

Meme-ing Mangione: Re-attuning Affect and Activating a Folk Hero

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Abstract

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On December 9th, 2024, Luigi Mangione was arrested for assassinating UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, a shocking act of political violence intended to spark public discourse about the United States' privatized healthcare system. The event quickly became what Douglas Kellner terms a *media spectacle*, transforming Mangione into a viral sensation. Rather than facing universal condemnation, Mangione was celebrated by notable segments of the public in online discourse, where he was portrayed as a folk hero. Drawing on theories of the media spectacle, affect, and Eric Jenkins' modal analysis, this thesis argues that Mangione-themed memes didn't merely reflect public sentiment but helped structure how audiences encountered his image. I introduce the concept of memetic modulation, in which the affective and cultural associations of a principal subject are re-attuned by the addition of familiar cultural referents. Through a close textual analysis of three Luigi Mangione memes, treated as circulating fragments of broader modes of engagement, this thesis demonstrates how memetic discourse can redirect affective associations and activate distinct relations between audiences and circulating media subject.

Meme-ing Mangione:

Re-attuning Affect and Activating a Folk Hero

On December 4th, 2024, Brian Thompson, the CEO of UnitedHealthcare, was shot to death in Manhattan, New York City. Footage of the murder was captured on CCTV and depicted a lone gunman dressed in a black hooded jacket shooting Thompson in the back. Images of the suspect in a black hooded jacket, revealing a set of straight white teeth as he purportedly smiled at a Starbucks barista, were widely distributed in mainstream media in a coordinated effort with the NYPD for identification (Sky News, 2024). Five days later, 26-year-old Luigi Mangione was arrested in Altoona, Pennsylvania, as the prime suspect in the assassination (Sanchez & Miller, 2024).

What followed quickly became what Douglas Kellner (2013) calls a media spectacle, in which news coverage of politically and culturally sensitive topics is sensationalized to encourage media consumption and stoke the embers of political division. This politically motivated murder appeared designed to reignite the national debate surrounding the U.S. privatized healthcare system.¹ But legacy media institutions did not solely focus on the politics of the act; instead, they homed in on superficial aspects of Mangione's character, including his Ivy League background, stylish fashion, and his desirable features in regard to conventional beauty standards (Katersky et al., 2024; Khanum, 2024; Travers, 2024). This emphasis could be understood partly as a function of longstanding journalistic standards to discourage amplifying the political statements of violent perpetrators, to prevent the inspiration of further violence and moral unrest. This selective

¹ Prosecutors submitted excerpts from Mangione's personal journal as part of the evidentiary record. As photographed and reproduced in these records, Mangione writes that his original target would "do nothing to spread awareness/improve people lives." To emphasize the political nature of his final target, his bullet casings were marked with the words "deny," "delay," and "depose" (United States of America v. *Luigi Nicholas Mangione*, 2024, p. 3).

framing participates in the media spectacle's tendency to deflect attention from structural violence and institutional oppression by foregrounding individual figures and events as the primary object of discourse.

Concurrently, the event became a prominent topic of discourse within participatory media ecosystems, transforming Mangione into a viral sensation across social media platforms. Rather than facing universal condemnation, Mangione was turned into a celebrated viral figure by a noticeable portion of the American public, who personified him as a folk hero through polymediated discourse in the public arena (O'Neil, 2025). As the legacy media news cycle came to a close, memes shaping discourse around the political assassin continued to spread across social media. Specifically, Mangione's likeness has circulated and taken shape across digital platforms: his persona and messages have been repurposed into memes; his physical appearance and fashion sensibility have been fetishized across the political spectrum; and his image has been commodified into merchandise, including t-shirts and votive candles (Issawi, 2024). Through remix, repetition, and attachment to familiar cultural forms, his image has been continually modified toward different affective associations that eventually set the bounds of modes of engagement for audiences.

I argue that Mangione-themed memes activate audience engagement and structure public perception through a process I call memetic modulation, or the layering of one or more familiar cultural reference points onto the image of another to re-attune the affective associations with the principal subject of the meme. As Mangione's image is repeatedly modulated and these new images are remixed, reshared, and liked on social media platforms, specific themes and genres begin to recur, activating distinct modes of engagement between the memetic artifact and the audience. Using the transformation of Mangione's public persona from an infamous enigma into

a household name, celebrated by some as a folk hero, as a case study, I aim to demonstrate how memes can re-attune affective associations of circulating subjects in our media ecosystems by modulating the subject's image with familiar cultural references. This thesis analyses three specific memes that represent emerging modes of engagement between memetic artifacts and the audience.

Memes as a Medium

As a medium, memes possess a unique capacity to spread quickly and widely on social media platforms. Taking their name from a term coined by Richard Dawkins (1976), memes refer to highly transmissible units of cultural information that are experienced through our senses, mentally processed, and then “repackaged” so that they can be communicated or spread to others (Dawkins, 1982). These user-generated artifacts take popular cultural images and “remix” them, or impose new meaning on them by adding captions, other images, or manipulating the original content (Shifman, 2013). Davi Johnson (2007) argues that memes not only spread quickly in terms of time but also spread rapidly geographically because of our global reliance on participatory mass-media networks. In other words, a meme shared by one person can become visible to audiences across the globe almost instantaneously. Compared to other forms of media, including short-form videos on platforms like TikTok, which take time to create, edit, and watch, memes can be composed, consumed, and understood very quickly, creating a relatively low barrier to participation in the creation, resharing and liking of content surrounding a viral meme subject.

The conventions of memes that enable their quick spreadability also affect the content they convey. Because memes feature images predicated on prior understanding, they tend to rely on highly recognizable cultural materials and can simplify complex societal issues by reducing

them to slogans, catchphrases or images that facilitate rapid consumption. Memes are often encountered while scrolling through a personal feed on social media platforms and are often intended to grab people's attention rather than generating substantial commentary. Memes create or distort a specific cultural image or icon and typically employ humor or irony understood by a particular audience. This creates an "a-ha" moment for the consumer, who can relish the delight of understanding the joke or social commentary, which also means that political and socially sensitive topics are easily turned into humorous quips. Additionally, memes often provoke quick reactions rather than complex arguments, making them more likely to elicit strong emotional responses. In doing so, they can reorient the affective associations attached to subjects circulating within our media systems. When engaging with politically, socially, or culturally complex issues, the affordances and constraints of memes significantly shape what can or cannot be conveyed.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle, affect theory, and theories of violent rhetoric, this thesis contends that hypermediated discourse can simultaneously facilitate political engagement while reinforcing preexisting hegemonic narratives that maintain power relations. Writing before the advent of social media platforms, Debord (2014) conceives the spectacle as a social order in which our lived relations are constituted by images, commodities, and representations. The spectacle functions as an abstraction of lived experience, reifying power dynamics by obscuring their social construction and presenting them as inevitable and natural. This includes, but is not limited to, media produced by bourgeois corporations and legacy media companies that set the narrative for how we interpret and respond to events. In our contemporary epoch, the emergence of participatory media platforms presents a challenge to Debord's conception that "the spectacle is the ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself, its never-

ending monologue of self-praise” (p. 7). Social media appears to disrupt this monologue by allowing non-professional media users greater visibility in the public arena. But recent scholarship has theorized that this disruption is absorbed into the spectacle. Mitman and Denham (2025) argue that as subcultural memes are remixed and spread by a broader public who are unfamiliar with the intended subversion of a meme and appreciate only the humorous elements, they are co-opted and transformed into spectacle, thereby devaluing the cultural labor and original meaning. However, I argue that the spectacle also provides the pre-existing conditions, such as the visual lexicon, through which participatory media users enter the public arena, laying the foundation for a commonality between specific publics.

In *Affective Publics*, Zizi Papacharissi (2014) argues that participatory media platforms enhance political engagement and enable publics to offer “pluralized narratives” that compete with the singular representation of events by legacy media. The multiplicity of accounts is held together by affect, understood as a collective intensification of feeling that orients people’s attention and shapes their political participation. However, these orientations do not emerge from a vacuum; in “Affective Economies,” Sarah Ahmed (2004) contends that emotions circulate in social contexts as much as psychological ones. Ahmed argues that these feelings appear as isolated objects but are in fact structured by history and its production. In other words, the feelings produced on participatory media platforms are shaped by the past narratives that naturalized our current power dynamics. These prior affective associations serve as resources that redirect, re-attune, or intensify current affective associations with a particular subject when additional images and cultural references are embedded in a meme.

This theoretical framework is particularly useful in developing an understanding of memetic discourses and violence. In *Ecologies of Harm: Rhetoric of Violence in the United States*, Megan Eatman (2020) argues that “violence functions as multimodal constitutive

rhetoric” (p. 150) which shapes subjects’ understanding of themselves, others, and the conditions of life. Eatman argues that the rhetorical force of violence does not emerge from a single isolated incident but from three interlocking yet distinct forms of violence that reinforce one another over time. These distinct forms, conceptualized by Johan Galtung (1990), are direct violence (acts of physical harm, such as murder, injury, or assault), structural violence (policies, laws, institutions that reinforce inequalities, etc.), and cultural violence (symbols, stereotypes, media narratives, and discursive practices that make direct and structural violence seem justified, normalized, or natural).

The concept of cultural violence can shed light on how memes can aestheticize or normalize violence without directly advocating for a specific violent action or event. Tina Askanius and Nadine Keller (2021) assert that far-right memes do not merely represent violence but instead normalize and circulate it through a process they call “the ‘memefication’ of white supremacism” (p. 2523). They assert that because memes rely on the remixing of cultural referents to produce humor and irony, they create another layer of abstraction between the signified and the signifier, allowing violent symbolism to be more easily digested and disseminated. Similarly, in their analysis of modern manifestos, Casey Kelly and William Sipe (2025) argue that the repetition of memetic practices can help “lower the threshold of violence” (p. 16). While this previous scholarship focuses on far-right and white supremacist digital cultures in which memes and online manifestos work to incite or inspire violence, this thesis will show how the form and function of memes from across the political spectrum can rhetorically shape or be shaped by existing cultural narratives. Instead of hiding behind cultural references to smuggle messages that are meant to inspire white supremacist violence and normalize it through repetition, memetic modulation alters the public’s relationship to a violent event in the media

through embedding pre-existing cultural referents that reorient the relationship to violence between the audience and the principal subject in a myriad of ways.

Bringing these frameworks of the spectacle, affect, and violent rhetorics together, this thesis argues that as non-professional media users' capacity to produce public discourse expands through participation on corporate platforms, the dominant narratives maintained by professional media production have been re-embedded in our contemporary participatory media systems. These hegemonic elements become cultural reference points in user-generated content that disseminates what are likely meant to be politically subversive and subcultural messages. These prevailing cultural reference points can work to reconfigure politically charged messages by relying on dominant narratives and redirecting our affective associations with systemic and direct forms of violence. In turn, aestheticized violence situated alongside familiar cultural reference points can activate a new mode of engagement between the audience and the violent event by modulating the intensity of emotional associations attached to the previous media representations of the violent event.

Modal Analysis

The scope of this project is not to make generalizable, comprehensive, or statistical claims about Luigi Mangione-related memes as a representative corpus. Instead, I have selected three Luigi Mangione-themed memes (see Appendix) for close analysis. These memes are treated as fragments, as described by Michael McGee (1990), in that they constitute pieces of public discourse and offer insight into the contexts and relationships through which meaning and ideology are formulated and circulated. Each selected meme is meant to be a representative fragment of a broader mode that has emerged among Mangione-themed memes.

Since memes encourage imitation and often create swarms of similarly remixed references, Eric Jenkins' (2014) method of modal analysis allows us to move beyond what an

individual meme represents visually and towards how thematically recurring memes can structure audiences' engagement. Jenkins conceives modes not as textual or visual features but as shared manners of engagement between the image and the audience. Since the rhetorical force of memes is often centered on the speed and space through which they circulate, when a body of similar memes swarms across participatory media platforms, they can be conceived as constituting a mode. These modes structure the terms of engagement through which an image is encountered, circulated, and felt. While Jenkins' modal analysis enables us to critically read and communicate the terms of engagement activated by swarming bodies of viral memes, it is also necessary to scale down our analytical methods to understand what is occurring at the individual level of a particular meme within a mode.

Memetic Modulation

While modal analysis allows us to better understand the rhetorical force of memes at the macro level, this paper introduces the concept of memetic modulation to account for how affect is reconfigured at the micro level. The process of memetic modulation occurs when the affective associations of one cultural referent are attached to another, altering how that referent is felt or interpreted.

Just as the term "remix" in a digital culture drew on the musical practice of sampling and recombining previously recorded material (Lessig, 2008), memetic modulation likewise draws its inspiration from the terminology of music and sound. In telecommunications, modulation involves altering the properties of a carrier wave to transmit additional information, such as audio that can be heard through a radio. In music, modulation refers to a change in key that can alter the emotional character of a piece. Additionally, synthesizer modulation involves adjusting qualities such as pitch and volume, allowing sonic frequencies to be amplified or diminished.

Memetic modulation functions similarly to the uses of modulation in regard to information and music. The process of memetic modulation occurs when a primary subject is modified, layered, or embedded with another cultural signifier(s), thereby transforming or reconfiguring it with additional information. Just as with a piece of music, mapping an additional cultural referent onto another alters the emotional associations evoked by the principal subject; and, as with synthesizers, this process can amplify or diminish the intensity of affective responses. If similar modulations of thematically related cultural references begin to recur over time, this swarm of memes can be considered a mode.

Methodologically, analyzing memetic modulation allows scholars of rhetoric to conduct close readings of memetic artifacts beyond the analysis of the juxtaposition of remixes, and to account for shifts in affective and cultural associations when two referents are brought into relation with one another. Analyzing this process adopts a critical rhetorical approach informed by cultural theory to examine individual memes as rhetorical artifacts. A close reading of a memetic modulation attends to the visual form, genre, affect, and cultural contexts of each referent, as well as the effected re-attunements created by their synthesis. My rhetorical reading of modulated memes demonstrates how memes can constitute a mode through circulation and repetition in participatory media's affective economy.

This thesis proceeds with three analyses of distinct memes, each representing a broader mode. Each analysis begins by naming and identifying a particular mode that encourages distinct forms of engagement with Mangione's likeness, and then proceeds to analyze an individual meme, treated as a representative of that mode, for the ways in which memetic modulation re-attunes affective and cultural attachments to the references embedded in the meme. The first section identifies ludic mode (see Figure 1), in which Mangione's vigilante persona is re-attuned

towards a more playful association when a familiar cartoon character is mapped onto his image. The second section identifies sanctification mode (see Figure 3), in which Mangione's persona is redirected towards saintliness through the visual comparison to Christ. The final section identifies the romantic-affection mode (see Figure 5), which encourages flirtatious engagement with Mangione through intimacy, attraction, taboo, and Valentine ritual.

Analysis

Ludic Mode

Jenkins (2014) writes, "modes are a relation of capacities for affect and affection, and in encounters, those capacities become activated, and feelings become energized." The first emerging mode, identified for this paper as the ludic mode, invites the audience to playfully engage with Mangione's likeness by reconfiguring his image to resemble a familiar cartoon or video game character. While many memes that constitute the ludic mode feature Luigi Mangione as Luigi, the brother and playful sidekick of the Nintendo character Mario, there have been a number of other comical characters used to modulate Mangione's violent associations (see Figure 1). The meme selected for analysis in this section (see Figure 2) features the Looney Tunes character Bugs Bunny dressed as Luigi Mangione, with one hand holding a sign that reads "CEO Season," a play on Bugs Bunny's rival's catchphrase, "Wabbit Hunting Season," and the other hand hiding a pistol equipped with a silencer in the pocket of his hoodie.

Glenn Anderau and Daniel Barbarrusa (2024) assert that a common trope in political memes is the caricaturization of politicians or political viewpoints that highlights and amplifies key aspects for the purpose of a simplified critique. The authors argue that much like political cartoons, caricaturization in memes removes the nuance from complex political discourse and replaces it with condensed, witty social commentary. However, I argue that caricaturizations

operate beyond embedding a sharp reduction of commentary onto a signifier; additionally, they can increase or decrease the audience's emotional responses to the signified. By layering an additional cultural referent onto an existing signifier, memes can re-attune affective associations through memetic modulation. The newly embedded sign modulates the original referent by fusing supplementary affective or cultural associations onto it, softening, intensifying, or redirecting audience attachment to the original figure. While caricatures are typically used to intensify feelings towards a political actor by exaggerating undesirable features of their character, policies, or physical appearance, caricatures can also diminish those feelings. The following analysis demonstrates how the latter maneuver can endear an audience to a political actor by introducing a familiar reference through caricaturization.

Portraying Mangione as Bugs Bunny reconfigures audiences' perceptions of the violent vigilante, recasting him as a charismatic trickster by fusing Mangione's cultural associations with those of the popular cartoon character. The selection of Bugs Bunny holds particular significance because the cartoon rabbit is a widely recognizable figure in the American lexicon, long identified with the trickster archetype. The iconic star of the Warner Brothers series Looney Tunes is known for pulling pranks and evading death at the hands of his archnemesis, the hunter Elmer Fudd. The elusive "wabbit" employs wit, cunning, and charm to destabilize the audience's expectations and cause humorous ruptures to the narrative structure. Eric Savoy (1995) argues that a key function of Bugs Bunny's trickster persona is to "complicate the relationship between the signifier and the signified" (p. 190) through the manipulation of expected semiotic patterns. The humor of Bugs Bunny relies on the "gaps" between the audience's recognition of this manipulation and the failure of his antagonists to realize they are falling prey to his mischievous tricks. Because familiar audiences already view Bugs Bunny as a

figure who destabilizes meaning, they are primed to accept the modulation of the affect attached to Mangione's image.

By remixing Bugs Bunny's image to mimic Luigi Mangione's likeness, the meme reattunes audience associations with the assassin, casting him as mischievous, playful, and resistant to institutional authority. If Mangione's image was transposed onto a familiar pop-cultural vigilante, such as the Marvel character the Punisher, the modulation would produce the opposite effect. Known for uncompromising retribution and lethal vigilante tactics, the Punisher would intensify the perceived severity of Mangione's violent act, creating a meme that could invite moral discomfort and unease rather than tongue-in-cheek humor. Altering Mangione's image to resemble Bugs Bunny's invites the assassin-turned-folk-hero to be perceived as a carnivalesque trickster.

According to literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), carnivals serve a societal function beyond being annual celebrations of foolery and debauchery; they function as a sanctioned site where subjects can temporarily critique dominant figures and institutions without fear of legal retribution. Carnavalesque characters such as the trickster rabbit or court jester enact this inversion through humor and absurdity, disrupting established hierarchies and inviting audiences to relish the temporary suspension of reality. Portraying Mangione as Bugs Bunny frames his actions through carnivalesque logics in which transgression is permissible, and the enjoyment derived from encountering the meme is momentarily acceptable. The artifact thus foregrounds cartoonish institutional critique and backgrounds the assassination, softening the perceived severity of his violence. This memetic modulation orients our affective perception of Mangione away from a violent vigilante and toward a playful and mischievous sensibility that makes the violence associated with his image less abrasive or jarring.

Memetic modulation is not unidirectional; the principal subject of the meme also modulates the associations of the secondary subject. In other words, characterizing Mangione as Bugs Bunny also re-attunes the affective associations with the latter character. The affective associations with the murderer are transposed onto the playful rabbit, intensifying his trickster persona and lending it a more sinister association with the beloved protagonist. Without references to Mangione, it would be more affectively shocking to see Bugs Bunny's bright orange carrot replaced with a smoking gun. This fusion of affective associations allows the audience to more readily accept Bugs Bunny as the CEO Hunter rather than as the innocent rabbit alluding to being hunted by his nemesis, Elmer Fudd, during rabbit-hunting season.

The circulation of modulated images across digital platforms can recalibrate the intensities of affect that have stuck to signifiers, thereby shifting the perception and interpretation of events in the public arena. As a recurring mode in participatory media, the ludic mode invites audiences to soften their perception of Mangione and fosters a playful relationship and a warmer affective association between the media figure and the viewer. The violent association with Mangione is not overwritten, but the elusiveness of his public persona becomes re-attuned as a mischievous and salient element of his cultural narrative.

Sanctification Mode

While ludic mode activates a playful interaction between Mangione and the audience, another recurring swarm of related memes positions Mangione as saintly or even directly compares him to Jesus Christ. This sanctification mode (see Figure 3) has become so popular that it has crossed over from the virtual realm to the physical in the form of votive candles featuring images of Saint Mangione (Kanugo, 2024). Sanctification mode encourages audiences

to revere Mangione as a virtuous savior who sacrifices himself for the hopes of a universal healthcare system.

The second meme (see Figure 4) demonstrates how memes can transfer historical associations to modulate present affective associations. The meme juxtaposes an image of Luigi Mangione alongside *The Disrobing of Jesus Christ* by El Greco. The image of Mangione is an official press photo released by the New York City police. The photo features Mangione handcuffed in a bright orange jumpsuit being perp-walked by New York City Police in full SWAT gear. Eric Adams, the Mayor at the time of the arrest, is noticeably one row behind, looking sternly at the back of Mangione's head. The adjacent image is a Renaissance-era painting of Jesus Christ in a bright red robe, escorted through Jerusalem by Roman soldiers amid a crowd of onlookers. It may seem like an odd comparison to position someone charged with shooting another person in the back next to a religious figure who famously preached that the proper response to violence is to turn the other cheek. However, the dissemination of hegemonic imagery and the circulation of affect in our media systems make the comparison of the two seemingly incongruous figures legible, compatible, and even culturally compelling.

Debord (2014) writes that "The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (p. 2), equating the spectacle to a worldview that has been actualized. Ideological and hegemonic narratives are reified through the mass dissemination of images, which renders social hierarchies natural and self-evident. One of these ideologies, which has historically justified colonial expansion and exploitation, is the ideology of white supremacy, which positions the social construct of whiteness as a biological and moral superiority. Within the spectacle, this social relation is reproduced and reinforced through the saturation of images that present these ideological positions as candid and natural. The

representation and circulation of our religious figures offer a clear example of this. If an American person were to close their eyes and imagine Jesus, there is a significant chance they would be imagining a “white” Jesus as portrayed in Renaissance paintings modeled after the racial hierarchy of colonial Europe, instead of an image of a Jewish man in Roman Palestine in the year 30 CE.

When the overwhelming majority of Western media circulate portrayals of religious figures as predominantly white, our associations of sanctity become structured through race. Widely circulated Renaissance depictions of Christ create an ambient backdrop that influences the dominant culture’s moral infrastructure. An example is the El Greco painting appearing on the left side of the meme. In the image, the face of Christ is several shades lighter than the soldiers surrounding him; in fact, his face stands out at the top center of the painting with a luminous whiteness. Because of the saturation of this representation of White Jesus in our media systems, it becomes all too easy to associate moral superiority with whiteness. This visual regime can work affectively to orient our perception of morality whether or not we adhere to a specific ideology or religious doctrine.

If whiteness is a structural thread of our moral infrastructure, this thread is strengthened by the affective economy. Ahmed (2004) argues that affect does not “reside in an object or sign” (p. 120) but intensifies and gains momentum through circulation, creating a velocity of feelings and orientations that slide and stick to signs through repetition and time. Just as narratives become historicized through spatial and temporal repetitions, so does affect. Hegemonic versions of history are legitimized by the sheer volume of their publication and by their repeated publication over time. Ahmed argues that affect also accumulates through volume and historical

circulation, moving sideways through the sticking together of signs, creating emotional association, and backward through the reopening of the emotional associations of the past.

With this in mind, the attachment of Luigi Mangione's image to a Renaissance-era image of Jesus subtly foregrounds Mangione's whiteness. Although Mangione's face does not glow in the photograph, as the face of Christ in the El Greco painting does, its whiteness stands out against the dark face of Mayor Adams behind him and the officers whose faces are somewhat darkened by the shadows of their hats or helmets. In addition to sanctifying Mangione's actions as righteous, the comparison to Christ sanitizes them through whiteness. This alignment of whiteness operates both structurally and affectively. Ahmed (2004) claims that affect slides through associations metonymically and can stick seemingly disparate things together. The emotional associations attached to whiteness allow Mangione's image to be positioned in a comparative relationship with Jesus Christ, as our affective associations slide from one sign to another. This association allows for the image of the political assassin to be more readily compared with Christ himself, the pacifist who sacrificed himself for the sins of others. This visual analogy of martyrdom amplifies associations of admiration for courageous self-sacrifice.

In certain Christian and Catholic theologies, there are three distinct degrees of martyrdom, each designated by a specific color (McCloskey, 2020). White martyrs devote their lives to Christ alone, green martyrs deny their desires, and red martyrs shed their own blood or sacrifice their lives for their Christian beliefs. The red gown draped over Jesus in *The Disrobing of Jesus Christ* can be read as a visual reference to the red degree of martyrdom, alluding to his sacrifice on the cross. The juxtaposition of Mangione in a similarly vibrant orange jumpsuit and maroon undershirt, with a comparable fair Western European complexion, creates a visual resonance in the color palette, frame, and composition. The staging of the police escorting

Mangione visually evokes the iconography of Christ's procession to the cross. This iconographic transfer of socio-historical narratives of Christ to Mangione slides affect from the past into the present, demonstrating how historical narratives of sanctified suffering can be adopted and conflated with systemic or direct violence. The violence done by Mangione is backgrounded as the state violence represented by the rifle-carrying police officers surrounding him is foregrounded. Through the comparison, he is modulated into a red martyr, a moral figure who sacrificed his own life for the benefit of the oppressed masses.

To constitute a mode, affect cannot circulate through historical context alone; it requires a spatial dimension to acquire rhetorical force. Memes are not merely symbolic units of cultural meaning that create isolated iconographic transformations but also artifacts that create cultural and affective force through spatial circulation. Davi Johnson (2007) argues that memes themselves are spread from one person to another at a unique geographical speed, aided by the participatory networks of mass media. The viral swarm of memes comparing Mangione to a saintly figure spread because, on the surface, it is initially shocking, ambiguous, and aesthetically powerful, making for a highly consumable micro-media artifact. However, while these aspects of the meme aid in its rapid dissemination, the structural associations with whiteness work to orient audiences to associate Mangione himself with moral superiority and even saintliness.

Thus, sanctification mode operates on two affective levels. First, the comparison of Mangione with sainthood can initially appear shocking, particularly given the cultural taboo against equating a murderer with a sacred religious figure. Yet, this shock is mediated by the structural narratives embedded in the spectacle that continuously code our experiences. Second, the initial shock is converted into a feeling of reverence and moral approval. The affective

associations attached to martyrdom diminish the rupture of direct vigilante violence and amplify the moral implications behind the act. Mangione's self-sacrifice for others is intensified by the comparison with Christ, while the violence he committed against another human being is obscured from our attention. By fusing Mangione to a preexisting moral infrastructure of sacrifice and sanctity, the mode reorients the violent rupture as righteous through the affective associations of the past.

Romantic-affection Mode

While ludic mode demonstrates how memes can encourage a playful relationship between the audience and subject of a meme and sanctification mode illustrates how affective associations can be imprinted onto present media subjects, the final mode re-attunes Mangione through desirability, flirtation, and romantic identification. As the 2025 Valentine's holiday approached, Luigi Mangione-themed memes began to circulate in the digital public sphere. For the purpose of this modal analysis, the recurring format, which follows the conventions of the traditional Valentine's Day card, features a flirtatious caption and visually emphasizes Mangione's desirability, activating what I am calling romantic-affection mode (see Figure 5). Romantic-affection mode does not erase the violence associated with Mangione but rather invites audiences to engage Mangione's dangerous image through flirtation, attraction, and playful intimacy. Through the genre conventions of Valentine's Day cards, Mangione's infamous persona becomes attached to familiar rituals of romance, humor, and exchange.

The final meme (see Figure 6) is formatted as a Valentine's Day card, with a pink backdrop adorned with hearts. It features a photograph of Mangione in an orange prison jumpsuit alongside the caption "Are you a healthcare CEO? Because you make me want to shoot my shot." The phrase is structured as a flirtatious pickup line, employing a double entendre that

simultaneously alludes to both a romantic pursuit and the political violence committed by Mangione. In common use, the phrase “shoot your shot” is an idiom meaning to risk rejection by expressing romantic admiration for someone. The phrase draws its imagery from aiming, risk, and taking a shot, terms associated with both basketball and firing a gun at a moving target. The latter comparison evokes a relationship between romance and violence in U.S. culture. In its address to the viewer, the opening line “Are you a healthcare CEO?” directly references the murder of Brian Thompson, making the addressee the victim or target of flirtation. Layering Mangione and the morbid pick-up line onto the Valentine’s Day card format modulates our association with the holiday itself; the sweet, nostalgic card takes on darker, more taboo, and more violent connotations. Conversely, Mangione’s image is foregrounded, redirecting the audience’s attention towards his fair skin, slim build, and dark hair and eyebrows. This relationship exemplifies memetic modulations’ bilateral influence on the cultural references embedded in a meme: the Valentine’s Day format re-attunes Mangione’s violent associations through approachable romantic engagement and flirtation, while Mangione’s associations with murder simultaneously make the audience’s association with Valentine’s Day more transgressive and sardonic.

This meme is not an outlier in its focus on Mangione’s physical appearance, emphasizing his alignment with hegemonic beauty standards. Prior to Mangione’s arrest, the NYPD released CCTV photos of the perpetrator on various social media platforms to elicit tips from members of the public who may have recognized the elusive figure wearing a dark hooded jacket and a black face mask. When a photo of the assassin was released, showing him with his face mask pulled down, grinning from ear to ear, revealing his fair complexion and noticeably white teeth, one user on X retweeted the image with the caption “Oh no lol this app is about to fall apart” (Klee,

2024). As Mangione was identified as the primary suspect, more photos, including a few of the Ivy League student shirtless while on vacation, were circulated in the media. The social media and memetic discourse emphasizing Mangione's good looks and physical attraction only intensified. In fact, legacy media outlets were so quick to report on this peculiar phenomenon that their sensational reporting was parodied on the television sketch show *Saturday Night Live* (2024).

Tanya Horeck (2025) argues that the celebrification and sexualization of Mangione is facilitated by the pre-existing cultural cachet of the mug shot in digital culture, which presents criminal subjects as both dangerous and helpless objects of desire. Horeck also notes that his desirability is amplified by his Italian heritage, providing visual proximity to whiteness. In the Valentine's meme, these pre-existing associations are intensified by a romantic-affection mode of engagement facilitated by its participation in the genre of the Valentine's Day card, a rhetorical choice that transforms Mangione from an object of public fascination to an object of flirtatious attachment. Through mapping Mangione onto the topography of a Valentine's Day card, the meme amplifies his conventionally attractive features, reframing his vigilante associations as a bad-boy image. The meme's pink background accents Mangione's light-skinned features and emphasizes his square jaw and prominent dark eyebrows, while his bright orange jumpsuit simultaneously highlights his dangerous allure and victimhood, reminiscent of the cultural allure of mugshot photos that reinforce hegemonic narratives around masculinity, whiteness, and danger.

Whereas affect refers to the capacity to feel or be influenced by an object, affection names the embodied orientation produced when those affective capacities are activated. In this case, the circulation of Mangione-themed Valentine memes invites a particular mode of

engagement. This romantic-affection mode amplifies the nostalgic affect associated with familiar U.S. Valentine's Day rituals, particularly the elementary school practice of exchanging Valentine's Day cards with classmates.

Just as Valentine's Day cards are distributed and circulated amongst classmates on the holiday, these memes encourage their circulation on social media platforms. The Valentine's Day card format makes for a particularly compelling meme because Valentine's Day cards are micro-media artifacts that feature a familiar cultural referent with a witty or playful caption that favors a quick, processed smirk rather than deep reflection. These highly consumable, often mass-produced cards are intended to create a temporal and affectionate bond among the artifact, its distributor, and its recipient. Romantic-affection mode transforms Mangione into a highly consumable image that foregrounds the pleasure derived from the flirtatious captions and the ability to reshare it with friends.

The romantic-affection mode does not require the meme's consumer to endorse political violence; instead, it encourages a playful, flirtatious engagement with Mangione's image that delights in the subject matter's taboo nature. The direct violence of Thompson's murder and Mangione's vigilante persona become re-oriented towards risqué flirtation and a taboo affection. This modulated association encourages a playful and intimate engagement with Mangione. Romantic-affection mode demonstrates how memetic discourse can reorient our perceptions of media subjects and cultural rituals through the circulation of and engagement with memetic modalities. This particular mode can make Mangione's image more alluring when it is attached to and activates familiar rituals, enticing language, and a focus on hegemonic beauty standards.

Conclusion

This thesis provided insight into how the memetic form and function helped activate a noticeable portion of the public to champion Luigi Mangione as a digital-era folk hero. The transformation of Luigi Mangione into a celebrated viral figure has turned the heads of many media commentators, who condemn his glorification and lament the slippery slope toward violent anarchy (Mac Donald, 2024; Boston Herald Editorial Board, 2024). However, psychologist Evan Clarkson (2026) contends that the vast majority of Gen Z does not support violence or murder as a viable political option, but rather their engagement with Mangione-themed memes reflects a desire for more meaningful conversations in the public arena that address their concerns.

While Jenkins (2014) examines the macro-level circulation of content on social media platforms, the concept of memetic modulation allows scholars of rhetoric a new mechanism for understanding how affect circulates on the individual level of a particular meme. Producing close readings of the re-attunements that individual memes create can provide critical insight into ideological and political shifts that are shaped by, and that shape, our ever-modulating public arena.

Mangione's reception cannot be adequately understood by simply asking whether audiences endorsed or condemned his violence. Memetic modulation helps illustrate how the affective terms through which audiences encountered Mangione changed and shifted. Each meme is a representative fragment of a particular mode that offered a different variation on the terms of engagement. Ludic mode encourages a playful engagement with Mangione as he is modulated with familiar cartoon caricatures; sanctification mode amplifies the reverence

associated with Mangione by comparing him to Christ; and romantic-affection mode invites desire and flirtation by mapping Mangione onto the conventions of Valentine's Day cards.

While this is in no way a comprehensive study of Mangione-themed memes, the selected memes, taken together, help demonstrate how the memetic format can be a rhetorically powerful medium that shapes public opinion through affective engagement. Each meme gives audiences a way to feel politically involved: they can laugh, recognize the reference, share the joke, admire the figure, or even participate in critiquing the healthcare system. Simultaneously, rhetors who use the memetic form need to be aware that the same thing that makes memes so politically powerful can also render them politically limiting and risk diminishing important aspects of public discourse through the same mechanism.

While memetic discourse can inspire and sustain meaningful political engagement, its genre conventions and modes of circulation can also function to stifle that engagement, limiting the possibilities for substantive liberatory change by relying on hegemonic cultural references. The analysis in this thesis demonstrates how memetic discourse can alter the affective associations attached to a media subject when modulated with additional cultural references. When considered as representatives of broader modes, these three memes highlight how shared meaning can be formulated and reshaped through participatory media systems, and how memes can reframe affect through circulation, modulation, redirection, and modal engagement.

This analysis presents a critical challenge for rhetors operating within digital frameworks who seek to produce subversive political critique. Doing so requires careful attention to how affect, circulation, and aesthetic forms can inadvertently reinforce hegemonic narratives of the system they seek to resist. Locating this tension demonstrates why memetic modulation matters

as a rhetorical concept; it provides a way to trace how cultural references re-attune affect at the individual level, while recurring modulations emerge into broader modes of engagement.

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Appendix

Corpus of Memes for Analysis

Figure 1

Ludic Mode

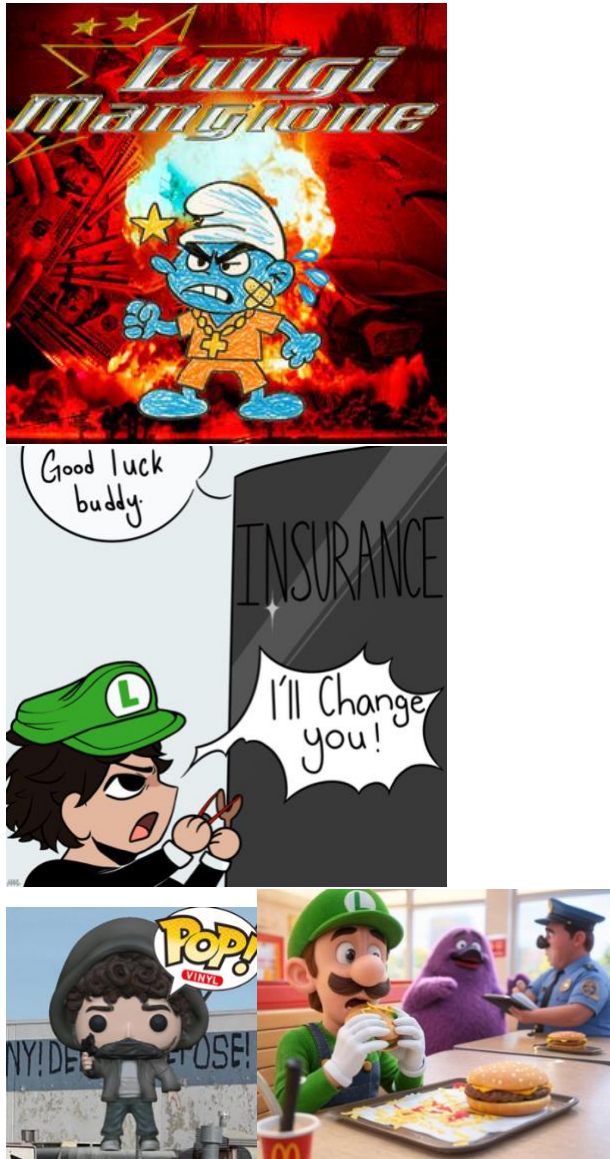


Figure 2

Bugs Bunny Meme



Figure 3

Sanctification Mode

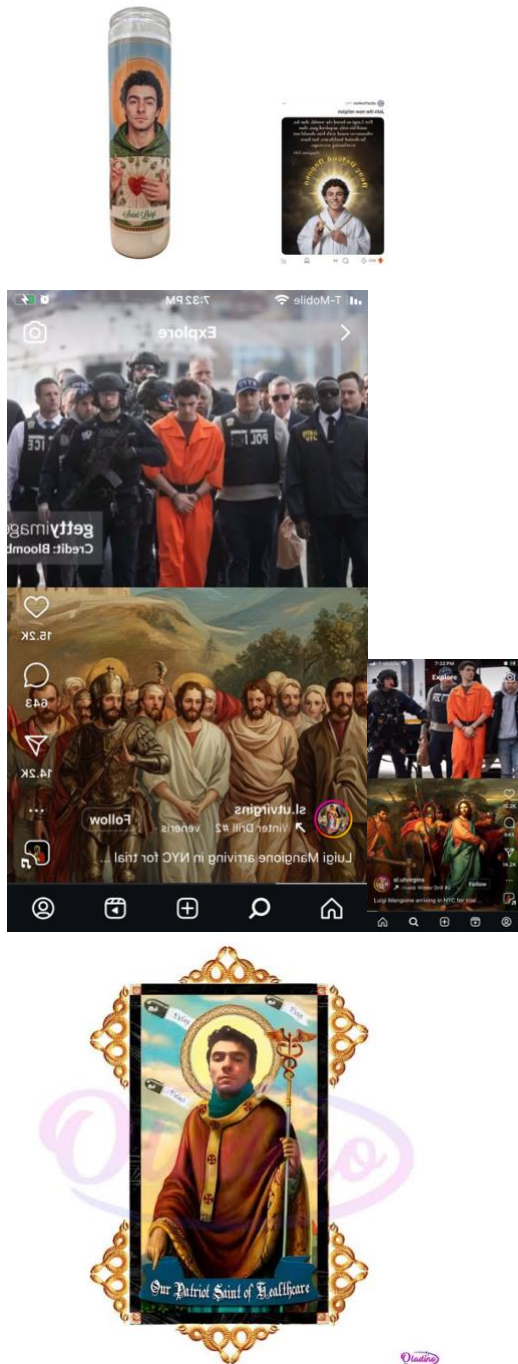


Figure 4

Disrobing of Luigi Meme



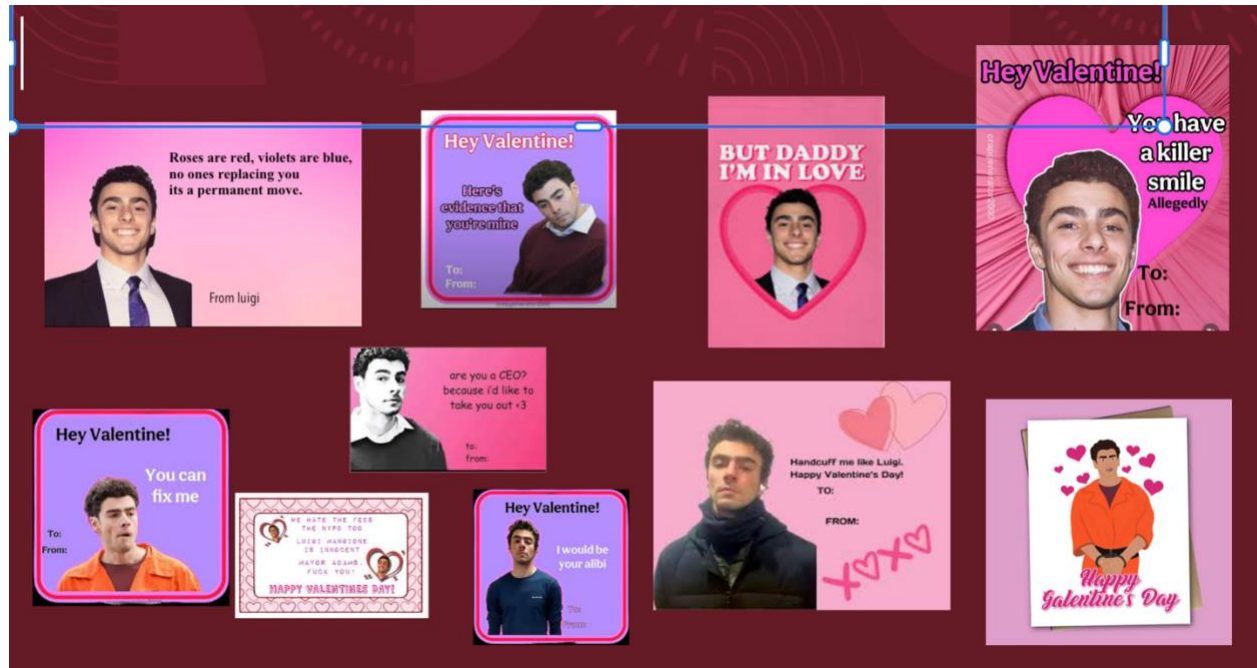
Figure 5*Romantic-Affection Mode*

Figure 6

Valentine Meme



