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A CRINGE WORLD...

Exploring the experience of cringe and what it means for brands

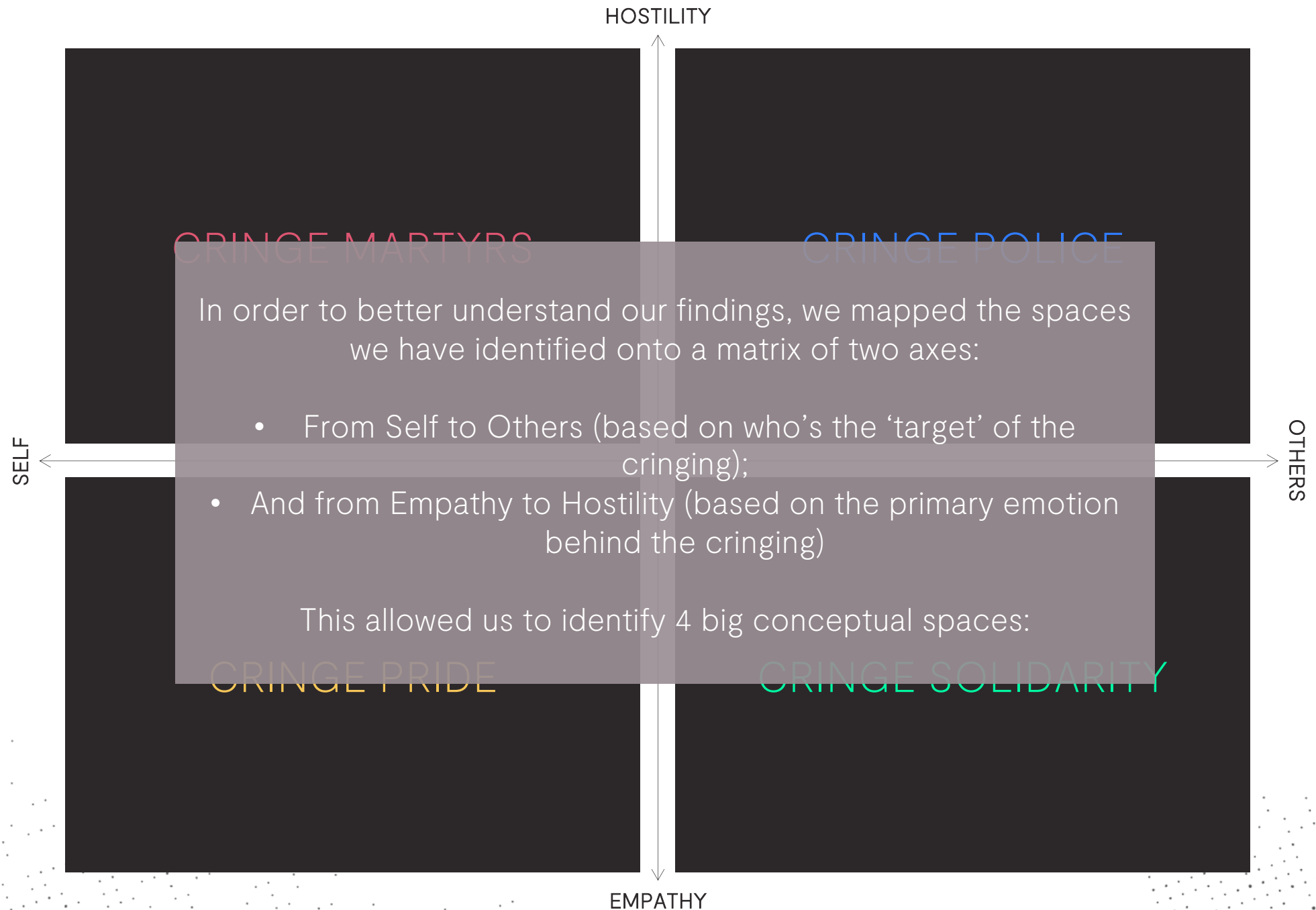
Introduction

We all know how cringe feels, but what does cringe really mean? What in our online worlds can make us cringe today or is judged cringeworthy? If we can understand why we cringe now, we can gauge its implications and find out why it's important for brands to know about cringe too...

We will also ask **where** and **who** do we see cringing. This is interesting as it includes an intergenerational element (e.g. Gen Z cringing at Boomer beliefs, Boomers cringing at 'self-love' elements of younger social media culture). From finding out where we cringe, we can also identify **why** we should care, and what impact an understanding of cringe can have on how brands relate to their audiences.



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Cringe Martyrs

In the beginning there was 'cringe' and this was self-cringe. Aren't we all embarrassed about things we've said or done? Very few of us are lucky enough not to be in a constant state of cringe when thinking of our teenage selves for example. Cringe here comes as self-punishment, self-hatred, and potentially as self-policing

Cringing to your past self



Very often, past memories can be cringe-inducing. Or rather, cringe-inducing memories tend to get more 'airtime' on our brains versus normal memories or, god-forbid, happy memories. But is staying up late in bed suffering with all of your past cringe healthy?

Key take out: Past cringe is painful but if we can all acknowledge experiencing it maybe we can see it as something that unites us?

“ Does anyone else have flashbacks when they were in middle school and did really stupid shit and just want to vomit at how cringy everything you did was or is it just me?”

Emotions are cringe



A sense of cringe coming through when you become aware of your feelings. Especially when emotions 'disagree' with our rational side (for example petty feelings like jealousy or envy). The dark side of this area is how younger people (and especially boys) might feel the fear of 'cringe' inhibiting them from listening to and understanding their emotions.

Key take out: Emotions are cringe but they are also valid. Ignoring your feeling to be 'cool' is not the way forward.

“ Imagine Henry turning as red as his hair when his man looks up at him and says he's been feeling all these emotions towards him and gives him the bedroom eyes...”

Cringe Police

We are still in the 'hostility' part of our initial mapping but this time the content openly targets other people, friends or even brands. Cringe is used to offend, discredit and ultimately police other people's behaviours and self-expression



Brands Saying Bae

@BrandsSayingBae

cool when a corporation tweets like a teenager's products.

Retweeted December 2014

#humblebrag

Cringey pop culture

Many different aspects of pop-culture are heralded by accusations of 'cringe'. There's something about popular media (and ads) that seems to make them particularly prone to this criticism. Maybe the fact that they are billion dollar operations trying to speak the 'language' of young people and it comes off disingenuous?

Key take out: If you are a brand or a big franchise you shouldn't be worried about being 'cringe' – you are not a teenager at school, cringe won't hurt you. Embracing cringe can actually be fun.

Try-hards and humblebrags

While bragging is not socially accepted (for most parts) at the same time social media culture heavily relies on self-promotions and humblebrags creating a tension where cringe thrives. People still don't like those who brag, but we all have to brag in order to raise cultural capital / clout that might affect aspects of our lives like our employability (think of LinkedIn).

Key take out: While bragging is still considered bad, the emergent culture of 'self-love' (very CRINGE) leaves space for healthy self-affirmations.

“

It's like babies first Assassin's Creed/Zelda with Fortnite graphics and '90s referential humour that is cringe and unfunny"

“

@user Girls say they humble n shy but make weird cringy compilations of themselves lol”



Why so serious?

Cringe policing is often targeting people who commit to something in a non-ironic way. Being serious about things comes with big cringe alerts. Whether it's politics, art or a sub-culture, somehow passionate attachments are often considered cringey.

Key take out: Yes it's good to not take ourselves too seriously but commitment is ostensibly the only way to reach your personal targets.

“ All these hardcore gamers are making it super cringy with their screeching about joe rogan attacking them when all he's saying is get off your ass and workout from time to time and don't waste your entire day playing games”



Woke cringe

There are two streams of cringe here. The first one has to do with multi-national corporations taking up radical leftist politics / identity politics in their discourse. The second is a more sinister alt-right approach to all progressive politics. The vocabulary of the two 'cringe' policings is similar but the target different. In the first case, cringe exposes the irony of corporate progressive politics, in the second, the aim is to discredit all progressive politics as performative and meaningless.

Key take out: When formerly 'transgressive' politics become mainstream their adoption can lead to questionable results.

“ The white knighting is kinda cringy”

Post-Cringe Solidarity

It might sound a bit too optimistic but increasingly online discourse embraces more empathy-led approaches to cringe. We are moving to a point where collective empowerment through cringe is a possibility!

A critique of 'cringe' shaming



This is the most explicitly anti- 'cringe policing' space. Users who actually identify cringe discourse as counter-productive and encourage people to deal with notions of cringe critically. One of the big inspirations for this white-paper and proponent of this camp is popular YouTuber Natalie Wyn (aka [ContraPoints](#)).

Key take out: There's an emerging critique of 'cringe culture' gaining traction.

Guilty pleasures are ok



As the pandemic allowed for all kinds of guilty pleasures to become normalised (almost as part of 'self-care') – the 'cringing' associated with such guilty pleasures also became milder. No guilt – no cringe.

Key take out: Even though online environments can be very toxic and hostile – the pandemic made us re-think our compassion and be a bit more forgiving.

“ That Supra is far from being my cup of tea, but it takes a real scumbag to attack someone else's pride and joy”

“ Regardless, Jeremy is a successful YouTuber and "influencer." We laugh and mock his weird, cringy persona, and yet we're still giving him views”

Don't rain on my parade



People are done with the negativity of 'cringe policing' and look for new ways (online and offline) to encourage a co-existence where aesthetic preferences and lifestyles are not judged very harshly.

Key take out: Moving towards a post-cringe horizon.

“ I remember how i forced myself to laugh at the miley vma memes to be in but i cringed coz that was just toxic and mean social media is exhausting”

Turning cringe into comedy



Cringe does not have to be a tool of bullying. Huge genres of comedy rely on the funny side of cringe – cringing can be entertaining. Big warning here, this type of comedy was very much what inspired horrible 'cringe content' communities who take a guerrilla approach to cringe comedy and harass actual people.

Key take out: Let's focus our cringe feelings on fictional characters vs real people?

“ I definitely enjoy cringe/meme humor more now as an adult cause I got out of that "I'm too mature for that" phase from when I was younger”

Cringe Pride

This is the final step in our cringe journey. After we can accept other people's cringey moments it's our cringe that's left to combat.

Overcoming the harrowing effects of self-cringe can have positive effects on our self-confidence and quality of life more broadly





Know thy cringe

Being aware of your cringe and accepting it. Cringe is part of life – the zen approach: let the cringe flow through your veins.

Key take out: Yes cringe will never be the source of joy – but accepting it as part of life is the best we can do.

“ This is realistic, *relatable* cringe



Braver than cringe

Don't let the sense of impending cringe stop you from putting yourself out there. Being brave enough to overcome your sense of future-cringe; particularly important in sharing creative work.

Key take out: Cringe seems to be more harrowing than 'failure' nowadays. Our advice: cringe again, but cringe better.

“ Yet here we are, with a great deal of society appearing uncomfortable with women sharing their work and demonstrating pride in it”



Final thoughts...

- Cringe policing can be a form of cyber-bullying so brands need to be cautious how much they engage with it
- When life gives you 'cringe' make some cringe comedy out of it and move on
- Cringe can be an essential part of self-growth
- Trying to avoid 'cringe' at all costs can inhibit your creativity – ALSO as we saw, trying hard not to be cringe-y might make you more cringe-y – cringe avoidance is a losing game



If you have questions on 'cringe' or beyond that please send us your message at:

info@discover.ai

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