

Psychological Effects of Memes on Sufferers

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Abstract

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The research titled Psychological Effects of Memes on Sufferers examines the memes from a psychological point of view. In this research, survey data from 20 participants with different educational levels were used to investigate the psychological impact of memes on individuals aged between 18 and 30. The findings raise serious question about meme culture's negative influence on mental wellbeing. Specifically, the majority of respondents indicated that memes that attack specific individuals can make individuals feel more stressed, and some indicated that memes cause victims to think negatively. Additionally, respondents also stated that being targeted by memes can lead to feelings of inferiority, and some concurred that memes that ridicule mental illnesses can exacerbate emotional distress. Half of the participants reported primarily using Instagram, suggesting that platform-specific variables may affect exposure to memes. These results emphasize how memes can be detrimental to psychological well-being through emotional detachment and a negative self-image. For a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between meme consumption and mental health consequences, larger samples must be used for future research.

Keywords: Youth behavior, Negative thinking, Digital humor, Social media, Mental health, :Psychological impact, Memes, Online culture



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Social media's rapid expansion has revolutionized communication, and internet memes have become a favorite method through which individuals express themselves online. As satirical or humorous visual depictions that recontextualize cultural references, memes are shared widely across platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, mostly among young adults. While memes are often employed for entertainment, social commentary, and community building, their psychological impacts—especially on individuals who suffer from mental illness—have increasingly become the focus of scholarly concern. Memes have been demonstrated to encourage emotional disclosure and in-group solidarity but also risk downplaying severe issues such as mental illness and violence against women, potentially causing vulnerable groups to feel even more anguish.

Dark humor or satire are commonly employed in memes that discuss mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, or suicide. This can desensitize or normalize viewers to the seriousness of such conditions, for example, show how memes trivializing conditions such as depression or Down syndrome aggravate social stigma and dilute empathy, and make those affected feel isolated. Young adults' sensitivity can be reduced by repeated exposure to memes with nonchalantly portraying mental health problems; interventions like educational videos may reverse this effect for some disorders. Memes often describe harassment as funny or insignificant and then reinforce negative stereotypes and normalize inappropriateness among Pakistani youth, states Zaman et al. (2025), who examined gender-based violence. These findings underscore memes' dual nature as possible vehicles of psychological hurt and cultural connectors.

Despite these findings, several questions remain unanswered regarding the influence of memes on individuals who are already suffering from mental illness; such individuals are termed "sufferers." There is limited research on the direct emotional and behavioral impact on individuals who already have mental illnesses; most research focuses on general populations or specific issues such as stigma or gender violence. In addition, quantitative data on victims' perceptions are scarce, even though qualitative analyses provide rich insights into meme framing.

Through an exploration of the psychological impacts of memes on individuals, this present study attempts to bridge such gaps. Through this study, meme content and tone are assessed on how they impact victims' emotional well-being, self-concept, and social attitudes.

Literature Review

Internet memes integrate humor, satire, and cultural critique to appeal to mass audiences across social media sites, have become a pervasive means of communication in the internet era. Memes, as pieces of textual or visual material that humorously or satirically recontextualize mainstream culture, spread virally and influence public opinion on a variety of social issues (Gupta et al., 2021). While memes are often employed as tools of entertainment and social solidarity, there are concerns regarding the psychological impact they have on individuals who suffer from mental health disorders and gender violence because they have the tendency to trivialize such grave issues. A critical examination is needed because memes often make light of grave matters, which can increase stigma, desensitize the audience, and hinder victims' efforts to heal. This literature review captures the double-edged nature of memes both as a cause of harm and a means of coping through bringing together the findings of three significant studies to examine the psychological impact of memes on individuals affected by gender-based violence and mental illness.

A study conducted by Gupta et al. (2021) examined how young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 trivializes mental health problems via internet memes. Their research employed a two-group experiment design where the experimental group provided ratings of the perceived sensitivity of memes about eating disorder, anxiety, depression, and suicide following exposure to a sensitising video intervention. The control group provided ratings for the memes with no prior help. The findings revealed that the experimental group was more desensitized to eating disorders, anxiety, and suicide than the control group, which supports the idea that sensitising interventions can mitigate the desensitising impact of humorous memes. Yet, no difference was visible for depression, which may be due to common misconceptions regarding the condition that may lower the effectiveness of interventions (Tay et al., 2017, cited by Gupta et al., 2021). The research highlights how memes can potentially normalize serious mental health conditions by using humor, which may lead to viewers becoming desensitized and less sympathetic. Desensitization, particularly when memes make mental health problems seem trivial or funny, can exacerbate feelings of isolation and invalidate the suffering of those who experience it.

Wu et al. (2024) examined how memes trivialize serious conditions such as Down syndrome, depression, and suicide, focusing on the social and psychological impact on young people. Their literature review highlights how memes, self-replicating units of cultural information, shape social identity and group membership. Yet they can be used to influence negative attitudes too by downplaying serious conditions. As per research, memes often simplify complex topics into frivolous, simplified material, which diminishes the perceived severity of sickness and chips away at social sympathy. Examples like informally describing depression as "being in a bad mood" or Down syndrome as being the equivalent of being clumsy perpetuate stigmatization and negative stereotypes and make it more challenging for affected individuals to validate themselves or pursue help (Pavelko & Myrick, 2015, as reported in Wu et al., 2024). This issue is exacerbated by social media algorithms, which may amplify trivialising content and induce emotional numbness and reduced compassion.

Zaman et al. (2025) examined Pakistani young people's views on sexual harassment and gender violence in terms of internet memes. The research was qualitative, mixing in-depth interviews with college students with content analysis of harassment memes. The study indicates that memes often trivialize harassment and represent it as harmless or funny, like "Men will be men" or "It's just a prank." The audience becomes desensitized to the severity of harassment because of these portrayals, which reinforce unacceptable behavior and promote traditional gender roles. Interview respondents expressed discomfort with these memes, noting that their lighthearted presentation might have ill effects in real life, like fewer interventions against harassment and increased tolerance of negative behavior.

Methodology

Research Design

To investigate the psychological effects of memes on victims, this study will use a quantitative research design and a survey-based questionnaire approach. People who frequently view memes and use social media responded to the study.

Population and Sampling

Social media users who are 18 to 30 years old

Sampling method

A convenient sampling technique was used to collect data across different demographics,

Sample size

About 20 respondents were polled to obtain preliminary insights.

Data collection method

A structured questionnaire was made and disseminated online via Google Forms, email, and social media platforms. Participants were asked to give the most informed responses they could.

Research Questions

- Do you think memes can be helpful for those experiencing stress or depression?
- Do you think some memes make fun of mental illnesses?
- Can a person feel inferior to others if memes are made about them?
- The people who are constantly being bullied can develop suicidal thoughts?

Theoretical Framework

The research examines the psychological impact of internet memes on individuals affected by mental illness and gender-based violence is the subject of this research, focusing on how such memes downplay key issues. This research applies Cultivation Theory as its central theoretical framework to contextualize this investigation, with complementing ideas from Framing Theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of how memes influence psychological outcomes and attitudes. To explain the manner in which the memes affect the victims and to steer the research objectives, this theoretical framework integrates the results from the previous research (Gupta et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2024; Zaman et al., 2025).

Cultivation Theory

Based on George Gerbner's (1976) Cultivation Theory, individuals' understandings of reality are cultivated through prolonged exposure to media messages, particularly if the media delivers repetitive and uniform messages. The theory was initially applied to television, but it has been later applied to digital media, like social media platforms where memes are prevalent (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Cultivation Theory explains that individuals who watch a great deal of media come to adopt, over time, the worldview presented by the media, perhaps not the world as it truly is. In this research, Cultivation Theory argues that frequent exposure to internet memes that demean gender-based violence (for example, sexual harassment) or mental illness (for example, depression, anxiety, suicide) is likely to instill perceptions that such problems are less grave, normal, or even amusing. By making viewers' perceptions harmonize with the dominant media frame, known as "mainstreaming," viewers can become less attuned to the severity of these illnesses (Gerbner et al., 1986). Cultivation may have profound psychological impacts on victims of gender-based violence or mental illness.

Memes that trivialize mental health problems lower the perceived sensitivity of young adults, particularly where there was no sensitising intervention, as Gupta et al. (2021) found. Likewise, Zaman et al. (2025) found that memes normalizing harassment as being funny or harmless desensitized audiences and lowered

the potential for intervention. Wu et al. (2024) further highlighted the manner in which memes that belittle serious diseases, such as Down syndrome, aggravate stigma and loneliness among victims of the diseases by weakening society's compassion. The theory further differentiates between second-order effects, meaning attitude and value changes, and first-order effects, meaning changes in beliefs regarding how common a phenomenon is. Based on this research, the stigmatization of mental illness or harassment through memes can have first-order effects, including victims perceiving their conditions as mundane or insignificant. Internalizing stigma, loss of self-esteem, or not seeking help due to victims feeling their struggles are being laughed at or dismissed are among the second-order effects. This research uses Cultivation Theory to examine how memes, influence the psychological well-being and attitudes of individuals who are afflicted by them.

Social Support Theory

One possible interpretation of the psychological impact of memes is through social support theory, highlighting the buffering effect of perceived support in reducing the ill effects of stress. Cohen and Wills (1985) suggested that when people feel supported by others—emotionally, informationally, or companionship-wise—their psychological hardness is enhanced. Memes related to mental health issues usually serve as a type of parasocial support, providing people with a sense of mutual understanding and common experience. When one runs across a meme that succinctly and hilariously or heart wrenchingly speaks to the pain they're struggling with, it can affirm them and remind them reassuringly that they aren't alone. Such shared digital artefacts can create a perceived sense of community and backup in the dearth of personal social interaction.

Online Disinhibition Effect

The online disinhibition effect, as defined by Suler (2004), has an important role in the articulation of mental health issues using memes. The comparative anonymity and feelings of safety in the online world reduce the psychological defense mechanisms of users, which enables them to share their weaknesses or view sensitive information more easily. Memes in this context turn into a low-threat and expressive channel for portraying feelings that would otherwise be challenging to convey through more direct or face-to-face interactions. Memes can even act as affective surrogates, speaking of complex or hurtful realities through familiar and often comedic outlets.

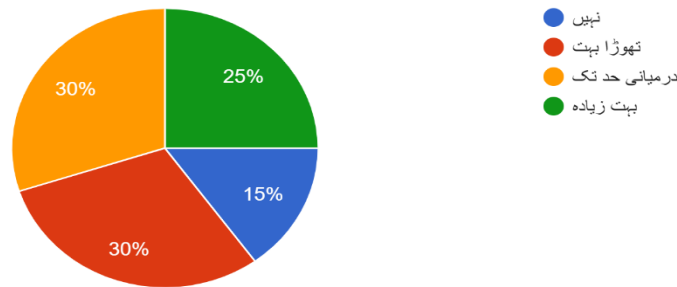
Gallows Humor in Resilience

In exploring the tone and content of most mental health memes, especially ones using gallows or self-deprecating humor, it is also worth noting the connection between gallows humor and resilience. Green gross and Miller (2011) argue that the capacity for using dark humor is associated with greater psychological resilience and emotional intelligence. For some people, this kind of humor can be a source of emotional release, normalize taboo issues, and facilitate adaptive coping. Yet the impact can be two-edged: while some take comfort and strength from laughing at their misery, others may see reinforcement for noxious narratives or become stuck in cynicism cycles.

Findings

Do you think memes can be helpful for those experiencing stress or depression?

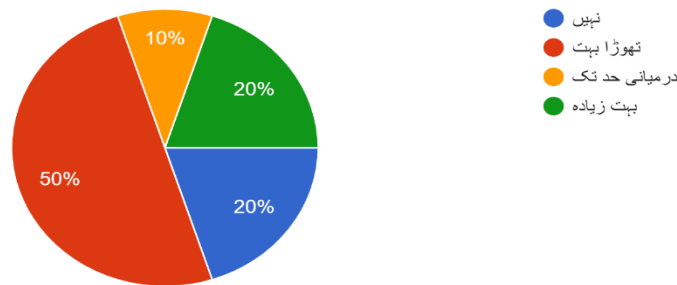
کیا آپ کو لگتا ہے کہ میمز ذہنی دباؤ یا افسردگی کا سامنا کرنے والوں کے لیے مددگار ثابت ہو سکتی ہیں؟
20 responses



Respondents gave mixed reactions to this question. As 30% reported to some extent memes can be helpful and 30 % of them reported as memes can be helpful a little bit. 25% within the sample size agreed that memes can be helpful in reducing stress and 15% of respondents don't think memes can be helpful at all.

Do you think some memes make fun of mental illnesses?

کیا آپ کو لگتا ہے کہ کچھ میمز ذہنی-بیماریوں کا مذاق اڑاتی ہیں؟
20 responses

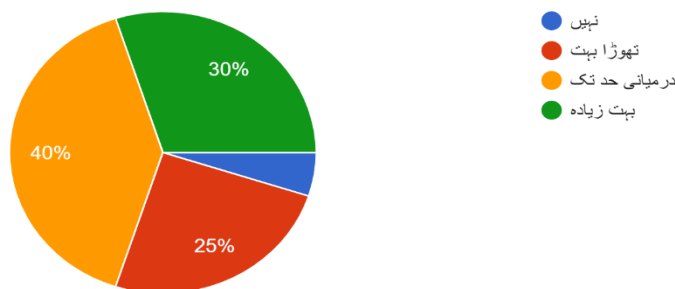


50% of the sample agreed that memes can make a little bit fun of mental illnesses while 20% thought that they don't make fun of them and 20% of them agreed that memes can make fun of mental conditions. 10% thought that they make fun to some extent.

Can a person feel inferior to others if memes are made about them?

کیا کوئی شخص خود کو دوسروں سے کم تر محسوس کر سکتا ہے اگر اس پر میمز بنائی جائیں؟

20 responses

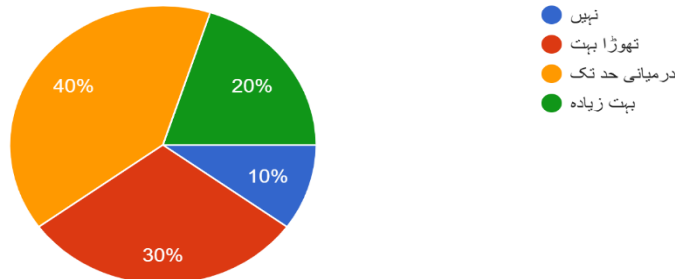


40% of respondents within the sample thought that memes can make person feel inferior a little bit. 30% of them agreed that sufferer can feel inferior. 25% of respondents reported memes to be produce inferiority feelings to some extent. 5% thought that memes cannot make sufferer inferior.

The people who are constantly being bullied can develop suicidal thoughts?

کیا مستقل مزاح کا نشانہ بنانے والے افراد میں خود کشی کے خیالات پیدا ہو سکتے ہیں ؟

20 responses



40% of sample size thought to some extent bullies can develop suicidal thoughts while 30% of them thought memes can develop suicidal thoughts a little. 20% respondents reported that memes can develop suicidal thoughts and 10% do not agreed with it.

CONCLUSION

This research provides a comprehensive exploration of how meme culture relates to mental health, particularly in the modern digital age when social media is integral to everyday communication. Memes are no longer solely a form of entertainment; they are now a source of emotional expression, social commentary, and coping for many. But there are huge questions about the potential psychological impact they may have, either positive or negative, with so much use and sway. A few respondents were unsure about memes' potential to ease depression or stress, and others think that they can be a little helpful. Additionally, a few of the participants admit that memes trivialize mental health conditions, which suggests

an alarming trend towards how mental illness is represented in the internet space. From the answers, memes can also amplify inferiority feelings, especially when they target particular individuals.

A few of the respondents believe that this can occur even on a low scale. More alarmingly, a majority of the respondents believe that prolonged bullying through memes can induce suicidal thoughts, highlighting the serious psychological risks associated with online harassment. According to most responses, memes related to a person's situation generally do not invoke grief, frustration and anger. Very few among them believe that they can induce these types of emotions. Some of the participants accept that whenever individuals are irritated, they attempt to view some memes to update their mood while others do not concur with. Additionally, some of the respondents very keen on the aspect that targeted memes can reduce stress on the individual on which memes are developed.

Regarding whether memes can trigger social phobia in sufferers, some respondents agree with the point of view while a small fraction of responses do not comply with it. Most respondents thought that memes do not cause any harmful effect on them while only few reported to have negative effect on their health.

The research contributes to an overall debate regarding digital responsibility and the psychological implications of online actions by considering such attitudes. It highlights how important tact and empathy are when creating or sharing meme material, particularly in issues of mental health. It also points out how audiences can become desensitized and negative stereotypes can be perpetuated when ridicule in humor of serious subjects becomes a regular occurrence.

Overall, this research explains the dual nature of memes in today's digital society. While they may offer fleeting comfort or enjoyment, they have the potential to harm mental well-being negatively, especially when being used thoughtlessly or in sarcasm. It emphasizes the importance of producing and consuming memes more consciously of their potential psychological influences.

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