its own set of limitations.

Findings

Phase 1: Open Coding

Through a preliminary data analysis, I found that college students expressed their sentiments towards HE administration, professors, student life, and a collection of other related topics (please see Appendix A). Students spoke to the situation of and their preferences towards

their residential situation—for or against on-campus residence—amid the pending or resulting decisions from HE administrators (Jenni 2020). They also spoke to their attitudes towards the job market and job search process, including the quality of support, if at all, they received from staff or faculty (Kesler 2020). Students also made memes directly commenting on their remote learning classrooms (Dasu 2020) and professors or affiliated teaching staff (Shankar 2020). Aside from this, students' meme posts provided insight into their own student life along three dimensions: (1) academics and career, (2) social life, and (3) mental health and (un)wellness. In the first category, students created and shared memes relating to their academic life and career preparation, commenting on assignments (Yeung 2020), workload (Rai 2020) and “adulting” (Mangalon 2020) or entering the “real world” post-graduation (Savit 2020), among other themes. In the second category, they shared posts to express their connections to friends (Chang 2020; Liu 2020), family (Trinh 2020), or other social connections (Lai 2020). In a third category, many posts also commented on the various mental health and wellness conditions of college students during the pandemic (Graves 2020; Shaw 2020). The ZM4SQ Facebook group memes cited here are examples, among many.

Overall, the sentiments shared in these meme posts tended to share mainly negative sentiments towards academic life and the associated actors, which was expected, as memes have been shown to be used as a tool for coping and stress management, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Myrick et al. 2021). Some posts directly acknowledged the use of memes as a coping mechanism (Savel 2020), while others also commented broadly on topics related to politics and “current events” (at the time) (Nguyen 2020) or personal/public health and safety (Lewis 2020; Siddiqui 2020). The rest of the posts in the August 1st to September 30th, 2020 timeline also touched upon academic subject/major-related jokes (Sweeney 2020) or were self-promotion materials that students wanted to publicize to a large internet base (Hui 2020).

Phase 2: Axial Coding

After completing the secondary, axial coding phase, I constructed a coding frame using the codes generated in the open coding phase (please see Appendix B). The keywords were shortened for clarity and the breadth was expanded to include four additional tags that became more apparent after scrapping and tagging posts individually. The coding frame has both a hierarchical and flat portion. The hierarchical portion uses “HE Administration,” “Professors,”

and “Student Life” as the top three umbrella categories (marked with a “1” superscript). Below these are second-level tags (marked with a “2” superscript) that add nuance to the first level. The flat portion consists of tags of “other” themes (marked with a “~” superscript) that describe relevant topics covered, and also add nuance, but are not restrained to any of the upper-level categories. Of the four additional tags, “Finances (2)” was added under the “HE Administration” umbrella to mark the posts that addressed college costs (Hassell 2020) and the student sentiments towards a college or university’s prioritization of finances over other values (Nobel 2020), for example. The “Reopening Plans (2)” tag was also added due to the number of posts that directly commented on college or university responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hamilton 2020; Rocca 2020), and how that was reflected in modifications to a “typical” academic year. Finally, the last two of the four additional tags were “In-person Classrooms (2)” and “Online Classrooms (2)” to provide the contrast between how students expressed sentiments for and against either in-person (McClung 2020) or online classrooms (Coates 2020; Rigan 2020). Once again, the posts cited here are examples, among many. In total, 560 posts were scraped and tagged.

Though my original RQ sought to explore general sentiments towards one’s “college experience,” the preliminary open coding phase provided context for me to narrow it to specifically address “HE administration and faculty.” I further narrowed in my RQ during the axial coding phase to only focus on sentiments towards “HE administration.” This allows me to deliver more succinct findings, given this paper’s intended size and scope.

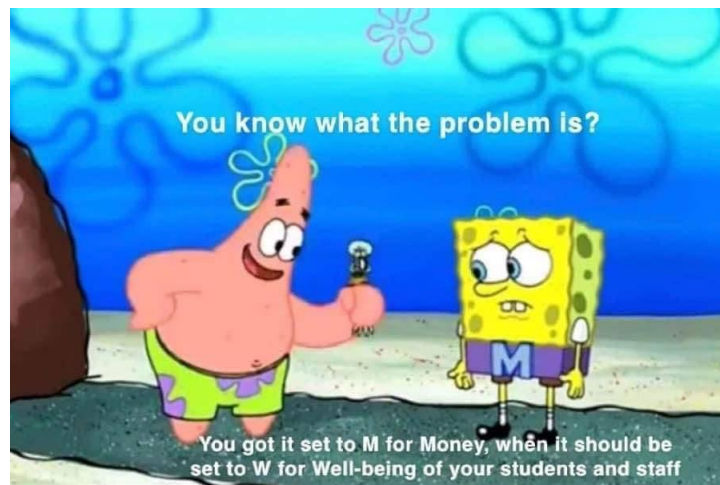
Phase 3: Selective Coding

From the 560 tagged posts, 99 of them were tagged with labels from the “HE Administration” umbrella. Of these, 45 posts were selected due to their relevance in answering this paper’s RQ. These 45 posts were analyzed to a greater depth, with field notes recording notable observations from each post’s associated meme, caption, and comments. After coding 19 posts, a critical mass was reached, where further coding only reinforced the previously discovered findings. In response to the RQ, *what do college students’ posts on social media reveal about their sentiments towards higher education administration, specifically during the transition to their first fully online semester/school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic?* My findings reveal a general mistrust of HE administrators by college students due to their deliberate prioritization of finances over student wellbeing and incoherent delivery of reopening plans.

Students were divided on their preferences towards the residential or remote learning situation, but still desired HE institutions to provide safe avenues for social development amid a pandemic. Students were also divided on the extent to which the enforcement of personal and public health measures should belong to students or HE administrations, with some students viewing peer-to-peer accountability as an honorable and necessary duty in a new in-person world.

General Mistrust in HE Institutions

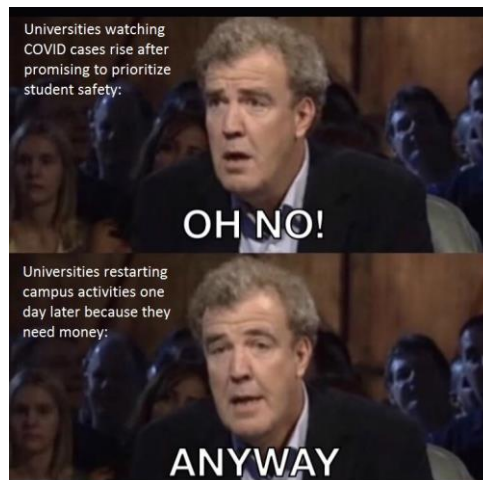
Social media posts from college students in the ZM4SQ Facebook group reveal an overall sense of mistrust of the motivations and behaviors of HE administrations during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Meme consisting of a screengrab from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, a popular American children’s T.V. show, edited to critique HE administration’s priorities (DeLand 2002; Nobel 2020).

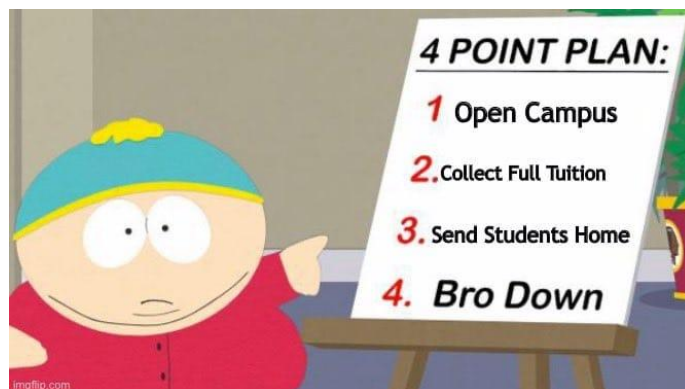
Finances vs. Student Wellbeing. Students in the ZM4SQ Facebook group feel that universities are being financially exploitative, especially at the cost of student health and safety. In the meme above, Spongebob, the protagonist of *Spongebob Squarepants* located on the right, is wearing a belt with the letter “M” on it. During this episode, Spongebob wears the belt upside-down, in a “M” shape for “Mini,” when it should be in an “W” for “Wumbo, a “nonsensical word” used for humor on the show (DeLand 2002). This screenshot was made into a meme with main message that universities priorities are misaligned with that of students—valuing profits over student wellbeing. Other memes confirm this sentiment, especially in one instance where a member comment, “they don’t care about us [3x Crying face emoji],” when referring to administrators directly (Menz 2020). This post consisted of a screengrab from *Bob’s Burgers*, an

adult cartoon, with the close-caption: “We don’t have time to create a safe environment!” (Menz 2020). This cartoon was taken out of context to mock the behavior of universities that are “rushing to get students back on campus” as a means to “collect enough tuition to remain in business,” even if it is at the cost of student well-being (Menz 2020). Why this might differ from business-as-usual is because many students did not see decreases in their tuition after the transition to online learning (Alving 2020; Ealy 2020; Mehta 2020; Menz 2020), some even saw increases (Hassell 2020; Mehta 2020). As one member put it, “the fact that they are still charging full tuition is proof that they only care about money” (Alving 2020). This was also without regard to living situation, as one member wrote, from the perspective of their university’s administration: “Let’s just charge them the same amount anyway and tell them to stay home” (Menz 2020). This financially exploitative behavior from HE institutions challenged the faith that students had towards their investment into HE, with three comments from three different posts using the word “scam” to describe this exchange (Hassell 2020; Lai 2020; Menz 2020). Overall, a large percentage of members in the ZM4SQ Facebook group agree that it was suspicious of HE institutions to be so eager to return to in-person living conditions, especially when most students felt that their wellbeing was being put to risk for the gain of their respective college or university (Maguire 2020; Mukobi 2020; O’Connor 2020; Rai 2020).



Meme template consisting of a screengrab from *Top Gear*, a British T.V. show, and bolded captions (“Oh no!” and “Anyway”) edited to portray disingenuous concerns from HE administrators (Alving 2020; Kotor 2020).

Students also doubted that universities unintentionally made the decision to prioritize finances over student wellbeing—they felt that it was a deliberate choice on behalf of administrators. In the meme above, Jeremy Clarkson, a *Top Gear* host, is depicted saying “Oh no!” and “Anyway” in response to two hypothetical scenarios universities had to face as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This meme shows that students doubt that universities have their best interests at heart, feigning their concern for “student safety” publicly, but intentionally choosing to prioritize “money” with their behavior (Alving 2020). On this post, a member agreed and elaborated saying, “It’s all about capitalism in the end. This is so sad. Schools just want our ‘coins’ in the middle of a pandemic” (Alving 2020). Other memes shared similar feelings of administrative willful negligence. One meme uses a template of two cartoonized dogs, one buff and standing, and the other normal and sitting, to contrast two ideas—one representing strength and confidence versus something else that’s weaker and less confident (JustOrdinaryMan 2020). The meme sarcastically interprets the messages they are receiving from HE administrators saying, “C’mon guys, pretty please! No parties and wear a mask. I’m serious, I said please!” on the side of the normal dog, while having “Full tuition! Football!! Money!!!” on the side of the buff dog (Ealy 2020). Many students did not believe that the circumstances were safe enough to return to campus so quickly and rushed, profit-seeking efforts did not demonstrate the careful consideration for health and safety that many students would have hoped for, and prioritized, from their campus administrators (Maguire 2020; Murphy 2020).



Meme consisting of a screengrab from *South Park*, an American animated T.V. sitcom, edited to display the proposed scheme of HE reopening plans (Herobrine 1997; Rocca 2020).

Reopening plans. Students from the ZM4SQ Facebook group were wary of HE institutions motivation to reopen, as they did not believe that universities would stay true to their

word and remain open after inviting so many students back to campus. Many students felt that the pandemic was still a major public health threat by the time colleges wanted to reopen (O'Connor 2020), so there was the expectation that cases would spike again if decisions were made haphazardly (Murphy 2020). Students felt that this was all part of an intentional scheme for universities to collect tuition and send everyone back home again, especially after universities already did do that back in March 2020 (Hartocollis 2020a). In the meme above, Eric Cartman, one of the main characters in *South Park*, is depicted pointing at a “4 Point Plan” for colleges to reopen, from the perspective of an administrator (Herobrine 1997; Rocca 2020). The plan says that universities would first open campus, collect full tuition, send students home, then enjoy the benefits⁴ of this plan (Rocca 2020). Other members agreed with the sentiment that HE administrators had ulterior motives for reopening. One member specifically commented that they felt administrators would “make it seem like we have in person class, take our money, [then] make everything online [again]” (Menz 2020). Another member commented with a mockery of how they interpreted college communication of reopening plans to be:

“College: We’re going open this fall! Get ready! All classes will be in person! Move into dorms on this day and here’s what you need! Don’t forget tuition!

College, 2 days later [and] 3 days before tuition is due: Remember when I said we were going to go back in-person? [It’s] not happening. We’re going to keep the money and not lower tuition! Have a good fall!” (Hamilton 2020).

Overall, students express a general distrust towards HE institutions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic without going back on their decision to bring people back to campus.



Meme depicting a 2020 interview of former President Donald Trump (on the left) by Axios journalist Jonathan Swan (on the right), edited to represent the vagueness of college reopening plans (Hamilton 2020; Matt 2020; Zach 2020).

⁴ The fourth step is an underhanded reference from the “Broadway Bro Down” episode (Herobrine 1997).

Exacerbating these trust issues, universities did not seem to make students less wary of their potentially self-serving motivations, as communication about reopening plans came across as too vague or not robust enough for the demands of the times. In the original Axios interview, Jonathan Swan is visibly expressing his confusion and frustration towards former President Donald Trump's responses (Matt 2020). The creator of the meme edited out the original graphs on the sheet of paper Swan is holding and replaced them the word "The," drawn in a fancy way. This fancy design is a reference to a *SpongeBob SquarePants* episode where SpongeBob procrastinates writing an essay for his boating school class so much so that he only comes up with the word "The," drawn in the fancy way it is depicted above (SpongeBob SquarePants Official 2019). This meme template is made to similarly explain the frustration, confusion, and lack of effort students felt went into reopening plans by HE administrators. Students either didn't know of a decision made by their respective universities yet—"we don't even know if we get to try out [an open campus]" (Rocca 2020)—while others did not feel like the reopening plans communicated to them were clear enough to be useful. One member commented, in response to the meme above: "We're open! Sike. Sike again. We may or may not open. Maybe 70% open. Nevermind, we're closed. SIKE! We are not not 'anti-open'..." (Hamilton 2020). This a mockery of how they felt university administrators were delivering the message of their reopening plans, also confirming a sentiment of confusion from communication from HE administration. Though a delay in releasing plans would have been expected due to the evolving nature of the pandemic, one student commented, in all upper-case: "Even though we're on campus, we still have no clue what's going on!" (Hamilton 2020). A sense of frustration overwhelmed students' feelings towards HE administration, especially amid a year already driven by much uncertainty.

Residential Situation

With the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, students were divided in their preferences towards living on-campus and/or conducting their semester remotely. In response to a meme that shows a hand clicking a button with the words, "f*ck go back," and is captioned, "When you joke about the fall semester going online and it actually does," there were mixed sentiments (Jenni 2020). Some students also wanted an in-person fall semester saying, "I just want to go back to school [Crying face emoticon]," while others directly disagreed and expressed

their hopes or preferences for school to take place online (Jenni 2020). On a related post, there were also some qualified arguments—one of which explains that in-person living would be acceptable, so long as schooling would still take place online (Menz 2020). The motivation behind one or another preference comes from one’s own level of concern with public health and safety (Mukobi 2020) or because of inconsistent and potentially unreliable reopening plans (Hamilton 2020). No matter the decision or preference, students acknowledged the social experiences that would be lost due to COVID-19 restrictions (Mukobi 2020; Saripalli 2020). To express this, one meme uses a popular template that consists of screenshots from the “Hotline Bling” music video by Drake, a Canadian rapper, to depict the creator’s preference of one option over another on some topic (Roy 2015). The meme is designed to have two contrasting screenshots, one of Drake shying away from the first caption and the other of Drake pointing at and looking pleased by the second caption (Roy 2015). In the ZM4SQ Facebook group, there is a post using this template that was edited to have “keeping campus closed to stop the spread of COVID” as the first caption and “cancelling Spring Break to stop the spread of COVID” as the second option (Saripalli 2020). This shows that students felt that the decision of administrators to reopen campus early would impact valuable social time in the longer-run, specifically with Spring Break as an example of a time when students get to vacation with friends outside of an academic context. Some students expressed their willingness to settle for restrained/online-based social activities, such as extracurriculars, in the short-run if that meant slowing the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the longer-run (Lai 2020; Mukobi 2020). Amid this were still feelings of frustration and disappointment for the social time lost. As one member put it, “the [coronavirus] is taking everything from us” (Mukobi 2020). College is a time for social development, especially for residential college students who most often are moving away from their childhood homes for the first time. One member specifically commented on this valuable time lost, saying that, “We are the year of stunted growth” (Kesler 2020). These sentiments reveal general disappointment with the COVID-19 situation on social interaction, and the strong desire for universities to help fill an intrinsic part of the residential college experience in a remote world.

Duty to Enforce Public Health and Safety

Student sentiments from the ZM4SQ Facebook group reveal an uncertainty in how to attribute the responsibility of enforcing personal and public safety measures—to the students or

the HE institution. A new challenge that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to residential campus life was the responsibility to enforce personal and public health safety measures, such as wearing a mask or limiting the size of in-person congregations. One meme post consists of a screenshot of a Twitter post that had two photos of a “sarcastically surprised” Captain Jim Kirk, from *Star Trek*, and description that says: “College administrators pretending they didn’t know h*rny 18-22 year olds they invited back to campus would party after months of quarantine at home with family” (Brady 1970; Lai 2020). The meme creates an argument that HE administrators have willful ignorance of student life, and would invite them back for ulterior motives, knowing they would most likely break supposed COVID-19 enforcements in the pursuit of social activities. This sentiment of inevitable student irresponsibility was shared beyond just this post, with another member sarcastically saying, from the perspective of HE administrators, “We trust our students to make the right decisions” (Ealy 2020). However, there was also lively debate against this idea. First, students cannot keep themselves safe entirely on their own, even if they wanted to. A new on-campus world amid a pandemic is new territory for everyone, students and HE administrators alike, so transition back into an in-person world would take mutual effort. One person, out of the concern that they would need to get involved if they saw someone acting irresponsibly said, “I literally do not know what I will do if I have to break something up” (Lai 2020). There are also measures that are predominantly out of the hands of students and require administrative intervention, such as providing safe options for immunocompromised people, as one commentor noted (Lai 2020). Unfortunately, the mistrust still lingers, making students believe that HE institutions’ want to deflect blame and responsibility onto the students, some members noted, would be for the sake of profits, once again (Lai 2020; Steciuk 2020). On the other hand, several arguments were made in favor of increased student responsibility for returning to campus, a list is below:

“I can’t agree with this. College kids aren’t actually kids, they’re adults. Sometimes we need to make smart decisions” (Lai 2020).

“Colleges aren’t to blame for students being reckless and short-sighted, and it’s a shame so many people are willing to shift the blame” (Lai 2020).

“If they can’t conduct themselves to protect others, they shouldn’t have gone back. They do not get to endanger the entire institution because of their inability to think larger than themselves” (Lai 2020).

“People blame everyone but themselves”

“Exactly! Zero personal responsibility. Imagine defending yourself by saying ‘but they knew I would!’” (Lai 2020).

Students seemed very passionate about making it clear to their peers that some level of personal accountability would be necessary in a new in-person environment. Even some students even saw this accountability as honorable, necessary, or even as a personal duty of theirs in a new in-person world (Mukobi 2020; Rocca 2020; Steciuk 2020). There is no clear side that would describe “most” student sentiments towards the responsibilities that students and/or universities should have in promoting public health and safety, but students do express that HE institutions should be honest in their evaluation of student activity and create proper accountability measures, while also hoping that their peers act responsibly, and like the adults that they are, for the greatest collective good.

Conclusion

I explored the RQ of *what do college students’ posts on social media reveal about their sentiments towards higher education (HE) administration, specifically during the transition to their first fully online semester/school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic?* Through the three levels of open, axial, and selective coding, I used a digital content analysis of meme posts from the “Zoom Memes for Self-Quaranteens” public Facebook group to analyze student sentiments (please revisit Appendix A and B). At the end of this process, I conclude that students express an overall sense of mistrust of the motivations and behaviors of HE administrations during the COVID-19 pandemic due to their deliberate prioritization of finances over student wellbeing and incoherent delivery of reopening plans. I also found that students were divided in their preferences towards living on-campus and/or conducting their semester remotely, but still desired HE institutions to provide safe avenues for social development amid a global pandemic. Finally, I also found that there is uncertainty in how to attribute the responsibility of enforcing personal and public safety measures—to the students or the HE institution—with some students viewing peer-to-peer accountability as an honorable and necessary duty in a new in-person world. The limitations of these findings are related to ethical issues and generalizability. Consent is challenging to measure in a digital world—especially when you have little-to-no contact with your “research subjects.” Also, consent is not continuous as a “deleted post” is not completely

erased from the internet, especially if a software tool like Zotero or NVivo are used to scrape it (Zoom Memes for Self-Quarantining Teens 2021). Luckily, my “research subjects” underwent an indirect consent form process to support this study (Bakshi and Agarwal 2020a). Also, since personalized data was not explored, these sentiments are considered “aggregate data” and generalizable to “overall college student sentiments.”

A policy implication from this research might suggest that colleges and universities should increase the prevalence and quality of student forums to incorporate student voice more directly into administrative decision-making, as students are sharing these sentiments on an intercollegiate level, but they are lost to the abyss that is social media unless they are directly and intentionally analyzed for its content. A research implication to . Future directions of study could explore to any of the other umbrella categories and/or tags that I observed, but was not able to study within the size and scope of this research paper, found in Appendix A and B. Two remaining questions are: (1) *Are my findings consistent with other meme groups or Facebook pages, or is this only specific to the ZM4SQ group?* And (2) *Are my findings consistent with student sentiments towards higher education institutions before the pandemic, or have sentiments towards HE administrators changed over time?* Studying social media is powerful in that you can have an infinite amount of extremely recent, or even present-day, data to reveal social . Even though it is a challenging and laborious process, the results can provide tangible meaning to an intangible internet world.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Preliminary Thematic Analysis of Data (Open Coding)

College student sentiments towards...

1. HE administration
 - a. Residential situation (remote learning, housing search, etc.)
 - b. Job and career preparation (applications, emails, etc.)
2. Professors (and Zoom classrooms)
3. Student life
 - a. Academics and career (assignments, procrastination, workload, stress, "adulting," etc.)
 - b. Social life (friends, family, dating, sex, etc.)
 - c. Mental health and (un)wellness (experiencing time, loneliness, memory, coping, etc.)

Other meme topics:

- Memes used as a “coping” mechanism, as a tool to “relate”
- Academic subject-*related* jokes (physics, scientists, geology, business/economics, English, IT, etc.)
- Pandemic-related, personal/public health and safety (concerns)
- Political, world events, “current events” (at the time)
- Self-promotion materials (student-created games, apps, papers, etc.)

Appendix B: List of Names of Zotero Tags (Axial Coding)

HE Administration ^{1*}	Professors ¹	Student Life ¹	OTHER TAGS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residential Situation² • Job/Career Prospects² • Reopening Plans^{2**} • Finances² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Classrooms² • In-Person Classrooms² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics and Career² • Social Life² • Mental Health and (Un)wellness² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coping/Relatable -ness~ • Subject-Related Jokes~ • Personal/Public Health~ • Politics~ • Promotion Materials~

*Categories are organized in order of their relevance to my RQ by the end of the second, axial coding phase (with the most relevant on the left and top).

**Bolded terms were added in addition to those from the first, open coding phase (listed in Appendix A).