EMPATHY TRIVIALIZED: CRINGE AND DEHUMANIZATION

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ABSTRACT
Cringe compilations on YouTube are discussed as a vector for the construction of dehumanizing affective associations with marginalized groups. The affective reaction most focused on is dismell, particularly in the context of cringe-contempt. The comment section of two differing YouTube cringe compilations targetted against LGBTQ+ people are examined, one with a host that reacts to the 'cringe' clips and one without a host. Results indicate that cringe compilations without a host to model dehumanizing affective associations for the audience caused significantly less audience alignment with the dehumanizing intent of the compilation.

KEYWORDS
YouTube, cringe, affect theory, LGBTQ+, dehumanization

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The term 'cringe' has become a popular term on the Internet (Madison 2022). The word has extremely broad applicability. It can be used as an adjective (a cringy video), a verb (I cringed at that performance), and a noun (that suit is cringe). Linguistically, it is meant to evoke a sense of second-hand shame, embarrassment, and humiliation in response to a threat to another's social standing (Muller-Pinzler, et al. 2015). Yet, I would argue that the cringe label as used online is also meant to define the subject as an object of contempt. While research has shown there are significant pro-social applications of the emotions associated with the 'cringe' sensation, such as empathic reaction towards witnessed social harm (Smith 2021; Jones 2022), I am most concerned with so-called hostile or weaponized cringe.

In this article, I will look at how 'cringe' is combined with a contemptuous affective reaction by reactionary content creators to dehumanize marginalized people and progressive ideologies. I will do so by explaining how this content creates and reinforces affective networks, the metaphorical economies within which feelings and memories 'stick' to the objects and concepts that we encounter in our daily lives, as described by Ahmed (2004). These creators can cause viewers to experience unpleasant visceral and emotional affects in reaction to the same or similar stimuli now and in the future, as well as recontextualize previous encounters with those stimuli in viewers' memories. Their goal is to encourage the dismissal of the humanity of marginalized people by deploying trivializing signifiers that do not conform to normative values or, in one case as we will see (Verma 2021), those who are acting excessively pridefully for their caste. These patterns reinforce unjust hierarchies and reactionary ideology. In this study, I explore two questions: How is the affect of cringe combined with contempt and mobilized against marginalized bodies and progressive ideologies in practice?; and, What factors predict greater audience alignment with cringe?

To answer these questions, I will examine how cringe is mobilized in social media, paying special attention to what is defined as cringe, and how that is communicated to the viewer using Isaac Butterfield's reaction video "THE MOST UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS" (June 6, 2023). This video covers themes and actions that are repeatedly shown within specific clips, such as the stereotypical image of the angry 'triggered liberal.' Other factors are external modifications to different clips. These external modifications include the insertion of sound and visuals that were not originally in the clip, or even audio and/or visual commentary from the uploader themselves to more precisely explain where the 'cringe' affective stimuli is located.

Cringe compilation success will be measured via sentiments expressed in the most highly-rated YouTube comments. For this study, a cringe compilation is defined as a video that is centered around a collection of different clips that are intended to trigger a cringe response. I will then compare the result to Verma's (2021) discussion of how the label of 'cringe' is used to dehumanize and dismiss the contributions of low-caste TikTok users and creators on TikTok prior to the platform being banned in India.[1]

I will be following Ahmed's (2004) theoretical framework, wherein emotions are socially defined practices that are experienced within the body, creating 'networks' of affect and stimuli that define socio-cultural norms. However, while emotions are socially defined, the shape of affective responses themselves exist preconsciously and become emotions when consciously observed. Thus, I will be using Tomkins' (2014) nine affective responses as a framework for describing the reactions that the examined content intends to trigger.

While, for Tomkins, affective reactions are instinctive, different stimuli trigger specific reactions that are socially and historically situated. These nine affects do not control behavior per se, instead they preconsciously prioritize what stimuli the conscious mind should focus on, as well as contextualize that stimuli. This is an important survival mechanism because we are constantly perceiving stimuli, thus we require some way to prioritize which stimuli to focus on. If that had to be done consciously then we would have no ability to act because we would constantly be 'sorting' new stimuli. Similarly, the preconscious contextualization done by affective reactions helps our bodies to become physiologically prepared for actions connected to that stimulus, (i.e., fight or flight reactions for an affective reaction of fear). The most important affective response for this examination of cringe is what Tomkins referred to as 'dissmell.'

Dissmell, Contempt, and Cringe

Dissmell is usually a reaction to noxious phenomena that should be avoided, such as the scent of rotten food or the sight of a rotting corpse. However, dissmell becomes contempt when combined with anger. Contempt is therefore an extreme form of repulsion and non-consumption of the offending phenomenon. This is closely related but distinct from disgust, a negative reaction to the consumption (metaphorical or otherwise) of undesirable phenomena. While the survival applicability of dissmell is

to encourage the removal of rotten food or other things that could be dangerous to ingest or remain in contact with, contempt, as dissmell's more complex derivative, is a useful affective reaction for processes of dehumanization. On an abstract level, this means that people who already associate signifiers of marginalized groups with that contempt/dissmell affect are motivated to dismiss the needs of those groups. This is usually done by turning away from the source of that stimuli, putting it out of one's mind. It does not necessarily lead to violence, although it can if the offending stimuli in some way refuses or is unable to vacate the sensory range of the person experiencing it.

It is important to note that while it is possible to experience dissmell without experiencing contempt, contempt cannot be experienced without its more nonconscious affective component: dissmell. This is because contempt requires the offending 'noxious' stimuli to also trigger an affective anger response. For a real-life example, while I may experience dissmell at encountering a loaf of moldy bread, I usually have very little reason to be angry at it. It is merely bread. However, if a person were to become identified as a noxious stimulus and that person (or a signifier thereof) continuously appeared in my perception, then I would experience both an anger and dissmell reaction toward them. This combination breeds contempt. It should also be noted that the term 'noxious' here covers not only something perceived as physically harmful or unpleasant, but also mentally and morally so, as well as being obnoxious (Merriam-Webster, 2024). This means that the dissmell/contempt response can be triggered by stimuli that is not physically present, yet still received via representative signs, such as through media.

This brings us, finally, to cringe to determine how that may be integrated with dissmell. While cringe is not one of Tomkins' (2014) nine basic affects, it still has some basis in his affect theory, through dissmell but also his concept of affective contagion. The reason why it has a basis within his affect theory is that all of Tomkin's nin preconscious affects are accompanied by involuntary physical responses that Tomkins found to be present even in extremely young infants. For example, dissmell is expressed through a wrinkling of the nose, and the upper lip and head pulled back from the source of the stimulus (The Tomkins Institute 2014). These physical reactions are moderated by social conditioning into more socially acceptable forms as people grow into adulthood, but they are still present.

Affective contagion is a phenomenon whereby perceiving an affective response in others causes one to vicariously experience that same affective response. We can see this as a key factor in the mechanics of empathy (in many ways, dissmell's alternate pathway) and how it helps to nonverbally motivate others in the vicinity in the preservation or removal (in the case of cringe/contempt) of the stimuli causing the affective response. Thus, if you see someone give the dissmell response, you will be more likely to ready yourself for encountering something unpleasant.

As will be discussed in the next section, the involuntary bodily movement that is defined by the verb 'cringe' accompanies an empathic response to pain, physical or otherwise. However, the way that cringe is often used in the common vernacular, 'that is so cringe' or 'this is cringy', is clearly different. No one would refer to a car accident as 'cringe', but one may *physically* cringe when hearing or seeing a car accident. This, too, is tied to affective contagion. Recognition that someone is cringing causes the recognizer to also cringe in response to an assumed source of that affect, perhaps in recognition that they will soon see or experience something physically or socially painful. Research indicates that the noun/adjective version of the term 'cringe' has a specifically social meaning that indicates sympathetic embarrassment and thus a form of social empathy (Pradhan & Drake 2022; Muller-Pinzler et. al. 2016).

One intersection of cringe and dissmell may therefore be found in what I call 'hostile cringe', where dissmell is used to label certain signifiers (in this article those associated with marginalized/abject groups) as both socially embarrassing and valid targets for rejection of that empathy. Remember that the negative affective contagion is used to motivate the removal of that negative stimuli from one's presence, it does not dictate *how that is done.* Experiencing 'cringe' for someone you identify with may motivate you to comfort, defend, or otherwise 'heal' them against whatever is causing their embarrassment, such as publicly standing up to a bully who is publicly humiliating someone, or covering for someone who makes a faux pas at a social gathering.

On the other hand, experiencing 'cringe' for someone that you feel dissmell/contempt for may motivate you to either dismiss their pain out of hand, deeming it unworthy of focus, or even cause you to stay and revel in the experience of someone you consider socially subordinate to you being 'put in their place.' Moreover, because revelling in that social pain can be pleasurable, it incentivizes affective economies of contempt to 'spread' to broader and broader signifiers associated with the initial subject (Ahmed 2004). In so doing, the fact that the subject 'produces' cringe can become associated with that contemptuous reaction. To narrativize it, one may feel contempt for someone because they are so embarrassing, yet that embarrassment

can become pleasurable to witness when coupled with contempt. However, the fact remains that the use of contempt to dismiss that empathetic impulse does serve to negate or even invert the initial function of cringe. Both categories of cringe will now be discussed, with emphasis placed on the anti-social or 'hostile' cringe.

Cringe as Pro-Social Experience

For such a universal experience, the social and physical dimensions of cringe itself are fascinatingly multifaceted. While the currently popular meaning of the term 'cringe' carries negative connotations, previous work has found that 'cringe' can be an avenue towards greater empathy and self-awareness. In Pradhan & Drake's (2022) examination of their 'hate-watch' of the Netflix series *Indian Matchmaking*, they conceptualise cringe as one of the "ugly feelings" described by Ngai (2004): visceral feelings that are physically apparent and often culturally policed. Through their cringe experiences, they found themselves experiencing social empathy for cast members, questioning their own Othering biases, as well as questioning repressive authorities and institutions.

Cringe as a source of sympathetic embarrassment and thus empathy finds support in a neurological study by Muller-Pinzler, et al. (2016), who found that the closeness of one's relationship with the subject of cringe will modulate the intensity of that affective cringe response. Specifically, the closer one's relationship is to the subject of cringe, the greater the responses in regions of the brain associated with vicarious embarrassment (although it should be noted that this merely gets at the mechanical workings of cringe rather than an ultimate explanation). These areas were also closely related to parts of the brain that are associated with experiencing empathy for physical injuries. In this sense, the function of cringe could be to provide motivation to prevent or ameliorate the social and physical pain of others. This characterization of the cringe affect as being neurologically connected to empathy via vicarious social pain was followed up on by Jesus, et al. (2022). They found that further study of cringe could be useful for examining empathic reactions as well as a fruitful area of study for subjects who lack empathy.

Havas & Sulimma (2020) examine the concept of cringe from an aesthetic and artistic perspective. They define the 'cringe aesthetic' as art that seeks to cause a physical reaction of discomfort in the viewer; cringe is one of what they call "body genres" (Havas & Sulimma 2020), such as horror and pornography, that likewise attempt to cause different physical responses in the viewer. Their study of cringe comedies/dramedies presents a departure from the previous examinations of cringe as an affective experience that closes the distance between observer and subject. Cringe humor requires that an affective distance be created, so that we cringe at the characters rather than with them. By 'affective distance,' I refer to the degree to which we 'see ourselves' in another person.

When that affective distance is close, such as with a close friend, a family member, or someone else that one identifies strongly with, then it is much harder to laugh at their pain and discomfort because that pain and discomfort will be experienced sympathetically as one's own. Conversely, when that affective distance is widened, such as by making someone the object of dissmell/contempt, the empathic response to that pain and discomfort is weakened, even neutralized. Furthermore, by being the subject of cringe humor, that affective distance may be widened still further to preserve the pleasure of the humorous reaction, making it an effective form for discouraging empathy, if wielded in such a way.

A recent example of these different affective experiences can be seen in the Netflix sketch comedy series *I Think You Should Leave* (2019–). Most of these sketches are based around the concept of a single character committing a social faux pas or making a mistake, and instead of apologizing and returning things to normal, doubling down on that faux pas to an absurd degree to avoid the loss of face. For example, one of the sketches centers around a group of former students having dinner with a respected professor. The professor eats one student's entire meal while they look on in discomfort. He not only refuses to apologize but attempts to blackmail them to prevent them from revealing his misdeed. The show maintains affective distance so that this extremely socially awkward and unsettling situation can become funny.

Yet in that same episode ("They said that to me at a dinner" 2021), there is a sketch wherein a man attending an adult haunted house tour takes the statement that they can say whatever they want to literally. He begins to ask sexually explicit questions about the ghosts that upset the other attendees and the tour guide. However, unlike most of the sketches where the reaction is one of anger or absurd stubbornness, this time the main character is confused to the point of tears at the arbitrary standard around what is okay for people to say. When a tour member makes him leave, he sadly walks outside to where his mother is waiting for him

in a car. There is still humor from the absurdity of the man's sexually explicit ghost questions, and from the upset reaction from the guests and tour guide. Yet we are also meant to empathize with the main character, and *his* discomfort and confusion with the situation.

The unnamed main character's reaction is less an attempt to save face at others' expense and more about trying to understand unwritten social rules of which he was not aware. The sketch invites us to use that sense of cringe to laugh at discomfort, but also to reflect on how often rules that we think are clear are, in fact, only that way because we have a deeper contextual understanding that goes unstated. This show, therefore, gives us opportunities to both cringe at and cringe with the various characters. Affective distance is created at the beginning by highlighting the man's social awkwardness, yet literally closes that distance when the camera focuses on his tearful facial expression and confused tone, making us more sympathetic to his clearly displayed distress.

In fact, by swiftly bringing us into closer emotional alignment with the main character after being the subject of mockery, this episode of *I Think You Should Leave* manages to remain humorous by subverting our expectations, making it socially acceptable to laugh at while also humanizing the sketch's main character. Thus, the modulation of affective distance and cringe humor can still be used pro-socially by providing an opportunity for us to reconsider our assumptions about what we consider cringe and what actions we should prioritize in response to them. The man in the sketch was being vulgar and embarrassing, but his actions were clearly motivated by misunderstanding rather than malice. Was it therefore right for the rest of the group to reject him?

Yet the darker side of cringe comedy can also be exploited for significantly more serious consequences. Cringe comedy expects viewers to not just accept the discomfort that characters experience but enjoy it. While cringe comedy can be a vector for empathy, as shown by the example from *I Think You Should Leave*, cringe can also be used by reactionary media to reinforce oppressive social norms when such media creators label attempts of self-expression or even public existence by marginalized groups as cringe. The next section of this essay concerns itself with this chief method of cringe mobilization.

Hostile Cringe as Vector for Contempt

My own contribution to the study of cringe and affect begins by examining a reaction video on YouTube called "THE MOST UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS" by Isaac Butterfield (2023). I will be contrasting it with Verma's (2021) analysis of TikTok creators in India where lower-caste creators were consistently labelled as 'cringy' by other, higher-caste influencers. In both cases, 'cringe' and the rhetoric surrounding those given that label are used to make these subordinate others into targets of contemptuous affects and, thus, reinforce an oppressive status quo. In both examples, the labelling of someone as 'cringe' is used not to imply that they deserve empathy, but instead that their nonconformity to hegemonic social norms is a valid reason to mock and dismiss their agency and humanity.

Butterfield's video is focused on viewing and commenting on subjects defined as being 'cringe' because they display attributes or behaviors that are associated with 'wokeness.' Wokeness in this context refers to a recent adoption of the term 'woke', historically used by the left-wing to denote awareness of systemic oppression by the right-wing. The right-wing definition of the term, which has quickly spread through public consciousness, is a shibboleth used to denote anything the right-wing does not like, making it nearly impossible to consistently define (Remnick 2023). For example, "UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS" includes an extended clip where an LGBTQ+ rights activist screams at a city board meeting to express the pain that board's policies are causing to their community. They are defined as 'woke' (and therefore cringe) due to their self-identification as LGBTQ+ but also because they possess signifiers associated with progressive activism, such as political buttons and dyed hair.

After viewing the video, I examined the comments to see how effective it was at aligning the audience with the affects of contempt that the video's host intended to attach to the subjects of the video. The audience of "THE MOST UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS" displayed significant affective alignment with the intentions of Isaac Butterfield. Why is that the case? How does Isaac Butterfield succeed at getting people to fall into affective alignment with him? Even if we consider that people will largely only watch and comment if they already agree with the views expressed by the video and indicated by its title, the fact remains that this is a successful example of hostile cringe mobilization compared to the myriad others offering the same experience on YouTube. I posit that presenting himself as the central figure in the video was a key factor in the success of this cringe-realignment.

The degree of affective alignment with Butterfield was measured by examining the top ten highest rated comments on his video. Three of the top-rated comments in "MOST UNHINGED TIKTOKS" included sentiments like: "Hard to believe these people are the voice of reason in modern society. What has the world come to?" (Walter White 2023), "I miss the days when mental illness wasn't glorified and pushed as a positive or heroic challenge." (Chaoz 2023), and "Man for a group of people who are all about Love and Acceptance, they sure get angry a lot and have no problems attacking others at the drop of a hat" (engirish1977 2023). The comments had 566, 483, and 401 likes at the time of this research. Butterfield's compilation has been successful in getting their audience to experience the desired affective reaction to the cringe set off by the subjects of these clips. Cringe has become a vector for the expression of contempt.

Another key feature here is that Butterfield's video is not only a compilation of TikTok clips, but also a 'reaction' to them. The idea of the reaction video is that the uploader watches the clips along with the audience and provides an amusing or otherwise entertaining reaction to the media being viewed. This enables the uploader to not have to trust his audience to feel the 'correct' way about the clips, instead they can model the 'proper' reaction to the stimuli on display.

While Butterfield watches the TikTok clips, the audience sees two kinds of reactions. First are his moment-to-moment reactions. The other is explicit commentary reactions when he pauses the clips and gives his opinion over the footage. He often removes TikTok from view and puts himself on full screen, becoming the sole focus of the video. This is a key point where the cringe affect can be inverted from producing social empathy to producing contempt. Butterfield's presence offers a 'model' of behavior that gives the audience 'permission' to freely express contempt in reaction to stimuli that is framed as evoking a cringe response.

The "react" video format also has the advantage of a pre-existing audience that has subscribed to the channel for the sake of the uploader rather than the content of the individual compilation. Those people watching an Isaac Butterfield video are likely already emotionally aligned with him, and it is easier and more pleasurable to go along with a figure they already like rather than to dispute him. Unfortunately, Butterfield uses the video to dehumanize the subjects of the

compilation. He does this by expressing negative affects toward the video, and then explaining why the video subjects should be dismissed from any kind of more compassionate consideration.

The type of affect he displays in the video ranges from amusement to aggressive anger; but, all of them were meant to communicate that the issues and perspectives raised in the TikTok clips are not meant to be taken seriously. The best example of this is in the clip discussed earlier where an LGBTQ+ activist addresses a city council. The activist begins shouting after stating: "I just want you to feel our pain. I don't know if you can at this point based off of your policy decisions, but I have to pretend you have some form of empathy left" (1:54). At the end of each sentence, Butterfield stops the video to mock their appearance, referring specifically to their age, the rainbow pin, and their wearing of a mask. By doing this, he is breaking up a statement that is meant to be communicated as a whole (fig. 1). This implies that the speaker's thoughts are not worth respecting. After all, interrupting is a rude thing to do. Furthermore, reducing age and sexual identity to mere signifiers also connects to reactionary associations of femininity (or perhaps more precisely, non-masculinity) with emotional immaturity and intemperance (Ahmed 2004).

The initial framing of the TikTok should also be considered. The TikTok starts with a caption saying that the activist will "go crazy" at the meeting. By using this specific clip, Butterfield reinforces the widespread reactionary discourse characterizing trans identity as a mental illness, such as when Joe Rogan and Matt Walsh refer to trans as a "mental health issue" (Paterson & Tirrell 2022). These associations trivialize the pain and anger the activist is expressing. By doing so, this activist hopes that the board will experience a fragment of that pain as real, instead of an abstraction. Instead, Butterfield changes a human being expressing pain and anguish into a badly behaved child having a tantrum by characterizing them as 'cringe.'

The 'natural' reaction to a scream of pain is to experience an empathic response that can be extremely uncomfortable, especially if that empathic affective response is triggered by an abject figure. In that moment, one viscerally acknowledges the common humanity that the other possesses, clashing with the hegemonic ideology that may otherwise be impressed upon the conscious mind. This leads to cognitive dissonance as the body feels what the mind has been told not to. Butterfield provides a very useful service for the reactionary audience. By labelling the marginalized Other as 'cringe' and then explaining how certain signifiers justify that label (the language they use, the pins and mask they wear, etc.), he can save the audience from their undesired empathy through the power of contempt.

Consider Butterfield's reaction (fig. 2). He smiles, dramatically bends his neck back to face upwards and then shakes his head as if a refreshing wave had crested over his head. By mocking and infantilizing the marginalized Other, the uncomfortable empathic response to the scream of pain can be neutralized. This models for his audience the release that one can experience from empathy by labelling the target as 'cringe.' This pattern continues throughout the video. Someone acts in a way that evokes associations with progressive causes, ranging from a likely staged video of a woman claiming a two-year-old girl shouldn't wear pink to Instagram models advocating body positivity for heavy people. All of them are reacted to in a way that models how and why audience members can and should dismiss their perspectives.

Furthermore, by placing himself as the 'host', or the primary subject of the video, Butterfield can act as a sort of buffer that prevents his audience from making an empathic connection with the clip subjects. By interrupting the clips to give his own views while making jokes about each specific clip, the host makes the clips and, particularly, the people presented in them feel less real to the audience. The format of the video not only allows the audience to viscerally experience mockery of the subjects but presents the subject in such a way that their expression is cut up into pieces, rendering the original clip emotionally incoherent. In so doing, the host demonstrates power over the clips and, by extension, towards those vague groups that those clips are meant to represent. Rhetorically speaking, the host takes something that would cause a negative affective reaction in their audience, interrupts it, and tells it to shut up without having to encounter someone else's feelings. Because the audience is likely composed largely of subscribers to Butterfield (in this case), then they would experience pleasure and a sense of vicarious power via their alignment with him.

Butterfield's clips are usually framed in such a way that the 'woke' figure is antagonistic to the status quo, independent of Butterfield's commentary. We have a woman questioning the legitimacy of a father's decision for what their child should wear, LGBTQ+ activists breaking norms of public civility by shouting in a formal board meeting, people refusing to conform to mainstream gender presentations, and women openly discussing male privilege. These are all set up as threats to be summarily mocked and defanged by Butterfield for the catharsis of his reactionary audience. It is easier to make people associate LGBTQ+ or other 'woke' signifiers with negative affective experiences when people with those

signifiers are acting in a way that the viewer might find somehow threatening after all. This video offers a representative example of the right-wing project to reinforce hegemonic white heteronormative values within society.

While violent rhetoric is often given the most attention, efforts like this present a significant danger to marginalized groups because they are attempting to encourage what Bratich (2022) would call numbness. This numbness is an important facet of microfascist performance wherein those performing microfascism allow themselves to become numb to the experience of the outside world, particularly to marginalized targets. This does not necessarily result in violence in all or even most cases, but it dehumanizes the target group all the same. The audience may not become violent, but it does encourage them to be more accepting of violence done *to* the targets. In this case it is done by creating an association of the presence of signifiers of the marginalized target (in this case clearly LGBTQ+ folk in the video) with an affective experience of contempt.

Hate-watching

Next, I want to push a bit further into the atmospheres of cringe and contempt toward the nature of hate-watching as discussed in Tarishi Verma's "Cultural cringe: how caste and class affect the idea of culture in social media" (2021). Her essay discusses how lower-caste Indian TikTok stars were described as 'cringy' to reinforce caste-based biases. Before TikTok was banned in India, the platform was extremely popular with users who were lower-caste and, therefore, had less access to economical and cultural capital compared to their middle and upper class (and caste) counterparts. This extended to language education, with higher-caste influencers often able to speak English, making their content accessible to a wider audience (Verma 2021).

Because of this lack of access to various forms of capital, many of the popular works by those lower-caste users did not have the same production values or aesthetic appeal as the higher caste users. Thus, in Verma's (2021) words, "When they find expression through TikTok in a way that is diametrically opposed to what the dominant cultural class wants, it is labelled as cringe" (159). That cringe label and all the sticky affects that go with it were applied to the TikTok creators, not just the content. For example, urban Indian TikTok creators specifically referred to videos created by lower-caste people as both "frivolous and cringe" (Verma 2021, 160). The implication is, of course, that their creations are beneath notice and, in fact, offensive to look at. Hence, because higher-caste creators are almost

exclusively able to access the cultural capital, wealth, and educational opportunities to create content that matches the desires of the hegemonic status quo, lower caste people *cannot* create anything as good, and should be quiet and listen to their betters. Those people who defy cultural norms, whether by trying and failing to live up to inaccessibly high production standards or by creating media that does not attempt to live up to them at all, are guilty of forcing people to experience cringe and, therefore, must be reminded of their proper place through mockery, contempt, and dismissal.

So, one question becomes: Why would viewers actively pursue the opportunity to participate in such an affective state of rejection and anger towards the subject that are made to bear the weight of cringe and contempt? Suryansu Guha (2022) provides a partial answer to this through the phenomenon of the 'hate-watch.' He frames cringe as a signifier of paradoxical love and hate through his description of the "hate-watch or cringe-binge" (870) as a source of "love for loathing" (871). Guha examines *Indian Matchmaker* and its reception by South Asian audiences as an example of 'trash television.' Unlike Drake & Praedhan's (2022) discussion of Ngai, Guha follows Sara Ahmed's concept of affective networks.

Guha describes how *Indian Matchmaker* can re-energize already circulating hatreds for the institute of matchmaking and arranged marriage in South Asian audiences. Hate-watching provides a way to act out the call to action that hatred sparks by engaging in discourse about the content of that hate-watch session (Guha 2022), often through social media. By joining others in publicly expressing a stance about the subject of cringe, viewers can experience a sense of cathartic accomplishment. Like the creators of cringe compilations, the marketing team for *Indian Matchmaker* was aware of how to capitalize on this process. To truly 'perform' hatred for the show, it must be viewed and then publicly discussed: the two best outcomes for a television show on a streaming platform (Guha 2022). This is how savvy content producers can exploit the process of hate-watching through its cringe content, despite it often being perceived as an oppositional act towards the producers of that content.

While I am not in any way making a straightforward equivalency between people hate-watching a lavishly produced reality TV show and people hate-watching content featuring marginalized people for the purpose of cathartic cringe, there is significant affective similarity when one looks at the feelings both audiences

experience, separated from the context. That is to say, those viewing Butterfield's contemptuous reactions to content featuring LGBTQ+ individuals engage with previously existing 'circulating hatreds' towards so-called 'wokeness' and people associated with 'wokeness' in his audience, much as hate-watching *Indian Matchmaker* engages the previously mentioned hatreds towards the institutions of arranged marriages and matchmaking (Guha 2022). Furthermore, because Butterfield presents himself in dialogue with his audience, literally addressing them throughout the video, the audience gets to experience that same sense of cathartic accomplishment by vicariously joining with Butterfield in expressing their stance toward the cringe subject. Thus, the viewing of "THE MOST UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS!" (Butterfield 2023) can also carry with it the sensation of 'doing something' about this vague concept of wokeness that is characterized as a creeping threat towards society. Likewise, engaging in mockery of lower-caste TikToks can be rationalized as attempting to maintain a 'proper' standard of aesthetic and cultural production (Verma 2021).

Cringe > Contempt > Removal

One final and crucial factor to consider: While the state of cringe-contempt may be unpleasant, the ability to fulfill the affective purpose of dissmell/contempt can be cathartic because it highlights the ability to impose one's will upon the world by successfully removing the source of contempt. Contempt brings with it an intoxicating sense of power because it manifests ultimately as a feeling that you can safely disregard the existence of another. By engaging with that source, you can continuously reinforce your own inner sense of superiority. In other words, contempt is "the mark of the oppressor" (Tomkins 1995, 139). Even the most benign and compassionate expression of cringe must therefore come with a momentary understanding of a hierarchy, because at least the target of social pain is not you.

This recognition of someone's subordinate space in a hierarchy and the possession of the ability to turn away from them can be a pleasurable experience. According to Tomkins (2014), the positive affect of joy is triggered by the lessening of unpleasant neural stimuli, and experiencing cringe as social empathy is not pleasant. After all, the purpose of affective contagion in the case of negative affects is to encourage a group effort in the removal of the cause of the negative affect. When you hear a baby crying, it can take up all your attention and make you want to remove or otherwise correct the situation so that the baby stops crying. So too with empathy.

When you see someone doing something embarrassing or perhaps being unjustly socially harmed, that cringe you feel is embarrassment or shame by proxy. Because people are generally incentivized to seek out positive affects rather than negative affects, it feels much more momentarily pleasurable to dismiss the pain of another person that is seen as beneath you than to continue to focus on that person and vicariously experience their pain. It is to say, 'I can completely disregard this thing because I am so powerful that it cannot affect me.' That is the reason why videos like Butterfield's are sought after. Viewers experience social embarrassment by proxy and then dismiss it, lessening the neural 'load' on their mind, so to speak, creating the sensation of joy. It was not you, so it is funny.

The function of presenters like Butterfield or the trolls mocking lower-caste creators on TikTok (Verma 2021) is to provide a rationale for why it is morally acceptable to convert cringe into contempt and, in so doing, create community alignment that is fundamentally based on the rejection of pain, expression, and agency. Yet emotions are sticky (Ahmed 2004), and do not remain isolated in a single context. Someone who connects signifiers of pain, marginalization, and attempts to express oneself with contempt and amusement will bring those associations into other facets of their life experiences. When they see news about anti-trans laws being passed, then they are more likely to disregard such news as well as the testimony of those harmed by those laws. And they can feel good while they do it. This makes it easier for powerful entities and institutions to brutalize marginalized groups, because segments of the population, usually the most privileged ones, may be primed to treat any expression of those marginalized groups as being embarrassing, trivial, and not worth giving attention to.

Conclusion: The Cursed Manipulation of Cringe

What does all this research tell us? We have seen how the cringe affect can act as a deeply empathetic reaction to another's social hurt, just as we may feel the pain of another's physical wound. One does not feel a cringe out of indifference, after all. Yet there is a darker side to the experience of cringe, one where that acknowledgement of another's social pain becomes the end in and of itself. Sometimes this is benign, as in the case of 'hatewatching' poorly made media wherein that cringe can become an outlet for socially disapproved 'ugly' emotions (Drake &

Praedhan 2022). Yet the Ahmedian flow of sticky emotions, even when pointed towards a legitimate target, such as when Guha (2022) discusses how the Indian audience used the Netflix show *Indian Matchmaker* as a sort of avatar for their negative feelings towards the institution of matchmaking itself, can be easily directed away from anti-oppressive ends. In the case of *Indian Matchmaker*, Netflix and the showrunners intentionally accentuated the 'cringy' parts of the show in its marketing, thereby ensuring social media buzz around it, ironically out of audience disdain for its content. Sharing cringe can feel cathartic. It can create a sense of community based on the shared sense that the target of the cringe is below the regard of the group.

That is not harmful in and of itself, but it crosses the line when hostile cringe, and the accompanying affective responses and emotions, are intentionally loaded onto marginalized peoples and anti-oppression movements. These cringe compilations and related media works spread a fog of contempt where people that are already materially brutalized can be further dehumanized, and their pain dismissed. Yet it should be remembered that while purveyors of reactionary, hateful media would have us believe that it is natural to hate and dislike that which is different from the norm, it is simply not true. Contrary to accusations lobbed by reactionaries at progressives, it is the right wing who are engaged in 'social engineering.' After all, it requires constant construction and reinforcement to maintain dehumanization. Halting the constant creation and maintenance of these dehumanizing discourses should, therefore, lead to greater societal empathy. One avenue to assist in the halting of the machinery of hatred is by examining how cringe can be used as a recognition of our shared humanity rather than a justification to push the Other out of sight. We must cringe forward to the future, not backwards to the past.

Notes

1. While one may note that the literature viewed here heavily focuses on Indian culture (Pradhan & Drake 2023, Verma 2021, Guha 2022), this is not meant to imply that the Indian cultural context has a special relationship with the concept of cringe, hostile or otherwise. There is nothing in that literature that states that South Asian people hate-watching *Indian Matchmaking* (Pradhan & Drake 2023, Guha 2022) is categorically different from another person hate-watching something else beyond the audience's specific cultural context tied to the institution of matchmaking and arranged marriages.

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