Memefying Mental Illness: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Mental Illness Portrayals in #Depressionmemes on Instagram

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Internet memes account for a substantial proportion of depression-related content on social media. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to how mental illness is portrayed in social media memes. This article presents the findings of a qualitative content analysis of depression memes on Instagram. We examined how mental illness, potential countermeasures, and individuals living with depression are represented in the memes. Findings show that the memes predominantly displayed subjective experiences and individual struggles of living with mental illness. Mental health issues were portrayed as uncontrollable conditions, overpowering the individual, and thus largely unchangeable. Treatment options and coping skills were presented as ineffective or even counterproductive. Moreover, the depression memes criticized misperceptions of mental disorders and unrealistic societal expectations toward affected individuals. Against this backdrop, the article discusses the potential short-term and long-term implications of exposure to depression memes on social media.

Keywords: memes, social media, mental health, depression, Instagram

The portrayal of mental illness in the media significantly influences society's understanding of these conditions. Media representations can shape perceptions about the causes and symptoms of mental illnesses, influence beliefs about treatment options, and, when harmful, contribute to the stigmatization of those affected (Wang, 2019). Additionally, how mental illnesses are depicted in the media offers valuable insights into the broader social discourses and attitudes surrounding these conditions (Ohlsson, 2018; Pavlova & Berkers, 2020). Questions about the accuracy and potential harmfulness of media representations have been extensively studied in the last couple of years. For traditional mass media, it has largely been concluded that portrayals of mental illness are inaccurate, undifferentiated, and potentially stigmatizing—with possible negative consequences on public discourse and those affected by mental health issues (Pirkis & Francis, 2012). However, findings on social media communication about mental illness, including how it portrays disorders and shapes related narratives, are mixed and indicate both negative

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and positive implications (e.g., Budenz et al., 2020; Lu, Pan, Liu, & Wu, 2021; Naslund, Bondre, Torous, & Aschbrenner, 2020).

One significant type of social media content that constructs and conveys portrayals of mental illness is Internet memes. A recent analysis of the hashtag #depressed on Instagram revealed that more than a third of the posts associated with the hashtag featured memes and similar playful content (McCosker & Gerrard, 2021). Moreover, memes are a relevant research subject because, unlike journalistic or predominantly informational content, they use humor and visual communication to portray serious issues such as suicidal ideation (Beach, 2021). Despite their popularity, memes, and particularly the way they depict mental illness to date, "remain[s] poorly understood" (Akram & Drabble, 2022, p. 2). Specifically, memes explicitly relating to mental illness (e.g., so-called depression memes) and how they portray mental illness have received scant scholarly attention. To address this research gap and investigate the content of depression memes, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of 400 memes posted under the hashtag #depressionmemes on Instagram. The specific goal of the study was to examine how mental health issues, countermeasures, and individuals living with mental illness were depicted in the memes.

Mental Illness Representations on Social Media

Social media has decisively transformed public discourse about mental illness (Issaka, Aidoo, Wood, & Mohammed, 2024). Due to their participatory nature, social media platforms allow for the sharing of experiences and representations of mental illness, supporting open communication about this sensitive health topic (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016). Social media platforms enable individuals experiencing mental health conditions to contribute to portrayals of mental illness by sharing their stories, expressing their emotions, and creating their own mental illness-related content (Hussain, 2020). As a result, social media is filled with personal accounts and stories of living with mental illness (Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte, 2017). Particularly on image-heavy platforms such as Instagram, these "visual illness narratives" (Hussain, 2020, p. 245) are frequently shared.

However, the implications of social media communication about mental illness are not exclusively positive. Scientific evaluations oscillate between high hopes for positive change and concerns about harmful effects: On the one hand, studies show that social media can promote self-disclosure, give voice to those affected by mental illness, and provide crucial social support to cope with mental health issues (Andalibi et al., 2017; Atanasova, Koteyko, Brown, & Crawford, 2019; Jamil, 2020; Kantrowitz-Gordon, 2013; Smith-Frigerio, 2021). Similarly, regarding the portrayal of mental illnesses on social media, studies have found that the content entails more or less specific medical information and that representations of mental health issues are predominantly medically accurate (MacLean, Basch, Reeves, & Basch, 2017; Mikhaylova, 2023).

On the other hand, empirical evidence suggests that social media use may worsen the symptoms of mental illness for some individuals (Naslund et al., 2020). Moreover, some social media representations may perpetuate stereotypes and paint distorted images of symptoms, treatments, and individuals suffering from mental health issues (Atanasova et al., 2019; Budenz et al., 2020). Additionally, studies highlight the spread of misinformation and negative representations of treatment options (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2021; Joseph et al., 2015). For example, a study found that antidepressants were frequently depicted as

ineffective and viewed negatively in Instagram posts (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2021), potentially shaping user perceptions unfavorably.

The mixed findings about portrayals of mental illnesses on social media suggest that this variability is influenced by several factors, including the platform, content type, specific health issue, content producers, and the commercialization of the issue. For example, platforms like Instagram and TikTok often prioritize visually engaging, personal, and potentially sensationalized content, whereas forums like Reddit might foster more in-depth and nuanced discussions. These distinctions underscore the need for further research to better understand and differentiate the diverse representations of mental illness across various social media platforms. Moreover, more differentiated research on the effects of the content is needed.

The way mental illness is expressed, represented, and discussed in social media spaces matters for how mental health issues and individuals living with them are perceived both publicly and individually. For example, stereotypical representations on social media may reduce users' support for individuals with mental illness and may also be detrimental to the affected individuals' self-perception (Myrick & Pavelko, 2017; Wang & Liu, 2016). Trivializing or stigmatizing portrayals of mental illness may hence contribute to stigmatization and self-stigmatization. Furthermore, the way mental illness is framed in terms of responsibility matters for individual perceptions of mental health issues: Empirical evidence suggests that emphasizing the responsibility of the individual for the genesis and countermeasures of mental illness—instead of referring to the complex interplay of individual, societal, and environmental factors—may foster negative views: depression-related Instagram posts using individual responsibility framing have been shown to increase attributions of responsibility to the individual, while attributions to society or the social network move into the background (Schaller, Wiedicke, Reifegerste, & Temmann, 2023). On the other hand, exposure to supportive mental illness-related social media content may increase self-efficacy, i.e., the belief that individuals can effectively manage and overcome their mental health issues. Self-efficacy is a crucial factor in medical treatment, such as medication adherence, and, hence, may support the improvement of mental health conditions (McCann, Clark, & Lu, 2008). In sum, how mental illness is depicted on social media shapes user perceptions and can have real-life consequences for those affected.

Research on mental illness portrayals on social media often focuses on information-laden content, such as social media campaigns, support groups, and influencer communication. (Visual) humorous content, especially memes, by contrast, has remained relatively understudied in terms of how it represents and depicts mental illness. In this article, we focus on Internet memes, specifically depression memes, to explore how mental illness is portrayed in visual entertainment content on social media.

Depression Memes on Social Media

As outlined before, social media memes do play a significant role in mental illness content on social media platforms (McCosker & Gerrard, 2021), and hence likely also for public and individual perceptions. Broadly, Internet memes are defined as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance" (Shifman, 2014, p. 41), which are modified and circulated among social media users. Covering an infinitude of different topics from politics and health to everyday experiences, memes typically

combine humor and playfulness with the proliferation of certain stances and positions (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). In doing so, they convey specific ideas and images of societal issues, including health in general and mental illness in particular. In a systematic review by Occa, Chen, and Teffeteller (2024), the authors conclude that memes from the health realm may impact individuals' ideas, attitudes, and behavior about prevention, treatment, and healthcare personnel, and that these memes may help in disseminating information and facilitating social media engagement.

One subtype of memes addressing mental illness is known as depression memes, a term introduced by Beach (2021) and alternatively labeled as "depressive memes" (Akram, Ellis, et al., 2021) or "depression-related memes" (Gardner, Jabs, Drabble, & Akram, 2021). Depression memes are "predominately negative and emotional in nature, often depicting themes pertaining to death, suicide and social isolation" (Gardner et al., 2021, p. 502). Similar to other meme types, and despite the seriousness of their content, humor, irony, and playfulness are key components of depression memes (Chateau, 2020). At the same time, some of the memes have a darker and sadder aesthetic (Akil, Ujhelyi, & Logemann, 2022). Typically, depression memes combine images with short textual captions and express personal experiences of living with mental illness (Gardner et al., 2021). Thus, it can be assumed that depression memes are often created and shared by individuals who themselves suffer from mental health issues. As a subgroup of Internet items referring to mental illness, they constitute an important part of the so-called "Internet depression culture"—a term coined by Chateau (2020) to describe the affective, irony-based networks that are built among social media users in the context of mental illness (para. 2).

The scant existing empirical research on depression memes predominantly focuses on the uses and effects of these memes and their role in coping with mental health issues. Studies on the effects of depression memes indicate that they may support individuals' coping with mental illness through the mechanisms of humor and emotion regulation (Akram et al., 2020; Akram, Irvine, et al., 2021). In particular, individuals affected by depression appear to relate more to the content, find it more amusing, allocate more attention to it, and experience mood improvement as a consequence (Akram et al., 2020; Akram, Ellis, et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2021). Similarly, students who claimed to suffer from an affective mental disorder in an Indonesian study preferred depression memes over other meme types and believed that they helped alleviate their symptoms (Kariko & Anasih, 2019). However, some evidence also suggests negative effects of depression memes on users' mental health and points toward inter-individual differences—especially for depression memes with darker and more negative content. For some users, depression memes may exacerbate depressive moods (Akil et al., 2022), which bears the danger of (long-term) negative health outcomes. Besides research on the use and effects of depression memes, research on their content also needs more scholarly attention.

Portrayals of Mental Illness in Depression Memes

To the best of our knowledge, no empirical study has yet analyzed how mental illness is depicted in depression memes, and only one study has empirically examined the contents of depression memes (Beach, 2021). How mental illness is depicted and constructed in depression memes is, thus, largely unknown. However, existing empirical evidence highlights certain themes and subjects addressed in the memes.

Portrayals of Mental Illness and Affected Individuals in Depression Memes

In their dissertation, Beach (2021) identified four different types of topics presented in depression memes on Reddit: The first topic, the struggle, portrays daily life as a constant battle for those affected by mental illness, highlighting how it complicates everyday experiences. The second topic, self-loathing, presents specific depressive symptoms as triggers for self-hatred and disappointment. The third, authority, addresses questions of ownership and sovereignty over the definition of depressive symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, judgment, and individual experience. Finally, memes on the fourth topic—eagerness to die—jokingly allude to suicide, death, and the practice of joking about suicide itself. While these themes suggest certain aspects of mental illness representations, questions arise about how mental health disorders, treatments, and affected individuals are portrayed in these memes. This is important since mental illness representations in depression memes may shape users' perceptions of mental illness. Moreover, the extent to which Beach's (2021) findings on Reddit depression memes apply to visually focused platforms like Instagram remains unclear. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ: How is mental illness represented in depression memes on Instagram?

To address this research question, we specifically focus on the portrayal of (a) mental health issues, disorders, and their symptoms; (b) potential countermeasures such as therapy, medication, and individual coping; and (c) individuals affected by mental illness.

The Role of Humor in Depression Memes

When studying the contents of depression memes, the style and form, as well as the humor strategies used, also deserve more attention. Often composed of pictures and images, memes typically entail "visual-verbal jokes" (Dynel, 2016, p. 660) that create humorous instances. Particularly for sensitive health topics, such as mental illness, humor may play a decisive role, as it may help overcome stigma and increase the shareability of the memes (Evers, Albury, Byron, & Crawford, 2013). Research has also shown that humor, including humorous memes, may be used as a coping mechanism and can have positive effects on mental health—also among individuals with a depressive disorder (Ayisire et al., 2022; Myrick, Nabi, & Eng, 2022; Schneider, Voracek, & Tran, 2018). However, humor in (digital) communication about illness may have diverging implications, ranging from the normalization of illness and emotional healing to the dissemination of misinformation and the perpetuation of stereotypes (Johnson, 2025).

One subordinate goal of our study was hence to consider the role of humor in depression memes and specifically identify which different humor strategies are employed in the memes, and how they relate to the specific themes, topics, and positions conveyed. To achieve this, we apply Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir's (2003) categorization of humor styles to the contents of depression memes. Originally developed to describe an individual's sense of humor (i.e., a relatively stable personality characteristic), the categorization includes the humor styles affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor. Affiliative humor describes a spontaneous, lighthearted, and anecdotal sense of humor (affiliative humor may be exemplified by the following: "Why did the therapist bring a ladder to the session? To help us reach new heights together"). Self-enhancing humor reflects a

generally humorous outlook on life and oneself, characterized by an uplifting humor type with a positive outlook on negative events (e.g., "Even baddies get saddies"). Both humor styles are constructive, positive types of humor. Conversely, the two latter styles refer to destructive, negative humor entailing disparaging, ridiculing aggression directed against others (aggressive humor, e.g., "This could be us but you're telling me just don't be sad") or against the self (self-defeating humor, e.g., "Me acting shocked because I am sabotaging my own happiness just like I have been doing all my life"). The different humor styles featured in these memes emerge through a particular combination of visual and textual elements. Focusing not only on the explicit content of mental illness representations in depression memes but also on its forms and humorous style allows us to obtain a holistic picture of how these memes potentially contribute to ideas and (mis-)perceptions of mental illness on social media.

Methods

To examine our research question, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of 400 memes shared under the hashtag #depressionmemes on Instagram. The hashtag is flagged by the social media platform and hidden behind a content advisory message offering support and first aid in the case of mental health issues. For the user, the content warning is comparatively easy to circumvent by simply proceeding to the hashtag after the advisory message is displayed. Despite its flagging, the hashtag #depressionmemes is quite popular, with more than 500,000 posts at the time of data collection in 2022.

Ethical Considerations

Both the sensitive health topic of mental illness and the analysis of social media data require particular ethical reflection and precautionary methodological measures. Representations of mental health issues on social media might include potentially harmful content, which needs to be handled with extra care and sensitivity by the researcher. To account for this, although we use exemplifying pictures to illustrate the findings in this article, we refrain from reproducing more explicit and potentially harmful memes referring to (the glorification of) suicidality or self-harm. Moreover, social media data, even when publicly posted, are typically analyzed without the consent of those posting the content (Taylor & Pagliari, 2018). Memes, by nature, are modified, recontextualized, and circulated among social media users in various versions and can thus be considered a less sensitive type of social media content (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Voigts, 2018). However, given the sensitive topic of depression, ensuring anonymity is crucial from the outset of the research process. Thus, when screenshotting the memes, the poster's name and all additional data, except for the posting date, were intentionally omitted. Moreover, if the Instagram handle or name of the poster appeared in the meme, it was blackened out (e.g., see Figure 9).

Sample and Sampling Strategy

We selected 400 memes using the following sampling criteria. Memes had to be:

- tagged with the hashtag #depressionmemes,
- displayed under the category "top posts" on Instagram,
- and posted between December 2021 and February 2022.

Of the memes that met these criteria, we selected the first 400 displayed under "top posts." Instagram sorts hashtags into the categories "most recent" and "top posts," with the latter featuring "those posts that are considered to be the most popular among users of a particular hashtag" (Baker & Walsh, 2018, p. 4559). While the exact algorithmic logic behind this categorization is unknown, it is not only impacted by views and interactions on the social media platform but also by previous usage patterns and preferences. To minimize the impact of previous activities, we accessed and saved the memes using a newly created research account with no prior activities on Instagram. Despite the platform supporting various types of memes (e.g., pictures and videos), we exclusively found pictures combined with short captions or pictures featuring texts or quotes. We took screenshots of the memes, manually saved them in a Word document along with their posting dates, and then individually pasted them into the data analysis software. Duplicates were deleted and replaced by additional memes within the sampling criteria.

Coding Procedure and Coding Scheme

Coding was performed by two coders—the authors of the study—using a collaborative team project in the data analysis software MAXQDA2020. Each coder independently assigned codes to the depression memes in the project, which allowed for making subjective interpretations, commonalities, and potentially different perspectives visible. To ensure intercoder reliability, we employed the principle of communicative validation, discussing potentially different perspectives on the content, as well as further ambiguous or unclear cases (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Our approach followed a qualitative content analysis procedure that combined deductive and inductive coding. This meant that the depression memes were assigned deductive codes derived from theory and applied to the material, as well as inductive codes developed in engagement with the material. Specifically, in the first step, the coders sifted the material and assigned memos and notes to the depression memes to document their initial thoughts. Then, deductive categories derived from theory and previous research were applied to the memes. They included aspects such as self-destructive behavior, the ineffectiveness of medication, and illness as a constant struggle—themes identified in earlier research on mental health-related social media content. One concrete example of these deductive categories is the four humor styles identified by Martin et al. (2003). All humor styles were used as separate deductive categories, and the corresponding codes were applied to the material. Next, inductive categories were developed during coding, which had not been covered by the predefined deductive categories but had emerged from the material. In the last step, the material was re-coded as a whole, the co-occurrence of certain categories was notified, and all memes were cross-checked to establish the definitive coding scheme. Since we aimed to analyze the diverse meanings within the depression memes, following this content-analytical approach meant that each meme was assigned multiple categories rather than being restricted to a single category.

Table 1 provides an overview of the categories of the final coding scheme. The categories developed in the coding process were sorted into the following dimensions: meme topics (e.g., constant struggle, authority, personal relationships), mental health disorders and related symptoms (e.g., eating disorders, bipolar disorder), mental illness depiction (e.g., uncontrollable actor), the portrayal of countermeasures (e.g., ineffectiveness of medication), representations of affected individuals (e.g., passive agents), criticism of societal expectations and evaluations (e.g., false ideas about supposedly effective countermeasures), the

artful means of presentation (e.g., use of pop cultural characters, animals), and humor strategies (e.g., affiliative humor).

Table 1. Final Coding Scheme with Deductive and Inductive Categories.

Dimensions	Categories
Meme topics	Constant struggle
	Authority over mental illness
	Personal relationships
	Everyday impairments and challenges
	Negative emotions
	Suicidality
	Self-harm
	Societal perceptions
	Biological determination
	Countermeasures
Mental health disorders	Depression
	Schizophrenia
	Borderline personality disorder
	Anxiety disorders and Panic attacks
	Eating disorders
	Bipolar disorder
	Body dysmorphia
	Insomnia
	PTSD and trauma
	ADHD
	Diffuse mix
Depiction of mental illness	Autonomous actor
	Uncontrollable actor
	Controlling actor
	Integral part of the self
	Biological and genetic predispositions and causes
	De-medicalization of mental illness
Countermeasures	Ineffectiveness of medication
	Undesirable side effects of medication
	Ineffectiveness of therapy
	Undesirable side effects of therapy
	Deterioration of mental health due to therapy
	(Nonadherence to) individual coping skills
Affected individuals	Domination by external force
	Passive agents
	Overpowered/manipulated by mental illness
	Innocence and blamelessness
	Responsible for genesis and causes of mental illness

	Biologically and genetically determined
	Fabricating mental illness
	Singularity and isolation
	Unable to comply with treatment
	Unwilling to comply with treatment
	Unable to apply individual coping skills
	Self-destructive behavior
Societal expectations and evaluations	Societal ignorance
	Misperceptions of mental illness
	False ideas about effective countermeasures
	Pressure to meet societal norms and expectations
	Inability to comply with norms and expectations
	Reluctance to comply with norms and expectations
Artful means of presentation	Animals
	Pop cultural characters
	Comic style
	Fictional dialogue
	Artful contrasts
	Fictional numbers and statistics
	Visual metaphors
	Screenshot of social media posts
Humor strategies	Affiliative humor
	Self-enhancing humor
	Aggressive humor
	Self-defeating humor

Findings

Our analysis of mental illness representations in depression memes was guided by three different foci: the portrayal of (a) the mental illness(es) and their symptoms; (b) the suggested countermeasures and treatments such as therapy or medication; and (c) the individuals affected by mental illness. Since these elements are predominantly inseparably intertwined within the memes, particularly in the representation of symptoms and affected individuals, we present our findings along more general themes that encapsulate the essence of the mental illness representations across the three foci.

Suffering and Daily Struggle of Living With Mental Illness

Despite their name, the analyzed depression memes addressed a broad spectrum of mental disorders and symptoms, including schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, panic attacks, body dysmorphia, borderline personality disorder, eating disorders, and insomnia. Often, memes depicted a vague mix of symptoms without explicitly naming, describing, or differentiating them. Associated topics such as suicidality and self-harm were addressed in some of the analyzed memes. Unsurprisingly, rather than conveying specific medical information, the depression memes focused on the *subjective experiences and everyday*

challenges faced by individuals with mental health issues. They illustrated the implications of living with mental illnesses such as bipolar personality disorder (see Figure 1), experiences with therapy, negative feelings resulting from mental illness, or struggling with basic self-care due to severe depression. One example of a meme capturing the strains of living with (multiple) mental health issues features the fictional character Ash Ketchum from the Pokémon universe. In the image, Ash is shown screaming on his knees, surrounded by towering, intimidating monsters. Each monster is labeled with terms like "depression," "anxiety," "stress," and "an embarrassing memory from 7yrs ago," symbolizing the overwhelming nature of these struggles (personal communication, December 15, 2021). This emphasis on everyday challenges aligns with Beach's (2021) content analysis, which identified the constant daily struggle with mental illness as a prominent theme in depression memes on social media.

Figure 1. Depiction of subjective experiences and everyday challenges of mental illness (personal communication, December 13, 2021).

Distinctiveness and Isolation Through Mental Illness Experience

The relentless struggle and emotionally exhausting experiences of living with mental illness are also portrayed as a defining characteristic in the memes, which sets affected individuals apart from others. Within this theme, the memes highlight the *singularity and isolation of those affected* and creates a sense of separation from those who do not share similar experiences. The severity and incomparability of their experiences is a common trope and seems to serve as a means to differentiate between an in-group (people affected by mental health problems) and an out-group (mentally healthy people). It is repeatedly emphasized that individuals with mental health issues undergo hardships incomprehensible to others, isolating them from the "mentally healthy" majority (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). In this context, it is striking that one of the two negative humor types is used: either self-defeating humor, where people ridicule themselves for being different and peculiar, or aggressive humor, where other people are ridiculed for not being able to understand or relate to their hardships. For example, one meme within this category shows a tweet reading, "Oh you have a weighted blanket? Haha that's cute, I sleep with the crushing weight of all my failures & shortcomings" (personal communication, December 12, 2021). This specific humor pattern

underscores the negativity of the experience while simultaneously reinforcing the divide between an imagined in-group (self-defeating humor) and out-group (aggressive humor).

Figure 2. Singularity and isolation of individuals affected by mental illness (personal communication, December 13, 2021).

Figure 3. Singularity and isolation of individuals affected by mental illness (personal communication, January 6, 2022).

Personification of Mental Illness as an Overpowering Force and Deflection of Responsibility

In the analyzed depression memes, the depiction of *mental illness as an autonomous, uncontrollable, and controlling actor* interfering with individuals' lives against their will also become visible. The affected individuals are portrayed as lacking control over their lives and being manipulated by the

mental illness. To highlight this *domination by an external force* and *lack of agency*, mental illness is repeatedly personified through pop culture characters in the memes. For example, one meme depicts panic attacks as Omni-Man, a character from the animated series *Invincible* (Kirkman, 2021). In this meme, Omni-Man effortlessly defeats the individual's attempts to resist the panic attack, symbolizing the *overpowering nature of the mental illness* (see Figure 4). Another meme exemplifying this aspect features a fictional dialogue between the self (labeled "Me") and the mental illness (labeled "My depression & anxiety"), which is embodied by a character from the animated TV series *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Hillenburg, 1999). The "Me" character expresses feelings of happiness and stability in the meme, to which the mental illness character responds with a forceful "You WHAT," suggesting a reassertion of control over the individual's mental state (personal communication, December 23, 2021).

Figure 4. Mental illness as an independent, uncontrollable actor (personal communication, December 23, 2021).

The personification of mental illness as an overpowering force is closely interrelated with the deflection of personal responsibility. In addition to the use of animated pop culture characters, some depression memes employ images of cute animals combined with positive self-enhancing humor to underscore the *innocence and blamelessness of individuals suffering from mental illness*. This way, the depression memes effectively shift the responsibility for the actions that are (allegedly) caused by the mental illness away from the individual and attribute them to the external agent of mental illness instead. One illustrative example features a photo of an uncontrollably moving cat knocking over its pet bowl, accompanied by the caption: "I am a stack of bones controlled by a meaty electrical circuit. I am not responsible for my actions." (personal communication, December 23, 2021). Another meme depicts a cute kitten hanging its head, with the accompanying text, "Sorry for acting like that, it will happen again" (see Figure 5). By associating the "Me" with cute animals, affected individuals are depicted as lacking personal agency, control, and accountability over their recurring behaviors. They appear helpless in the face of their illness, yet acutely aware that their own behavior is harmful to them.

Figure 5. Immutability of the mental illness (personal communication, December 22, 2021).

Depiction of Essentialist Beliefs and Immutability of Mental Illness

Although mental illness is portrayed as an external agent in the memes, it is simultaneously depicted as an inseparable element of the self and identity of those affected. Though seemingly contradictory at first, both aspects underline the immutability of mental health issues and the individual's inability to control them. One category belonging to this pattern is the portrayal of *mental illness as an integral part of the self.* This portrayal reflects so-called essentialist beliefs about mental illness, which suggest "that the disorder is caused by something inside the person that is core to their identity" (Peters, Menendez, & Rosengren, 2020, p. 1318). In addition to the previously mentioned notions of blamelessness for certain behaviors, individuals and their predispositions are depicted as the irrevocable cause, object, and vessel of their (mental health) problems, and therefore, again, not responsible. The essentialist "something" inside the person is repeatedly attributed *to biological and genetic predispositions as a cause for mental illness*, and the brain and the hormone system are mentioned as determining factors. For example, one meme depicts a brain suffering from depression compared with a manic brain, illustrating the varying cognitions and symptoms resulting from both (see Figure 6).
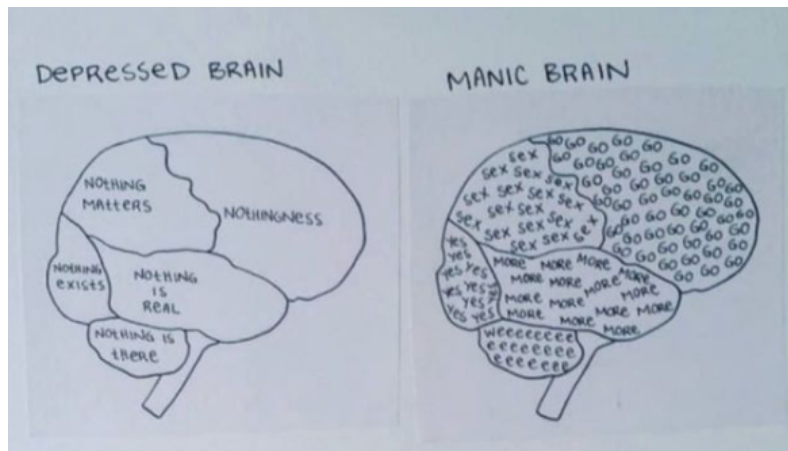
Figure 6. Mental illness as an integral part of the self (personal communication, January 6, 2022).

In this context, besides this attribution to biological factors, a de-medicalization of mental illness can be observed. Here, mental health problems are presented as an involuntary *fabrication by those affected* rather than the result of an actual illness. For instance, one meme illustrates this by stating, "I've got 99 problems and 86 of them are completely made up scenarios in my head that I'm stressing about for absolutely no reason" (personal communication, December 14, 2021). Here, mental illness as a pathological condition is deferred, while the negative implications on everyday life are still emphasized.

The perceived immutability of mental illness is not only reflected in the portrayal of symptoms and everyday situations, but becomes particularly evident in the representations of potential countermeasures. In the depression memes, both medical treatment, such as therapy and medication, and individual coping skills are depicted as either ineffective or counterproductive, suggesting the *ineffectiveness and insufficiency of the available countermeasures*. This includes the depiction of *undesirable side effects and the ineffectiveness of medication*, the failure of therapy, and the *deterioration of mental health due to therapeutic measures*. The ineffectiveness of medical treatment is sometimes also attributed to an *individual's inability or unwillingness to comply with recommended treatment*. For example, one meme illustrates the gradual worsening of an individual's mental health over three therapy sessions, using the depiction of a cyclist inserting a stick into the spokes of their own bike (see Figure 7). Another meme refers to the avoidance of hospitalization by refusing to disclose the severity of mental health issues to medical personnel: This meme shows a house in ruins labeled "My mental health" in the top image; and the same ruins covered by a canvas with a house façade printed on it that is labeled "What I show to avoid hospitalization" in the bottom image (personal communication, December 15, 2021).

Figure 7. Ineffectiveness of medical treatment (personal communication, December 24, 2021).

The application of individual coping skills as another potential countermeasure is often also depicted negatively in the analyzed memes. In this context, individuals affected by mental illness are portrayed as *incapable of applying constructive coping skills*, instead behaving in a self-destructive manner and resorting to mechanisms that ultimately worsen their mental health (see Figure 8). The portrayal of ineffective countermeasures is notably marked by the use of two types of negative humor. As shown in Figure 8, self-defeating humor is employed, where the affected individual is ridiculed in a harmful way and mocked for their inability to improve. At the same time, aggressive humor is used to target external "enemies," such as the healthcare system or society at large, as seen in the earlier mentioned meme about hospitalization. This dual use of humor creates a compelling tension between the individual's personal responsibility and society's collective responsibility.

Figure 8. Personal inability to apply coping skills (personal communication, December 23, 2021).

Critique of Societal Misperceptions and Pressure to Conform

The social dimension of mental illness already alluded to in the portrayal of countermeasures is echoed in the critique of societal misperceptions and the perceived pressure to conform, both of which are addressed in the memes. Here, societal expectations, judgments, and social norms are explicitly observed and criticized through the lens of individual experience, highlighting the consequences for the affected individuals. One important issue addressed in the depression memes pertains to presumed *societal ignorance and misperceptions of mental illness*. In this context, the memes criticize a lack of general knowledge about mental health issues. For instance, one meme portrays a man talking to a wall with the caption reading, "Explaining to people that you can be stable sometimes and still have bipolar disorder" (personal communication, December 29, 2021). At the same time, the memes criticize *false ideas about supposedly effective countermeasures*, sometimes coupled with well-intentioned but unsolicited advice or popular lifestyle changes often promoted as cures for depression on social media (e.g., veganism or a ketogenic diet). One meme, for example, depicts Heidi, the main character of the children's anime TV series *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (Takahashi, 1974) together with her wheelchair-using friend Clara. In the upper picture, Clara is assigned a speech bubble that reads "I had depression too but then I became a raw vegan," suggesting a potential way to cure the mental illness (personal communication, December 15, 2021). In the bottom picture, Heidi is then seen pushing Clara out of the wheelchair and down a cliff as a reaction to her statement (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Criticism of societal ignorance and misperceptions of mental illness (personal communication, December 15, 2021).

As this figure illustrates, the critique of misperceptions about the causes and countermeasures of mental illness is typically purported by the use of negative-aggressive humor directed against people who disseminate these false ideas. This category thereby corresponds to the theme of *claiming "authority"* over one's own mental illness, which had been previously identified in Beach's (2021) content analysis of depression memes on Reddit.

In addition to this critique of societal misperceptions, the memes also heavily criticize the *pressure to meet prevalent societal norms and expectations*, which is depicted as particularly difficult for people suffering from mental health issues. In this context, the memes highlight the need to hide mental illness to function in a performance-based postmodern society, at the workplace, and within social relationships (see Figure 10). Depression memes suggest that to be socially accepted, affected individuals must conceal their mental health issues.

Figure 10. Criticism of pressure to comply with social norms and expectations (personal communication, December 30, 2021).

However, this necessity to meet societal expectations is contrasted by the inability or *reluctance to comply with these societal norms and expectations* by individuals suffering from mental illness. In this context, the individual struggle becomes apparent again, with people affected by mental health issues being portrayed as not willing or not capable of carrying out behavior that is socially expected of them (see Figure 11). Both the pressure to conform to societal norms and their noncompliance appear to convey an implicit critique of a society that is lacking inclusivity and understanding.

Figure 11. Inability and reluctance to comply with societal norms and expectations (personal communication, December 15, 2021).

Discussion

The goal of our empirical study was to examine how mental illness is represented in depression memes posted under the hashtag #depressionmemes on Instagram. While our analysis covers an under-researched phenomenon and expands the limited research on mental illness portrayals in visual social media content, several limitations need to be noted. The analyzed memes represent only a small segment of depression memes, and the analysis only focuses on a specific hashtag on a particular platform, i.e., Instagram. Moreover, interactions with these posts, such as likes, sharing, or comments, were not examined, although they might add to or even counter the portrayals of mental illness and impact user perceptions. Along these lines, since the study exclusively focuses on content, speculations about potential effects on users must be treated with caution. Despite these shortcomings, the content analysis still provides important insights into representations of mental illness in depression memes.

Five major findings of the qualitative content analysis need to be noted. First, the depression memes predominantly displayed subjective experiences and individual accounts of living with mental illness, underscoring results by Beach (2021) about depression memes on Reddit. Second, mental health disorders were portrayed as uncontrollable conditions that are an integral part of the individual self and thus largely unchangeable. Third, the affected individuals were presented as being overpowered, controlled, and manipulated by their mental health issues, hence lacking responsibility and control over their actions. Being doomed to depression, the isolation and loneliness of those affected also become apparent in the memes, as others can never entirely relate to the subjective experiences of suffering from mental illness. Fourth, and related to the immutability of mental illness, treatment options, and individual coping skills are presented as largely ineffective or even counterproductive—partly due to the affected individuals' incapability to comply with them. This resonates with previous findings by Gupta and Ariefdjohan (2021). Fifth, the depression memes also convey a critique of societal ideas and (mis-)perceptions of mental illness as well as the social norms and expectations that pressure affected individuals.

From a health communication standpoint, our findings suggest that the representation of mental illness might be problematic for several reasons. The depiction of mental illness as an undefeatable entity and of countermeasures being ineffective might weaken individuals' self-efficacy, which constitutes a key factor in coping and recovery. Moreover, the dissemination of essentialist beliefs bears certain risks. Suggesting that the illness is an unchangeable part of the individual with a natural, biological rather than a socially constructed basis may inform stereotypes and foster (self-)stigmatization among users of the memes (Haslam & Ernst, 2002). The depiction of affected individuals as lonely, isolated, and misunderstood might also increase the risk of worsening the symptoms of individuals with affective disorders (Naslund et al., 2020), and could possibly discourage them from seeking support. Furthermore, depression memes attribute causal responsibility to individuals and their largely unchangeable personality, which may increase attributions of responsibility to the individual (Schaller et al., 2023).

Finally, many of the aspects mentioned in the memes are in line with the narratives expressed by people who are living with depression (Hussain, 2020), e.g., dysfunctional thoughts about the self, feelings of worthlessness, difficulties in performing daily tasks, challenges in help-seeking, or struggling in social interactions. From the perspective of narrative therapy, these repeated narratives may impact a person's identity

and reinforce problematic storylines about their lives, making it important to explore ways of re-authoring these stories to highlight strengths, resilience, and possibilities for change (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

While being able to express negative emotions and tell one's own stories is an important and helpful feature of social media, being confronted with these ideas regularly might perpetuate these feelings. Given these aspects and the algorithmic logics of social media platforms, long-term exposure to the memes might potentially be problematic, especially in "online communities where people can feed off each other's negativity and reinforce ideas and beliefs through repeated exposure within a closed system" (Ahuja & Fichadia, 2023, para. 2). Although research suggests that depression-related hashtags promote dispersive practices of self-expression rather than contributing to the formation of a tight-knitted community (McCosker & Gerrard, 2021), they might still circulate within already existing, more or less secluded social media communities, and contribute to the spread of potentially harmful ideas and perceptions. Along these lines, scholars have recently also pointed toward an increasing tendency for "romanticization" (Issaka et al., 2024, p. 221), "glorification" (Ahuja & Fichadia, 2023), or "glamorization" (Jadayel, Medlej, & Jadayel, 2017, p. 465) of mental health issues on social media that might potentially be promoted by the dissemination and consumption of humorous depression memes. As a consequence, while depression memes may support short-term coping among those affected (Akram & Drabble, 2022), they might contribute to the cultivation of problematic perceptions of mental illness and affected individuals in the long haul.

At the same time, there might also be potential positive effects of exposure to depression memes: The memes may enable practices of self-expression and identity performance and strengthen feelings of connectivity and collective affectedness for the users (Chateau, 2020). For example, the in-group and out-group narratives that we found in the depression memes might instill a sense of shared identity, mutual understanding, and social support, which could in turn have positive effects on depression symptoms or well-being (Lu et al., 2021). Additionally, the strong critique of societal ideas and expectations related to mental health issues suggests an activist stance and might foster the impression among affected individuals that they belong to a peer network (Naslund et al., 2020). Lastly, the humor and playfulness of the memes may alleviate the burden of suffering from mental illness and may even have positive effects on individuals' health (Bennett & Lengacher, 2008).

To determine the effects of depression memes and their potential long-term implications for individuals, future studies should increasingly focus on users, their perceptions, and their general mental illness-related social media practices. This refers to both media effects studies and media use(r) studies, as it is crucial to also examine how user practices—the creation, sharing, and processing of depression memes and mental illness narratives—are embedded in everyday lives (Feuston & Piper, 2019). Nicomedes et al. (2024), for example, investigated user perceptions of suicide memes. In their study, a multitude of different perspectives on the memes became visible. While some memes potentially contributed to destigmatization and created a sense of relatability for those affected, others were perceived as potential triggers or inappropriate. The study also suggests that perceptions highly depend on the poster and that users' perspectives should be included in future research. Now that our study has provided further insights into the presentation of mental illness, future studies on depression memes should also take the contexts of their production, dissemination, and consumption into account.

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