5-11-2020

Another Likable Serial Killer: Fans' Representation of "You"'s Joe Goldberg through Memes

Carlisle Lynch
Salve Regina University, carlisle.lynch@salve.edu

Another Likable Serial Killer: Fans' Representation of *You*'s Joe Goldberg Through Memes

By

Carli Lynch

Prepared for

Dr. Madeleine Esch

Department of English, Communications and Media

Salve Regina University

May 11, 2020

Another Likable Serial Killer: Fans' Representation of *You*'s Joe Goldberg Through Memes

ABSTRACT: *America is no stranger to likable serial killers in the media and Netflix's* You *with its protagonist Joe Goldberg is an example of this trope. Fans are taking to Twitter and TikTok to share their opinions about their new favorite serial killer, and the opinions are similar. The purpose of this research is to discover what the limited ideas on Twitter and TikTok reveal about how fans view Joe. Scholarly research shows that social media platforms have shifted fans from observers to participants, with the ability to create and share their own content across the Internet. The snowball effect that is common on both Twitter and TikTok shows a narrowing of opinions about Joe overall. Through my analysis, I have seen that the most popular perceptions appear to be comedic, relatable, or romantic. The research shows that by using memes, fans can skew the audiences' perception of a serial killer.*

Introduction

"He may be a serial killer but at least he's funny," tweeted Twitter user @fivelstewarts. She is referring to Joe Goldberg from Netflix's hit television series *You*. In December 2018, the psychological thriller premiered on Netflix to an international audience. The series took off instantly and in just one month, the first season had attracted an audience of around 40 million (Low). Despite his character as a serial killer and stalker, Joe Goldberg, the series' protagonist, has become the subject of obsession since *You* premiered. "The more we get to know about Joe, the more we know to be afraid of him, but we also see where he's coming from," said *IndieWire* critic Liz Shannon Miller. "It's dangerous... but sometimes danger can be an exciting thing."

Joe, played by Penn Badgley, seems to be a simple man working at a bookstore until we are let in on his little secret. The fans fall in love with Joe through his internal monologue and Badgley's edgy but handsome appearance. A year after the release of the first season, *You* released a second season and the series increased in popularity. I started my research on this topic just one month after the premiere of the second season, since I continuously saw memes across social media about Joe and they were surprisingly positive towards him. I found the *You* phenomenon to be intriguing, as I have always been interested in America's fascination for serial

killers. Joe Goldberg is a current example of the "hype" surrounding serial killers in popular culture. Past examples include Dexter Morgan from the 2006 drama television show *Dexter,* or the infamous Ted Bundy, who killed over 30 people in the 1970s and was popular for his good looks and charm ("Ted Bundy Biography").

Many of the memes about *You* that I was seeing on social media were mostly from TikTok and Twitter. TikTok is a video-sharing platform that has risen in popularity in the past year. In December 2019 and January 2020, there were hundreds of videos emerging on TikTok about Joe. This was just after the second season premiered, so the engagement rates were still high and the show was trending. *You* was also trending on Twitter during this time. Twitter is a social networking service but has become known as a popular meme site as well. Many of the memes in my research were originally posted to Twitter. In the age of social media, the outlets in which fans can share their opinions range from creating fan art, writing fan fiction—fantasy stories about favorite characters, often erotic or romantic—and creating memes. It is fascinating to discover that serial killers get this kind of fan engagement, too. Since the sentiment of the memes in my research were mostly positive, I found it surprising that there were articles that criticized fans who found Joe relatable. One example is an article on *Daily Dot:* "Joe is definitely a character you're not supposed to like—or have a crush on. But fans of the show think otherwise" (Kelly). The article then discusses the way that the actor who plays Joe, Penn Badgley, has often shared his disgust in the way fans portray Joe online through their memes and tweets.

The question that has driven my research is "How do the posts with highest engagement show a narrowed opinion of Joe Goldberg on Twitter and TikTok?" I believe this question is timely because social media is an influential part of our everyday lives and drives the energy

behind the conversation. They also influence people and can have the power to change opinions. My research is based on the posts created by a certain demographic, which is the same age group that is most influenced by social media. America's fascination with serial killers and why we as a culture gravitate towards characters like Joe Goldberg through the influence of social media has long been an interest of mine.

Literature Review
Fans' engagement on social media

Social media is what connects fans to a television show, in a way that has never been possible before. Annemarie Navar-Gill posits that producers have clued into viewers' need for engagement, and Twitter accounts for TV shows have been able to do that. The producers and/or writers of shows can interact with the fans of the show, which contributes to the viewers' engagement (416). Certain networks, specifically The CW, have used social media engagement to decide which shows to cancel and which shows to renew, pushing aside ratings and critics (420). This proves that fans engage with their favorite shows through social media more than anything else. Navar-Gill points out that the writers of the Twitter accounts for shows hype up the fans by bringing back memorable scenes from the past episodes and reminding fans how much they love it (421). Similarly, the official Twitter account for Netflix's *You* uses the platform to ask viewers to share with them their theories about the upcoming season, as well as memes and other anecdotes. The account keeps up with current meme formats, placing the characters into those memes and integrating quotes from the show when fit. One example is a post that uses a current meme format, showing joke profile pictures for each popular social media. The *You* Twitter account posted the meme with the squares blacked out, and the photo next to the meme was a shot from the show of one of the characters telling Joe, "I looked you up.

You're not on the socials" (see fig. 1). This meme is an example of thousands about *You* but will only be understood and enjoyed by those who have seen the show.

Fig. 1. @YouNetflix uses a scene from season two in a popular meme format: "I'm a little behind the times."
Twitter, 24 Jan. 2020.

The increasingly popular social media platform TikTok has also contributed to the fans' perception of Joe Goldberg through memes. Like Twitter, fans can share their opinions on Joe and the television show itself, but TikTok does this in video form, which is arguably more effective than written words. Jiang Xiao Yu suggests that social media has shifted viewers from "passive" observers, to participants (29) and discusses how that affects the user experience. He argues that TikTok encourages a "user centric" environment where creators can customize their content and interact with others' content (29). The addicting nature of the app causes content to be repeated and stolen, but with that being said, this increases the popularity of memes within the video app. Yu points out that snowballing—adding onto or copying original content—is common on TikTok; therefore, it increases the popularity of the subject and encourages reusing

original content. The spread of ideas on TikTok has contributed to the phenomenon that is *You*,

encouraging countless reenactments and customized memes about the show. Furthermore, Yu

argues that TikTok has become more vulgar and controversial, and "some of the content violates

the mainstream values of the society," which can most certainly be applied to the Joe Goldberg

memes. It is not socially acceptable to relate to a serial killer and stalker, yet TikTok normalizes

the comparisons in a humorous way.

The American fascination with serial killers

Aside from the most current fictional serial killer, Joe Goldberg, there are several that

have come before him, affecting the audience in a similar way. Serial killers have held the

fascination of American consumer culture for decades. Brian Jarvis illustrates this by stating that

there are over a thousand serial killer films, according to the Internet Movie Database (326).

Real-life serial killers have gained fame and fortune, even when locked away for life. Movies

and shows have been made from the stories of these killers, like Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and

Ed Gein. Jarvis argues that there is a link between serial killers and consumerism and believes

that serial killers and consumerists share some of the same traits, like "aggressive narcissism, the

compulsive collection of fetish objects and fantasies of self-transformation" (332). He uses

Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* as an example of this idea. Bateman is a consumer: he

has a lengthy beauty routine, owns nice clothing, and is materialistic (330). This stereotype is

common, like in *Silence of the Lambs* and *Se7en*, for example, but does not factor into Joe

Goldberg's identity as a serial killer. Although he could fit the "compulsive collection" trait—he

is obsessed with books—he is not outwardly consumerist and is not materialistic in any way. His

character is quite the opposite and that is one of his trademarks. For example, Joe looks down on

Peach Salinger, one of the characters in the show who comes from a rich family, because she

uses her last name to get anything she wants. Unlike Peach, Joe doesn't wear flashy clothes or

put much thought into his appearance. Joe is not materialistic, and this sets him apart from his serial killer counterparts. The fact that Joe appears to be a simple man who doesn't have social media or care about what he looks like also plays into the reason why his audience views him as an antihero.

There are many serial killer characters in film and television, but only a few draw sympathy from their audience in the way Joe Goldberg and his predecessor Dexter Morgan do. Joanna Dunn suggests that the main character of *Dexter* is portrayed in such a way that the audience feels as though he is a "protagonist" (137). Dexter's thoughts are narrated through an internal monologue, thus ensuring that he has control of the narrative in the show. Although Dexter's actions are wrong and inhumane, the writer uses his narration to make the viewer sympathize with him because they can see into his mind and understand him. Dunn also points out that this makes Dexter's voice become comforting and familiar to the audience, making him seem less threatening and almost justifying his choices. The narration in the show is a vehicle to show the reasoning behind why Dexter is a serial killer in the first place—due mostly to traumatizing events in his past—as well a way to reflect the worries of modern society. He asks himself rhetorical questions about his character and his choices (139). In contrast to Dexter, Joe rarely questions his actions but tries to justify them in his mind. The only time that he has any doubt in himself is when he is about to get caught. Dexter can be considered the predecessor to Joe because of the many similarities between the two. Joe, like Dexter, expresses his thoughts through narration, having almost the same effect on the viewers as Dexter does. The tactic of this narration is to bring the viewer into Joe's mind to help them understand the reasoning behind his actions in order to evoke sympathy. Another similarity between Dexter and Joe is that they are traditionally handsome, which contributes to their likability. Since *Dexter* premiered before

memes were popular, fans didn't have as much of a chance to express their attraction to him in the same way that they do with Joe. Like Dexter, Joe has a protective instinct when it comes to children and would never consider harming one, thus evoking sympathy from the audience. The relationship between Joe and the other characters at first is like Dexter's relationships because they seem to have normal friendships but lead these secret lives. Both can be committed and show that they care about certain characters, even though they are psychopaths. Dunn argues that it is because of Dexter's psychopathic traits that he can charm and convince people that he is normal. The same can be said about Joe. While many of these likable traits are written into the script and portrayed by the actors themselves, social media does have a part in making the characters more well-known and more liked.

Encouraging fan participation through Twitter

Social media has grown so important that the television industry has used it to their advantage when trying to increase viewership. Ryan Cassella argues that social media creators recognize that engaging viewers and fans online will help them for a "more personal connection," thus increasing views (13). Cassella states that certain shows have been altered by the opinion of social media followers. He gives an example of the audience choosing the ending of an episode, something that wouldn't be possible without a social media platform. *You* doesn't exactly do this, but the social media accounts, specifically Twitter, encourage fans to tweet out their theories for the upcoming season. Using the many hashtags related to the show, fans will share their theories and thoughts about what will happen next. Oftentimes these theories will be reposted or "retweeted" by the show's Twitter account, engaging the viewers even more. When the official *You* Twitter retweets fans' posts, it encourages other fans to tweet about the show and starts a chain reaction. Social media interaction heightens the connection that the fans already have with the show, and the people behind the social media accounts use this to their advantage.

Twitter accounts take on a personality of their own in order to engage viewers. Cassella points out that social media is not only useful for raising engagement rates, but for financial opportunities (14). Of course, engagement rates help raise the possibility of gaining these opportunities. Many television shows will branch out to collaborate with other companies or turn themselves into a franchise with merchandise and more. So far *You* has not done any of those, but with the engagement that the show has, there could be a possibility to branch out in the future. The show has already been renewed for a third season, just a couple weeks after the release of the second season, so there are endless possibilities for how the show could expand.

The crossover of social media and television is continuously brought up these days when discussing fandom and viewership. Twitter has a particularly strong association with television. The short, quick format makes for a good platform for fans to share their opinions, either as the show is live, or after it has already premiered. With streaming services like Netflix, fans can share their thoughts online and anyone can see them and start to watch the show, because they now have access to a streaming service. Wood and Baughman examined fan behavior in association with Twitter, specifically the show *Glee*. They state that the nature of social media encourages "participatory culture" within fandoms and with social media, fans are "empowered individuals" (330), which emphasizes the idea that with social media, fans have the possibility of controlling the outcome of the show. This feeling of democracy gives fans the permission for "the creation of or addition to a fictional world of some kind" (331). Meme creators are an example of these participants. The tweets, TikToks, and memes are an extension of *You*, with fans making posts putting themselves in the situations, or forming theories about the show. Wood and Baughman use *The Matrix* franchise as an example, stating that without having a knowledge of the comic book or video game, much of the movie and other parts of *The Matrix*

world are hard to understand (332). A similar idea can be applied to *You* and how viewers won't

be able to relate to the memes without seeing the show, although readers are able to understand

the show without having read the book of the same name. Wood and Baughman expand on this

idea even more when discussing *Glee*, which has a large fandom. Like their idea about *The*

Matrix franchise, they state that fans cannot fully understand the memes made about the show,

specifically on Twitter, without having seen the show. Someone who does not watch *Glee* would

not get the reference in a tweet in the same way that people that are not fans of *You* would not

understand the inside jokes shared by viewers. Further, Wood and Baughman posit that not only

do the Twitter accounts create "discourse," but they "enhance the general fan experience and

personal connection to the characters in the show" (333). Although there are many ideas in

Wood and Baughman's article that can be applied to *You*, they bring up roleplay fan accounts,

which are not common in the *You* fandom, partially due to the fact that pretending to be a serial

killer isn't deemed as socially acceptable as pretending to be one of the *Glee* characters, for

example. There are still the popular "point of view" video memes on TikTok, jokingly sharing

stalker confessions. The social media interaction surrounding *You* is different from that of the

Glee fandom in the way that users don't have fake conversations between the characters in *You*.

In fact, that behavior is shamed online by viewers, journalists, and the cast themselves.

Serial killer fandom

Oftentimes, a fandom is full of people who all feel like they only found their place once

they found their fandom. Some fandoms are looked down upon as "weird," but the whole point

of fandoms is to form an alliance of likeminded people, aside from the rest of society. Grace

Smith argues that fandoms have become even more expansive because of the Internet. There is

an endless network of people with the same interest, over which they can bond (139). Fandom

has become a mainstream concept, after scholars like Henry Jenkins popularized the term. Smith

talks about fandom, but more specifically the fandoms that are considered more taboo than others, like serial killers. She discusses how fans are drawn to these subjects because of their forbidden nature. Smith shares a set of tweets that talk about serial killers in a dreamy, romantic manner. This same kind of behavior can be seen in the *You* fandom. Many fans tweeted that they wished the main character would stalk them because they were so attracted to him. As Smith points out, a similar reaction came from fans in the late 1970s when Ted Bundy was accused of murder. He had hundreds of female fans, some of which would wait outside the courtroom. Now, with the Internet, people that are part of the serial killer fandom can start blogs, create memes, and share tweets about their attraction to serial killers. Smith states that she found Tumblr blogs and fan fiction that were dedicated to real-life serial killers, such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy, where creators would post made-up scenarios romanticizing the killer (147). Only a couple of Tumblr blogs centered around Joe-themed fanfic exist, but that might be partly because the show is still somewhat new. Much of the serial killer fandom is centered around real-life killers, which does not include Joe, but he is a still part of pop culture.

The memes about Joe have a humorous aspect to them, which reflects how the audience perceives him. I wanted to focus on the ways that Joe is portrayed on Twitter and TikTok and how fans express a limited opinion of his character, due to the snowball effect of the two platforms. By analyzing the most popular tweets and TikToks about Joe, I wanted to show that the majority of fans have a limited opinion of him. How do the posts with highest engagement on TikTok and Twitter show a specific perception of Joe Goldberg?

Method

In order to answer my research question, I looked directly at Twitter and TikTok for memes and videos that relate to my topic. I wanted to discuss positive memes about Joe

Goldberg from *You*, rather than focus on the few negative ones. I chose TikTok and Twitter because the nature of these apps allows users to recreate and copy ideas, causing a snowball effect and narrowing of opinions. TikTok allows users to create videos up to 60 seconds using music or other audio created on the app by other users. Like other social media platforms, the most popular memes are usually the ones about current shows, movies, or celebrities. Twitter is a social media platform on which users can share written posts, as well as photos and videos. The written posts have a limit of 280 characters. Like TikTok, Twitter has a snowball effect with its popular posts. Features on both apps allow users to share and reuse content. On TikTok, it is common to repeat someone else's idea by using the same concept as them or using the same music or audio. On Twitter, the retweet feature allows users to repost tweets to their own profiles for their followers to see. The more relatable or funny a tweet or TikTok is, the more people will repost and repeat. Twitter's influence is also spread to other platforms like Instagram, as is TikTok's, which allows a bigger audience to see the posts.

I gathered posts from TikTok and Twitter using inductive reasoning. I have observed many memes with an overall positive and relatable theme, which are the memes that I am focusing on in my research. TikTok videos are created mainly around songs, often referred to as "sounds" on the app. The post that was first to use the sound always shows up first on TikTok, and then the most popular follows. There are a couple of different audios that often are used for videos about Joe. On TikTok videos, the name of the sound will appear in the caption, and you can click on it, showing every video that used the same audio, in order from the post with the highest engagement to the least. I used this feature to find videos about Joe. Using the most popular videos emphasizes my point that people find these videos relatable. I found the 20 most popular videos using the sound of Joe's famous line "I just need to know who you really are." I

have also looked under the hashtag #you, which led me to other videos of Joe. When I found

these videos, I downloaded them directly from TikTok onto my phone, so I could view them

without having to use the app.

I gathered posts from Twitter mostly by using the hashtag #YouNetflix. I also acquired

tweets from the *You* Twitter account to show how the social media accounts behind the series

support the fans' perceptions of Joe. I searched through the *You* Twitter to find the top 20 posts

with the highest engagement, and I found that some of them are retweets from other users. I used

a similar method with Twitter that I did with TikTok, where I found the most popular posts and

themes. Many of the posts have been either comedic or relatable, therefore they have a lot of

likes and/or retweets. To save the tweets that I used for my research, I took screenshots of them

and kept them in a folder, in case they got deleted. For this research, I focused on positive or

funny memes, because those themes came up the most in my research. There were very few

popular posts showing Joe in a negative light.

Analysis

I gathered 20 TikToks and 20 tweets and analyzed them in order to answer my research

question. At the time that I found them, the most popular TikToks had hundreds of thousands of

likes. Fans use the content to try to identify with Joe Goldberg, which suggests that they see a

reflection of themselves in Joe's actions, to an extent. This is not to say that all the fans of *You*

are stalkers and serial killers, but Joe's ways of using social media to stalk and obsess over his

love interests are relatable to our generation.

Stalker confessions on TikTok

A common TikTok trend among *You* fans is the "stalker confession" where they identify

with an aspect of Joe's character. The first TikTok sound I looked under was Joe saying his

famous line from the show: "I just need to know who you really are." One of the top posts, with 441,200 likes, is a video of a guy with the caption "when she replies to the screenshot on your story of a song you got from her Spotify which you found through her VSCO." This explains how someone was stalking a girl on her VSCO, which is a photo-sharing app, and found the username of her Spotify account—a music streaming service—in order to find out her favorite song. In the video, the creator of the video walks up to the phone and stares into the camera, and then it slowly fades to a photo of Joe. The use of Joe's narration implies that finding out someone's favorite song through their Spotify, which they found through another social media platform, is stalkerish. This video is also tagged as the "original" on TikTok, which means it was the first video to use that particular audio of Joe's voice. Another top video, with 465,500 likes, is captioned "when you use real estate apps to find his address after counting which house is his on snap map so you can see what his kitchen looks like." This video also uses the Joe's narration, and shows a screen recording of someone looking up a house on the map and scrolling through the realtor's photos. The high engagement rate of these videos shows that people can identify with taking a crush too far. In a way, fans are making light of stalking by exposing themselves in a comedic way. It is unexpected that a character like Joe would be an inspiration, but the nature of social media allows people to take things to the next level, where trends can spiral out of control.

Joe's narration was mostly used for stalker confessions, but there was one video that counteracts the rest. The video, with 494,400 likes, is a montage of the girl who created the video, crosscut with photos of Beck, Joe's first victim. This formula is used in other TikTok videos, unrelated to Joe, but it is a common way to say, "something similar happened to me," or "I look like this person." The video shows a selfie of the girl who created the video fading into a

photo of Beck. There isn't necessarily a physical resemblance, but the video is trying to show how she can relate or identify with Beck, in the same way that other users are identifying with Joe's stalkerish ways. The caption of the video reads: "When he adds your snap by username. But you never posted your username anywhere." The video is implying that the girl is being stalked by someone like Joe. This girl used the same sound as the other video, but chose to take the "victim" perspective, which I did not find to be a common theme.

While analyzing popular Tweets and TikToks, I observed that there are many memes that poke fun at or make comedy of Joe's actions. These posts weren't necessarily about identifying with Joe but were making jokes about the crazy things he does in the show, like keeping his victims in a box or stealing their phones without their knowledge so he can impersonate them. There were several tweets following this theme, especially on *You*'s Twitter account. One tweet, with significantly high engagement at 123,100 retweets and 436,200 likes, is a nondescript photo of Joe saying "caption this." The user who retweeted the original post captioned it "he be killing people and still able to text back. Don't settle for less ladies." This was retweeted by *You*'s Twitter. Although it's a joke, this tweet shows the way that fans and viewers romanticize Joe. The amount of likes and retweets show that Twitter users either identify with that post or find it funny.

Another tweet with high engagement is a photo of model Bella Hadid in a museum glass box, from a campaign she did in 2019, with the caption "Me bored as fuck in Joe's glass box while he's out getting food and helping random children" (see fig. 2). This tweet makes light of the fact that Joe keeps his victims in a glass box, usually before he kills them. The user is identifying with the victim in a way, but it is in a much more humorous manner and is obviously not realistic. That post has 101,500 retweets and 431,500 likes. This is another example of a

tweet that was used for comedy, and an inside joke that only viewers of the show will

understand. If someone hasn't seen the show, the meme would be confusing because it's talking

about how Joe is consistently kind to only children and they never become his victims. Because

of the photo of Bella Hadid that originally doesn't have any relation to Joe Goldberg, the tweet

becomes even funnier due to its specificity. Social media has a way of uniting people, and some

You fans have been united through these types of memes.

Fig. 2. Twitter user @VeryHarryHill makes an inside joke about Joe's glass box.

TikTok reenactments

As with any popular show, *You* has a passionate fandom. This is a group of people that

not only watch the show but love it and support it. Fan fiction is something very common within

fandoms. On TikTok, fanfic has taken a new form in videos. In my research I have come across

several videos of Joe lookalikes or impersonators. These users create short skits based on certain

scenes from the show. One TikTok user, @theresbeenarobbery, has posted several videos where he and his girlfriend pretend to be Joe and Love—Joe's girlfriend in season two—and create skits. The couple doesn't necessarily look like Joe and Love, but they dress up as them and have similar mannerisms. These videos poke fun at *You* and they tie different aspects from the show into their skits. Their most popular video, with 1.6 million likes, shows the character of Joe walking down the stairs to see Love about to drink a jar of yellow liquid. The video even uses Joe's famous narration and says "I hope you don't think that's moon juice, Love." He sees her about to drink it, then sneaks down the stairs, where she isn't supposed to have seen him. She then dumps the liquid down the drain and Joe dodges out of her sight, a signature mannerism of the character. He then thinks, "I gotta stop peeing in jars." This scene didn't happen in the show, but it uses the characters and ideas from the show to create an original scene. The scene references the first season of *You* where Joe was hiding in Peach Salinger's house, in order to find Beck and protect her. He had been hiding for so long and had to pee, so he peed in the jar next to him and left it in Peach's house. Joe also realized after that it could be used as evidence if someone ever suspected him of killing Peach. There are several other posts where people have impersonated Joe, one set in a library, where a man is following a woman around, also using Joe's classic narration. There is another one where a guy puts on a baseball hat, Joe's signature stalking outfit, and narrates his wife's actions as she is cooking, then pretends to hide when she looks over at him. Those are just a few of the examples of how fans reenact Joe.

Blurring the line between reality and fiction

Fan posts also blur the line between Joe Goldberg the character and Penn Badgley the actor. Badgley is an actor who was in the popular 2007 teen show *Gossip Girl*, about Upper East Side young adults who live privileged lives. Although Badgley was already a well-known actor during this time, people associate him with Joe now. TikTok users will take videos of Badgley in

real life—at press conferences or meet and greets or performing in his band—and lay over the sound, "I just need to know who you really are." This video trend is a way of fans identifying themselves as stalkers in their own way, even if it's subconscious. By taking the ideas and themes of the show and applying them to real life, they are showing that they have stalker tendencies as well. This is different from the "stalker confessions" because they aren't confessing to something they did in their past, but they are filming the real-life Penn Badgely in a secretive way. I found several videos of this type, but one of the most popular examples had 628,500 likes. It was a video of Badgley greeting fans as he walked onto a talk show. The caption was "Kinda scared to make eye contact with him tbh," with Joe's narration in the background. Although fans can distinguish between the real person and the character, sometimes fandoms blend the two, especially when the character is so popular. Many of the videos with this theme talked about how they were scared of him or creeped out by him. Another example is a video of a girl at a dog park, where she zooms in on Badgley sitting on a bench. She captioned it "Joe really followed me to the dog park I'm scared guys." Although this isn't exactly fan fiction or reenactment, it is still creating a new narrative while using pieces of the show, in this case Joe.

The snowball effect

While analyzing the trends on TikTok and Twitter, I have observed that there is a snowball effect in how memes and media are spread. Both platforms encourage copying and expanding on ideas. An idea gets picked up by one person and the trend unfolds, which creates a "snowball." Twitter uses meme formats and their retweeting feature, while TikTok uses sounds to do this. The Internet is expansive but because of the nature of TikTok and Twitter, narrow opinions are spread about Joe through these meme trends. Because of society's belief that "sex sells," along with murder and crime, it's no surprise that the popular memes have glorified this aspect of the show. Trending memes do not discuss the controversy that comes along with

romanticizing a character like Joe. The popular social media posts about Joe that I chose to analyze show a positive, relatable side of Joe Goldberg, despite him being a sociopathic stalker and killer.

Conclusion

Through my analysis and research, I have found that a majority of the most popular memes relating to Joe Goldberg are positive, comedic or relatable. These TikToks and tweets show that the snowball effect is used on both social media platforms to share a limited opinion of Joe. TikTok allows users to copy video ideas from other users, creating repetition, allowing more users to see the idea. Similarly, Twitter users have a retweet feature that allows them to spread other's tweets and memes. Joe is not portrayed as a hero in *You,* but the audience sympathizes with him in the show. The memes that viewers have created since the show's premiere have distorted Joe's image even more out of proportion, making him appear more likable and attractive than he should be. There are possible alternatives to how fans could react to Joe on social media. Penn Badgely strongly objects to the idea that *You* is a love story because of the abuse and murder that occurs in the series. In contrast to Badgely's opinion, actress Millie Bobby Brown shared her thoughts on *You* in January 2019. She defended Joe on her Instagram stories, saying: "So I just started that new show *You*… He's not creepy, he's in love with her and it's okay… By the way, I know everybody is gonna say 'Ahhh, he's a stalker, why would you support that?!' But like, he's in love with her… just watch the show and don't judge me on my opinion" (Reilly). Brown was attacked by fans for being naïve for believing that a toxic person like Joe could be only motivated by love. This is an interesting twist in my research because all the popular memes that I have analyzed have supported Brown's opinion, yet when she defended Joe, she was attacked online. I think this is because she wasn't communicating her opinion through a funny meme, so it was taken more seriously than it would be if she had made a joke

about it on TikTok or Twitter. I believe that most viewers of *You* do not actually believe that Joe is relatable or a good person, but young fans may not be able to distinguish between jokes and reality, so this spreading of a very narrow opinion about Joe can be problematic.

Most of my research confirms the scholarship in my literature review, especially Jiang Xiao Yu's source about TikTok, which states that social media has opened doors for fans to become participants, as opposed to observers. With Twitter and TikTok, among other social media platforms, fans can create their own view of their favorite characters and publish theories about the shows. Wood and Baughman's source about the *Glee* Fandom illustrates the kind of relationship that fandoms have with their show or movie. Memes about Joe prove that the fans stay engaged with their fandoms by creating original content. Unlike Wood and Baughman's research, I have not found any Joe Goldberg fan fiction, which is an important part of most big fandoms. That isn't to say that there won't be fan fiction about Joe in the future, though.

My research has shown that the most popular memes on TikTok and Twitter present Joe in a certain way, but it does not say whether viewers are affected psychologically by these memes. In order to answer that question, I could have conducted surveys with viewers of *You* to discover if there are any psychological changes in how they view Joe. Instead of conducting a survey, I chose to focus on the types of memes that were being produced about Joe today and the fact that the positive ones seemed to gain more popularity than others. There will continue to be content developed about Joe across social media platforms, but there is no guarantee that they will always be positive or comedic. My research only includes memes from TikTok and Twitter, and on these platforms, memes are usually made for humor and not to be taken seriously.

Memes and social media, by nature, have a way of romanticizing serial killers or making criminals seem more likable. A recent example of this is Joe Exotic from Netflix's new

documentary series, *Tiger King. Tiger King* premiered in March of 2020 and the audience's

reaction to Joe Exotic, a convicted felon and former zookeeper, is similar to that of Joe Goldberg

when *You*'s first season premiered. There is a TikTok video that uses the morph effect to cut

from Joe Goldberg's face, then to Joe Exotic's face with the caption: "When your name is Joe

and you do some pretty messed up stuff but a lot of people still like you anyways." By looking at

this TikTok and other similar ones about Joe Exotic, I've found that making memes about

criminals or serial killers is a trend in today's society and goes hand in hand with the culture of

social media. I believe that this trend shows our culture's fascination with murder and true crime.

This is reflected in some of Netflix's most popular features, like *Making a Murderer, Killer

Inside: The Mind of Aaron Hernandez,* or *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, a film

based on Ted Bundy's life. According to an article by *Psychology Today*, "many more females

than males are fans of true crime narratives" (Ramsland). This could explain the popularity of

You, considering the protagonist is a handsome guy who wants us to believe he is vulnerable and

sensitive.

My research shows that original content on Twitter and TikTok creates a narrowing of

opinions that shape the way Joe Goldberg is perceived on social media. Observing the most

popular trends and memes have revealed how fans feel about Joe. My research about Joe proves

that memes can be popularized through the snowball effect, potentially changing viewers'

perceptions of the character. In this case, fans have chosen to put a positive spin on even the

worst of Joe's flaws, as illustrated perfectly by this tweet: "Joe killed 4 people in season 1 and he

killed 2 people in season 2. You know what that is... GROWTH."

Works Cited

@briezyyyyy. "Joe really followed me to the dog park I'm scared guys." *TikTok*, 9 Jan. 2020,

vm.tiktok.com/gDjkGK/.

Cassella, Ryan. "The New Media: How Social Media Is Changing—And Saving—Television."

Television, Social Media, and Fan Culture, 2015, pp. 1-22.

Dunn, Joanna. "How a Psychopathic Serial Killer Becomes an American Favorite: An Analysis

of Dexter Morgan." *Augsburg Honors Review*, 2012, vol. 5, article 10.

@einahpetss. "When he adds your snap by username. but you never posted your username

anywhere." *TikTok*, 3 Jan. 2020, vm.tiktok.com/gD1Mak/.

@elizabethpace1234. "Kinda scared to make eye contact with him tbh." *TikTok*, 8 Jan. 2020,

vm.tiktok.com/gA37Pt/.

@fivelstewarts. "He maybe a serial killer but at least he's funny." *Twitter,* 26 Dec. 2019,

pic.twitter.com/fSohyZGTD3.

@gabesco. "When she replies to the screenshot on your story of a song you got from her Spotify

which you found through her VSCO." *TikTok*, 29 Dec. 2019, vm.tiktok.com/gDeKJa/.

@itsmesafaaa_. "He be killing people & still able to text back. Don't settle for less ladies."

Twitter, 1 Jan. 2020, 1:50 a.m., twitter.com/itsmesafaaa_/status/ 1212264770994180097.

Jarvis, Brian. "Monsters Inc.: Serial Killers and Consumer Culture (2007)." *Crime and Media*,

Aug. 2019, pp. 351–363., doi:10.4324/9780367809195-32.

Kelly, Tiffany. "Penn Badgley: Please stop asking me to stalk you." *Daily Dot*, Jan. 9, 2019,

    www.dailydot.com/upstream/penn-badgley-fan-tweets-netflix-you/.

Low, Elaine. "Inside 'You' Season 2 on Netflix: We're Not in Manhattan (or Lifetime)

    Anymore." *Variety,* 13 Dec. 2019, variety.com/2019/tv/features/wb-thriller-series-you-to-

    netflix-1203434995/.

Miller, Liz Shannon. "'You' Review: Lifetime's Addictive New Drama Has Dangerous Fun

    Exploring Why Obsession Isn't Love." *IndieWire,* 7 Sept. 2018,

    www.indiewire.com/2018/09/you-lifetime-review-stalker-drama-penn-badgley-elizabeth-

    lail-1202001470/.

Navar-Gill, Annemarie. "From Strategic Retweets to Group Hangs: Writers' Room Twitter

    Accounts and the Productive Ecosystem of TV Social Media Fans." *Television & New*

    Media, vol. 19, no. 5, May 2017, pp. 415–430., doi:10.1177/1527476417728376.

Ramsland, Katherine. "Girls Who Love Ted Bundy." *Psychology Today,* 21 Oct. 2019,

    www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/shadow-boxing/201910/girls-who-love-ted-bundy.

Reilly, Nick. "Millie Bobby Brown responds after being accused of defending Joe Goldberg

    from 'You.'" *NME*, 27 Jan. 2019, www.nme.com/news/millie-bobby-brown-has-a-

    controversial-take-on-joe-goldberg-from-you-2432248.

@_sashajackson. "Joe killed 4 people in season 1 and he killed 2 people in season 2. You know

    what that is... GROWTH." *Twitter,* 29 Dec. 2019,

    twitter.com/_sashajackson/status/1211423005856845825?.

Smith, Grace. "Living Life on the Fringe: Examining how the internet has enabled the growth of

the serial killer fringe fandom." 2018. Department of Communications, University of

New Hampshire, undergraduate research journal.

"Ted Bundy Biography." *Biography.com,* 6 April 2020, www.biography.com/crime-figure/ted-

bundy.

@theresbeenarobbery. "I hope YOU don't think that's moon juice, Love." *TikTok*, 17 Jan. 2020,

vm.tiktok.com/gAwokU

@tunaprunez. "When your name is Joe and you do some pretty messed up stuff but a lot of

people still like you anyways." *TikTok*, 1 April 2020, vm.tiktok.com/WN6tw4

@veryharryhill. "Me bored as fuck in Joe's glass box while he's out getting food and helping

random children." *Twitter*, 2 Jan. 2020, 8:05 p.m.,

twitter.com/veryharryhill/status/1212902653707137024/photo/1.

@vxnessa.m. "When you use real estate apps to find his address after counting which house is

his on the snap map so you can see what his kitchen looks like." *TikTok*, 2 Jan. 2020,

vm.tiktok.com/gAvTYa/.

Wood, Megan M., and Linda Baughman. "Glee Fandom and Twitter: Something New, or More

of the Same Old Thing?" *Communication Studies*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2012, pp. 328–344.,

doi:10.1080/10510974.2012.674618.

Yu, Jiang Xiao. "Research on TikTok APP Based on User-Centric Theory." *Applied Science and

Innovative Research*, vol. 3, no. 1, 3 Feb. 2019, p. 28., doi:10.22158/asir.v3n1p28.