Memes, Romanticized Jealousy & Abuse: How Neo-liberal Capitalist Ideology Upholds Gender Essentialism in Relationships.

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MEMES, ROMANTICIZED JEALOUSY & ABUSE: HOW NEO-LIBERAL CAPITALIST IDEOLOGY UPHOLDS GENDER ESSENTIALISM IN RELATIONSHIPS.

by

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Abstract

I aim to draw the connections between jealousy, gender essentialism, and neoliberal capitalism through exploring how jealousy has become romanticized on social media via memes. This romanticization of jealousy not only prevents us from seeing it as a tool for abusive behaviors but also from connecting jealousy to larger systems of power and control like neoliberal capitalism. Without looking at jealousy holistically in the context of our current neoliberal capitalist system, we will not be able to disrupt or dismantle this cycle of power and control. These systems that favor masculinity, productivity, and individualism affect our behaviors in relationships, and we must address it in order to combat abusive jealous behavior. I hope this paper will show the connections between larger structures of power and individuals on relational levels. Specifically, I want to provide a better understanding of how capitalism and our current neoliberal society affects our everyday behavior and perception regarding relationships. This is important to me because I often find that helping professions--like social work--separate micro and macro practices, but taking a holistic approach, recognizing how the two intertwine and interact, provides a better way of understanding complex issues.
This poorly edited word art (figure 1) slapped onto a still frame from “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia” is an example of a meme, one you might see today on the internet. While this still frame has become a meme--it’s the continuous editing and recaptioning of this meme, and others, that make and keep relevancy. There is power in this decontextualizing, and it’s what allowed me to show this meme as a clear, visual representation of the process I went through constructing this thesis. This meme is often reposted--without attribution to the original source--including captions related to everything from TV show plotlines to conspiracy theories (figures 2-4). I haven’t even watched the show myself, but there are many different variations of this meme with the main theme revolving around explaining something complex.

Background knowledge aside, I was able to give this meme a new meaning based on my own perception and interpretation. This seemingly tense, harried person drawing connections between scattered pieces of paper really resonates with me. When I look at the still frame, I see the obvious frantic, wide eyed person, but I also see emotion and determination. I can relate, in that I too feel
like I’m grasping at straws as I try to connect seemingly disparate elements of our gendered culture and scarcity economy in new ways, drawing big red lines between concepts and ideas that are large and complex in themselves. As I continue deeper into research, more and more connections and parallels arise—and I try my best to tie them in as I go. But all of that hysteric thought processing has led to a strong passion to share what I’ve learned so far and has ultimately helped in the creation of what you’re holding before you. Oh, and this meme is also much easier than titling the piece “Memes, Romanticized Jealousy & Abuse: How Neo-liberal Capitalist Ideology Upholds Gender Essentialism in Relationships.”

What is a meme?

Often times “meme” is thrown around as if there is a widely-known definition, similar to how I was using it above, so I’d like to clarify what my thoughts and perceptions are of the definition. Merriam Webster defines a meme as an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture. This short and simple definition doesn’t quite capture the entire effect of memes, though it is referring to a term coined first by biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book The Selfish Gene. Meme in this context is to be understood as separate from (but similar to) “internet meme,” which is what I will be referring to throughout the paper. This older definition of “meme” is useful because the current trend and its impact has deep roots in Dawkin’s initial idea. Exploring the definitions of meme isn’t my central focus here, but connecting internet memes to Dawkin’s “meme” provides a fascinating parallel to the issues I will be exploring with internet memes. In
an interview, Dawkins claims he coined the term in order to name the “self-replicating units of culture,” as opposed to the biological form of replication through genes (Dawkins, 1999). These units of culture could include things like music, clothing, and ideas; these could also be understood as a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation (Jeffreys, 2000). This imitation is a key aspect in internet memes, where a person replicates the original, with slight modifications to create a more relevant or relatable product. Dawkins describes memes in the context of natural selection and genetic mutations, and it is this “replicator” unit that really drives evolution—especially since the replicator has some “influence or power over their own probability of replication” (Dawkins, 1999). His idea grew within the influence of Darwinism, which can be easily paralleled to neoliberal capitalism, considering it also values competition for “scarce resources,” indicating that those who are successful are those who are “fit” enough to gain access to them. This becomes extremely problematic, considering that this application of Darwinism to the “social sphere” is how social Darwinism was produced, which positioned white Europeans as “the fittest.” In 2013, Dawkins had another interview in which he addresses specifically internet memes, claiming that the competition grew from pure human creativity. Dawkins even became a meme himself (figure 6). While memes definitely rely on the creative replication of an original to make a more relevant meme, I argue that there are even larger systems of influence to consider.

Extending Dawkins’s ideas, I believe this competition is influenced by the neoliberal and capitalistic ideology surrounding us in the United States (the primary
setting for this paper). Haiven (2013) claims that the widespread misunderstanding of Dawkins's book as a “biological explanation and justification” for human selfishness (i.e. The Selfish Gene) grew very popular around the 1990’s as neoliberalism gained control. This is no surprise to me due to the heavy value placed on individualism and the self within this ideology—one among many components of neoliberalism that I will discuss further in my essay. Here I want to argue that the power that comes with internet memes revolves around not just competition but also relevancy and virality. The more widely shared or “viral” a meme is, the more effective it is and the more it becomes an indicator of how relatable the content is (see figure 5). People who share the meme can be considered consumers, and in a neoliberal capitalist society, more consumers means more success. As internet memes rose from Dawkin’s first theory of the meme, businesses and companies latched onto memes as a way to advertise to consumers. Businesses soon understood that individuals associate their consumer behavior and identity with these memes, and it became a marketing tool for those who understood the references (figures 7 & 8). So not only are memes tools for sharing cultural and societal knowledge, they are also used to attract a particular consumer base in a highly competitive economic context. All of this is to say that the concept of “meme” has been around for a while and has influenced us as individuals, a society, and consumers but in ways we don’t yet fully understand.
The reposting, sharing, and viral spread of information is unlike other modes of exchange we’ve seen before; the speed in which internet memes travel is remarkable and seemingly untraceable. Dawkins compares memes to a virus; however, not everyone agrees with the metaphor. When looking at the mapping of viruses and memes, they may actually look similar (as seen in figure 5), but Jefferys (2000) claims the metaphor is dangerous because it asserts that the meme is a “virus of the brain.” This also could mean that it must then be destroyed—since the general perception of virus is negative in the US. While I don’t think memes are inherently negative, I do think they have a powerful impact that deserves to be acknowledged and addressed. Memes can be a way to relate to others and to stand in solidarity with them. But in this paper, I want to express my concern that some internet memes make it easy to normalize certain, often unhealthy, societal beliefs and behaviors. For example, many memes are supposed to be funny and humorous—a quick google search can lead you to many such “funny” memes. When information is presented in such a playful format, it becomes more difficult to critique the way it influences our behavior and perceptions. I know. I routinely have the experience of being the “feminazi party killer who can’t take a joke” when I criticize this kind of humor.

“C’mon, lighten up”
“It’s not like I ACTUALLY mean it—it’s just funny”
“You’re the reason comedy is dead”
“Political correctness is ruining the world”
“We can’t have fun around you anymore”

This isn’t just for internet memes, but jokes (that often do get turned into memes) in general. I honestly haven’t thought it was too big of a request to refrain from jokes that demean, invalidate, and/or trivialize a person’s identity or background… Man, was I
wrong. I guess pointing out heteronormativity and sexism in jokes isn’t the best way to make friends, but if we are unable to analyze how this humor affects our lives, we’re not doing justice to the kind of humor we’re defending.

I want to clearly state that my working definition of a meme is a combination of the current and past ideas—a meme as used in this paper will mean a viral post (picture, video, quote, idea) shared on many social media platforms that functions to spread relatable content reflecting societal/cultural knowledge or beliefs. My purpose is to add to contemporary studies on memes by analyzing how they reflect current societal values and norms that essentialize jealousy as a “normal” gendered response. These memes, like most of them, usually don’t credit original posts, and they can be found on many social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and others. A majority of the memes I came across that used quotes or word graphics had some of the most obvious themes of gender essentialism. To further explore their cultural resonance, I will also use pop culture definitions and articles on social media that help illustrate the gender norms being shared and circulated.

The Relationship Between Gender Essentialism and Neoliberal Capitalism

Gender essentialism refers to the characteristics, behaviors and personalities we assume are innate in people based on their gender. Gender essentialism is embedded in the confusion of sex with gender, in binary conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity, and in heteronormativity, which is a system that normalizes the assumption of heterosexuality and binary gender identities and assigns expectations to genders and
relationships that uphold such assumptions. We’ve used this framework to understand different aspects of our lives, especially jealousy in relationships. Jealousy has long been gendered, and it has been gendered according to the innate and inherent behaviors and characteristics culturally assigned to each binary gender. I’ve heard the word jealous being thrown around like it is an inherent trait for many years, as in “Oh I’m just a jealous person. Oh I just get jealous easily…” And while any and all genders can use this phrase, it’s perceived differently depending on who says it. For men embodying or centering masculinity, jealousy is a sign of love and passion. For women embodying or centering femininity, it’s a sign of catty competition and insecurities.

Luckily, we have feminism to save the day, though, right? Well, unsurprisingly, white neoliberal feminists have cultivated a sort of feminism that isn’t as holistic as I believe it should be. By this, I mean white, neoliberal feminists often promote the idea of individual choice and freedom without considering intersectionality and the multiplicity of identities that each person holds. Figure 9 points out a few aspects of what white, neoliberal feminism looks like, though in a more humorous, ironic form. I’ve observed these exact types of mindsets and frameworks in person and online. There’s often a sense of “well if I can do it, and I’m a woman, you can too!” Similar to the “pull yourself up from your bootstraps” mentality when it comes to the American Dream. This disregards the layers of oppression and marginalization that other women may
face, and the barriers that come with it. I pasted Taylor Swift’s face on this meme because she is a prime example of a white feminist role model. She is often praised for her leadership, which isn’t surprising to me, since I’ve noticed that many white feminists praise any woman in leadership, regardless of the woman’s actual views and actions. Without being able to stay critical when recognizing a woman’s leadership, we are framing feminism as mere “success in society,” with the success usually indicated by productivity and wealth accumulated. Similarly, Taylor Swift and other neoliberal feminists tend to fight for a particular type of woman—white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-upper class, able bodied, thin, American—which is parallel to the limited perception that neoliberal capitalism has of who is productive, or valuable, in society. We can see this in her older songs, where she pits herself against other “more sexual” women, shaming them while highlighting her “shy nerdiness.” She also has many issues with cultural appropriation and using people of color, especially Black and African American individuals, as props in her music videos. She claims to be a feminist, but continually exploits and shames other women. I’ve noticed this trend in the now-mainstream white, neoliberal feminism: the invalidation of transwomen or non-binary individuals, the pitying of women from other countries, the policing of other women’s gender expression. This is not my feminism. My feminism is intersectional and inclusive, and it most definitely isn’t rooted in the values of a neoliberal ideology.

To put into the context of larger systems, a common example of neoliberal feminism is the focus on saving “poor women” in the “global south.” No matter how well intentioned, this often takes the form of just getting women into the global market. Wilson (2015) critiques development programs like WID (Women in Development)
which supposedly work to empower women; he describes how these initiatives often rely on women as a homogeneous group and don’t take into account the many different kinds of skill, interest and characteristics that can be embodied in womanhood. Women are expected to be grateful when pushed into an enterprise for crafting, sewing, lace making, etc. For those women who are also mothers and/or wives, their reproductive work was ignored as they were pushed into programs intended to “help” them. Again, this reinforces the idea that house work is “women’s work” and doesn’t count as a road to success. It also assumes that women will be willing to take any sort of work from the good ol’ white people because any job is better than what they’re doing now! This is the same neoliberal feminism stated above where productivity and accumulation of capital is seen as empowerment instead of being critical of how and why this is being done. This is just one of many examples in which neoliberal feminist efforts have continued to uphold systems that are detrimental to the very women they’re trying to help.

Taking it to the individual level, Bay-Cheng and Goodkind (2016) led a study on how neoliberalism has been affecting single women based on class, and I believe the results have themes that could resonate across oppressions. The more privileged women (higher socio-economic status and going to private university) described that they were “free” without a relationship, and had an abundance of opportunity ahead of them. The women of lower socioeconomic status, thus less privilege, described that they were able to “better” themselves this way, or focus on self-improvement, while a few others said it was to protect themselves. Bay-Cheng and Goodkind (2016) states that this could be a partial reflection of a similar “cautious planning and prioritization when attempting social mobility without the safety nets afforded by class privilege,” and I don’t believe this influence
stops at relationship status. People with privilege may often see their “freedom” or agency as a given, or as an indulgence, while those with marginalized identities may feel their agency as something that must be defended, or used to keep proving oneself. When I use agency, I use it in a similar context of the self-interest and free will that neoliberalism supports while it simultaneously ignores the systemic and institutional barriers in the way to fully exert the free will. Neoliberalism obviously affects everyone in such society; however those that benefit from neoliberal capitalism may perceive their agency within it differently as seen in the study. While it’s reach was limited to the New York area, and only women, I still believe the results have implications for further study on how neoliberalism intersects with other marginalized identities individuals hold. We must address how economic and political ideology influence us, as well as our social justice movements, otherwise gender essentialism cannot be dismantled. Thus we must consider jealousy and the gender essentialism that resides within it in the context of neoliberal capitalism’s culture scarcity and competition.

I will explain more in depth what this gendering looks like in jealousy memes, but first it’s vital to provide a short definition of “neoliberal capitalism.” The summarized definition I am using for neoliberal capitalism is this: strategies and frameworks that support the extraction of labor in a way that maximizes wealth and benefits the elite by exploiting marginalized populations through policies and values such as privatization, free trade, globalization and individualism. In an interview series produced by Barnard Center for Research on Women (Berstein & Jakobsen, 2013), scholars described their different approaches to understanding neoliberalism and the ways they used those definitions in their work. I want to specifically refer to Sealing
Cheng, an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Hong Kong. Cheng explained that gender has become tremendously important for the entrenchment of the state and that people are expected and needed to fall into their binary category in order to “ensure the smooth operation of neoliberalism” (Berstein & Jakobsen, 2013). This is the exact point I will be making; neoliberalism relies on societal norms regarding gender even as it has also positioned itself to be on the front lines of “gender equality” (Wilson, 2015).

Women and young girls have become the “perfect neoliberal subject.” Dr Christina Scharff (2014) describes how the supposed “empowering” of women has become a way to push women back into forms of consumption and work that are still undervalued and discredited in comparison to white men. Women are also expected to work outside of the domestic sphere because of “equality,” but are still expected to complete domestic work. Scharff (2014) offers a contemporary example with Nike and their “girl effect” project—“the unique potential of 600 million adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves and the world.” Women are seen as the perfect subjects due to their ability to explore new markets AND control reproduction. Not only does this rely on the extreme exploitation of women—something expected with a capitalist society—but this perpetuates the competition between women (which I will discuss further in later sections.) In short women who are “empowered” and introduced into the free market are deemed free, while those who are not are labeled “passive victims of the patriarchy.”

This discourse is racialized on many levels, but it especially targets women of color and women in the “global south,” whom neoliberal feminists often judge as oppressed with no personal agency (Sharff, 2014). Sandra K. Soto, Associate Professor
of Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Arizona, names some of the key terms in current legislation that reflect more of these neoliberal capitalistic ideals, such as “personal responsibility, law abiding citizen, strong family values,” all which target a certain type of citizen or person in the United States based on moral judgements and assumptions that are gendered and racialized. This is a framework that values certain humans and bodies over others and, again, targets people of color, people with disabilities, and people of marginalized identities in general, especially women. The buzzwords are used in legislation in order to blame people for their struggles and justify the punishment and disempowerment that follows. This ignores the institutional and systemic discrimination that pervades and seeps down to all levels of society.

Neoliberal capitalism is about the individual and their ability to make a life for themselves. In this framework, it becomes acceptable to problematize the individual instead of the systems and institutions in place that purposefully disenfranchise certain communities. I believe it is imperative to address how it is seeping into our personal and social lives.

Who is left out?

It is important for me to acknowledge at the outset what identities and individuals may be left out in the remainder of this thesis. Much of my analysis focuses on memes that are both binary and heteronormative and rely on capitalistic and neoliberal ideology, and both of these frameworks benefit and privilege white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied males. Relationship dynamics can and do look completely different depending on the multitude of factors an intersectional framework
allows you to see. It is the purpose of my thesis to point out how these posts are based on unrealistic relationships standards that are not often relatable to those outside the privileged circle, but everyone is still affected. For example, those outside of the heterosexual community may assume “oh well those straight people just don’t know how to do it right. Good think my relationship looks different.” While this may be true in some cases, in other cases, it takes off the responsibility to check in on intracommunity violence. One may disregard the need to stay critical of unhealthy behaviors in their relationships because they aren’t part of the “assumed majority” group. Memes can be and are understood or perceived differently depending on background and experiences. So while my thesis will be addressing big picture norms and messages, I want to recognize that each person will experience relationships and jealousy differently and may read the memes I’ve selected differently. Yet while I want to acknowledge that each person has a different connection to gender essentialism, capitalism and neoliberalism, my purpose here is to connect these broader systems of power with the individual manifestation of these forces in the memes I analyze and thus to expose their exclusions and stereotypes.
Social Media and the Gendering of Jealousy

I haven’t quite asked others about their first experiences with memes, but I know that I can’t really pinpoint mine. They eventually just tiptoed into my life—maybe it was myspace back in the day, or just from other friends in my classes. Slowly, I started shifting my focus and energies between different social media sites and the memes seemed to follow; though subtle and occasional, these earlier examples (figure 10 & 11) were really how I was first introduced into the world of memes. Soon enough, they were stomping and kicking their way into all of the spaces I was frequenting, and I didn’t realize at the time how much memes would change the way I, and others, communicate. I began replying to people using fewer words, and more pictures. It was like a competition of who could say the most relevant and funny thing with the least amount of words. Memes soon began to sit with me on buses while scrolling through Facebook. I’d find them in conversations I’d be having with my brother, and I’d especially see them lurking in the depths of unspoken relationship issues. I’d especially like to focus on the latter example because, in my experience, it’s something often unrecognized and unaddressed.

I used to, and often still, see memes and Facebook posts about relationships and/or jealousy. These posts are usually gendered, especially in a way that implies heterosexuality. We tend to impose gender on many things—tangible and intangible. These subtle messages of what is “masculine” and what is “feminine” all combine to
create a sort of binary categorization in our heads. In this section, I’m going analyze how jealousy has been gendered in memes and focus on some of the ideas that mainstream health media/websites put forward about jealousy as it relates to gender. I find this important because “psychology today” and “health.com” may often be seen as reliable websites, but gender stereotypes and biological assumptions have seeped into their logic, inevitably so. Even psychologists and health professionals aren’t exempt from the pervasive nature of gendered stereotypes and internalized gender essentialism.

The examples to the right (figures 12-15) are just a few representations of jealousy memes, all which were found when browsing sites like Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. As you can see, these viral meme posts focus on how jealousy is experienced and/or perceived differently by “guys” and “girls” (figure 12, 13, 15). A very clear issue is the perception of what jealousy means for each gender. These widely shared memes imply that girls get jealous easily, and as suggested by figure 12, it’s because of other girls. Each meme frames jealousy as the competition felt between other girls, and in each post, the other girl(s) are shown in a negative light, with mal-intent. For example, “we don’t trust the girls” “she’s going to steal him away from me” (figure 12).
This distrust between women has been normalized, while the exact opposite has been normalized for men. Anthony, Okorie and Norman (2016) point out that often times men are portrayed as having a “code” to put each other over other women. “Bros before hoes” is a saying that has gained a bit of traction; however this same standard is not held for women. Women feel distrust or anger with the other woman in many heteronormative situations. While this competitive nature is not inherent in women, the same study showed that over 33% of women did think it was in their nature to be jealous of one another (Anthony, Okorie, Norman, 2016). The belief registered in this study, I would argue, is created by many external pressures put on women to compete with each other. This is not inherent; it is socialized and then consistently internalized by gender essentialized messages still present today. This includes pressures originating within social expectations of femininity and structures of marginalization and neoliberal capitalism. Anthony, Okorie and Norman (2016) claimed that this competition--or constant comparisons--between women is used to “understand where they rank” and to give a sense of “winners and losers in the game of achieving feminine ideals.” The competition, they argue, comes down to who performs femininity better. I would connect this argument to the continuous struggle of being a productive member of a capitalist society, noticing that these women are competing over femininity instead of “resources” as one sees in discussions of capitalism. This is where I wish the study above had a more inclusive and intersectional lens. This article was binary and heteronormative and even enforced the negative stereotypes it seemed to be addressing, and it made a few too many generalizations about gender. It assumed that each woman had the same definition of femininity, and it more broadly assumed that all women in general want to strive towards femininity. It also assumed that all of the women in their study were interested in men, claiming that finding a (male) mate is less about the
partnership and more about competing with other women over who is “more feminine.” I do not agree with this conclusion; it may fit for some women and their relationships, but this idea that it all comes back to femininity doesn’t fit for women who define femininity or embrace femininity differently, and it also doesn’t fit for those who don’t identify as femme at all.

I chose to use this source, however, because it does explain the way women are socialized into believing and even adhering to strict gender hierarchies, with men and masculinity at the top. Anthony, Okorie and Norman (2016) defined an important term for me, and it’s something that we can subtly assume/observe from the figures above (12-15).

“Involuntary internalization” of sexism, they claim, can include many different internal affects like “self-doubt, self-censorship, plus doubt or mistrust of and competition with other women.” One can see in figure 12 that the blame falls on themselves and other girls, with zero fault lying on men. This is a theme I’ve noticed throughout my exploration of these posts. Often times, jealousy is portrayed as internalized by girls--they take these feelings and equate them to personal faults or short comings, like the self-doubt mentioned in figure 12 ("she’s prettier, smarter, etc"). Jealousy becomes a perceived fault for women who are experiencing it, but a key marker of love or attraction for men who experience it.

Hartigan-O’Connor (2016) brings an important class based feminist analysis to this discussion, pointing out some key components in capitalism that relate to gender, particularly in relation to private property law. Hartigan-O’Connor (2016) discusses how this specific aspect of capitalism “reinforced gender as hierarchy in the way it protected specific forms of ownership.” The key word I want to point out here is
ownership. In a patriarchal neoliberal capitalist society, ownership and entitlement belong mostly to men, and this can be seen in figures 16 and 17. In each post, there is a strikingly overt sense of entitlement and ownership over the girl’s body and who has access to look at or be close to her. In these kinds of posts, the fault of “jealousy” doesn’t seem to be internalized by men. The problem seems to lie with other men, thus creating competition between men; however, this competition is valued. Hartigan-O’Connor rightly reminds us that capitalism relied on gender in order to build itself into the system it is today and this same male entitlement and ownership in capitalist systems can be found within intimate and familial relationships.

Thus men are allowed to be jealous--it is okay, and even “cute.” It’s seen as a healthy competition and men are “healthy consumers,” to frame it in the context of capitalism, when they practice it. Historically, consuming and contributing to the economy is “expected” for men, so when women consume, they consume wrong. They consume “too much” … “only for themselves” (e.g. the stereotype that women love shopping sprees and spending all of their “husband’s” money). Hartigan-O’Connor (2016) explores a new sort of “feminized” consumption in which nonproductive consumerism (for example, spending “unreasonable” amounts of money) has been attributed to and portrayed as a “female” or feminine issue. The interesting part of Hartigan-O’Connor’s (2016) argument is that males are seen as “unable to stop it,” it meaning nonproductive consumption by women. This additional piece of the argument furthers the idea that jealousy experienced by women is between and because of women, with no acknowledgement of the man’s role. Jealousy, including the emotions and behaviors involved with it, are the product that women are consuming. Hartigan-O’Connor (2016) explains that women’s competitions have had to stay in the “feminine realm” through
interpersonal connections. She states that this sort of consumption or competition is still “work,” but again, men’s “consumption work” is more valued than women’s.

Since women are often expected to be the most invested in interpersonal relationships there is more pressure for them to be constantly monitoring their partner and doing this competitive work. This is continuously upheld by our society, and one can see this when women are at fault if there is infidelity: they shouldn’t have “let” this happen, they must have done something wrong for their partner to do this. If relationships are seen as a thing to be “upkept,” which I argue they are, and women are expected to do the “upkeeping,” then it becomes their fault if there are issues of infidelity. This pressure aligns with the pressures of capitalism; not feeling jealous feels like a stagnant position. If one isn’t competing, one isn’t actively upkeeping the relationship, so one isn’t moving forward. If we feel unproductive in a neoliberal-capitalist society, we feel unsatisfied and unvalued.

This idea may explain why Muise, Christofides and Desmarais (2014) found that women spend significantly more time monitoring partners on Facebook and often experience more jealousy in general when doing so, actions which perpetuate this cycle. If women’s consumption work is valued less and often shamed, then this social media “creeping” becomes an underground method of consuming without judgement. It is a more covert and acceptable way to participate in the competition, since no one can actually see it. Since the information is publicly posted on social media, one absolves themselves of guilt for looking through this information. Similarly, when one views jealousy as “inherent” for women, this cycle would seem unstoppable. This is a continuous loop of experiencing jealousy--accepting that it’s “natural” for women, knowing that no one can monitor their creeping, creeping and then again experiencing heightened jealousy from creeping in the first place.
This exact cycle can be seen in the frame work of capitalism as it benefits men. Neoliberal capitalism thrives in “scarcity” and the idea that there are limited resources (Flisfeder 2015); this can be translated to the idea that love is so scarce, “special,” and hard to find that one may become competitive, aggressive, or possessive in order to secure this love. This contributes to the cycle of social media creeping; jealousy is inevitable, so one will rationalize that the behaviors that follow are inevitable simply because they “must” adhere to the suspicion or possibility of infidelity. If they don’t, they aren’t doing their jobs of upkeeping relationships and remaining productive. If there are actions or behaviors that follow the perceived threat, the fact that violence is viewed as inherently masculine normalizes any male violence stemming from jealousy, while it’s seen as “blown-out-of-proportion” for women. Additionally, men are expected to hide or cover emotions in our society, so jealousy is easily accepted because it means they must “really care” if they are breaking out of their toxic masculine shell. Women are already deemed over emotional, so their jealousy may not be taken as seriously because women are “always” overreacting. Additionally, a person can and will find threats—whether real or perceived—to satisfy their need to feel important and wanted. But since men are not expected to be the one’s upkeeping relationships, and since men’s productivity is already valued in a neoliberal capitalist society, this extra emotional “consumer work” is seen as cute, acceptable, and a “true” sign of love because they are going “above and beyond” what is expected of them.

Of course, this double standard in heterosexual relationships isn’t new; Cossman (2006) explains a history of legislation that often punished women more harshly than men for “adultery.” If a woman had committed a single act of infidelity, it was enough grounds for a husband to divorce her, while men had to be “living in adultery” or “habitual adultery” for women to be entitled to a divorce. Hackathorn and Harvey (2011) reiterate that even today
women are often expected to “refuse sex or set the sexual limits” within a relationship, while men are seen as aggressive initiators. There is still a stigma around infidelity and adultery, but it remains a double standard that affects men and women differently. Women are allowed to be “socially punished”—meaning blamed, shamed, isolated—if they cheat on their partner, but men are expected to cheat so women should be okay with it (Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011). While jealousy is not cheating in itself, it may include the real or perceived threat of cheating, which is affected similarly by these stigmas around infidelity.

Popular media continues to uphold these cycles and stereotypes in articles about jealousy. Articles from Psychology Today and Health.com define gender differences in jealousy as basically innate and formed through evolution, meaning they also rely on the biological assumptions and stereotypes that come with being male or female. These articles are interesting because they separate romantic jealousy and sexual jealousy; they claim emotional jealousy has to do with one’s partner/person of interest having intimate romantic feelings for a different person, while sexual jealousy occurs when one’s partner/person of interest has sex with another person. There was a small study done in Psychology Today, which I don’t believe was reliable or representative enough, asking which type of jealousy is more prevalent among male and female identifying people. It was concluded that women are more likely to feel upset by emotional infidelity (romantic jealousy) while men will feel more upset by sexual infidelity (sexual jealousy). This claim was backed up with evidence regarding evolution, specifically around investment in reproduction. According to these two sources, men would feel most upset about sexual infidelity because if their partner became pregnant, they would be unsure if the child was theirs. It wouldn’t lead to “reproductive success” taking care of genetically distant offspring. On
the other hand, it was argued, women are supposedly more dependent on men for resources, so emotional infidelity may feel like a threat to the supply of resources for herself and child.

While this argument does make some sense considering historical norms and evolution, I don’t agree that its impact is still identifiable in today’s world of jealousy. Biological essentialism has shaped many of the stereotypes/norms we have now, but there are different social stigmas and expectations that influence jealous behavior. Jealousy can stem from a multitude of different things, from social media, dating websites, texts/messaging, all things that weren’t available not very long ago. Relationships and dating also look different now than they may have before. Hook-up culture and the acceptance of non-hetero relationships has become more prevalent, and the social climate around sexuality has changed. So while I can agree there may be some evolutionary history involved, the types of feelings experienced when reproductive success was threatened may are not currently relatable, especially since relationships are defined individually and may place more or less value on things like reproduction. This theory also doesn’t account for how jealousy intersects with sexuality, not does it acknowledge that there have always been Queer people/animals. A theory that relies on biological sex differences cannot fully apply to an individual or relationship that falls outside of these strict categories. I am wary of studies or arguments that rely on biological sex differences in general, because, in reality, these are not rigid, defined categories.

People may believe that these themes found throughout media are small and unimportant, but I beg to differ. A society that accepts sexist memes is not okay. A society that accepts stalking is not okay. A society that accepts abusive jealousy is not okay. A society that tells me I should expect to be controlled and manipulated is not okay. These are messages that I scrolled past in middle school and high school like they were nothing, and I absorbed them all without
even knowing it. Had I been socialized differently, had I been sent different messages about what relationships are, maybe I would have noticed the warning signs sooner. It would be unfair and simplistic to blame social media for my experiences with jealousy in past relationships; in no way could I even pinpoint one direct cause because there isn’t only one. However, truthful and informed conversations around jealousy and abuse could have helped me understand myself—and others—much better. Deconstructing popular media is not the end all, be all solution. Critically analyzing how neoliberalism and capitalism have negatively affected our relationships needs to be a part of this conversation.

This Wasn’t Me

When I was younger, my understanding of relationships relied on the straight people I saw on TV, rumors from around school, and the gendered jokes spat at me from family members. What does this mean, you ask? Let me tell you:

Boys play games but will come back to you if you wait long enough. Boys will break your heart for “that other hoe.” Boys won’t be able to keep their hands off you, it’s just their nature.

Of course, I didn’t question any of this when I was younger. All I knew was that I wanted to shrivel up and hide from boys—which is exactly what I did. Looking back, I tried to make myself smaller. I accommodated, I hid, I blended, I disappeared. I couldn’t be in a male-dominated space without racing thoughts. I crossed my legs as tight as possible to make more room for boys on the bench. I didn’t make eye contact so I wouldn’t send the wrong idea. Boys were intimidating, scary, and quite honestly they grossed me out. It was normal when I was younger; everyone said boys had cooties. But suddenly that changed so I changed. I was
supposed to have crushes, and dates, and boyfriends. I had classmates coming up to me asking me who I liked—No, who I LIKE liked… I made up feelings. I made up desires. I began to discover how great of an actress I was because I honestly started believing myself. I wanted to gossip and rant with the other people in my class. I started to see girls as malicious. They were flirts and boyfriend stealers because obviously *they* do the stealing at no fault of the boy. I began competing over things I didn’t want, just for the sake of competing…

That wasn’t me.

I luckily felt less pressure after entering high school. By “luckily” I mean my Queerness was talked about, my relationships were assumed, my labels were given, and I was pushed out of the closet with the door locked behind me. Funny, maybe if I had known being Queer meant no one would ask me about crushes and dating advice, I might have voluntarily come out on my own. Over the course of the next four years, the messages I was getting earlier in school came back in a new form and were reinforced in my relationships. I dated two people in the length of this time span; one partner lasted one year, the second partner lasted three years. I was very inexperienced with relationships, and with an additional thanks to my parents, I had grown to understand that constant monitoring and controlling behavior meant that a person very much cared for me. When I was experiencing this with my next two partners, I didn’t think much of it. I was living in constant shame and walking on eggshells… But when that’s all I’ve known, it was comfortable and familiar. I grew to be someone who is passive and secretive, for fear of the consequences.
That wasn’t me.

I learned that my privacy was nonexistent when a partner was involved, that they were entitled to know any and all passwords I had, to look through my text messages and Facebook account, to know where I was and who I was with. Had I not told my partner about a new friend I made, it was a threat. Especially if it was a male-identifying person. They must have obviously been flirting with me, and I was going along with it. I was intentionally hurting my partner by not telling this new friend I was already in a relationship. I began to believe that whenever someone new spoke to me, it was only due to romantic or sexual interests; that is the only reason someone would want to talk to me, right?

I didn’t have any male-identifying friends in this 4-year span.

It became a routine whenever I wanted to go anywhere: I had to ask my parents, THEN ask my partner, THEN make sure I had a detailed report of everything that happened. If I leave out any detail at all—whether I thought it was big or small, whether on purpose or accident—I became a liar. I was a bad partner, a bad daughter, a bad person.

I stopped going out with people other than family or partners.
This breach of my autonomy translated to many different aspects of my life. I soon learned that my freedom only went as far as my partner was comfortable. If I crossed this *unspoken* boundary, I was to blame. For example, we had a 5-8 minute passing time in between periods at my high school; I was expected to meet my partner at the shared locker between every class and conclude each passing time with a hug. There *had* to be a hug each time because god knows what would happen if we don’t hug between each 45 minute period. I tried to pretend like I didn’t feel the same when my parents made me hug distant family members. I tried to pretend like this didn’t lead to other unwanted intimacy at school. I tried to pretend like my classmates and teachers didn’t say anything because they didn’t know. I tried to pretend like my body was still mine.

I couldn’t even think about brushing off the hug because I knew what would happen. It’s the same thing that happens every time I disobey, or sense that I might have disobeyed, my partner… or my parent… or any person that my mind had told me has authority over me and my body.

It starts in my stomach—a drop, a hollowness, an empty that eats itself within me. It creeps down my arms, to my hands—a warm, tingly sensation, with fingers cool and clammy. It reaches up to my face—it’s red, it’s burning, it’s buzzing behind my eyes. It’s a wave of guilt. It’s the spread of shame. It’s my fault—and I’m a bad partner.

This started with my parents. This started with movies and television. This started with social media. This started with the belief that jealousy meant love.
It wasn’t until I came to college, and started working in the field of anti-violence and sexual violence prevention that I realized this was unhealthy. I also learned it wasn’t uncommon. I was introduced to the Power and Control Wheel a year or two into college, and I immediately recognized the behaviors on the wall before me. I was staring so hard, I thought the wheel would break. It wasn’t until recently that I began to draw connections between the jealous behavior I had experienced and each spoke on that wheel. Now I’m not saying that all jealousy is inherently evil; I’m saying that the behaviors motivated by jealousy can be abusive.

Jealousy as Abuse

As seen below in figure 18, power and control can take form in many ways. Many gendered ideas perpetuated through memes fall onto this wheel. Since social media is so casual and one can share almost any post, we consume these ideas regularly to the point that we are desensitized. In our culture of violence, acts like stalking and social media/cell phone abuse are continuously falling under our radar. The ongoing theme of “competition” and “winning” within neoliberal-capitalist ideology already harbors a similar environment of power differentials. These tools for power and control are used in relationships to reduce feelings of insecurity and scarcity, and I believe these tools could also be used with the excuse of “jealousy”.
These poems are another type of viral internet meme found on social media sites, and they illustrate how even our definitions and expectations of jealousy/love show threads of violence and entitlement. They express similar feelings about what love and jealousy are, though the first piece of writing by Helen Fisher (figure 19) draws a parallel between being in love and feeling a “drug” high. Fisher begins by describing the feelings and emotional changes that take place when falling in love, or, in comparison, routinely using drugs. They also compare love to signs of addictive tendencies, like being unable to go periods of time without the person or taking great risks to win the person, or, as Fisher says, the person’s affection. Similarly, the second poem (figure 20) explains jealousy as a competition to “win” in which rivals won’t be tolerated. This piece differs, however, in that it calls jealousy beautiful. Amidst the lines of rivalry and threats, right in the middle of the poem, jealousy is framed as fragility by admitting concern of losing someone.

These two pieces express, imply, and perpetuate many beliefs and norms that are found throughout social media and general society today. While my focus is specifically on jealousy, relationships, and capitalism, I must add in a brief disclaimer regarding the problems present when comparing drug use to anything. Fisher first doesn’t even specify which drug, which is important because all drugs affect one differently. Fisher also made assumptions about addiction and behaviors when using drug use as a comparison. It is an unfortunate theme that I have been
seeing in media and hearing in music. Love is compared to a drug that is addictive, that changes a person, that one would go through great measures to possess. Despite our societies incredibly inhumane treatment of those who are struggling with addiction, this is the one kind of “addiction” that is accepted. While there are multiple issues that could be explored regarding the semantics, and structures, I just want to acknowledge this poor metaphor.

Looking again at Figure 20, the perceived threat is losing a person—a person you “love” or an intimate partner. This implies that another person will be gaining whatever is lost (that person). This is a very common and still valid feeling that is shared by many, and a powerful influence on this type of thinking comes from capitalism. Since our society is imbued with capitalistic values, these thoughts may come into play through parts of our lives that don’t seem like they would be affected. This is important to note because it is one of the key reasons we fail to connect economic structures and political ideologies to discussions about the “social sphere.” We believe it is unaffected by them. Neo-liberal capitalism thrives off “scarcity” and the idea that there are limited resources (Flisfeder 2015); this can be translated to the idea that love is scarce, “special,” and hard to find, so one may become competitive, aggressive, or possessive in order to secure this love (see figure 20). There is always a need for competition or rivalry in this kind of love because that is how we indicate our productivity. One then spends time proving their love, proving their dedication and warding off “rivals.”

These graphics, however, also imply that only one person can be the target, or consumer, of your attention, also meaning that a partner should only be offering their attention to you. Jealousy is interesting in the sense that many people describe it as feelings of fragility or insecurity (as seen in figure 20), but the flip side of this thinking, is that a person believes that they have everything a person could ever need in their lifetime to stay in love and fulfilled.
goes back to the feelings of entitlement. However, I challenge these notions, considering that these graphics seem to only describe monogamous partnerships between strictly two people. There are many people who engage in polyamorous relationships and may not identify with the idea of giving one’s full attention to only one other person. Normalizing the idea that we only need, or should only need, one person sets up unrealistic expectations and standards for what a partner can and should provide in a relationship. It also invalidates those who do identify within the polyamorous community. The attachment of jealousy to love makes it seem as if there must be one, if the other is present. This creates difficulties for those who many not experience romantic love—would they still be able to experience jealousy? And if they do, would it still be perceived as jealousy even though we connect it so closely with romantic relationships and love? While this isn’t the focus, it is important to notice that these memes leave out certain kinds of relationships and individuals; this doesn’t mean that these individuals aren’t affected.

Neoliberalism, again, is inescapable in the society in which it operates. The individualism and self-interest that resides in neoliberalism especially transfers over to interpersonal relationships, for example, in the idea of self-improvement and/or “proving” oneself. The writers above, especially figure 20, express how important it is for them to obtain and sustain the attention of the other person. The writer of figure 20 claims they can “be more” if they are about to lose their love. They can prove their worthiness, and they can “be more than a stellar explosion” in order to keep what is “theirs.” Bringing this idea back to entitlement and ownership, I see how in this system one feels entitled to the love of another only after proving their worth. It seems to me that both writers assume that changing oneself for another person is an essential part of love, whether that change is involuntary or voluntary. These are aspects that play out in interpersonal relationships, and though they may be disguised, they are aspects that
are seen in graphics and memes like figure 19 and 20. Love and capital are two things we are
told to want, two things we supposedly should be willing to sacrifice ourselves for, or fight and
compete for. This is also a key aspect in capitalism because, often times, to be a “productive
citizen” in a capitalistic society, one must conform to the needs and desires of said society
despite the odds or consequences. The idea of having to continuously change oneself or compete
to stay relevant or important in the relationship may still stem from wanting to escape “scarcity”
because it’s in the interest of oneself to be secure.

This desire to escape scarcity may result in
violent behaviors to secure love, and a common tool
used in anti-violence spaces to identify abuse is the
power and control wheel. Though it’s not usually
contextualized into power and control from larger
systemic forces, if I were to create a wheel to
specifically address the influences and behaviors I’m
discussing today, it would look like figure 21. As laid
out in the beginning of the paper, it’s easy to see that
we have set up a culture of violence and scarcity through definitions of jealousy and love that
require competition to avoid scarcity. There are many layers of power and control within our
understanding of love and jealousy, and while the power and control wheel differs across the
spaces and organizations that use it, the main components remain the same. There are two
encompassing rings representing external influences and norms and (sometimes) a ring in the
middle for internalized beliefs. While there could be many, many different combinations of rings
and influences, I’ve adapted this one to address neoliberal capitalist culture and how jealousy is
used as an invisible tool/excuse to enact different kinds of abuse. First is the overarching context of power and control within neoliberal capitalism in which we are in a constant state of scarcity. As I explained earlier, gender essentialism is key in maintaining and upholding it. In order to ensure our “resource” (aka love, or partners) is secure, we continuously search for threats as a way to stay productive, with jealousy being the “alert” of a threat. The jealousy ring not only represents the actual persistent feeling of threat, but the perceptions and ideas that we have of what jealousy is and how it should be experienced and handled. The inner ring represents the socialization of the individual; this is the internalized messaging from media, society, and even friends or loved ones that promote neoliberal capitalist ideology. I removed the specific examples of behavior because they could easily be adapted or brainstormed in a group depending on where and how the graphic is being used. To give a few examples, using pets/loved ones could be combined with isolation when a person continues to control when and where a partner goes because they “aren’t spending enough time with them and always putting [certain friend] above them.” This is traced back to previous discussions on the expectation of a partner to give the other their full and undivided attention; this could feel like jealousy or loss, as one competes for the resource of “love and attention.” Denying, minimizing or blaming could look like gas lighting. A partner may be feeling jealous or insecure and continually accuse the other of always flirting or causing the jealousy, which puts the blame and responsibility for “fixing” the problem on that partner. There are obviously more examples, but it is not my intention to go in depth and publish this wheel as a brand new tool; instead I hope to visually portray the societal influences on relational abuse through the better recognized power and control wheel. In essence, the forms of abuse may look similar to the ones in the original power and control wheel, but, under the guise of “love,” jealousy and the resulting behaviors are excused. Since these widely-shared
perceptions of jealousy are normalized, and we understand abuse as a pattern of controlling behaviors, the patterns are imbedded in everyday social media so they are harder to recognize.

Neoliberal capitalism also works in a way that seems “invisible” in our lives. In Ryan LaMothe’s “The Colonizing Realities of Neoliberal Capitalism,” he stresses that individualism and “self-interest” are commonly understood as a bedrock for America (i.e. the American Dream), but they are also key components of a form of neoliberal capitalism. Someone should “follow their heart” and they can do anything. This gives room for people to rationalize violence (2015). Perhaps a person just “wants to make the love work,” or maybe they have “put so much work” into the relationship that they feel they deserve equal reciprocation. Whether true or not, I argue these reasons are still about the individual wanting to feel secure amidst scarcity and feeling entitled to love since they spent a lot of energy. This could lead to violence in order to maintain feelings of security, disregarding the other partner(s) experiences. If that person doesn’t actively resist, or say no, there must not be a problem; this is paired with a lack of affirmative consent education. The weight on personal responsibility and agency within neoliberal capitalism cultivates an environment where mutuality is “out of the picture, and we have no collective responsibility” (Bay-Cheng, 2015). There is less focus on the larger picture of boundary setting, negotiation and communication between parties, and more emphasis on personal responsibility to change the situation. I am not advocating for the complete disregard of personal responsibility. Rather I contend that the sole focus on this can lead to victim blaming and shaming in situations of abuse, a point that Laina Bay-Cheng makes in her current literature on neoliberalism and young girls’ sexuality. She lays out the double edged sword of neoliberalism, in that it promotes and values agency and autonomy, but a person should be expected to handle any and all consequences, no matter the influences of systemic oppression or
barriers. Bay-Cheng (2015) states that our conception of agency is extremely narrow, and due to neoliberal capitalism, there is a certain criterion for “what it looks like, to what goals it should be directed, and who is capable of it.” When thinking of these implications, it is often women, people of color, people with lower SES, and other marginalized identities that are socially sanctioned when exerting their agency. This creates perceptions of victims who “deserve” or “brought on” what was coming to them. Since neoliberal capitalism upholds a hierarchy of personhood, cisgender, heterosexual, white, upper/middle class men are the most free from such sanctions. We are fortunately becoming more aware of systems of privilege and power, and in “The Agency Line,” Bay-Cheng discusses how our societal and cultural views about gender norms have shifted, but our language and models about sexuality and relationships haven’t (Bay-Cheng, 2015). I completely agree. This is why I wanted to reimagine abuse and victimization in the context of neoliberal capitalism and jealousy, using the power and control wheel.

Conclusion: Forms of Resistance.

While neoliberal capitalist ideology is pervasive, and jealousy and memes are rampant, there are still ways to recognize and respond to unhealthy and negative influences. I want to acknowledge that although I am calling out the culture surrounding memes, I am also participating in it. I am producing and sharing memes that could very well begin circulating in this competition of the fittest, the competition when it’s been 5 minutes since I’ve told my significant other how proud I am of them.
of the most relevant meme. However, I believe the approach I’m taking falls closer into a new realm of internet meme culture, a wave of “wholesome” memes have begun to push back against the unhealthy messages being spread with the mainstream memes. When modifying memes to make them wholesome, some content is left untouched in order to easily reference the original, but the captioning is changed into something more positive is inserted. This is a grassroots style of active resistance that I think is so important when bringing awareness to the unhealthy messages meme-consumers scroll past or glance at on the daily (figures 22-24). While there is scarce academic or scholarly research considering this phenomenon, there is an interview hosted by Amani Bin Shikhan for Fader, a New York based magazine that publishes content about music, culture and style. The creator of the original “WholesomeMemes” account on Instagram is interviewed about how and why she started the page. The creator wishes to remain as anonymous as possible, only sharing small details like pronouns, major of study and age (20 years old.) Her first post was in March of 2016, and ever since, she has been getting overwhelmingly positive responses from social media users.
There are other accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr that post wholesome memes as well; while I’m unsure if it’s the same user as the original Instagram page, I \textit{do} know this means the wholesome memes are able to circulate on the same platforms as other unhealthy memes. I am critical of the name “wholesome” memes because I believe this is starting more than just another category of memes. It isn’t just about feeling warm and fuzzy inside. It’s about change and transformation. It’s about collectively recognizing the unhealthy messages sent within mainstream memes and actively working to change them. This is a start in reaching more consumers.

This toolkit will be another way to reach potential meme-consumers, as well as social workers, social justice advocates, activists, professors, teachers, anti-violence workers, and beyond. I want to briefly explain my reasoning for the “zine” end product. I find that in some cases, zines are more accessible and easily understood, so I want this toolkit to reach a wider audience. The concept of neoliberal capitalism can be hard to grasp, and I believe that having explanations in zine form will make it less daunting. This thesis and the memes I analyze already rely heavily on visual components, and neoliberal capitalism is so dense that a more visual and creative based end project would be a good way to keep readers engaged while exploring the pages. Academic papers and language can be exclusionary in their nature, so I wanted this toolkit to break the concepts down concisely and in a way that was easy to follow. The limitation to this type of project is that it may not be taken seriously in all spaces. For example, if I wanted to give this zine to an administrator at an institution, I may feel a little hesitant, like the zine is out of place. Zines tend to revolve around the social justice, radical feminist sphere, so even the word may throw people off. A way around these situations could be to call
it just a toolkit, booklet, or pamphlet (leaving out the “zine” label.) While that seems minor, even the label change could appeal to a different kind of audience. Either way, I hope this project in all its forms will show the connections between larger structures of power and individuals on relational levels. Specifically, I want people to better understand how gendered capitalism and our current neoliberal society affects our everyday behavior and perception regarding relationships.

I propose different levels of change making within awareness, primary prevention, and intervention that can be in addition to the zine (which could fall under all three categories.) These are examples of different strategies and methods individuals can use and modify in order to start combatting neoliberal capitalism and jealousy in their spaces. A multi-media campaign for awareness around abusive jealous behaviors could start the conversation in one’s area, especially since social media and meme culture obviously have many examples of unhealthy jealousy. To increase visibility and accessibility, it could also be a physical “art” display of the different memes that perpetuate stalking, unwanted text messages and phone calls, and controlling behavior. There are some examples of these memes in the zine; however, considering their pervasive nature, a quick google search could bring many results. Neoliberal capitalism tends to be a harder pitch in my experience, so often times pairing a visual awareness event with an educational flyer or brochure could be a good way to familiarize others with the vocabulary. For example, an organization or institution could hold a display of popular memes with unhealthy messages about love and jealousy and have the zine toolkit to handout along with it.
Education is an important place to start when considering primary prevention, and even direct intervention. We must recognize the neoliberal ideology in our social justice and feminist organizations/movements. This could result in collaborations with other culturally specific organizations and diverse movements to ensure the inclusivity of the space. There is a checklist in the zine, and while lighthearted, it highlights some of the recent trends and themes within neoliberal feminist thinking. This is just one step among the many possible ways to continually assess a space or group and ensure community and relationship building with others. The toolkit zine also provides short definitions, visual critiques of memes, as well as interactive, activity pages that allow you to create your own meme or practice boundary setting. The toolkit can be navigated individually, but also led as a group. In an ideal world, this material could be implemented into an already existing workshop about abuse and/or relationships—such as consent or healthy relationships workshops being held at a local sexual violence agency or social work training center—giving it a wide reach. Education and application surrounding boundary setting and consent negotiation are key to cultivating a healthier relationship and are found within the zine. However, this material can still be discussed in a classroom or a regularly meeting support/social group as a stand-alone mini workshop. Holding workshops and sessions with the zine could create some great discussion; while I didn’t provide a lesson plan with the toolkit, it is set up in a way for individuals to adapt and share the content in ways that make sense for them and their space.

When speaking about one-on-one intervention, I believe steps found within bystander intervention trainings could apply when witnessing abusive jealousy online
or in person. For background, by-stander intervention is an initiative that frames violence as a community wide issue that requires a community wide response; those learning about bystander intervention are given skills and strategies to adapt and use when they are witnessing or sensing a problematic situation. The goal is to create a shift in culture, where we all find responsibility in cultivating a safer environment. Finding ways to intervene when seeing problematic jokes or memes could include calling it out on your own social media page, or creating your own “wholesome” meme, to bring awareness. There is a practice activity within the toolkit zine regarding the construction of memes. If one is witnessing problematic or abusive behavior regarding jealousy in person, there are different ways to intervene. First, it would be best to check in with the partners in an abusive situation to ensure they feel safe and validated. One might also cause a distraction if there is an escalating situation, in order to diffuse and separate the partners/individuals. It is important to remember that this must be done within the context of self-determination and understanding that if someone is in a potentially abusive situation or relationship, they are ultimately the expert of their own lives and have a better understanding of what they’re capable of and how to react. By taking over the situation, or telling others what they should do in the abusive situation, one could replicate the exact system of neoliberal capitalism we’re trying to dismantle. Do not tell someone the best way to “exert their own agency”, which is an underlying issue within neoliberalism. Ultimately, when supporting someone, it is first important to believe and validate their experiences, then continue to offer support in whatever capacity they need—even if that means they don’t want to talk to you or leave the abusive situation. Having the
zine toolkit as a customizable, personalized take-home piece for the workshop makes it more effective. While I acknowledge that one-time sessions tend to be a “band-aid” approach to creating change, my intention is that this workshop/zine would be used in conjunction with much larger discussions about power, control, and abuse.

Again, it is important that these discussions take place within helping professions—like social work. Taking social work as an example, though it may be found in other professions, often times micro and macro practices are separated. On the graduate level at my university, they even had separate tracks for graduation, divided into micro and macro. When I’ve asked classmates or coworkers what they’re interested, I often heard “I’m thinking more micro practice like therapy settings” or “I’m thinking more macro fields like non-profit work”. This sets up a classroom and professional environment where one may feel they work solely with individuals, or solely with systems… but taking a holistic approach, recognizing how the two intertwine and interact, provides a better way of understanding complex issues. Bringing in neoliberal capitalist ideology is an important next step in understanding abuse in relationships, and it has strong implications for our social justice work as well as the field of social work. The “systems theory” and “person-in-environment” approach is often found within Social Work (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012). They are both, in some capacity, supposed to provide social workers with a lens that recognizes the individual and how they interact within the context of their external environment, outside influences, and systemic/institutional realities. I believe neoliberal capitalism should be considered when looking at external pressures and influences. We must consider how individuals internalize and function within larger political/economic systems as it relates to personal, social, and relationships.
The “ecological approach” relies on the person-in-environment framework mentioned above. This includes the “social environment”—which is understood as the circumstances, conditions, and interactions that a person is surrounded by and dependent on in order to “survive and thrive” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012). These systems could range anywhere from support systems like family, the school system, the criminal justice system, and more. This theory acknowledges all the various systems around clients, because social work practice is intended to “improve the interactions among the person and various systems” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012).

Kirst-Ashman & Hull (2012), authors of a social work text book for generalist practice, even state that social workers in generalist practice will target “systems of virtually any size [to make] change.” This must include political and economic systems like neoliberal capitalism; it seeps into our individual lives and relationships, as discussed throughout this paper, and it also affects our social justice movements and societal perceptions. By disregarding neoliberal capitalism, we aren’t fully taking into consideration the barriers and effects it has on our clients. This is generalist practice, the basics for the profession of Social Work. I strongly urge social workers to begin taking neoliberal capitalism into account when working with systems, communities, relationships and individuals, because we are not doing our job otherwise. We are not understanding and working with clients to the best of our ability.

My hope is that this toolkit and thesis will be starting point, a piece among many other mechanisms needed, to disrupt neoliberal capitalism. I have offered a few examples for how one can use the toolkit, but these ideas are not exhaustive. All spaces look and feel different, and the
adaptability of this toolkit would hopefully benefit the multiple spaces it may enter. I personally believe it will work best among grassroots efforts within individual and community level change. While I hope many different groups of people can make use of this toolkit, I especially want resource centers, anti-violence/anti-oppression organizations, classrooms, feminist/social justice spaces and professions like Social Work to incorporate discussions about neoliberal capitalism, jealousy, and the current meme culture into our work and violence prevention efforts. This thesis and toolkit zine could be the jumping off point into a more complex, critical, and holistic review of how we understand abuse and relationships under a neoliberal capitalist regime.
References


Additional Resources


