

Text versus Audience: Where Does Cringe Emerge?

Interview with Associate Professor Irena Reifova

What exactly is cringe? The literature offers various terms: ‘vicarious embarrassment’, ‘Fremdscham’, ‘empathic embarrassment’, and ‘cringe’. Some scholars conceptualize it as a form of empathic emotion sharing, others argue that cringe is actually closer to disgust than shame, and Brianna Escoe, for instance, defines cringe as a reaction to ‘an embarrassing attempt at making a positive impression’. Is there a consensus on what cringe actually means?

Cringe is a rather ostracized concept and, at first glance, appears to have limited significance for mainstream social issues. However, it actually provides a rapid and effective bridge to questions of social inequality. Given that it is generally regarded as an amusing curiosity, I doubt the scientific community will ever converge on a single definition. Moreover, I do not believe that contemporary publication culture particularly encourages consensus—amid the deluge of texts and publications, this eruption of scholarly output, everyone naturally strives to differentiate themselves. Therefore, I do not anticipate that the cultural studies community will ever celebrate achieving a unified conception of cringe.

How do you personally conceptualize cringe?

I actually struggle to differentiate cringe from shaming in my own thinking, as I have been engaged with shaming research for an extended period. Both phenomena originate from the fundamental Ekmanian emotion of disgust. However, cringe combines fascination with the experience of discomfort and a somewhat masochistic sensation. This ambivalence is absent in shaming.

Indeed, Sianne Ngai writes about ‘ugly feelings’ as ambivalent emotions. Cringe shares characteristics with shame, embarrassment, disgust, and compassion. For me, the central element distinguishing cringe from shaming is the aspect of awkwardness. These are contents that possess a high capacity to evoke feelings of awkwardness in those who consume them.

Some scholars, such as philosopher Thomas Spiegel, argue that cringe is a ‘hostile emotion’ directed outward, rather than inward like shame. Others emphasize the empathic dimension. Are these distinct phenomena, or merely different intensities and orientations of the same affective experience?

Cringe is affective, physically uncomfortable. We can observe that various metaphors typically contain references to bodily movements or positions. When people explain it colloquially, they describe it as an awkwardness that compels you to turn away completely.

Generation Z often reports that their toes curl.

Yes, exactly. This is almost an anthropological constant—that shame induces toe-curling in people. One dimension is thus the feeling of awkwardness, which is affective and embodied, but on the other hand, there is a form of pleasure connected to self-worth: the awkward, impossible one is not ‘me’.

Affect theory emphasizes that emotions are culturally and socially constructed. Simultaneously, neuroscience demonstrates universal activation of certain brain regions during cringe content consumption. Is cringe primarily a biologically rooted reaction with cultural variations, or a fundamentally cultural construct?

The feeling of awkwardness certainly originates from affects, which are biological structures. As Tomkins states, affects are neural firings. Unlike drives, affects are permanent and simultaneously possess multivalent orientation—they can be filled with entirely diverse content. This variable component that triggers the affect is, in my view, no longer neuropsychological but dependent on social environment, values, standards, and norms. Cringe is therefore partially a biological affect, but its specific orientation, intensity, and all surrounding practices are not biological—it is a cultural construct.

J. Logan Smilges, in their ‘cringe theory’, argues that cringing reveals more about ourselves than about the object of our observation—it is a projection of our own affective norms. Is cringe subjective? Does it depend more on who is watching, the implied reader, than on the specific content?

I would say cultural rather than subjective. I believe the boundaries, often associated with moralizing hierarchization, do not run between individuals but between cultures, subcultures, and groups.

On the other hand, you mentioned that cringe can reveal much about our self-confidence, that watching cringe content tells us something about our own potential insecurity. Philippe Rochat speaks of an ‘irreconcilable gap’

between how we see ourselves and how others see us. Is the subject therefore not important?

The perception of insecurity is important, but it is social insecurity, not individual. We react to cringe according to whether we are an aging postmenopausal woman concerned about being overweight, or an aging Gen Z individual worried about lacking style. We do not hold these identities as individuals but as members of certain categories.

Is this how we might understand Slavic cringe of the ‘Squatting Slavs in Tracksuits’ or ‘Babushka’ variety?

Precisely. These are people from the so-called East who engage in self-deprecating humor. What is actually at stake is the sense of self-worth of that entire large geopolitical category of Eastern people who traditionally feel inferior to the civilizationally more advanced West.

Can we therefore locate cringe in the text itself, or must we always examine its audience? Does cringe exist only through the act of audience reading?

Cringe is certainly a polysemic category, but this polysemy is not entirely boundless. It is possible to abstract certain features and textual properties that must exist independently of the specific person viewing the cringe content. We can speak of different interpretive communities. They will naturally not agree, but as a researcher, we can identify what constitutes cringe from, for example, a gender-sensitive perspective. The key is perspective and the researcher’s awareness of it. What probably does not exist, or cannot be studied, is universal cringe.

Perspectives often differ considerably. Could comparative studies offer a pathway—examining whether different age groups, genders, ethnicities, or nationalities perceive content as cringe?

Yes, although it would be quite demanding. It would require conducting lengthy interviews that probe meanings and hidden layers. So I probably would not want to undertake it myself, but theoretically it is interesting.

If cringe content is polysemic, does it make sense to study it through textual analysis? Is ethnography the only path when examining its interpretations?

It is certainly one way to avoid numerous problems, but I believe we can go further—it is not entirely necessary to abandon identifying cringe content from the researcher’s perspective. As I mentioned, knowing the social and cultural context is crucial. Once you understand the cultural or social specificity that interests you—something like ‘who is cringing?’—you can study cringe from the text itself without having it ‘filtered’ through audiences.

Is there not a risk that the researcher will import their own perspectives into the research?

We constantly worry about being carriers of a particular perspective that we might implant into the research. This is merely a positivist illusion—the notion that in cultural studies one can ensure the researcher’s perspective does not figure in the results. If we completely eliminate textual analysis, it is as if we were claiming it is possible to ensure the researcher has no perspective and plays no role. That seems imprecise to me. I think it is certainly better to combine potential textual analysis with, for example, autoethnography and identification. First work with oneself, determine which interpretive community I belong to, what this means for my optics, and reflect on it. Thus, some form of autoethnography is essential.

We have already mentioned that philosopher Thomas Spiegel characterizes cringe as a ‘hostile social emotion’ often used to reinforce class hierarchies. When we as academics study cringe, are we not inevitably positioned as ‘those who cringe’?

But the academic is a cringer. And also a shamer. Just as they are also a liberal or conservative, have some class origin and value repertoire... There is no point pretending we are different from those we study. These optics are not individual.

In your view, one cannot escape this responsibility?

One cannot. Cringe speaks through us as well. We are marinated in a sociocultural environment, and our advantage through education is at most that we possess tools for a certain reflexivity and perform some containment. If we claim we are not those who simultaneously feel awkwardness and relief—that it is not our awkwardness regarding some specific social value—it is not true.

The academic sphere actually reproduces cringe simply by making cringe content increasingly a subject of research.

Of course. The very fact that this topic appealed to us, that we find it sexy and submit grant applications for it, is evidence that we think this way. That our brain processes it somehow, copes with it somewhat differently than people who produce cringe content rather than reflect on it. I am being somewhat elitist now, but even for the researcher, the emotion comes first, the affect—that is the same. We can endeavor to use tools for rational taming of that affect as scholars, but it always comes in the second step.

How can this be done practically? Should we include some form of authorial disclosures?

That is an excellent question. It relates significantly to conventions of qualitative study writing. The original idea was actually that every qualitative study should include some form of reflexivity. You will still find this in many textbooks. However, if someone did this today, it would probably be returned, or at least appear strange. I think we could attempt to make autoethnography a genuinely stable component of methodology and interpretation for these types of texts. A certain self-analysis focusing on what constitutes a threat to my own self-worth. It would be almost a confessional section...

Some might object that this would considerably disrupt textual coherence...

It is actually surprising that we perceive this as something that disrupts textual flow. The original idea of qualitative research truly was that this would be everywhere. It used to be stated that a qualitative research report should contain a reflexive section—specifically a paragraph by the researcher about which personal parameters and experiences co-shaped the results. Today, however, the field moves in the other, Glaserian direction, much more positivist, seeking to measure reliability and intercoder agreement and so forth.

The study of cringe, and indeed the study of digital content generally, is strongly connected to a certain temporality. What was cringe in 2010 (e.g., early YouTube personalities) is today either ironically valued or considered authentic. Havas and Sulimma speak of ‘flexible normalism’—norms are flexible and cringe with them. When conducting research, we always capture only a momentary snapshot. How can we capture this moving target?

We touched on this at the beginning. Perhaps cringe content will disappear before any somewhat stable consensus on what cringe is can be established. For example, I am currently supervising a student's thesis on brain rot, and this is precisely such an ephemeral topic. He conceived it last year, it was approved sometime in spring, and it barely exists anymore. Nevertheless, just as there are no small roles, there are no small or insignificant topics.

One issue is relevance, another is decontextualization, because the norms that the content violates change. How do we address this?

Let us be frank: in the current peer review system, norms change several times before the review process even concludes. [Laughter] On the other hand, what we do has somewhat of an archival function. Even if norms changed and the described context no longer existed in social reality, it remains important to capture these ephemeral phenomena. Perhaps they will return in some other form, in some extended, adapted version. So I would not worry about it too

much. One must accept this when studying digital content. I would rather say the problem lies in explaining to grant institutions and generally to funding bodies that this is a relevant topic—even though it is a very niche, minority topic and often extremely mutable.

At the same time, when conducting interviews with creators or consumers of cringe content, we encounter retrospective construction of meaning. Schmidt and Winkler note that retrospective emotional reactions are filtered through memory and interpretation. How can we methodologically distinguish between authentic experience and post hoc rationalization?

I think trace interviews and walkthrough methods work well here. Respondents are presented with posts, ideally supplemented by the environment, the interface, which helps them return to that context.

But even there, some rationalization or stylization of responses can occur... Certainly. Not everyone will agree with this entirely, and there is also a form of self-correction. For example, someone who exclusively swipes on women with very large breasts probably will not do so in front of a researcher. Nevertheless, similar walkthrough methods are very useful for analyzing social media content.

Comments from YouTube, TikTok, or Reddit are often considered authentic data about audience reactions, but Phillips and Milner, for example, point to the ‘ambivalent internet’ where the boundary between sincerity, trolling, virtue signaling, and performativity is unclear. When someone writes ‘cringe’, does it mean they actually cringed, or are they performing for their online audience? Do you perceive a difference between authentically performed cringe and intentional cringe that is part of the culture industry?

I think there is a significant difference—I would hardly even compare them. Yes, they work with the same affect, they work with evoking awkwardness, but generally with cringe, not only content matters but also form. The form is often deliberately low-key, shabby, intentionally appearing amateurish or kitschy. This is why it is important that articles on cringe comedy have emerged in film studies, because now we can distinguish it from something else. Someone like Borat, for instance, has a completely neutral form—it cringes only through content. It would have to be filmed with some Kazakhstani film technique, or something... Which of course does not exist—I do not actually think Kazakhstan has less developed filmmaking techniques.

And then there is another, essentially meta-level, of various cringe compilations that are themselves cringe.

Indeed, it is almost a second-hand embarrassment. The forms are quite different, but it remains true that with cringe, the most important aspect is that it is essentially a mediated message about the standards and values of a given society.

Does authentic cringe differ from intentional cringe in any other way?

It can represent a certain revolt against elites. This, I think, is present only in authentic cringe, not the professional variety. I have always been interested in that layer of values and notions of perfection derived from neoliberalism and capitalism. In the case of authentic cringe content, the imperfection and failures it depicts are often combined with a battered aesthetic. Failure is defined (and commented upon with that relieved mockery) as non-compliance with a norm, and this norm very often expresses values and ideals inflated by neoliberalism. The emphasis on aesthetics, an almost designer perfection of visual phenomena, minimalism, restraint, moderation, 'beigeness' as manifestations of good taste—these derive from middle-class bourgeois habitus. When you violate or ignore this 'color palette' that today characterizes elite glamour style and serves as the language of neoliberalism, you end up on social media as a cringe character. The polysemy of cringe moreover encompasses both sympathy toward violating the neoliberal canon and mockery of the same.

Do you really see such power positions in this symbolic negotiation of neoliberalism? Is it not just digital folklore?

It is true that when people react to such content online, academics from their ivory towers tend to view it as merely harmless and completely marginal entertainment. On the other hand, in one of our projects we emphasized the concurrence of cringe content popularity and the boom of populist, anti-elitist attitudes in society. We were struck by the question of whether an analogy could be found between this celebration of amateurism and the revolt of the masses—new masses. I see in sympathies toward cringe also sympathies toward various forms of imperfection and failure and deficits, thus antipathy toward the perfectionism that neoliberalism brought. In cringe there is both mockery and sympathy for resistance to this perfection and thus copying of elites—and the same motif can be found in anti-elitist populism, where it is no longer just a joke. When a completely drunk tragic figure with one tooth becomes a viral hero, this is partly due to general fatigue and exhaustion from copying elite style and appearance, which is expansive within the neoliberal framework. In other, less amusing forms of political populism, the same position is occupied by reluctance to copy elites in other dimensions: their emphasis on education, science, information quality, minority human rights... Elites, unfortunately, so angered

a significant portion of the population with expansive neoliberal imposition of universally binding decent jackets and tasteful bathrooms and workaholism that it swept away the universal bindingness of respect for human rights and education as well...

Can we make generalizable statements about ‘cringe culture’ at all, when every cringe reaction is situated in specific cultural norms?

In my view, the concept of cringe is generalizable. As a reaction that is simultaneously unpleasant and pleasant. The realization that some failure is occurring, some non-compliance with a certain norm or demands, and simultaneously a shudder of delight that it is not me who fails to comply.

Cringe studies is a young field—the main theoretical works have emerged only in recent years. What future lies ahead? What aspects of cringe content can be further investigated?

I do not know what future it has, but if Donald Trump continues to rule for much longer, cringe studies may become very flourishing. Cringe can be, for example, a tool of certain resistance, forms of opposition. If the quality of democracy deteriorates and authoritarianism spreads, perhaps cringe practices will become spaces of dissent.

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