

- Mark your confusion.
- Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)
- Write a 250+ word response to the article.

(If you are a teacher or student who would like to modify this Google Doc, go to File > Make a Copy. I cannot and do not respond to Share requests -- my apologies!)

Harvard Rescinds Acceptances for At Least Ten Students for Obscene Memes

By Hannah Natanson for *The Crimson*, 6-5-17

Harvard College **rescinded** admissions offers to at least ten prospective members of the Class of 2021 after the students traded sexually explicit memes and messages that sometimes targeted minority groups in a private Facebook group chat.

A handful of admitted students formed the messaging group—titled, at one point, “Harvard memes for horny **bourgeois** teens”—on Facebook in late December, according to two incoming freshmen.

In the group, students sent each other memes and other images mocking sexual assault, the Holocaust, and the deaths of children, according to screenshots of the chat obtained by *The Crimson*. Some of the messages joked that abusing children was sexually arousing, while others had punchlines directed at specific ethnic or racial groups. One called the **hypothetical** hanging of a Mexican child “piñata time.”

After discovering the existence and contents of the chat, Harvard administrators revoked admissions offers to at least ten participants in mid-April, according to several members of the group. University officials have previously said that Harvard’s decision to rescind a student’s offer is final.

College spokesperson Rachael Dane wrote in an emailed statement Saturday that “we do not comment publicly on the admissions status of individual applicants.”

The chat grew out of a roughly 100-member messaging group that members of the Class of 2021 set up in early December to share memes about popular culture. Admitted students found and contacted each other using the official Harvard College Class of 2021 Facebook group.

“A lot of students were excited about forming group chats with people who shared similar interests,” Jessica Zhang ’21, an incoming freshman who joined both chats, wrote in an email. “Someone posted about starting a chat for people who liked memes.”

Messages shared in the original group were mostly “lighthearted,” wrote Zhang, who said she did not post in the splitoff meme group and that her admission offer was not rescinded. But some members soon suggested forming “a more R-rated” meme chat, according to Cassandra Luca ’21, who joined the first meme group but not the second, and who also said her offer was not revoked.

Luca said the founders of the “dark” group chat demanded that students post provocative memes in the larger messaging group before allowing them to join the splinter group.

“They were like, ‘Oh, you have to send a meme to the original group to prove that you could get into the new one,’” Luca said. “This was a just-because-we-got-into-Harvard-doesn’t-mean-we-can’t-have-fun kind of thing.”

Employees in the Admissions Office emailed students who posted offensive memes in mid-April asking them to disclose every picture they sent over the group, according to one member of the chat whose admission offer was revoked. The student spoke only on the condition of anonymity because they did not want to be publicly identified with the messages.

“The Admissions Committee was disappointed to learn that several students in a private group chat for the Class of 2021 were sending messages that contained offensive messages and graphics,” reads a copy of the Admissions Office’s email obtained by *The Crimson*. “As we understand you were among the members contributing such material to this chat, we are asking that you submit a statement by tomorrow at noon to explain your contributions and actions for discussion with the Admissions Committee.”

“It is unfortunate that I have to reach out about this situation,” the email reads.

The anonymous student also said that administrators informed implicated students that their admissions status was under review and instructed them not to come to *Visitas*, Harvard’s annual weekend of programming for prospective freshmen held at the end of April. Roughly a week later, at least ten members of the group chat received letters informing them that their offers of admission had been withdrawn.

The description for the official Facebook group for the Class of 2021, set up and maintained by the Admissions Office, disclaims all administrative responsibility for “unofficial groups” and warns members their admissions offers can be rescinded under specific circumstances.

“As a reminder, Harvard College reserves the right to withdraw an offer of admission under various conditions including if an admitted student engages in behavior that brings into question his or her honesty, maturity, or moral character,” the description reads.

Luca said she had mixed feelings about the administration’s move to revoke admissions offers. She said she was “going back and forth” on the matter.

“On the one hand, I think people can post whatever they want because they have the right to do that,” Luca said. “I don’t think the school should have gone in and rescinded some offers because it wasn’t Harvard-affiliated, it was people doing stupid stuff.”

She added, though, that if memes sent over the chat posed any kind of threat to members’ lives or well-being, then she believed administrators’ actions were justified.

Other members of the Class of 2021 said they strongly supported the Admissions Office’s decision. Zhang wrote that she thought the students’ actions were indefensible, and that the administration was correct in choosing to penalize those who posted obscene images.

“I appreciate humor, but there are so many topics that just should not be joked about,” Zhang wrote. “I respect the decision of the admissions officers to rescind the offers because those actions really spoke about the students’ true characters.”

“I do not know how those offensive images could be defended,” she added.

Wyatt Hurt ’21, who said he did not participate in either meme chat, agreed and said he was glad administrators took action.

“I haven’t seen any of the stuff firsthand, but I definitely think that the administration made the right choice and I think that as an incoming student—we all have our group chats and everything like that going on—we all pretty much universally agree it was the right decision,” he said.

Hurt added that he recently attended several scholarship conferences and that students he met at those events—many of whom he said planned to matriculate at Ivy League schools—also agreed that “rescinding was definitely the way to go.”

This incident marks the second time in two years that Harvard has dealt with a situation where incoming freshmen exchanged offensive messages online. Last spring, some admitted members of the Class of 2020 traded jokes about race and mocked feminists in an unofficial class GroupMe chat, prompting Dean of the College Rakesh Khurana and Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid William R. Fitzsimmons ’67 to issue a joint statement condemning the students’ actions.

“Harvard College and the Office of Admissions and Financial Aid were troubled and disappointed to see a conversation that included graphics with offensive themes,” Khurana and Fitzsimmons wrote in their statement, which they posted on the Class of 2020’s Facebook page.

But administrators chose not to discipline members of the Class of 2020 who authored the messages. Then-Interim Dean of Student Life Thomas A. Dingman ’67 said in an interview at the time that the individuals in question were “not matriculated students at this point.”

Harvard admitted 5.2 percent of applicants to the Class of 2021, accepting 2,056 of the nearly 40,000 total applicants. Roughly 84 percent of students invited to join the class accepted their offer, marking the highest yield rate in recent memory.

Response Options:

- What was Harvard's reasoning for rescinding admissions offers in this situation? Summarize this reasoning, and then respond with whether you agree or disagree.
- Choose a passage and respond to it.