

I'm not lonely, I have memes

the cognitive (disembodied) experience of depression memes

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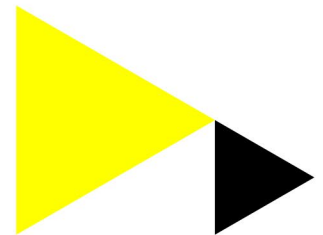
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CRITICAL MEME READER II

INC READER #16



MEMETIC TACTICALITY

EDITED BY CHLOË ARKENBOUT AND LAURENCE SCHERZ

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I'M NOT LONELY, I HAVE MEMES: THE COGNITIVE, (DIS)EMBODIED EXPERIENCE OF DEPRESSION MEMES

LAURENCE SCHERZ

A long time ago, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, a sad, dark thing clawed its way into our social media feeds: depression memes. These memes, shared on social platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, 4chan, and TikTok, date back to as early as 2016, although it's hard to tell precisely. What we do know is that people (meme makers) have been saying to their audience (users with or without clinical depression and/or anxiety symptoms) that it's *okay* to feel horrible and that if our therapist asks 'What do we do when we feel this way?' we do not reply 'Add to cart'. The online world has given us clearance to lift the taboo (slightly) on mental health issues while simultaneously educating some boomers along the way, resulting in many users using memes ever since as the life raft they can be.

Therapist: And what do we say when
we're sad?
Me: ADD TO CART
Therapist: No.



Fig. 1: 'Therapist: And what do we say when we're sad? Me: ADD TO CART Therapist: No.', posted on reddit by @u/caprileen, accessed last on August 15, 2022. Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/eh5vsc/add_to_cart/.

The pandemic and its lockdowns boosted this trend even further, keeping every meme maker out there not only locked inside their home with time to devote themselves to memes, but also making them rather gloomy. A foolproof recipe for *a lot* of memes about depression: enter depression memes, your newest, saddest trend.

Depression Memes to the Rescue

But what, can we wonder, while pretending to have a completely healthy, worry-free mind, do depression memes *do* for online users who suffer from (clinical) depression and/or anxiety? Research done by several professors from the Northumbria University, Newcastle shows that depression memes can help alleviate certain negative emotions, because ‘the use of humour itself may down-regulate negative and up-regulate positive emotions.’¹ These memes also provide the user with a virtual social community and mutual understanding; we can even see how ‘online self-disclosure is theorized to enhance relationships to a greater extent than face-to-face disclosures.’² On top of this, ‘perceived social support through online interaction appears beneficial in reducing psychiatric symptoms.’³ And: depressed users tend to laugh harder at depression memes than the completely carefree folks out there, a sign that they cater to their audience quite nicely.



Fig. 2: ‘I just think they’re neat’, posted on Instagram by @felixmeritisamsterdam, last accessed on August 15, 2022. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaPV7Bh13b8/>.

What these memes also do is show us the dire situation of mental healthcare and how it is severely lacking in many countries around the world. This is a different conversation

- 1 Umair Akram et al., “Internet Memes Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Potential Coping Mechanism for Anxiety,” *Scientific Reports* 11, no. 22305 (2021): 6.
- 2 Kathryn J. Gardner et al., “Humour Styles Influence the Perception of Depression-Related Internet Memes in Depression,” *Humor* 34, no. 4 (2021): 502.
- 3 Akram et al., “Internet Memes,” 6.

altogether, yet it is interesting to note how, in being freely accessible on the internet for all without any waiting lists or huge medical bills, depression memes hold an even greater power for a community around mental issues. There are even online mental health coaches at the ready, although naturally their psychological merit is to be taken with a grain of salt. Psychologist and author Eleanor Morgan points out that ‘the way (mental health) coaches market themselves on social media feeds into the wider memefication of emotion. [...] If this isn’t a clear emblem of capitalism and individualism, I’m not sure what is.’⁴ And there we have it: our old friend capitalism crashing the party uninvited once again.

Morgan goes on to question the true therapeutic power of memes and the subsequent shared misery online when she asks exactly ‘how much self-awareness is really generated when we scroll away?’⁵ A valid question. But, for the sake of our own mental health—pun very much intended—let’s try to look at depression memes in a positive light. For example: we can look at the act of scrolling as an almost trance-like movement of the body, complete with some numbing of the mind perhaps, but we can also look at it through a cognitive lens and see how ‘our physical actions directly link to our thought processes’,⁶ because ‘we think kinesically, too’.⁷ This could mean that our body, although seemingly abandoned during (doom)scrolling is, in fact, pretty active and—dare we even say it?—stimulated.



Fig. 3: 'I had no idea you could buy this, I've been just using vintage cameras', posted on Instagram by @memes_on_film, last accessed on August 15, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CdL5LS_ooOY/.

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- 4 Eleanor Morgan, "Sharing Mental Health Memes is Making Things Worse, not Better," *Refinery29*, last updated June 16, 2021, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/mental-health-memes-humour>.
- 5 Morgan, "Sharing Mental Health."
- 6 Jay Seitz, "The Bodily Basis of Thought," *New Ideas in Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2000): 24.
- 7 William Farr, Sara Price, and Carey Jewitt, "An Introduction to Embodiment and Digital Technology Research: Interdisciplinary Themes and Perspectives," NCRM Working Paper (February 2012), 8, https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/2257/4/NCRM_workingpaper_0212.pdf.

The (Dis)embodied User Has Feelings Too, You Know

Let's talk some more about bodies. We might be inclined to say that a user scrolling through memes—depressive or not—is letting one single finger do all the work for them, and is not bodily involved in the digital realm at all. But is this true? We can, at least, see how 'new forms of "online" contact create new forms of cyberculture, and cybersubjectivity',⁸ which in turn means that 'online encounters are seen as new ways in which the individual is embodied.'⁹ Moreover, 'technological boundaries, in a physical and social sense, are examples of embodiment and presence, e.g. the sense of someone else (through the avatars) being in "your" space.'¹⁰ We might have briefly thought to leave our body at the proverbial door of the internet but our mind knows best, for 'the self and the body can only be formed from the imaginary perspective of others.'¹¹

What is also interesting in this regard is what happens to the neurons in our brain when we so much as see a representation (our good old meme) of an action: 'The firing of the neuron occurs as *if* the observer were actually carrying out the act itself.'¹² And if we believe for a moment that a meme is enough of a representation of an action, then what are the neurological implications of looking at a depression meme cathartically dealing with severe and quite dark—excuse the language—shit? Are we not bound to leave this interaction a little bit changed, hopefully for the better?



Fig. 4: 'We need a pill that makes you feel like you're buying stuff online,' Posted on Instagram by o_naww, last accessed on August 15, 2022. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTDv5c6jvjl/>.

8 Farr et al., "An Introduction," 9.

9 Farr et al., "An Introduction," 9.

10 Farr et al., "An Introduction," 9.

11 Farr et al., "An Introduction," 9.

12 Farr et al., "An Introduction," 8.

There is, as neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett sees in *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain*, something called the ‘language network’; brain regions that process language and control the insides of your body, for example guiding your heart rate up and down. Other people’s words have a direct effect on your brain activity and your bodily systems, so she writes, and your words have that same effect on other people.¹³ A.k.a.: if one reads a meme (Fig. 4) that says *We need a pill that makes you feel like you’re buying stuff online*, then perhaps the darkness that lives in their heart will briefly lit up, if only for a second. Scrolling through memes thus becomes a thing of rare beauty; an ingenious thought process all on its own.

Cognitive Representation? Yes, Please

Thinking even while we scroll mindlessly, you say? Let’s take this even further. What if we look at memes through a cognitive lens and see them not only as relatable and shareable—next to hopefully hilarious—but also as a tool for cognitive representation? Human cognition is always situated in a complex, sociocultural world and cannot be unaffected by it;¹⁴ thus our online world, packed as it is with sociological and cultural dimensions, is a hotbed for cognitive impulses in which the meme belongs to one or more cognitive levels of representation. Furthermore, if the ‘development of cognitive representation [...] occurs through enactive, iconic and symbolic levels of representation’¹⁵ in which the iconic is image-based (recognizing pictures or diagrams as signifiers) and the symbolic is language (or symbol) based, then our online users can experience cognitive recognition from the memetic narratives existing within depression memes. Upon seeing this active cognitive load, what the brain does is encode past experience, processing it so that the experiences may prove relevant and useable in the present.¹⁶

A meme is a story for our brain to comprehend, react to, and link to other, past experiences—in this case, depressive experiences and how to deal with mental illness. The depression meme not only makes *us* feel seen, it makes our *brain* feel seen. Thanks, honey. We needed that. Now what would really make us feel better, is a little laugh...

One Humor, Two Humor, Three Humor

Within depression memes there are different kinds of humor being deployed, something especially interesting when comparing the way depressed users experience these as opposed to those without any symptoms. We already know that depressed users laugh harder than others at these memes.

13 Lisa Feldman Barrett, *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain* (New York: Picador, 2020), 89–90.

14 Farr et al., “An Introduction,” 7.

15 Farr et al., “An Introduction,” 6.

16 Farr et al., “An Introduction,” 6.



Fig. 5: 'Hello darkness my old friend. Darkness (2 days later): Sorry just saw this', posted on Instagram by @disturbingzone, accessed last on August 15, 2022. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdAii3Ms-EM/>.

Studies—from the same researchers at the Northumbria University—further show how, compared to non-depressed individuals, those with symptoms of depression reported increased ratings of not only humor, but relatability, shareability, and mood-improving potential.¹⁷ Even better: 47 percent of individuals reported engaging with the memes as a way of alleviating psychiatric symptoms.¹⁸

It is, of course, rather uncontroversial to regard humor as a coping mechanism, thus also beneficial for those suffering from depression, but this does depend on *what kind* of humor is active within the meme. For it is true that 'those experiencing symptoms of depression reported greater use of positive self-enhancing humor and less use of self-defeating humor',¹⁹ which is unsurprising given that a depressed user's sense of self is most likely already deflated due to unstable mental health. Even though self-defeating or self-deprecating humor can be relatable indeed, it does not really lift one out of their misery. Liking a silly possum alone in an empty room with a text that says *When you clean your room so good, the only trash left is you* might give you a few laughs (Fig.6), but will most likely not make you feel any less like trash. (Is this a good time to interject how we value and respect you? You are not a possum.)

17 Akram et al., "Internet Memes," 2.

18 Akram et al., "Internet Memes," 2.

19 J. Uekermann et al., "Executive Function, Mentalizing and Humor in Major Depression," *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* 14, no. 1(2008): 60.



Fig. 6: 'When u clean ur room so good that the only trash left is you', posted on Reddit by @u/superbloggity, last accessed on August 15, 2022. Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/jrf69l/god_dont_make_no_trash/.

Against the Tyranny of Happiness

So, if we're not trash, then what are we (online)? Are we that all-too-healthy, skinny blonde girl that uploads a video of what she eats every day, a diet consisting solely of broccoli and vegan chicken? No. Depression memes, thankfully, help debunk this girl's seemingly perfect life. By turning around the tiresome narrative of 'happy' social media in which we see individuals sharing their best selves, best engagement pictures, best smiling selfies—the so-called 'happiness effect' of an online persona—depression memes offer a glimpse of authenticity in this perpetually sunny virtual world. They are here to keep it real. They are here to let us know that, let's be honest, *we all sad here, bitch*. And that's totally fine.

This honesty is, as researcher Lucie Chateau also sees it, precisely the depression meme's appeal: 'To many, the irony that makes depression memes [...] work is in their subversion of the happiness effect and the authenticity imperative.'²⁰ The depression meme lets us be our truest, freest, most miserable self, as 'the meaning to be reconstructed in a depression meme consists of peeling back the layer that demands from us to act as the best, happiest, version of ourselves online.'²¹ So, the depression meme shows the internet's true colors. Moreover, this habitat is intrinsic to its nature, or as Chateau puts it: 'Online, the cultural context in which depression memes have risen to popularity is precisely that which gives them their reason for being. To understand

20 Lucie Chateau, "Damn I Didn't Know Y'all Was Sad? I Thought It Was Just Memes: Irony, Memes and Risk in Internet Depression Culture," *M/C Journal* 23, no. 3 (2020): 4.

21 Chateau, "Damn I Didn't Know," 4.

this, we need to realize that, for the last decade, the symptoms that depression memes cultivate have been lying dormant under the tyranny of the happiness era of social media.²²



Fig. 7: ‘Microdosing hell by waking up every morning’, posted on Instagram by @gothsdoingthings, accessed last on August 15, 2022. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaHytW5P8YE/>.

And although it might seem like we’re rooting for depression memes even more by giving them the badge of online authenticity, if we briefly turn back to their neurological impact, we can ask ourselves how much is too much, or what it does to our brain when we become overexposed: the *doom* in doom-scrolling.

David Eagleman, another neuroscientist, warns us in his book *Livewired: The Inside Story of the Ever-Changing Brain* that ‘what you spend your time on changes your brain. You’re more than what you eat; you become the information you digest.’²³ Should we then, perhaps, collectively go on an anti-depressive information diet?

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

Depression memes can, in short, be seen as humorous tools for building community; activators for cognitive representation that sizzles through not only our brains but also our bodies; tools that elevate, albeit briefly, depressive psychiatric symptoms; plus, an—again excuse the language—authentic fuck you to all the fake, not-really-that-happy online personas out there.

22 Chateau, “Damn I Didn’t Know,” 3.

23 David Eagleman. *Livewired: The Inside Story of the Ever-Changing Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books), 143.

While looking at depression memes, we realize that not only are we not trash, we are treasure. Our mind and body react as one, even online, making stories in our heads where there once were only memes. To finish up with a personal favorite, here's Oliver Sacks in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat*, ending our tale on a positive note: 'It is this narrative or symbolic power [of cognitive representation] which gives a sense of the world—a concrete reality in the imaginative form of symbol and story—when abstract thought can provide nothing at all.'²⁴ Memes can be our symbols, our stories, our fuel for a healthy mind. We're not lonely, for we will always have memes.

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24 Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat* (London: Picador, 1985), 174.