

Introduction and Definitions

In this postmodern age of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1988), where the internet has shrouded tangible human contact in a cybernetic blanket, popular culture is as elusive to define as it is to keep up to date with. Here, popular culture will be defined as the Internet, the vehicle most complicit in the fabrication of our contemporary virtual existence. Psychiatry is as difficult to qualify as popular culture, encompassing “the study and treatment of mental illness, emotional disturbance and abnormal behaviour” (Oxford University Press, 2016). This essay will thus shine a light on the portrayal of mental illnesses within a socio-culturally relevant and recent mode of Internet communication: memes.

The term ‘meme’ was first used by Richard Dawkins (1989, p.199) when describing them as “self-replicating” units of cultural information, that is, the essential components of human psychiatry: emotions, behaviours, thoughts, identity. Since then, theories of ‘radical memetics’ have placed memes at “the center of a materialistic theory of mind and personal identity” (Poulshock, 2004, p.68). Dawkins (1989, p.352) explains the way memes can shape human nature in a discourse analogous to evolution. Proposing that memes “physically reside in the brain,” (Dawkins, 1989, p.109) he describes them like genes, evolving through user variation. As the etymology of ‘meme’ is “to imitate,” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2016) what sexual reproduction is to evolution, imitation (with slight variation) is to memes. As such, memes participate in the struggle for survival: popularity or rather, virality.

Most frequently in the form of image macros¹, internet memes range from short videos to blocks of text copied-and-pasted on Internet platforms. The most typical feature of Internet memes is humour, usually that which focusses on “social commentary or an evaluation of everyday situations” (Milner, 2012, p. 142-143.) Here it should be stressed that this quotidian relatability is imperative to the success of a meme.

¹ An image macro is the most common type of meme with an image, usually drawn from a set of known images understood by many Internet users, with text above and below.

The Helpful Meme

Grounded in humour and relatability, the meme is most helpful to psychiatry in its capacity to be an online adjuvant to therapeutic psychiatry. While tangible human contact and the outside world are well-documented beneficial forces for mental health, memes, as the contemporaneous virtual form of human communication (Miltner, 2014), remain an untapped resource for psychiatrists.

This beneficial element exists in the meme's ability to enhance patient treatment, mainly through humour. Against experiences of alienation, misunderstanding and disempowerment, humour within memes can act as an adjuvant to psychiatric therapy (Kuiper, 2012, p. 481). This is grounded in the "affiliative humour" (Gelkopf, 2011, p.3) of the meme, that is, one which fosters an insider group of users who relate to a shared experience. In this, memes generate a safe online space for psychiatric patients, fostering group cohesion, support and interaction (Gelkopf, 2011, p.2-3). In this, they are analogous to group therapy. For example, this meme, which attempts to provide sufferers of Borderline Personality Disorder humorous encouragement to surf urges and act effectively, in line with the skills taught in Dialectical Behavioural Therapy:

When urges pop up

bpdprobs:

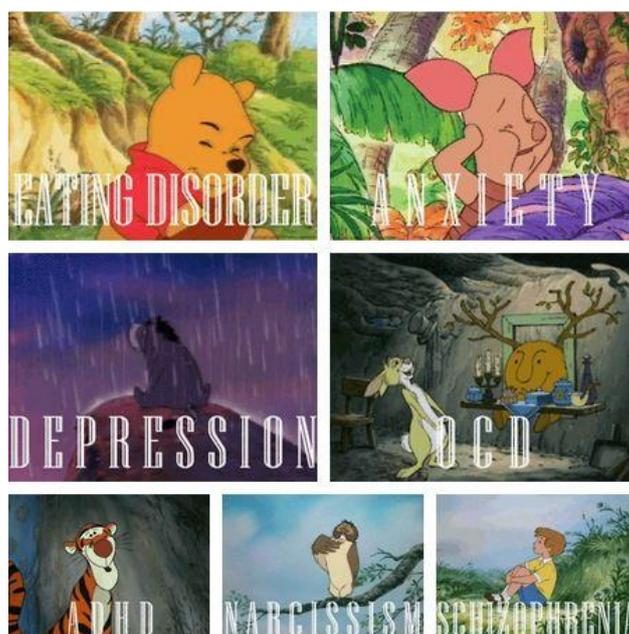


This psychiatric support is furthered by the anonymity of the Internet, the so-called "online disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004, p. 321), which allows patients to secretly and comfortably share private stories. Thus, the therapeutic aim of psychiatry is enhanced by memes which weave personal crises into shared burdens (Josefsson, 2005), forming a quasi-online therapy and inspirational support-base, seen for example in:

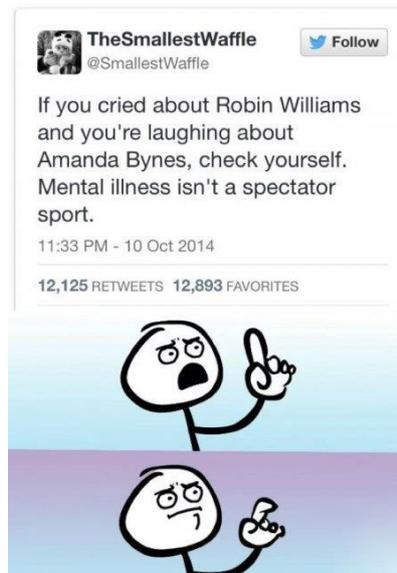


However, the meme is most beneficial to psychiatry in its ability to inspire understanding of, and empathy towards, the psychiatric patient. This is achieved through the representation of psychiatry through a humorous lens, allowing both patients and the 'mentally well' to relate to the content provided. Memes can thus be understood as the 'new empathy,' an emotional contagion of inter-relatedness.

The influence of the Internet on culture has been well-studied, with new forms of 'Internet speak' being assimilated into the Oxford English Dictionary every year (Furedi, 2014). Therefore, memes harbor a potential to shape human understanding. Shaping micro-level interactions between individuals, and macro-level trends and social phenomena (Shifman, 2013, p. 365), the meme then is capable of dismantling the stigma of mental illnesses, fostering greater empathy towards patients, and educating the mass populace. For example, this meme uses the relatable, well-known profiles of Winnie the Pooh characters to educate and provide insight into the characteristics of psychiatric illnesses:



Further, in their “group affiliation,” memes can transmute individual anguish of the psychiatric patient into righteous anger, a call for action, or social change” (Corrigan and Watson, 2002, p. 38-44; Kidd et al., 2009, p.1427). Harnessing the positive flurry of attention given to psychiatry following the suicide of actor, Robin Williams, this meme highlights the silent nature of mental illness which often means patients are misunderstood, alienated and berated. This meme draws particular attention to Amanda Bynes², whose public humiliation and downfall can also be attributed to mental illness, but wasn’t by social media, exposing inherent hypercriticisms, attributional biases and judgmental flaws in society:



As such, memes, capable of ‘going viral’ and influencing countless people around the globe, can turn public attention to the field of psychiatry. In this, psychiatry can be better understood, less feared, and more accepted by society at large, which can only encourage further support for the profession and its patients.

The Harmful Meme

Dawkins conceives of the possibility that, like genes, certain memes can have detrimental effects on hosts, and yet continue to selfishly spread for their own virality (Dawkins, 1989, p. 352). Then, memes which may help the portrayal and therapeutic work of psychiatry, can also harm the mentally ill patient, fostering a humour that only belittles, normalizes and over-simplifies mental illness.

² Amanda Bynes was a popular actress who “lost it” in October 2014, being arrested for driving under the influence, engaging in drugs, and various other public misdemeanours.

While meme humour can create a sense of community for patients, it can also create a “self-defeating” humour which degrades the patient, prompting damaging psychiatric consequences (Kuiper, 2012: 481-482). For example:

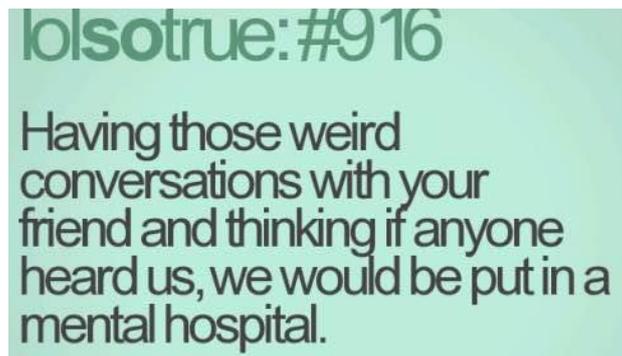
When you tell him you're bi but leave out the polar



This meme is as humorous to bipolar patients as it is damaging in its normalization and minimization of the torment of bipolar disorder. Through attributing normal mood swings, relatable to by all humans, to the psychiatric label 'bipolar,' the disorder, which causes considerable dysfunction and suffering to the patient, is reduced to the point of normalization. This has harmful consequences beginning with the creation of humour at the expense of the patient, understanding of the disorder, and enhancement of empathy. In fact, this sort of reductionist, inadequate content of memes has been previously documented as damaging (Raffchia and Lewontin, 2005).

Similarly, in its normalization of bipolar, this meme invalidates the bipolar patient, forcing them to question their entire diagnosis and mental state. Further, with the entire amorphous monolith of the 'Internet' mocking them, the bipolar patient may become overwhelmed with alienation and stigmatization. The methods through which “public stigmas” have been internalized into “self-stigmas” has been well-documented in psychiatry (Corrigan and Watson, 2002, p. 36-37), thus this meme undoes the therapeutic work of the psychiatrist for the patient, and the push of psychiatrists to have their profession, and patients, taken seriously.

This dismissal of the severity of psychiatric conditions and the subsequent necessity of therapy, casts psychiatry in a “damagingly negative light” (Hopson, 2014, p. 175), in line with popular culture’s demonization of the profession. For example, here, psychiatry is reduced to a study of the alienating and ‘weird.’ Further, for the in-patient, this meme’s only take-away is the understanding that the rest of society deems them abnormal and dangerous, again harming the portrayal of psychiatry in society:



Hence, memes, like genes have a certain capacity to shape the cultural psychiatry of humanity. When memes are reductive, simplistic or inadequate in their portrayal of psychiatry, the consequences are undeniably damaging. However, the most damaging category of meme is that which exploits its inherent educative power to teach what is blatantly false. For example:



It has taken decades for psychiatry to popularize and credit the biological model of psychopathology, and the subsequently crucial role of psychotropics within society (Tavakoli, 2014, p.1). When memes like this are circulated to countless individuals, this work is instantaneously erased. However, this is perhaps even more damaging to the medicated patient, who is immediately invalidated, afraid, and driven to stop taking their medication for fear of 'stigma.' As the critical role of psychoactive medications in psychiatric treatment is debased and ridiculed this meme is indisputably harmful to the portrayal of psychiatry in popular culture.

Conclusion: Where to now?

As such, memes have an irrefutable power to shape popular culture and human psychiatry, whether for good or bad. Given the reach, ubiquity and power of the Internet, memes are ultimately a vehicle to be harnessed by the psychiatric community to educate, enlighten and empower patients and society, bringing further awareness to the credibility and significance of the profession, given its increasing number of patients.

However, what role does the meme have beyond the screen? Besides being mere trends, and creating short-lived awareness for an issue, the potential of memes to incite conversation in avenues which matter has been limited. Perhaps this is not a reflection of the insubstantial nature of the meme however, but rather begs the question, what will it take for us to treat psychiatry with the significance the undeniably humanistic profession deserves?

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Note: the memes – in the true style of memes – were not able to be traced to a single creator.