

Nihilism and Absurdism in Reddit Memes

Research Question:

How and to what effect does Generation Z meme culture reflect nihilism and absurdism through the ironic interplay of text and image?

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Introduction

Generation Z, born in an era of remarkable technological progress, inherits a world teetering on the brink of multiple crises: climate change, widening inequalities, political fragmentation (Lopez-Claros). This unique position drives them to confront existential questions with a depth and urgency unlike any generation before them. A study by the American Psychological Association highlights that 91% of Generation Z young adults have experienced significant stress-related symptoms, with a mere 50% feeling they are comfortable with dealing with them (Bethune). This emotional toll reflects a broader shift in social attitudes, a rejection of a grand narrative, which led many in the generation to reinterpret traditional meanings ("Gen Z: The First"). This essay will critically examine the ironic detachment and juxtaposition in nihilistic memes, as well as the post-ironic nonsensicality in absurdist memes. The analysis of these memes through the dual lenses of nihilism and absurdism will provide insight into how Generation Z uses humor, irony, and absurdity to confront the nihilistic challenges of modern life. In doing so, it will be argued that Generation Z is actively reshaping nihilistic narratives, using the digital tools available to them to assert agency in the face of uncertainty.

Memes, classically viewed as low culture due to their popular appeal to the masses and ephemeral nature, will be evaluated as high culture in this analysis by serving as the primary source. Meme is a concept coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, as "the new replicator," something that conveys "the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Parashar and Chaudhary). In the digital age, a new form of memes, internet memes, appears. They are often humorous, immediate, and highly shareable, serving as both cultural artifacts and methods of communication (Couture). Ephraim Sutherland, co-founder of the Yale Memes for Special Snowflake Teens group, explains that these memes often come from a place of disillusionment and anxiety, serving as empathetic vehicles for shared experience (Owens). Rather than confronting these issues directly, meme creators use exaggeration, humor, and cultural quotation to create a secure space where these feelings can be explored indirectly (Owens). Thus, these internet memes were chosen as an effective and direct method to understand representative broader cultural trends within Generation Z.

Within the sphere of internet memes, Reddit is a popular online forum that has become a central hub for the creation and dissemination of memes (Reddit). Importantly, Reddit's user base skews heavily toward the Generation Z demographic — people born from 1997 to 2012 — as an analysis found that the average user age is 23, and the app was most used by individuals between the ages of 18 and 29, which positions Reddit as a significant cultural space to analyze Generation Z culture (Duarte). In this research, memes from the sub-reddits — communities within reddit — of r/nihilism, r/PhilosophyMemes and r/nihilistmemes will be the focus, as their engagement with existential themes offers a rich source of content that reflects the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. Additionally, memes will be drawn from a specific post-pandemic time frame, between August 2022 and August 2024, due to the intensified anxiety that emerged in the wake of the pandemic.

Before the analysis, we must first understand and define absurdism and nihilism. Absurdism responds to nihilism by acknowledging the universe's meaninglessness while challenging us to live definitely within it (Camus and O'Brien). Nihilism, however, asserts that everything lacks inherent value or purpose, rendering any search for meaning futile (Webb).

Mundane Existence

First of all, the mundane existence of humans, a central problem that dominates modern life, is exhibited in both nihilistic and absurdist memes. The repetitive, senseless routine of humans is likened to that of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder up a mountain only to see it roll back down, endlessly, repeating the same task (Plant). He cites the concept of "being-in-itself" describing the fixed, rigid existence of an object, which cannot define itself (Siame). As many modern workers are trapped in cycles of "rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep," their existence is in a state of "being-in-itself" (Plant).



Figure 1. A meme titled ‘agree?’ posted on r/nihilism (“agree?”).

This nihilistic view of the problem of mundane existence is exhibited in the meme labeled Figure 1. The meme mimics an infographic, using eye-catching visuals, intuitive flow, and concise texts; but it does not serve its function — educational conveyance of information. Ironically, audiences learn that they learn nothing. It subverts the text type, concluding that one finds no meaning within the instructions, serving as a piece of social commentary, portraying life as a series of habits, devoid of any real purpose, and echoes the nihilistic view of the future.

The image begins with a top banner depicting a congested city highway, a chaotic and busy atmosphere that visually reinforces the mindless drudgery of everyday work. Through metonymy, people are depicted as cars on a highway, symbolizing the monotonous journey of modern existence. The simple imagery, of vehicles on an endless road, moving forward without any clear purpose, mirrors the lives of modern workers: both navigating their daily routines without fully grasping the absurdity of their actions.

The text accompanying the image reflects an over-generalized view of life, but one that sheds light on its unthinking nature: tasks are reduced to a list of mechanical actions. Diction which suggests a sense of purpose, like “made,” is used ironically to imply that life is created with a certain function, but instead reveals the futility behind everyday activities. The presentation of actions in list form mirrors the monotonous and streamlined characteristics of modern life, where each task is a basic, robotic command. Within the list, tasks are written with simple imperative verbs and minimalistic text, and exhibited with symbols, further reducing them to mere representation, stripping them of any deeper meaning. For instance, the meme states that humans “sit at the desk 9-5,” highlighting their state of idleness, simply looking at a screen in an office building for most of the day. Even when there are vacations — opportunities to adventure beyond — the fleeting escape is still constrained by the rigid structure of everyday life, as it is stated that one is only able to do so for two weeks in a year. Furthermore, the meme’s framing of creativity and aspirations as something that is “beaten” down by the weight of routine is violent and graphic, suggesting that the system actively suppressed individuality and innovation, forcing people into a mold of conformity.

The meme ends ambiguously — “there is nothing more to life” — by using post-irony, a characteristic of the generation Z online movement. It involves two layers of irony: an ironic message that returns to sincerity (“Post-Irony, Meta-Irony”). On the surface, it appears to be a nihilistic reflection on the futility of life — everything reduced to a series of repetitive tasks devoid of meaning. On the first level of irony, one is expected to fight back against this blanket statement: there has to be more to life, right? Only on the second level of

irony, does it suggest that one lives through a series of repetitive habits to distract us and keep moving forward, exposing audiences to the nihilistic view that modern life is truly meaningless due to its mundane and repetitive nature.

In contrast to the state of “being-in-itself”, an embracement of absurdism leads to the condition of “being-for-itself,” referring to individuals who have the freedom and responsibility to define themselves through their actions and choices (Siame). This state of existence is exhibited in the absurdist view seen in Figure 2, a meme that presents a synthesis of absurdist philosophy and dark humor, wrapped in a biting parody of the iconic Nike slogan ‘Just do it.’



Figure 2. A meme titled ‘Just do it’ posted on r/nihilistmemes (“Just do it”)

Initially, the meme is a profound recognition of the nihilistic idea of the mundane and meaningless existence, leading one to arrive at nihilism — rejection of meaning. The phrase “Believe in Nothing” is a concise and forceful encapsulation of this rejection, urging audiences to abandon all systems of meaning: not only traditional or philosophical systems, but all forms of beliefs including those that provide comfort. The grotesque figure in the background, depicting H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu from a popular video game, deepens this nihilistic sentiment. Lovecraft’s cosmic horror mythology centers around the idea that humanity is insignificant in the face of vast and incomprehensible cosmic forces (“Cthulhu”). The creature’s monstrous design evokes feelings of existential horror, where humanity’s place in the universe is not just small, but utterly meaningless. Like the cosmos in Lovecraft’s stories, the world of this meme is one where human concerns are irrelevant. The creature’s cold, alien visage reinforces the notion that the universe offers neither comfort nor understanding to our meaningless existence. Furthermore, the shadowy atmosphere of the image intensifies the existential dread that permeates the scene. The suffocating darkness enveloping the creature is both terrifying and liberating — enhancing the somber undertone of recognition while also offering a path to enlightenment and freedom from systematic imprisonment.

However, the meme does not merely dwell on the bleakness of nihilism; it showcases a radical solution to the mundanity of existentialism: an embrace of absolute freedom, achieved through destruction. The forceful and direct imperative statements, “Believe in nothing” and “Sacrifice everyone,” serve as absolute commands that instruct audiences on breaking free from the cyclical emptiness of everyday life. The unambiguous tone suggests that escaping the mundane requires a complete and unapologetic abandonment of previously held values, beliefs, and attachments. The second imperative, “Sacrifice everyone,” in this context should not be interpreted literally or as an endorsement of violence; rather, it illustrates a radical rejection of societal expectations and interpersonal obligations. It refers to a willingness to prioritize personal authenticity over

anything, as seen from the magnitude and weight from the use of “everything.” Such action that aligns with traditional absurdist rebellion, to achieve liberation from the structures imposed by society.

The destructive freedom is supported by the use of the Nike logo and slogan, “Just do it,” which is emphasized against the black background. Nike, a global brand that carries significant symbolic weight, is associated with athletes, sports, and a culture of perseverance, determination, and achievement. The slogan “Just do it” is typically a rallying cry for action and the pursuit of excellence. When used in this context, it suggests that the same relentless drive within the pursuit of athletic or personal success can be applied to the pursuit of absurdism (Friedman). The meme co-opts Nike’s message, to imbue tenacity within the audiences, urging them to achieve liberation from life’s mundanity through believing “in nothing” and sacrificing “everyone.” The use of situational irony here, where the results are contrary to audience expectations and the motivational slogan turned on its head, serves to critique the very notion of conventional motivation. A motivational poster, which is associated with positivity and social cohesion, is instead built upon a premise of destruction. It suggests that the real path to freedom from meaninglessness of existence lies opposite to the conventions of social order, but in recognizing its futility, and embracing absolute freedom. It encourages us to “Just do it” with unwavering determination.

Through these digital reflections of life’s cyclical drudgery, Generation Z does not merely observe their nihilistic existence — they actively dismantle it with irony and wit. The memes subtly mirror the repetitive tasks of modern life, but with each layer of humor, they reclaim the very absurdity that seeks to consume them, reinterpreting it as a form of rebellion through an embracement of absolute freedom.

The Inevitability of Death

In every moment of existence, the looming fate of death persists. It is the ultimate reminder of life’s impermanence and the futility of all human efforts to create lasting meaning, and can be seen through a

nihilistic and absurdist lens of memes. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, discusses how people often live as though they are unaware of their “destiny” through the act of elusion — a kind of mental trickery where they cling to hope or some grand idea that transcends life itself (Plant). This hope, however, only betrays the individual, as it distracts from the harsh reality of existence — finite and devoid of inherent meaning (Camus and O'Brien). This nihilistic view of the inevitability of death, which postulates that death renders everything meaningless, is exemplified within the meme labeled as Figure 3. The meme confronts the viewer with the inescapable reality of death, encapsulating the irony of human life: while individuals are driven by pride, greed, and self-centered ambition, the inevitability of death renders these pursuits meaningless.

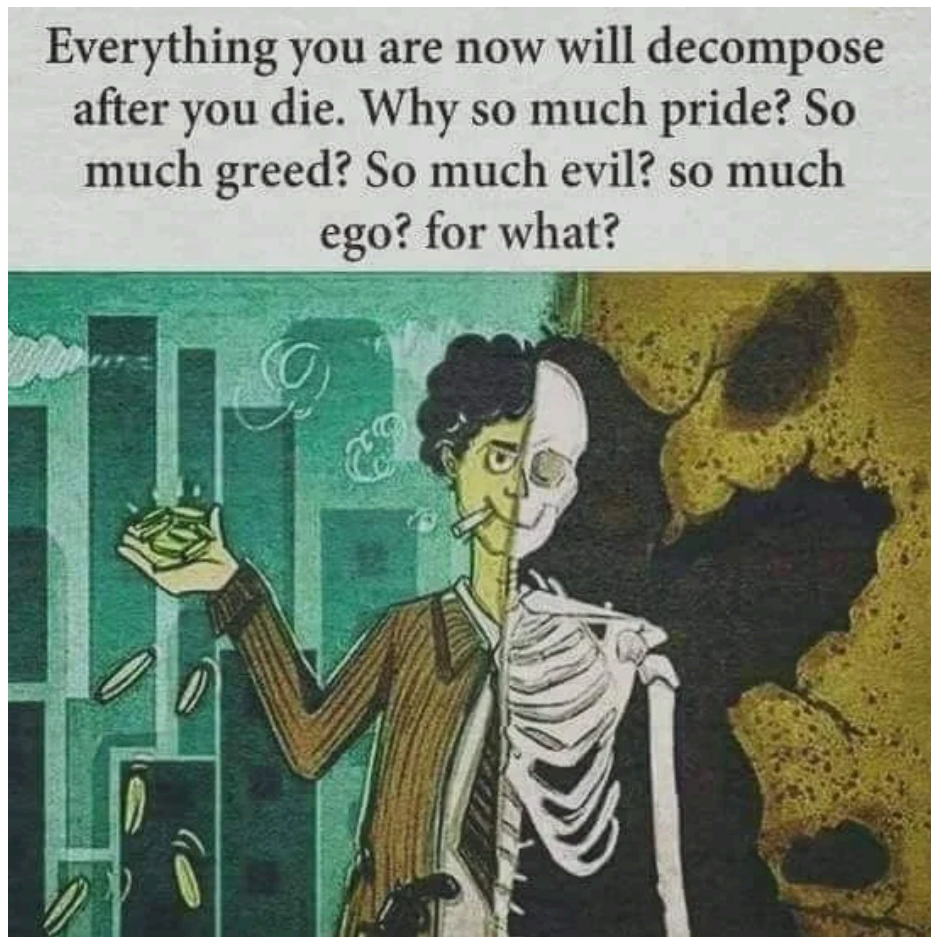


Figure 3. A meme titled ‘Why bother’ posted on r/nihilism (“Why bother”)

The meme opens with a direct existential assertion that serves as the foundation for its nihilistic claim: “everything you are now will decompose after you die.” Building off this existential premise of the inevitability of decay and transitory nature of life, the meme shifts to a critique of specific human behaviors through rhetorical questions: “Why so much pride?” These questions serve as a direct challenge to societal values that prioritize material success and self-aggrandizement. The repetition of “so much” emphasizes the excessive nature of these behaviors, suggesting that human beings are disproportionately preoccupied with selfish pursuits. Each of these traits — pride, greed, evil, and ego — represents a facet of self-centered human behavior, particularly in capitalistic societies, where material success and social superiority are often prioritized over more enduring ethical or spiritual concerns.

Visually, the meme reinforces this critique through a striking juxtaposition of life and death, depicted in the form of a split image. On the left half, the figure is alive, clothed in a sharp suit, and surrounded by symbols of material wealth: a cascade of coins and a backdrop of tall, corporate buildings. This side of the image represents the world of the living, particularly the capitalistic, materialistic realm where pride, greed, and ego reign. The figure’s smug expression along with the casually held cigar points to a life of self-indulgence and superficial success. The coins flying from the figure’s hand further emphasize the transient nature of wealth — something that is easily lost, yet it holds undue significance in the living world. Additionally, the color palette of this side — dominated by cool blues and greens — evokes a sterile, corporate environment, highlighting the relentless pursuit of such values and the cold detachment from more existential concerns.

In contrast, the right side of the image portrays the same figure in a state of decomposition, transitioning from life to death. The visual shift is striking: half of his face has decayed into a skull, and the vibrant cityscape has been replaced by earthy tones within a burial underground, symbolizing decay and death. This side seems to be empty and devoid of any notable objects, with nothing more than a black print with muddy marks. Notably, the skeleton, grinning ominously, stands as a personification of the grim reaper — an unfeeling arbiter — which

along with the visual contrast captures the inevitability of death. They underscore the idea that no matter how much wealth, power, or status one may accumulate, death will ultimately strip away all outward markers of identity and success, such as the treasured coins within the left side of the meme. The seamless transition between the living and decomposed halves of the figure suggests that death is not a distant or abstract event but an event that can occur at any time. Only one line separates a living man, splendid in life's achievements, from the dissolution of everything within death.

The rhetorical question “for what?” encapsulates the meme's irony: the futility of human ambition in the face of inevitable death. This question, posed after the litany of human vices, distills the absurdity of human ambition into a single pointed inquiry, asking audiences to confront the ultimate meaninglessness of pride, greed, ego, and by extension, everything in the face of an indifferent universe and an inevitable death. The situational irony, where the outcome of success is subverted, reflects an absurdist worldview that highlights the contradiction between human striving and the ultimate futility of it all. Attempts to cling to significance are mocked by the very fact that, in the end, they are reduced to the same dust as everyone else. Posing the question forces audiences to confront this uncomfortable truth, blending discomfort with a wry amusement at the absurdity of life, showcasing the nihilistic view of death.

In the face of nihilistic defeat, Camus reframes the Myth of Sisyphus — symbol of nihilistic defeat — by arguing that he is the absurd hero (Camus and O'Brien). Sisyphus knows the full extent of his wretched condition, yet within this knowledge lies his rebellion and victory. Camus describes Sisyphus' struggle: “face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass...” Yet, he is not broken by his eternal task, as Sisyphus becomes “stronger than his rock” (Camus and O'Brien). Camus imagines him happy, for it is not the achievement of an impossible goal that defines his existence, but the struggle itself that “is enough to fill a man's heart” (Camus and O'Brien). This sentiment is exhibited in Figure 4, which

captures the struggle of confronting a meaningless universe, paralleling Camus' concept of embracing the absurd, by highlighting the moment of peace found in embracing life's fleeting beauty.

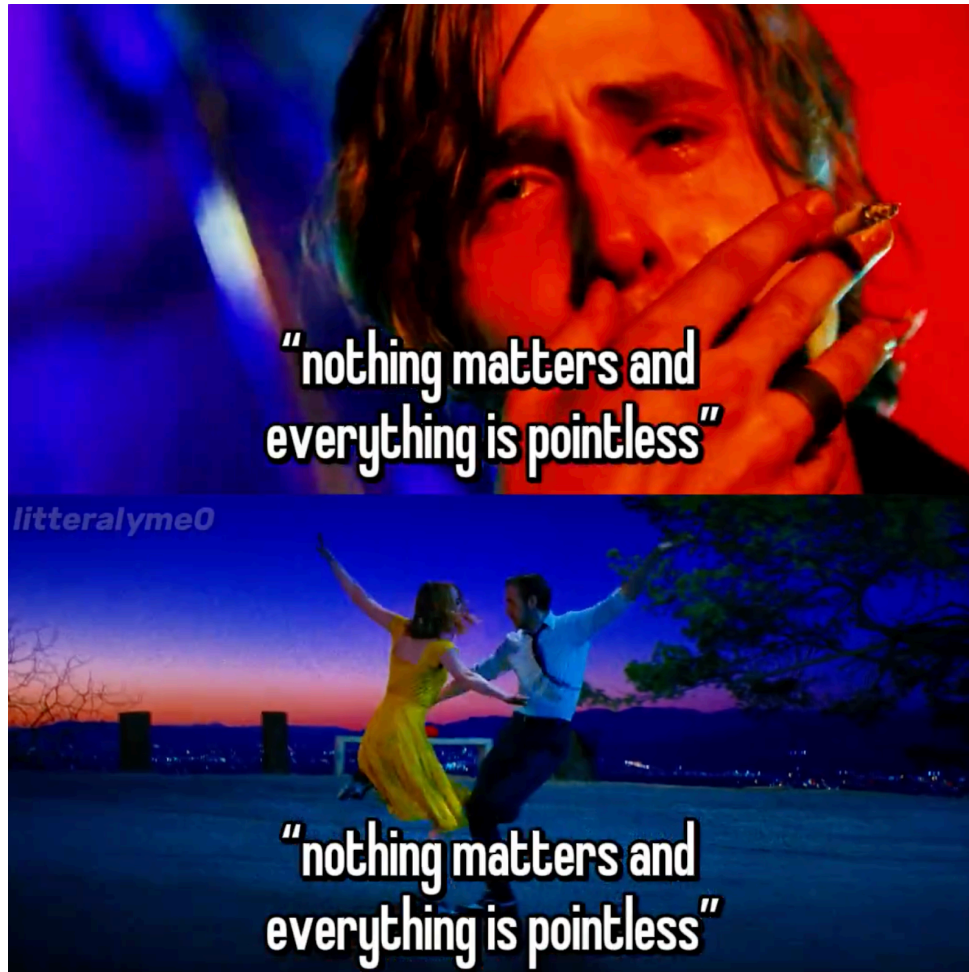


Figure 4. Image taken from a meme video posted on r/PhilosophyMemes, titled “Raw doggin life with a stupid monkey brain” (“Raw doggin” 0:03).

The upper half of Figure 4 presents a close-up of Ryan Gosling, his face partially obscured by his hands, with a cigarette posed between his fingers. His dejected gaze, cast off into the distance, is framed by deep saturated reds and blues, creating an oppressive atmosphere. The tight framing and blurred background isolate Gosling from his surroundings, visually representing the alienation and paralysis that accompany existential despair. The cigarette, delicately held in his hands, serves to underscore a moment of contemplation, a brief

respite from the weight of reality. This visual composition, dominated by shadow and saturated colors, externalizes the internal turmoil that comes with the recognition of life's inherent meaninglessness. The accompanying text, "nothing matters and everything is pointless," further reinforces this nihilistic outlook. Superimposed over Gosling's anguished expression gives the words a despairing tone, suggesting that the realization of meaninglessness has led to a sense of hopelessness.

In stark contrast, the lower half of the meme showcases the movement and transformation to embrace the absurd. Here, Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone are captured mid-dance, their bodies in motion against the backdrop of a golden sunset fading into twilight. The visual composition of this panel — with its wide, open and fluid movements — mirrors Camus' assertion that after acknowledging life's absurdity, one can choose to embrace it fully. Moreover, the expansive framing and warm hues of the sunset suggest openness and freedom, evoking a sense of possibility and a transcendent atmosphere. The characters' dynamic movements — outstretched arms and twirling bodies — contrast sharply with the stillness of the upper panel, displaying Gosling's active choice to engage with life despite its inherent meaninglessness. The repetition of the phrase "nothing matters and everything is pointless" is applied to two radically different emotional contexts. There is situational irony in the assumption that the acknowledgement of absurdity must result in a feeling of defeat; however, the phrase transforms from an expression of despair into an affirmation of life's fleeting beauty. The playful tone created by the juxtaposition of contexts reflects the post-ironic sensibility: it acknowledges the nihilistic existence but embraces it with humor and lightness. It is used here not to mock nihilism, but to show that one can laugh at the absurdity of life while still engaging with it meaningfully.

The presence of Ryan Gosling across the panels vividly illustrates and juxtaposes two potential paths after accepting the nihilistic truth: being consumed by nihilism or embracing absurdity. This is also conveyed through the video format, where various memes with the same composition of two distinct panels with antagonistic images showing Ryan Gosling in two distinct states, are seen in sequence. The quick successions, 3

seconds apart, universalizes the duality in perspectives, showing that the simple shift in perspective can be applied universally to all aspects within one's life. Together, these highlights a crucial point: the words themselves are neutral; it is our interpretation and application that gives them weight. In fact, there is a fluidity within this shift in perspective, as seen from how the blue and red hues seem to bleed from the top image to the bottom image in Figure 4, suggesting a seamless connection between the two states. This parallels how one perceives nihilistic values, the core idea that life lacks inherent meaning doesn't necessarily lead to despair. Instead, it is a reminder that one has the power to shape their response to life's fundamental questions. Addressing the issue of nihilism, the meme proposes that the choice, as Ryan's contrasting expressions suggest, is entirely our own.

Instead of cowering before its finality, memes of Generation Z explore such nihilistic sentiments with a wry smile, pairing existential dread with post-ironic humor. The absurdist memes strip death of its gravity, rendering it laughable, disarming its power, and transforming the ultimate symbol of nihilism into yet another absurd concept.

The Medium of Memes

In addition to specific memes, the entire Generation Z's engagement with absurdist humor, through the overarching medium of memes for rebellion and liberation, serves as a vital coping mechanism in confronting the chaotic and nihilistic reality they face. The humor is not a passive escape but an active rebellion. Neurologist Sigmund Freud suggests that humor possesses a unique capacity to resist the forces of nihilism allowing individuals to "question embedded beliefs and false assumptions" in a way that can "liberate us from the weight of tradition" for the creation of "new values" (Gordon).

A significant part of this defiance lies in how the "content of the meme" is "at odds with the medium itself" (Couture). On the surface, memes are playful and humorous, yet they frequently address serious,

existential concerns, such as the imminence of death. This juxtaposition, where humor and gravity are intertwined, reflects a metamodern mode of discourse: one that oscillates from irony and sincerity (Couture). We are living in a “surface-centric moment” where even the most inauthentic or borrowed content — like stock photographs — can express profound truths (Couture). This dynamic allows Generation Z to use absurdist humor as a way of addressing existential dread without being consumed by it, but also highlights a broader philosophical tension within Generation Z’s culture.

Far from being hollow expressions of apathy and nihilism, these memes offer a space where the apparent nihilism of contemporary life is acknowledged, but not passively accepted. Instead, like Camus’ absurd hero — Sisyphus — who finds strength in the face of futility, Generation Z’s humor is a form of defiance. By laughing at the absurdity of their world, they resist the pull of nihilism and refuse to be immobilized by the enormity of the problems they face. In fact, as expressed in a Medium article, Generation Z young adults are the “best absurdist since Camus” (Mercado). Their humor, often dark and self-deprecating, reflects an acute awareness of the world’s chaos and a refusal to retreat into despair. Jokes about our slow march to death or the futility of everyday actions, while appearing to be signs of resignation, are actually a means of confronting these terrifying possibilities (Mercado).

Conclusion

The duality between the apparent meaninglessness of the world and our rebellion against it is what defines Generation Z’s digital absurdism. These memes, as cultural fragments, embody this digital absurdism through post-irony, but also through the absurd nature of the medium. Just as Sisyphus becomes stronger than his rock through his eternal struggle, Generation Z strengthens its resolve through humor that defies nihilism. They recognize the absurdity of the world, yet they continue to push forward, finding fleeting moments of joy, connection, and solidarity in their shared experiences.

Their commitment to absurdist humor should not be seen as nihilistic defeat, but as a form of defiance and a declaration that, despite the apparent indifference of the universe, they will continue flourishing. In this way, their absurdist memes are a continuation of the philosophical tradition of absurdism. Just as Camus imagines Sisyphus happy, one might imagine Generation Z finding moments of joy and connection in their seemingly nihilistic, yet deeply rebellious, memes.

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