

Therapy Is Expensive, Memes Are For Free:  
Reconceptualizing Resilience and Care  
Through an Auto-Theoretical Analysis of Meme Discourses and Cultures

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## **ABSTRACT**

Existing literature has examined psychological and administrative treatments for mental health challenges in higher education, exploring the impact of traditional therapy as well as various palliatives (usually focusing on harmful methods, such as substance abuse) (Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000; Brown & Schiraldi, 2004; Kadison, 2005; Cook 2007; Lee et al., 2014). Given that the positive impact of informal treatments remains understudied, it is beneficial to explore less institutional and less traditional – yet positive – methods students can (and do) seek to cope with stress or depressive symptoms. One such method involves online humor, such as engaging in meme culture as a form of social support. This study investigates, auto-theoretically, the value of using memes and meme culture as one such palliative towards coping with trauma-induced depression and anxiety. More specifically, how my personal involvement with memes and meme culture (a culture sharing much of the same ideologies found in Sick Woman Theory) encouraged me to reconceptualize resilience and care in a way that allowed me to generate productive coping strategies, ultimately allowing me to achieve genuine recovery and long-term resilience. The results of this research, although personal in nature, yield implications suggesting that memes are valuable tools whose cultures can very powerfully contribute to one's recovery, particularly in a socio-economic climate and academic context wherein traditional therapy is either inaccessible or ineffective. Forbye, this study acts as a stepping-stone towards other novel multidisciplinary explorations of memes and meme culture.

## **RÉSUMÉ**

Les textes académiques ont depuis longtemps examiné les traitements psychologiques et administratifs pour les maladies mentales rencontrées par les étudiants collégiaux et universitaires, explorant l'impact de la thérapie traditionnelle ainsi que diverses options palliatives (se concentrant généralement sur les méthodes nocives, telles que la toxicomanie) (Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000; Brown & Schiraldi, 2004; Kadison, 2005; Cook 2007; Lee et al., 2014). Étant donné que l'impact positif des traitements informels reste un domaine sous-étudié, ça serait avantageux d'explorer des méthodes moins institutionnelles et moins traditionnelles – mais positives quand même – que les étudiants peuvent chercher à gérer le stress ou les symptômes dépressifs. Une telle méthode serait de s'engager dans l'humour et la culture des mèmes internet comme une forme d'aide social. Par des moyens auto-théorétiques, cette étude examine la valeur de l'utilisation des mèmes internet et de la culture des mèmes internet comme soins palliatifs pour faire face à la dépression et à l'anxiété (induites par psychotraumatisme). Plus précisément, la façon dont ma investissement personnel dans les mèmes internet et la culture des mèmes internet (une culture qui partage essentiellement les mêmes idéologies que celles de la Théorie de la Femme Malade) m'a encouragée à reconceptualiser la résilience et des soins d'une manière qui m'a permis de générer des stratégies d'adaptation et de survie productives, me permettant de récupérer et de réaliser de la résilience à long terme. Les résultats de cette recherche, bien qu'ils soient de nature personnelle, suggèrent que les mèmes internet sont des outils utiles, dont leurs cultures peuvent contribuer à la guérison mentale, en particulier dans un climat socio-économique et un contexte universitaire où la thérapie traditionnelle est soit inaccessible, soit inefficace. En outre, cette étude agit comme une étape académique préliminaire vers d'autres explorations multidisciplinaires nouvelles des mèmes internet et de leurs cultures.

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Thank you for not dying on me as I wrote this thesis. Rest easy now.

Good night, sweet prince.

TL; DR

thnks fr th mmrs

no one should take themselves so seriously

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **PREAMBLE TO THE PREAMBLE**

When I was 17, I left my small town and sheltered life for a big city with untold freedoms and possibilities. I was set to begin a new chapter of my life: an undergraduate degree at McGill University. However, my optimism and excitement quickly dissipated as I struggled to adjust to an independent, unstructured lifestyle. Having navigated the first year of my bachelor's degree very naively, I finished my freshman year beset by anxiety brought on by transitional and academic stress. Rather foolishly, I chose to not seek treatment for this anxiety: Out of fear of judgement, I sought neither therapy or medication, nor did I even confide in friends or family. As I entered my sophomore year, I vaguely promised myself that things would get better. And by that I meant that I would pull myself together and “suck it up”, seek better study strategies, overcome my anxiety, and finish my degree – grossly oversimplifying and underestimating how difficult it would actually be to attain these goals.

Naturally, life is never as we plan it, and more often than not is full of surprises (not always pleasant). For example, in my sophomore year, life decided to smack the ever loving life out of me: To simplify a highly traumatic and complicated series of events, on December 5th 2015, I bore witness to the near-death experience of a very close friend.

I cannot emphasize enough how sheltered my life had been theretofore my time at McGill, and so nothing in life had prepared me to be in such a precarious position. Despite having no prior experiences to guide me, I desperately tried (and fortunately succeeded in) saving him from accidental overdose. While he lived to fight (read: suffer from alcohol poisoning) another day, I was not able to shake off the stress of that night so easily. I was already ill-equipped for managing my pre-existing anxieties, but the ensuing post-traumatic stress of that night completely broke me.

I trudged through the end of the semester, enfeebled by a seemingly never-ending series of panic attacks. As the winter holidays rolled around and I returned home to my family and

small town, I attempted to feign normalcy by bottling up my emotions (always a healthy approach to dealing with trauma, of course). When I returned to Montreal, I spent two weeks in bed, crying my eyes out. My life (slowly) resumed but with one very big setback: The fallout of the situation had left me incredibly lonely and alone. The friend who overdosed moved back to his home country; and while we remained in contact, navigating distance, time zones, and our completely different schedules was not exactly easy. I had also grown apart from my close McGill friends of the time: They could not empathize with my situation and distress, so we parted ways. Apart from a few remaining trusted friends, I refused to confide in anyone (even family) about my trauma for fear of judgement.

In those two weeks, I hit rock bottom. Surviving on a single English cucumber, a loaf of bread, and minimal amounts of water, I achieved what the Jenny Craig program could only dream of delivering and lost seven kilograms in those two weeks. Unfortunately, the trade-off was that I also lost all my physical strength, mental willpower, and emotional stability. Of the few hours of the day I managed to stay awake, most of these were spent browsing memes on my phone. For the uninitiated, a meme is defined as a humorous and shareable picture with an embedded resonating message (Zittrain, 2014). More specifically, internet memes are pieces of digital content—such as images, videos, or any other digital format— that spread through various iterations, and quickly become online social phenomena and shared cultural experiences (Shifman, 2014).

My love for memes began in highschool and has never wavered since. But at that time – at my absolute worst – I could only bring myself to indulge in depression and anxiety related memes. These validated my feelings and pain by openly and honestly expressing thoughts similar to my own. In some ways they allowed me to empathize with myself and normalize my feelings; they even made me feel less alone – there were other people who understood the pain I felt! They were also how I signalled to my remaining friends that I was not okay; and due to their humorous nature, I was able to reassure myself that I was not a burden when I sought their support. Though this practice may seem similar to how some may use self-deprecating humor to express their difficult situations, ultimately I found it less harmful as I was simply describing my situation (and not doing so at my own expense).



But this is not an inspiring story of how I recovered from my trauma by “pulling myself up by the bootstraps”. Rather, it is a confession that I did everything “right” and still failed horribly. I sought out therapy, I tried working through a self-help book, I started exercising regularly, I changed my sleeping, eating, and working habits for the better, I took on creative projects, I attended social events. None of these methods, which relied heavily on me and my willpower, helped beyond providing my life a superficial structure. If anything, they worsened my condition: as every new attempt at recovery failed, my feelings of helplessness and hopelessness amplified.

I soon realized that having access to mental health resources is not enough to overcome anxiety and depression. One of the main reasons why, is due to the Western individualized, neoliberal notion of resilience and recovery that traditional therapy seems to emphasize. The burden of recovery is thrust upon the individual, as they are told that they are the only ones with the “true” power to help themselves; that they should pull themselves up by the bootstraps, and that overcoming trauma is a heroic journey. Once I realized that traditional paths would not work for me, I sought novel palliative approaches.

## **OVERVIEW**

I believe we have become too used to dryly written, convoluted academic texts. I have always been irked by rigid expectations – any boundary that may impede one's creativity or joie de vivre should be challenged. If there is anything to be taken from this paper, it is the importance of protest: Sick Woman Theory protests against capitalistic notions of health, meme "therapy" protests against inaccessible forms of "traditional" therapy, and the writing style of this thesis protests the notion that academia must be unemotional and sterile in order to be valid.

If traditional academia has declared insipidity as it's God given right, then I should be allowed to write as manically as possible – in the name of auto-theory, of course. Attempting to censor or expurgate a very personal account so that it may be "acceptable" by socio-academic standards would not only do a disservice to the power of the account, but it would also defeat one of the main purposes of auto-theory: providing personal, moving descriptions of taboo topics (such as mental illness). Unfortunately, there is still a fine line to be walked here: I am ultimately bound by the manacles of academic traditionalism. So, as always, a healthy balance in life is the best course of action. This paper oscillates, perhaps dizzyingly so, between the personal and the professional – an academic voice and an auto-ethnographic one. I endured a very rocky road to recovery and resilience, and so too shall you now embark on a rocky read in an attempt to extract some kind of value and meaning from this paper. (Good luck, have fun!)

Transitioning to university life is not an easy task, and many students struggle to adjust to the often-stressful lifestyle (Rutter & Sroufe, 2000; Lee, Dickson, Conley, & Holmbeck, 2014). These pressures can instigate or exacerbate symptoms of depression and anxiety in young adults (Rutter & Sroufe, 2000; Lee et al., 2014). This thesis outlines my own undergraduate struggles with depression and anxiety (but with a traumatic twist!) and how the Western neoliberal and individualized conceptualization of care and resilience failed me, and ultimately hindered my recovery. Furthermore, it outlines how I found solace and support through memes and meme culture, as a form of alternative therapy that may be deemed ersatz by some. More specifically, this is the story of how meme culture allowed me to redefine resilience and notions of care in a way that worked for me and allowed me to pave a path to genuine recovery.

In this thesis I explore how my involvement with memes and meme culture (henceforth collectively referred to as meme/culture) promoted my reconceptualization of resilience and care in such a way that permitted me to generate productive coping strategies and achieve genuine recovery. I do so by exploring the unique multimodal affordances of memes, feminist cultures that can be found within meme Discourses, and how these cumulatively allowed me to develop and maintain effective strategies and strong networks of support. Following this overview, I offer a contextual discussion of the conceptual framework and methodology of this work, as well as a rationale for this study. This paper is framed by Sick Woman Theory, a theory which insists that current neoliberal and capitalist regimes are making us and keeping us sick (Hedva, 2016), which in turn supports the position that we must push back against the individualized notion of [pulling yourself up by the] “bootstraps resilience”. As well, this account is methodologically guided by auto-theory, a term used to describe modern works that integrate auto-biography with theoretical discourses “in ways that transgress genre conventions and disciplinary boundaries” (Fournier, 2018, n.p.). Influenced by the tenets of Sick Woman Theory, this exploratory work looks to highlight the shortcomings of Western notions of resilience and care, particularly in the scope of North American academic institutions. Going further, this personal account details a novel approach to palliative care through meme/culture, and how that experience ultimately guided the journey of my own recovery and resilience.

The overarching question that guides this thesis is:

*How did my involvement with meme/culture promote my reconceptualization of resilience and care, in such a way that permitted me to generate productive coping practices and achieve genuine recovery?*

This question is further broken down and answered by addressing:

1. *How did the unique multimodal affordances of memes enable them to be a coping tool through my struggles with trauma and depression?*
2. *How did meme Discourse (and cultures therein) provide a framework which allowed me to pursue a path of productive recovery?*
3. *How did partaking in meme/culture throughout my recovery allow me to develop and maintain sustainable practices of resilience and care?*

## WHY SICK WOMAN THEORY?

### (CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK)

Sick Woman Theory works to understand how “sick” (wherein “sick” can be defined by the individual themselves) womens’ (wherein “women” is defined by identity, not [definitions of] biological sex) pain is frequently delegitimized. Upon studying this theory, it reminded me of my own undergraduate experience of seeking help for my condition, being denied the care I sought, and how such institutional systems of care exhausted me of my limited remaining energy.

As mentioned, my struggles with trauma-induced depression and anxiety began with crying in bed for two weeks, losing seven kilograms and eighty percent of my energy – physical, mental, and emotional. The traumatic events and aftermath of the December 5th event, in short, ruined my young teen life. Dropping from 56kg to 49kg in such a short amount of time led to me losing most of my energy and will to live. (I suspect that this “extreme” lifestyle left my immune system a shoddy mess.) And because when it rains, it pours, I soon after caught a bad cold which left me with an unshakeable cough and even less energy. One of my only friends at the time forced me to go to the McGill clinic. I only agreed because my cough had become excruciatingly painful, but mostly because he physically dragged me out of my bed. As he dropped me off at the clinic, he implored me to ask the doctor for help with my post-traumatic stress. Out of guilt, I acquiesced to his request.

I had grown up believing that admitting to and seeking help for mental health struggles was reprehensible. I believed that if I ever sought professional help, my name would be on a blacklist somewhere that would one day prevent me from any number of professional opportunities. A silly notion (worthy of a tinfoil hat), but one I truly believed due to the stigmatization and demonization of mental illness that is sadly quite prevalent and constantly perpetuated in our societies. However, at that point, I was so devoid of any kind of strength that I immediately broke down and sobbed a confession of my deteriorating condition to the doctor, who was noticeably uncomfortable by my emotional outburst. She told me she could not help me directly, and instead referred me to the McGill Mental Health clinic. When I went to book my appointment with their psychiatric services, I was told I could not be seen until weeks later. Due to the clinic’s reputation of inaccessibility (long wait times, limited appointment

opportunities) I expected this, but it was discouraging nonetheless. Still, the wait times were relatively harmless compared to the emotional damage the actual appointment caused me.

Few things have hurt quite as much as finally meeting with my assigned psychiatrist – an elderly, white man – and his treatment of me during our session. But before I explain why I have chosen to hold a lifelong grudge against this man, allow me to put the general situation McGill Mental Health and McGill Counselling Services into perspective.

A lack of mental health resources seems to be a prevalent issue across many academic institutions. At McGill University, specifically, it is not uncommon to encounter comments from students regarding the difficulties and frustrations they face when seeking access to university mental health resources, particularly appointments with McGill psychiatrists and/or therapists. So I did understand and accept that there would be limited appointment opportunities, or that it would take weeks before I could actually be seen by a practitioner.

However, some time ago, I learned (by word of mouth from a reliable yet uncitable source) that McGill employs fewer than 30 practicing psycho-therapists; in contrast, around 40,000 students are enrolled at McGill annually (“McGill University Enrolment Reports”, 2019). Even if only 11% of this student body population (4400 students) requested counselling services, that would entail [a maximum of] 146 students per every psycho-therapist. (Assuming 30 therapists, this means only 4380 students can secure appointments; 20 are already left out.) Going further, let us assume these practitioners work with students every single day (which I know, for a fact, they cannot; some days they cannot book any appointments at all due to training sessions and miscellaneous meetings). But if they did, on a 9-to-5 schedule (discounting one hour for a lunch break), this would allow one practitioner to see 7 students in a day; meaning 35 (*different*) students in a five-day week. Over the course of a month [4 weeks], this would mean 140 distinct students can receive help from a single practitioner; 6 of 146 students are left out. Already, 200 of the 4400 students have been failed by this system. But ultimately, this kind of practice fails all 4400 students – even the ones lucky enough to be granted appointments. This is because seeking therapy only once a month does very little for anyone who is struggling. (And if my math here was wrong – keep it to yourself, thanks.) So while academic institutions do offer mental health and counselling services, and these services can overcome the first roadblock of

financial inaccessibility for many (either due to a students' insurance status or perhaps these services are simply offered free of charge by the institution), they are rarely truly accessible and there are still many hurdles for students to overcome.

When I first gained access to McGill's Counselling Services, I was very fortunate to be seen every week (or else every other week). Because even in one day (let alone one week, let alone one month), situations for people struggling with depression can change drastically. Truthfully, at the most unstable points of my illness, my situation would change within the hour. It was very disorientating, to say the least. This past year, I resumed counselling at McGill (and again, I was very lucky to be seen at all). Yet this time I was told I could only be seen once a month due to the limitations of this service. I was lucky that, at this point, I had developed my own tried-and-tested coping strategies. As well, I was much more resilient than my teenage self. I am sure that had I received this kind of "help" in my sophomore year, it would have discouraged me just as much as my Mental Health Clinic appointment. In fact, my appointment with McGill Mental Health was one of the biggest setbacks in my overall recovery.

Allow me to spin you a little yarn to elaborate on this statement.

I received a referral to McGill Mental Health on February 11; on February 24, the Mental Health Clinic confirmed they received my request. They eventually contacted me to tell me that I would be seen by a psychiatrist on the 8th of March. What I found particularly ironic was that they had booked me for an early morning time slot (7:30AM on a Tuesday to be precise), considering that when I detailed my situation to their office, I mentioned that for weeks I had been struggling to get out of bed. Clearly, I had missed the memo that depression actually makes you an early bird. Nevertheless, I dragged my limp, lifeless body out of bed and into the clinic.

There, I once again poured my heart out to someone I believed might be able to help me. I was already exhausted having to tell the story to a complete stranger again; but this time I also found myself to be deeply uncomfortable telling this story to a man who could not even fake empathy for me, as he mostly ignored me and chose to scroll through his phone instead. Prior to this experience, I had been apprehensive about seeking "professional help", but his apathy was truly disheartening. I remember holding back the tears welling up in my eyes, and trying my best to push past the lump in my throat as I told him my story. I told him that I was experiencing

cyclical breakdowns – on the 5th of every month (the day of the original incident). I told him how it made me feel hopeless and unstable, and that I wished to regain control over myself and my emotions.

And then he posed the question that has haunted me for the past five or so years:

“Are you sure it’s not just your period?”

I will not deny that menstrual cycles can absolutely wreak havoc on one's hormones, to the point of inducing depressive episodes lasting for days. But given that I had just described the context of my meltdowns to be trauma-induced, I found his response beyond insulting and humiliating. I remember sitting there, eyebrows raised in shock, for several moments before I managed to stutter out a meek response. I felt incredibly embarrassed having to describe my menstrual cycle in order to prove to him that it did not align with my breakdowns. I felt such shame in having to justify my feelings to this man, and having to give him some kind of proof that my emotions and traumatic responses were not “just because of my period”. I burst into tears right after trying to defend myself, not because of the pain I was already dealing with, but because of the pain of having my trauma minimized – reduced to nothing more than typical menstruation symptoms! (It also reminded me of the pain of having my once closest friends downplay and disregard the realities of my anxious and depressive symptoms, but I digress.)

Next, he truly impressed me by crushing what little remained of my spirit:

“I’m sorry, but I can’t help you unless you want to be put on medication.”

I did not.

My whole life, I have rarely resorted to taking ibuprofen for headaches, so to be put on substances that would alter my brain architecture was out of the question. It was not so much that I believed in “natural healing”, but rather that I was still dealing with the early aftermath of my trauma, and the small part of me that remained hopeful for my recovery truly believed I could get through my struggles unassisted (or at least, unaided by medication). As well, to me, using a prescription to recover seemed like a very bandage solution, in the sense that it would simply mask my symptoms – rather than resolve the underlying issues that were making me so unstable. From a more cynical standpoint, I also perceived this suggestion as my psychiatrist seeking to



shirk from the responsibility of actually putting in the work to help me get better. Figure 1 visualizes how I felt about this psychiatrist and the “help” he offered me.

**Figure 1:**

*A meme regarding my feelings towards my ex-psychiatrist.*



And then, he went for the triple whammy:

“Here’s a good self-help book you can try working through!”

At that point, I was beyond exhausted and I felt my anxiety spiking again. I just wanted to go home, curl up in bed and cry. So I conceded, took down the name of the book, and walked home feeling like an empty shell.

The book he suggested was named “Beat the Blues Before They Beat You”. The lighthearted title seemed like another cruel (though hopefully unintentional) reminder that my pain was trivial to this man. I was not dealing with “the blues”, I was struggling with



trauma-induced depression and anxiety. While such books can offer helpful insights, they can also massively downplay the energy, willpower, discipline, and determination it requires to positively shift one's mindset – and none of these things are expendable (or readily available) while struggling with an illness like depression.

And therein lies another issue with the kind of care academic institutions offer: assuming a student is fortunate enough to be offered one of only a handful of available appointments, they must then overcome the challenges of (1) finding an appointment time that does not interfere with their academic schedule (and oftentimes students will skip class to make these rarely afforded appointments), (2) enduring the long wait time until the initial appointment, and (3) coping with the inefficiency of sporadic appointment bookings. Even then, there is still no guarantee they will receive beneficial care, because there is always a chance that they will be assigned to a practitioner who simply does not care.

Depression is already exhausting; when combined with anxiety, even more so. This exhaustion can be further exacerbated by an inability to take care of oneself, which would weaken one's physical state greatly. So to endure this kind of mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion, followed by the exhaustion of dealing with the bureaucracy of neoliberal institutional forms of care, just to be met by the crushing exhaustion of having one's pain delegitimized by a "mental health professional" – at best, it discourages one to ever seek professional help again. Or else, this process can actually deter students from productive means of recovery, and push them towards more harmful forms of "coping" (such as substance abuse). (I have actually met [non-vegetarian] students who would often choose alcohol over meat during their weekly grocery trips, so this really is not such a ridiculously wild statement for me to make.)

Yes, one could argue if these academic institutions fail students so often, why do students not seek external services and independent practitioners for help? The simple fact of the matter is that, unfortunately, being able to access the kind of therapy that truly works for you is an immensely privileged practice. And one of the reasons that I find Sick Woman Theory to be so important for the reconceptualization of resilience and care.

I am immensely privileged myself: I am white-passing (and so, I benefit massively from white privilege and white supremacy). I am able-bodied (and so, I do not suffer from chronic

illness or exhaustion, and I can actually resort to using strenuous exercise to my benefit – as many self help books suggest). Though I am not wealthy (for example, I cannot comfortably afford to regularly see a private psycho-therapist), I still have the immense privilege of not having to worry about housing, food, or prescription medication (to name a few things). Yet despite all the privileges I benefit from in my daily life, I still could not access care that truly helped me. And when I finally did access beneficial care, it was simply due to luck. Even so, soon after, this care became inaccessible to me again (as my therapist left McGill and I could not afford his private practice rates).

I do not write as if Sick Woman Theory describes my situation – because truthfully, while I may have been at the time, I do not think I constitute as a “Sick Woman” in the present day. But it is due to my immense privilege that I can see how invaluable Sick Woman Theory is, especially for those who do not benefit from the same systems and same luck that I do. If this system fails those with the racial, socio-economic privileges that ensure success in our society, how horribly does this same system impact those without such privileges and those who have been systematically set up to fail? I cannot speak to the experiences and hardships faced by those who are less privileged than me, and I do not claim to write this paper as an academic activist. I can only highlight that this is an unempathetic and ineffective system we are navigating. Though I veer away from Sick Woman Theory explicitly, as I highlight my novel form of coping, ultimately, the ideas that guided me to recovery are very much the same ideas touted by Sick Woman Theory.

In the end, memes as artifacts were the bandages I used to treat my depressive symptoms – yet it was the collective care and community support I found and maintained through these artifacts and their feminist cultures that truly allowed me to recover. In a predominantly individualist society, it can be easy to forget the fragile condition of human nature and disregard our inherent need for communal care and strong, meaningful networks of support. When navigating a neoliberal system that alienates us and fails us so often, we are constantly reminded of the pain of struggling alone, and how unattainable bootstraps resilience truly is. My own lived experience was a cold wake-up call to the reality of the uncaring capitalist structures we live by,

and Sick Woman Theory emphasized for me the importance of pushing for collective care and communities of support.

And so, while my own recovery from trauma, depression, and anxiety was mostly due to luck and determination, it was also a fate decided by exhausting every possible option of care until something stuck. In the end, it was feminist meme culture that allowed me to reconceptualize resilience and care, and that allowed me to develop sturdy, caring networks of support alongside sustainable and productive coping strategies. While I do not feel comfortable labeling myself as a Sick Woman, particularly as my condition was comparatively short lived, I benefitted nonetheless from the notions of care encouraged by Sick Woman Theory much more than I ever did from the institutional, neoliberal structures of support – even though these structures have been set up to ensure the success of those as privileged as myself.

### WHY AUTO-THEORY?

It is simple: I am incredibly vain. I want my story permanently published for the world to know. I would like to be applauded for overcoming my trauma and becoming a better person. It is the ultimate act of petty vengeance against my ex-psychiatrist and all those who have ever wronged me (circa 2016).

Just kidding.

Put simply, auto-theory is a feminist practice of writing from one's own lived experiences (Fournier, 2018). While we may be accustomed to the notion that quantitative data is the easiest way to make a convincing argument, more often than not figures and statistics cannot truly convey the seriousness of sensitive matters. To address intimate facets of mental health, such as depression and anxiety, solely through quantitative data seems counterproductive. Numbers and figures tend to detract from the very real and horrible truths of these illnesses and disorders. Sensitive topics such as these, would benefit more from being analyzed through raw and empathetic lenses, capable of moving an audience persuasively and allowing them to truly understand the weight and depth of these matters.

Through auto-theory, and subsequently narrative analysis (a process wherein researchers interpret and make meaning of stories told within research and/or everyday life scopes), highly

moving and persuasive accounts can be written. Through this kind of qualitative data, an audience may be better suited to understand the arguments being made by the research. Put simply, we learn and understand best when we can empathize, relate to, and make connections with the texts we read. Auto-theory also allows for a more accessible kind of research. On a surface level, by doing away with unnecessarily complicated and specific academic jargon, which can convolute and obfuscate the overall arguments being made, research can be disseminated more widely, and break free of academic restrictions and circles. By doing away with the notion that research must be cold and sterile in order to be taken seriously, research can be expressed in more moving ways that genuinely resonate with the reader. Auto-theory is able to push back against such neoliberal expectations and standards of research, and provide arguments that are truly engaging and convincing.

Let me convince you of this.

Most people have (at some point in their lives) accidentally hurt themselves, by a papercut for example. Which is easier to remember: the act of being cut, or the feeling of being cut? We tend to remember the feeling over the exact details of the incident. (Unless it was a particularly remarkable incident, such as accidentally slicing off part of your finger with a potato peeler, in which case your mother will never let you forget it.) We can accidentally cut ourselves in numerous different ways, but the resulting pain(s) we feel tend to be quite similar – varying mostly by scale or spectrum. Similarly, by writing an auto-theoretical account of my experience with depression and anxiety, the reader (that’s you!) may be able to relate to my feelings – maybe having at some point already experienced the things I discuss. If my experiences resonate with someone else’s, they are more likely to be convinced of my argument – because we have felt the same or similar things. Ergo, through empathy there can be greater understanding and agreement.

While I do not write this paper with the intention of touting “meme therapy” as the end-all solution to trauma-induced depression and anxiety, I hope that it can at the very least further convince academics and laypersons alike that neoliberal individualist notions of resilience are often more harmful than helpful. Ideally, I hope that this paper may promote greater consideration towards (feminist) practices of respect, empathy, and accountability, as well

as greater consideration and respect for digital media and cultures (specifically towards meme/culture).

And so, I pose my research questions to show, through my own lived experiences, how cultures of collective care can work – and how they are more effective compared to existing neoliberal notions of care. I believe that this thesis is an opportunity to disseminate my personal findings in a way that is comprehensible and accessible. By detailing my own experiences through auto-theoretical sections, I hope that the reader may empathize with me more than my psychiatrist did, and agree that the “norm” of recovery society has set for us is rarely feasible or appropriate.

### WHY RECONCEPTUALIZE RESILIENCE AND CARE? (AND WHY WITH MEMES?)

Despite the fact that there are few formal studies on meme/culture, and most of these seem to focus on the impact of meme/culture in politics (particularly the 2016 American Presidential election), there are endless opinion pieces on memes – often dismissing these artifacts as abstract yet simple forms of humor. Similarly, there is also a large amount of non-academic literature criticizing digital cultures and media: namely, insisting that the Internet and social media is negatively impacting our youths in every possible way. This is, of course, a very popular narrative regarding technology – particularly from older generations. Surprisingly, although there are many positive impacts of technology (for example, increasing and maintaining long distance connectivity), this kind of narrative prefers insisting that technology divides us.

While certain social media practices are undoubtedly harmful (e.g. cyberbullying among schoolchildren), it would be naive to blindly group and condemn all manners of digital practices. At the end of the day, as with any tool, it all comes down to intent versus impact. And as we have come to realize, social media users (and their pedestrian digital practices) are not solely to blame for increased socio-political polarizations: A big chunk of responsibility lies on the executives who control the content and algorithms on these platforms – often promoting the sensationalized “fake news” spewed by outlets who deliberately push schismatic reporting and encourage the “us versus them” divide. Unfortunately, it is the more provocative (polarizing, disturbing, graphic, incensing) content that generates the most engagement and revenue for these kinds of sites.

Under the guise of protecting free speech, this kind of harmful content is allowed (and encouraged algorithmically) to be shared and spread. I will not name names (because I do not wish to be sued), but there is one big democracy-destroying lizard nerd king that immediately comes to mind in this regard. (But I digress.)

This thesis explains how memes and meme culture contributed positively to my personal recovery in an attempt to remove some negative stigma from digital cultures and media – and promote the very real, positive benefits meme/culture can (and does) offer our societies. Instead of condemning innovation because it is unfamiliar to us, perhaps it is faulty traditional or capitalistic thinking that should be abandoned. For me, the prevalent notion of bootstraps resilience did not work at all. This kind of individualized resilience was not sustainable. As time went on, attempting to stand on my own two feet and navigate my troubles alone made me quite miserable. I believe that the notions of resilience our Western societies impose upon us tend to discourage those who are already exhausted, and they can do more harm than good. Subsequently, I knew I needed to develop a strong support system because I could no longer go at it alone. While I did have some people to lean on, I also knew that becoming dependent on my few friends of the time would be terribly unfair to them.

Unfortunately, months of isolation had left me feeling awkward and nervous in social situations. I still had a strong sense of guilt that I could not (or should not) be happy or carefree around others; I held the twisted belief that if I was truly depressed, I had to look and act the part. I struggled to convey my complex thoughts and emotions to my friends – both because I felt vulnerable and uneasy about sharing my feelings, but also because I knew it would be very emotionally taxing for them to take in the full extent of my feelings and trauma.

So I began expressing myself by sharing the depression and anxiety themed memes that resonated with me most deeply. Soon after I decided to create my own unique content to express my very specific feelings and situation. In many ways, being able to view my problems through a creative, humorous lense was exceptionally helpful: Being able to make myself laugh and share my struggles in a way that was less emotionally demanding of my friends greatly eased my feelings of guilt regarding seeking help. It was one of the first attempts at coping that actually worked for me, and one that led to more opportunities for recovery.

There seems to be a standard checklist society throws at us when it wishes us “Good luck with The Depression™!”: We are expected to seek therapy, to exercise, to adopt healthy eating and sleeping habits, to take up hobbies – and I did my best to check these boxes off my “Depression To-Do List”. I tried speaking with a mental health professional – it had left me broken, defeated and discouraged. (I would also just like to briefly add that we are so quick to encourage: “Seek therapy!”, as if this is groundbreaking, helpful advice. It is so much easier said than done! There need to be more conversations regarding the fact that, even if you can overcome the financial hurdle of seeking therapy, it still takes an incredible amount of work and effort to find a practitioner who truly understands and works well with you. This process is even more exhausting and frustrating when you are seeking help mid-crisis! But I digress.) I had also tried working through a “prescribed” self help book; admittedly, the advice was so trivializing and irrelevant to my struggles that I gave up halfway through. Around three months after the original incident, I started going to the gym. One of my only friends of the time would go every morning and would force me to go with him. In turn, I was starting to eat again (and even healthier than before). And truthfully, this is a very privileged form of recovery: Though I felt as if I had no energy to expend, I was still able-bodied enough to try to use vigorous exercise as a form of care. In addition, I was very fortunate to be able to afford these investments towards my health. Many more boxes were ticked over the next month – I had even managed to curb my procrastination habits and adopt a very productive mentality towards my studies. As well, I was taking on creative personal projects in my free time: I started making art, I learned to sew and embroider, I began story-telling, and I continued diversifying my “meme portfolio”.

Yet I still struggled horrendously. Regardless of how stable, good, or happy I felt, I would still break down on the 5th of every month. Whatever progress I would make, would dissipate in the blink of an eye as my body chose to relive it’s trauma. For six months, I was stuck in this cycle. All these individualized, relatively standard forms of “care” were not helping me. They were simply bandages that gave my life a semblance of structure, while underlying issues remained unaddressed. Meme/culture, on the other hand, helped me tackle some of these issues, and ultimately stimulated my personal growth, allowing me to overcome some of my struggles.

In this first chapter, I set up the story of my personal trauma and why institutional help was not accessible or ideal for me at the time, briefly discussing the novel palliative approach of care I resorted to instead and how this guided my journey to recovery and resilience.

Chapter 2 identifies and discusses the framework of this thesis – Sick Woman Theory. I also briefly introduce the methodology guiding this work – auto-theory – and its relation to Sick Woman Theory. Going further, I contrast Sick Woman Theory with the pre-existing, dominant theory of bootstraps resilience, and through the tenets of Sick Woman Theory I discuss the merits of pushing back against this individualist conception of bootstraps resilience. Chapter 2 also restates the research questions guiding this work.

Chapter 3 dives deeper into the methodology, explaining the general idea of auto-theory, as well as more modern-day uses of this approach. I also discuss the specific use and merit of auto-theory in this particular paper.

Chapter 4 undertakes an analysis of auto-theoretical narratives in order to address my research questions. These analyses are accompanied by visual samples of meme/culture. Chapter 4 is organized thematically and by research question; however, ultimately each section leads into the next to form a holistic view of my personal journey towards resilience.

Chapter 5 discusses the perceived outcomes of my novel approach to recovery, as well as the sustained practices learned from meme/culture. These outcomes are discussed through candid auto-theoretical postulations to further emphasize the importance of the conceptual framework which inspired this work.

The sixth and final chapter concludes this paper by briefly discussing the limitations of this paper, as well as investigating the implications of this work towards other novel discourse practices and uses. This paper is not necessarily intended for widespread dissemination of novel palliative care efforts (particularly not as a substitution for pre-existing forms of institutional care); however it contributes to the overall body of work pushing against individualist, neoliberal concepts of resilience and care. This paper is ultimately written with the intent to contribute positively to literature regarding digital cultures and phenomena.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **RESILIENCE IN NORTH AMERICA**

Resilience has been formally defined as the process of adapting well when facing adversity, trauma, or significant sources of stress (American Psychological Association, 2010). However, there are a multitude of varying definitions for resilience. Resilience can be considered as the capacity to recover from adversity and encompasses a dynamic process of positive adaptation (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000), or the process of successfully adapting faced with difficult situations (Howard & Johnson, 2000). It can be the skill of adapting to and coping with negativity (Block & Kremen, 1996), or the resistance of an individual despite the negative effects of difficulties (Gilligan, 2001).

While definitions may vary from study to study, the majority of previous research agrees upon the positive benefits of resilience. Several studies have found resilience to be inversely correlated with negative emotions and life outcomes such as depression (Wagnild & Young, 1993; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher, & Bernard, 2008; Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009). It has been shown that resilient individuals are better able to adapt and adjust to stressful transitions and significant life events (Werner, 1985; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987; Block & Kremen, 1996; Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Luthar et al., 2000; Beasley, Thompson, & Davidson, 2003; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Other modern studies have also highlighted the positive impact of resilience towards adjusting to difficult conditions and transitions (Fassig, 2003; Li, Nussbaum, & Richards, 2007; Werner, 2012; Yates & Grey, 2012; Theron & Theron, 2013), and established that resilience can be a potential defense against the development of psychological stresses such as depression (Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2003).

Yet while the variety of definitions allows for a multi-faceted view of resilience, it is not guaranteed that the literature is as comprehensive as it is broad. This assumption stems from the fact that most studies seem to focus on the outcome of resilience, rather than the process of

becoming more resilient. As well, most studies seem to focus on resilient individuals rather than resilient communities.

Furthermore, there is a disconnect between the scientific research and definitions of resilience, and the societal definitions and expectations for resilience. The research suggests resilience is defined by an ability to adapt and overcome diversity, but more importantly, that this kind of resilience is best developed through positive social ecologies and support networks. Meanwhile, our society expects us to achieve resilience through adversity and trauma; meaning, that it is expected that our suffering, rather than our strong relationships and coping strategies, is what makes us stronger.

### SICK WOMAN THEORY

Sick Woman Theory defines existence in a body as something that is inherently vulnerable, and insists that a body is defined by its vulnerability – rather than temporarily affected by it (Hedva, 2016). It considers chronic illness, pain, and trauma as social and cultural phenomena, asserting that “the body and mind are sensitive and reactive to regimes of oppression, particularly our current regime of neoliberal, white supremacist, imperial-capitalist, cisheteropatriarchy” (Hedva, 2016, n.p.). Indeed, a “sick” body is often defined under capitalist maxims and values – a sick body is one that cannot work. Moreover, with wellness as the default norm or expectation, there is a presumption that sick bodies must (or can) be fixed. Yet it seems that societies that define sickness and health in such ways, also insist that the onus of recovery be placed upon the individual. While placing this burden of responsibility on individuals, capitalism has simultaneously made it harder to access care and treatment. The disparity between lower and upper classes is growing to the point that the middle class is shrinking into non-existence. What little wages are earned must be spent on bare necessities, leaving little to no leeway for spending on expensive therapeutic and medicinal needs. This aspect of capitalism makes it easy to be selfish: When it is a matter of survival, it is every person for themselves.

Sick Woman Theory pushes back against assumptions that we must brave adversity alone, asserting that we require constant care and support. The Sick Woman is any and “all dysfunctional bodies made culturally illegitimate and politically invisible” (Hedva, 2016, n.p.).

The Sick Woman is an identity; it is a body belonging to anyone that is denied the privileged existence of a straight, white, healthy, neurotypical, upper- or middle-class, cis-gendered, able-bodied man. The Sick Woman is anyone who does not have guaranteed access to care, specifically the care afforded to and enjoyed by wealthy, cis-gendered, masculine, white bodies (Hedva, 2016).

But even those who have access to care can find themselves being hurt by neoliberal, individualized, institutional ways of practicing care and conceptualizing resilience. These ways insist upon “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps” – to succeed without help, to overcome the challenges of illness and trauma alone – and separating us from communities of support.

Sick Woman Theory is a relatively new theory, thus there is not much literature to cite on the subject apart from Hedva’s own analysis. Regardless, it is both an argument in itself towards the call for a reconceptualization of resilience, as well as a movement geared towards doing this kind of work. Through Sick Woman Theory, I seek to provide an argument towards the need for redefining our expectations and such buzzwords that we tend to throw at those in society who struggle with illness – especially those who cannot access the forms of care that they want or need. Subsequently, auto-theory is the most appropriate framework for this paper. By analyzing my own lived experiences, I am able to detail how I reworked the individualist definition of resilience that was learned unto me, into a concept that genuinely worked for me.

### SICK WOMAN THEORY & AUTO-THEORY

Sick Woman Theory is an extension of auto-theory, a feminist practice of writing from one’s own lived experience (Fournier, 2018). Similar in notion and ideology to the Confessional movement of the 1950s, wherein works explored taboo themes and private experiences (such as mental illness and trauma), Sick Woman Theory uses auto-theory to make visible and theorize – in an accessible way – ongoing personal experiences and how these connect to political concerns (Fournier, 2018).

There have been many auto-theoretical accounts that have critically tied trauma to specific experiences of (chronic) illness. These accounts tend to highlight the experience of

interacting with Western notions and medical establishments that fail to understand or empathize with the pains women face (Berkowitz, 2015; Fournier, 2018).

Sick Woman Theory in particular has been used to push back against harmful notions of wellness and care. It is a theory that seeks to destigmatize all forms of illness, disability, pain, or trauma, and push back against the notion that seeking help, support, and care are shameful acts. It is a theory that rose out of necessity, to bring visibility to those who undergo the “trauma of not being seen” (Hedva, 2016, n.p.) – individuals who our neoliberal, capitalistic society does not deem valuable, or “healthy” enough to be valuable. Furthermore, as a postinternet theory, it encourages practices that allow earlier feminist movements to be grounded in more modern discourses of theory, and in such a way that the dissemination of information can be holistically accessible. Finally, Sick Woman Theory seeks to emphasize the importance of structures of support and collective care in the face of illness, disability, pain, or trauma. Consequently, it is the theoretical framework outlining this particular auto-theoretical work.

I aim to use auto-theoretical narratives as examples and arguments towards the research questions to be explored in this paper, but also as (narrative) analyses in themselves. This kind of analysis is useful for interpreting how my experiences have motivated me to push back against notions of resilience and care that put the weight of coping and recovery onto the individual. Additionally, auto-theory and narrative analysis allow me to interpret the larger cultural structures at play that had led me to having such experiences at all – providing further justification for the arguments outlined by this work.

### RESILIENCE & SICK WOMAN THEORY

In spite of many studies agreeing that social ecology and support contribute greatly towards building resilience (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011; Yusoff & Othman, 2011; Murray, Lombardi, Bender, & Gerdes, 2013), resilience still seems to be characterized in a neoliberal and highly individualised manner. In Western culture especially, there is a pervasive belief that individuals can (or should) “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” (Ungar, 2011). Thus, as the concept of resilience in mental health research is constrained by the lack of a unified

definition (Shastri, 2013), the concept of building resilience in Western culture and society is hindered by institutional and systemic ideologies.

Sick Woman Theory is in many ways a call for the reconceptualization of this obsolescent way of thinking – one that acknowledges and encourages the role healthy social ecologies and strong support systems play towards building resilience (both in individuals and in communities). It should not be the standard to demand that struggling individuals embark on a “heroic journey”, and have the burden of recovery lay entirely on their own shoulders alone.

In addition to neoliberal notions of resilience, consideration should be given to shifting our current ideas of care, that seem to further uphold the harmful capitalistic structures of our societies. Currently, the notion of “self-care” is mostly defined, perhaps mockingly so, through coping methods such as “retail therapy” – suggesting that material products and possessions are suitable replacements to actual therapy. Sick Woman Theory and the meme Discourses I discuss both promote ideas of self-care that actually encourage care – insisting that we must be kind and understanding to ourselves and each other if we truly wish to cope with the pains and traumas that afflict us. Feminist ideology in general tends to support values (such as respect and empathy) that emphasize the importance of building positive relationships with one another, forming strong networks and community solidarity. These are principles that framed my own personal definition of resilience, allowed me to grow into a more flexible and optimistic person, and allowed me to continuously work on personal growth and self-betterment, resulting in my becoming a genuinely resilient individual.

I often muse about how others marvel at or applaud me for my resilience, amazed that I have and continue to endure all sorts of unpleasantness and trauma while maintaining genuine optimism and happiness. I am not a superhuman being, capable of bearing and overcoming massive amounts of pain. I am not wise beyond my years (though some like to say that trauma can age you more quickly, resulting in greater perceived maturity). What allows me to remain resilient, is the incredible network of support I have managed to create for myself, as well as adopting perspectives and attitudes that allow me to think and problem solve more flexibly and creatively. What I think is genuinely noteworthy, is that I accomplished these things through

memes and meme culture, because memes are so often shrugged off as artifacts unworthy of greater consideration outside of their simple (or absurd) humor.

### MEMES: OVERVIEW

Richard Dawkins first used the term “meme” in 1976 to describe “an idea, behaviour or style that spreads from person to person within a culture”; more specifically, “small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation” (Dawkins, 1976; Shifman, 2013, p. 2). Going further, internet memes have been conceptualized as follows: “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with an awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman, 2013, p. 7-8). Thus memes are “socially constructed public discourses” – “reflections of cultural and social collectives, as well as the individual voices constituting them” (Shifman, 2013, p. 171).

Due to frequently absurd styles, surreal idiosyncrasies, and challenging interpretive dynamics (for “outsiders” of the culture), memes have yet to be given major consideration. Regardless of (or perhaps rather, due to) their often unconventional characteristics, they are important products of modern digital cultures and embody many of the fundamental qualities of these cultures (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2013).

A meme in the context of this project is defined as a humorous and shareable picture with an embedded resonating message (Zittrain, 2014). While memes have a simple purpose – to be humorous (popular) content that can be easily noticed and spread in a social network (Bebić & Volarevic, 2018) – they can be used in rather complex, novel, and effective ways. They are inherently creative forms of humor, but can also be political. Able to quickly spread easily-digestible and accessible messages broadly, memes are capable of creating and disseminating social and political movements and ideologies – such as the ones outlined by Sick Woman Theory.

## MEMES: AFFORDANCES & VALUES

To understand how marginalized people participate in shaping society requires an understanding and appreciation for how they push back against established disenfranchising power structures, systems, and discourses. For example, academia often faces criticism for needlessly complex and convoluted writing, chock full of overly specific jargon. Memes are creative tools that members of society can (and do) use to create new and more accessible forms of participation in these types of discussions, discourses, and movements (Schultz, 2012; Burton, 2019). This in turn allows the ideologies and messages conveyed by memes to be disseminated more effectively.

One of the key affordances of meme humor is that it has the ability (and tendency) to critique those in power (Ask & Abidin, 2018), instead of resorting to humor that punches down. Humor is highly interdependent on culture (Apte, 1985), which is why meme humor can be a crucial insight into the emotions and beliefs of its community, and even more so of a community that uses such humor with a specific goal in mind. For example, current and newer generations are more comfortable with discussing stigmatized topics such as mental illness (and entailing conditions including, but not limited to: anxiety, depression, delusions, mania, and suicidal ideation). Memes have the ability to allow for discussions on such “controversial” issues, and by opening up these discussions they can in turn help destigmatize these sensitive topics.

In addition to traditional forms of comedy (e.g. stand-up comedy performances) that have been adapted to online platforms (e.g. comedy specials created specifically for Netflix releases), new forms of humor are being borne out of the platforms in which they circulate. Memes, for example, are in circulation across all the popular social media websites – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, etc. As one of the main affordances of a meme is its multimodality, it is an ideal format for conveying humor reliant on expressing feelings that mass audiences can relate to. That is to say, a picture is worth a thousand words; and the abstract nature of memes allows them to visualize emotions that may be indescribable by words alone.

Social media websites allow memes to be universally widespread and accessible, to the point that memes are now a practically inescapable form of content for the average online user. For example, increasingly, many brands and companies have been trying to incorporate memes

into their advertisements in an attempt to appeal to younger audiences and spread their advertisements more widely with little effort on their part. Of course, this is an act that can backfire easily – more often than not these shallow, insincere attempts at participating in meme discourses alienate those who genuinely partake in such Discourses.

### MEME DISCOURSES

The term discourse has generally been socio-linguistically defined to refer to verbal interactions between individuals. James Gee has defined (“big-D”) Discourse as the correlations and connections between social identities and situation-specific uses of language (Gee, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001). Thus, discourse is language used for every day communication; Discourse is language used in specific social contexts or by specialized social groups. In turn, meme Discourse refers to the specific expressions, values, and feelings generated by meme cultures.

It is important to make note of meme Discourses, because (like all Discourses) these cultures and communities have specific inherent guidelines, as defined broadly by Gee: First, Discourses are inherently ideological. They demand their members to hold specific values and views, which in turn define who is an insider or outsider to the culture. Second, Discourses are resistant to internal criticism; this defines the critic as an outsider of the community (Gee, 1990).

For such reasons (among others), meme Discourses can be difficult to penetrate. For example, for the purposes of capitalistic gain and advertisements. Discourse members that are ideologically opposed to the tenets of capitalism will not accept memes being used to advance such agendas, and those who attempt to do so are quickly condemned as outsiders of the culture.

Similarly, the meme Discourses that may resonate most profoundly with younger Western populations, are those that promote feminist ideologies. These Discourses often seek to push back against harmful societal structures and inequalities, such as systematic racism, sexism, prejudices and phobias. As well, they promote notions of empathy, respect, kindness – towards others and the self. Mental health, in particular, is a topic that is often discussed in meme Discourses in an attempt to challenge the stigmas associated with mental illnesses. By pushing back against harmful societal “norms” and judgements, these Discourses can try to work towards productively and positively reconceptualizing notions of coping, care, resilience, and recovery.



By promoting cultures of respect, empathy, and kindness, meme Discourses can influence their members, who in turn practice these values both internally and externally to the Discourse. Equipped with the ideological tools that meme Discourses promote (values of respect and care towards others, plus a decent sense of humor), members partaking in meme cultures may even find it easier to interact with others and form meaningful relationships.

### MEMES IN MODERN SOCIETY

Existing research has discussed common methods and strategies used by youths to build communities of social support. For example, investigating the influence of alcohol on peer relationships (Nezlek, Pilkington & Bilbro, 1994; Borsari & Carey, 2006). Yet research is lacking on meme culture (and subsequently, meme communities) as a viable form of social support, due to the relative novelty of this topic. Where societies of the past may have relied more heavily on alcohol as a social lubricant to increase their social desirability and likeability (and thus, form relationships that double as support systems), people engaged in meme Discourses embrace creativity and humor to help them navigate their own lives, as well as their relationships with others. Not only can humor can be used to form or strengthen reciprocal, interpersonal relationships (Ziv, 2010), but it is generally far less damaging than alcohol (both physically and emotionally). Thus the use of meme culture as a strategy towards coping and ultimately resilience is one that should be given greater consideration.

Besides the minimal consideration for meme cultures and communities, few studies have been conducted on the ability to generate this particular kind of humor and the benefits of such a practice; for example, developing an ability to think more flexibly and thus approach stressful situations with greater ease. Oftentimes, members of meme Discourses will joke about the fact that their sense of humor is “horribly warped”, because they find the silliest, simplest, most nonsensical things to be funny. In reality, this ability to find humor in nearly everything may actually demonstrate their ability to think more creatively and flexibly. It also reinforces the feminist values of meme cultures, as members do not see the need to resort to offensive humor that punches down (for example, racist jokes mocking marginalized communities).

Memes are created or remixed to suit the purpose of the individual: e.g. with the goal of sharing some message (usually specific, sometimes oddly so). This is quite valuable as memes allow content creators not only to seek opportunities for humor, but also to deliberately derive humor from daily life as a basis for their meme-making. This in turn can encourage creative and flexible thinking, which can be crucial for mental health – especially due to the fact that younger people tend to have fewer opportunities to confront adversity and create coping strategies for themselves (Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller, & Hampes, 1997). At the very least, this property of memes can allow one to find humor in not-so-humorous situations. And as young people are exposed to more humorous stimuli than previous generations, they tend to value humor more, and find more opportunities for social approval and support through humor (Thorson et al., 1997).

## THE CURRENT STUDY

This thesis explores how engaging with memes and meme culture (referred to as meme/culture in this paper) allowed me to redefine resilience and care for myself and subsequently allowed me to develop productive coping practices for myself, which resulted in my genuine recovery from trauma and trauma-induced depression/anxiety.

In other words, this thesis addresses the following question:

*How did my involvement with meme/culture promote my reconceptualization of resilience and care, in such a way that permitted me to generate productive coping practices and achieve genuine recovery?*

This overarching question will be answered through the following subquestions:

- 1. How did the unique multimodal affordances of memes enable them to be a coping tool through my struggles with trauma and depression?*
- 2. How did meme Discourse (and cultures therein) provide a framework which allowed me to pursue a path of productive recovery?*
- 3. How did partaking in meme/culture throughout my recovery allow me to develop and maintain sustainable practices of resilience and care?*

Each question unravels to lay the foundation for the next, while following the story of my own recovery thematically. As well, I have chosen to qualify my recovery as “productive”, because I sought practices that enabled me to better myself, rather than practices that would simply return me to my prior state. These questions have been borne out of my own personal lived experiences, as well as my thoughts regarding Sick Woman Theory and the Western notion of bootstraps resilience.

Western Resilience, as I had learned it, encouraged me to recover from my trauma-induced depression and anxiety through my own volition. I abided by these beliefs initially and refused to seek external help, though eventually I reached a point where I conceded that “professional” help would be beneficial. However, while I was lucky to have access to some forms of professional help (McGill’s Mental Health Clinic, McGill Counselling Services), this proved to be a double-edged sword for me: While the resources offered by my university were free to access (or free due to my insurance), they often fell short of actually meeting my needs.

For one, these resources could be difficult to access due to the high-demand needs of several thousand students versus a very limited number of practitioners, resulting in weeks-long waiting times for appointments – which often discourages students from even attempting to seek out such resources. Furthermore, as some students (like my sophomore self) may not already know the differences between a psychiatrist (Mental Health) and a psycho-therapist (Counselling Services), they may inadvertently seek out a service that begets greater harm than good. In my case, while seeking what I thought constituted as therapy, I instead endured a very painfully alienating experience wherein my assigned psychiatrist both delegitimized my pain (suggesting my cyclical meltdowns were simply symptoms related to my menstrual cycle), as well as offered me a very individual form of “care” that I greatly opposed (to be put on medication).

Sick Woman Theory affirms and calls attention to these kinds of experiences, particularly within neoliberal systems and individualist structures upheld institutionally (e.g. by universities). This theory also explains how members of society (who are not cisgender-heterosexual white males) often have their pain, trauma, and illness invalidated. Sick Woman Theory also highlights the need for a reconceptualization of resilience, and offers a substitute interpretation – one that emphasizes the importance of collective care and support.

Such lived experiences and feminist theories made it clear to me that I could not (and would not) recover with such prevalent, rigid ideas of resilience and care; nor that I could (or would) recover through the limited neoliberal systems offered by my university. I realized that I needed to reconceptualize these ideas for myself in order to set and pursue achievable goals for my personal recovery. At the same time, I was (somewhat inadvertently) subjecting myself to a culture that already pushed back against these notions and structures that were hurting me. The more I immersed myself in meme Discourses, the more I became conscious of the merits of collective care. Though I initially resorted to memes to numb my pain with humor, through their unobtrusive messages I was exposed more and more to feminist ideologies. The more I understood these ideas, the more they appealed to me. Both consciously and subconsciously, I began instilling such learned feminist values back within myself and my choices. Put simply, this practice greatly promoted my personal growth, which ultimately led to me becoming a genuinely

resilient person. In short, while I cannot insist that memes can become substitutes for genuine therapy, I can demonstrate how memes and meme culture can be therapeutic in certain ways.

Through auto-theoretical explanations, I detail my own personal journey to a productive definition of resilience crafted from the values I found within meme culture/Discourse. Issues of mental health are manifold: As such, it would be inappropriate to generalize experiences with mental illness and recovery through massive studies relying on quantified, statistical data – which may counterproductively simplify highly complex issues and needs. Though this is just one account of seeking palliative care when institutional care proved to be insufficient, I believe that this synthesis of ideas may challenge the effectiveness and usefulness of neoliberal, individualist forms of coping and recovery. Ideally, it may help further push the call for the reconceptualization of resilience and care towards feminist ideas – such as the the ones expressed by Sick Woman Theory. While this is a unique account outlining a somewhat novel form of coping, it also highlights the tenets of Sick Woman Theory and how shifting to collective care can be massively beneficial, and can help establish practices and networks that promote genuine, productive, and sustainable traits required to acquire resilience.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **AUTO-THEORY**

As previously mentioned, Sick Woman Theory, which frames this paper, is an extension of auto-theory, a feminist practice of writing from one's own lived experience (Fournier, 2018). Going further, auto-theory "takes one's embodied experiences as a primary text or raw material through which to theorize, process, and reiterate theory to feminist effects" (Fournier, 2018, p. 646). Indeed, an embodied life is the main basis for auto-biographical production and research derived from life-writing is capable of generating powerful insights through various lenses of intersectionality (Brophy, 2018).

Auto-theory has a well-established feminist genealogy, seeking to bridge the gap between theory and practice, while upholding beliefs that "the personal is political" (Fournier, 2018). Many feminist writers have defined their own views of auto-theory, yet all use auto-theory to bring visibility to embodied experiences, and subsequently theorize and connect these experiences to socio-political issues of concern to feminists, including the delegitimization of women's pain (Fournier, 2018).

Auto-theory offers a novel approach to theory – one that may help render academia, and the academic principle of "theory", more accessible. In 1991, Nancy K. Miller contemplated that feminist scholarship bridging the personal and political had already become a trend in academia; in the 2010s, auto-theory became a viable way of making theory and philosophy more accessible to wider publics (Fournier, 2018).

#### **MODERN DAY AUTO-THEORY**

Though practices of auto-theory (engaging with culture, performativity, art, the self, etc.) are traits of both recent and early auto-theoretical works (Fournier, 2018), post-internet spaces and practices allow auto-theory to resonate at once with our 21st century context of social media (Fournier, 2018) and the affordances of such sites and platforms (such as greater outreach and

accessibility). At best, the inaccessibility of academic discourses of theory can be seen as intimidating, at worst hostile (KC, 2016).

Some definitions for auto-theory include: “a word for writing that integrates auto-biography and social criticism.” (Samatar, 2015, n.p.); “a method of using the body’s experience to develop knowledge.” (Young, 1995; Preciado, 2013; Radchenko, 2017, n.p.); “both a practice and an ongoing form of analysis-theory dialectic” (Bal, 2015, p. 124).

This last definition resonates most with the use of auto-theory as the methodology of this paper, due to the fact that Bal turned to auto-theory after being “confronted with the shortcomings of written documentation, especially for the understanding of contemporary culture, which is by definition still ‘in becoming’” (p. 124). I feel similarly regarding the phenomenon of memes and meme culture being used as a form of feminist pseudo-therapy. As well, not only are memes very much still “in becoming”, but meme/culture develops, morphs, and spreads at astonishing rates; so much so that a paper explaining the essences of meme culture in the early- or mid- 2020s could very well become irrelevant or obsolete by 2029.

As well, there is little formal academic literature outlining the value of memes in terms of mental health. Although "laughter as medicine" has been well researched with positive results (Nezu, Nezu, & Blisset, 1988; Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller, & Hampes, 1997; Olson, Hugelshofer, Kwon, & Reff, 2005; Kidd, Miller, Boyd, & Cardena, 2009), meme d/Discourse is a relatively new field of study. Due to frequently absurd styles, surreal idiosyncrasies, and challenging interpretive dynamics (for “outsiders” of the culture), memes have yet to be given major consideration. Thus given that the positive impact of informal treatments remains understudied, it may be beneficial to explore less institutional and less traditional – yet positive – methods students can (and do) seek to cope with stress or depressive symptoms.

### THE CURRENT STUDY

Sick Woman Theory emphasizes to me what I already knew: I was not being heard (or even listened to) when I attempted to seek help for my illness. Auto-theory allows me to speak my truth, and in fact emphasizes the notion of being heard – particularly in a moving and accessible way. (I find this to be invaluable, as it is all too simple to attempt to conceptualize mental illness as a series of symptoms – when the reality of the experience of depression is much more personal and much more complicated.) Furthermore, the value of memes towards mental health is often only informally discussed, mostly in casual articles and think-pieces. Yet, similar to auto-theory, these are highly valuable tools that allow(ed) me to express myself when otherwise unable or unwilling to do so.

The road to recovery I embarked upon was too rocky to be quantified, and mere figures or cited literature would not do justice to my experiences. (As well, there are no formal studies to cite on the power of memes as a form of therapy or as stepping stones towards building support systems and resilience.) Thus, employing auto-theory is the most effective way in which to provide proof towards the therapeutic merits of memes. For the purposes of this paper, I believe that my lived experiences are the best sources of “data” for analysis. In the context of auto-theory, the body (i.e. the self) can be considered a place where data is created, emitted, and leveraged (Smith, 2016). Thus auto-theory provides the ideal methodological framework to craft persuasive, moving arguments in the scope of the questions posed by this paper.

While issues of the malleability of memory seemingly render my personal accounts unreliable, it is for this same reason that they are accurate. That is to say, the deeper I sunk into my own depression and anxiety, the more I started struggling with my own memory. I quickly reached a point where my depression-induced memory loss led to constant confusion and dissociation, which further fuelled my anxiety. To combat this, I resorted to documenting every single aspect of my life. This meant saving all my memories and conversations – important or otherwise – through photographs and screenshots, which I would then review obsessively in an attempt to better retain these memories in my brain. Moreover, this practice helped me emphasize moments of happiness, as well as dispel anxiety over moments of doubt (which would often cause great confusion and spikes in my anxiety).

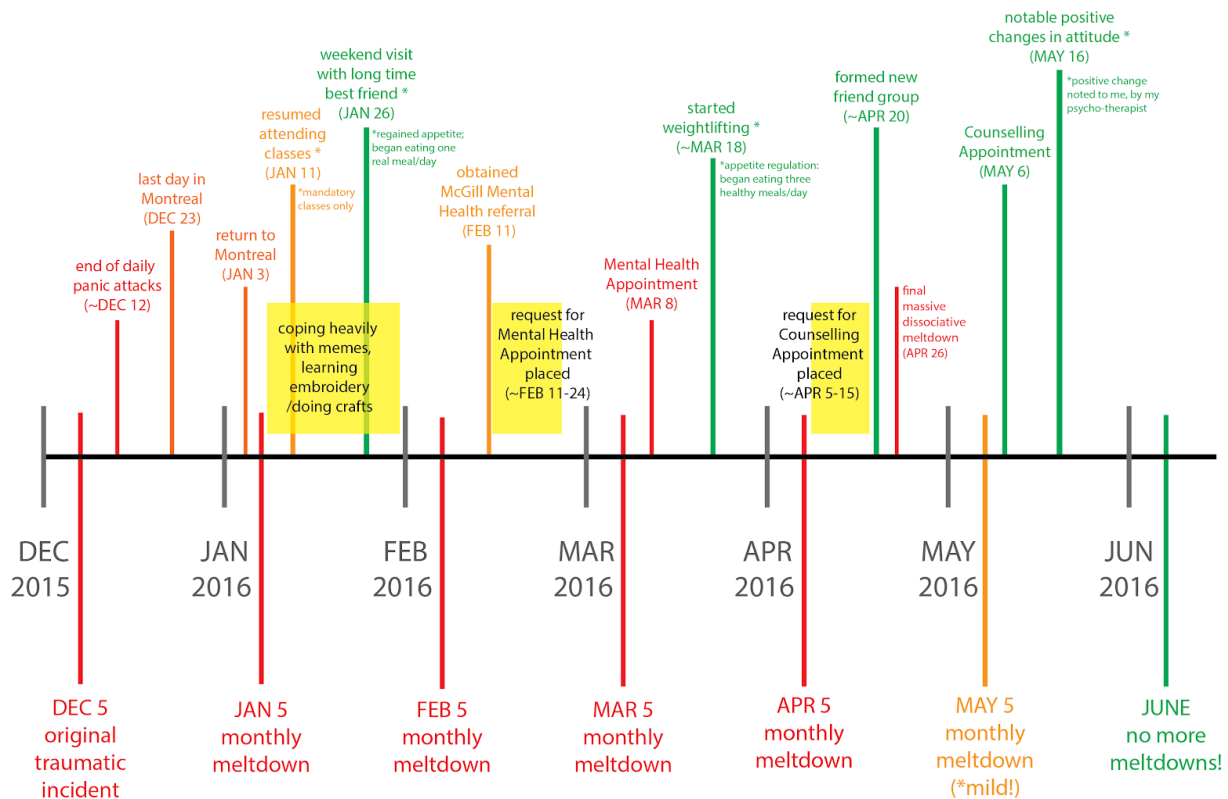


Ultimately, having had engaged in this practice means that all the memes I shared or engaged with during my period of deep struggle have been saved in some form, and generally categorized by date. More specifically, they had been saved and sorted by the dates that I saw and recorded them (rather than the dates they were originally posted online). This allowed me to reliably track my progression with meme/culture, and create a fairly accurate timeline of the events leading up to my recovery.

Due to the sensitive nature of such photographs and conversations, I will not be laying these out for public record. However, by revisiting these records, I have managed to recreate a timeline of events to chronologically demonstrate my mental health journey.

**Figure 2:**

*A comprehensive timeline of my recovery, from my trauma-induced depression and anxiety.*



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **NARRATIVE ANALYSES**

### **(RESEARCH FINDINGS)**

Through a series of narrative analyses of my own lived experiences, this thesis ultimately looks to answer one overarching question:

*How did my involvement with meme/culture promote my reconceptualization of resilience and care, in such a way that permitted me to generate productive coping practices and achieve genuine recovery?*

This question is answered through the following sub-questions:

1. *How did the unique multimodal affordances of memes enable them to be a coping tool through my struggles with trauma and depression?*
2. *How did meme Discourse (and cultures therein) provide a framework which allowed me to pursue a path of productive recovery?*
3. *How did partaking in meme/culture throughout my recovery allow me to develop and maintain sustainable practices of resilience and care?*

I first examine how the inherent characteristics and affordances of memes contribute to their usefulness as tools for coping. Such properties include their humorous and relatable nature, their spreadability and accessibility, as well as their multimodality and creativity. I then discuss meme Discourses, as a segue into answering the second question. Examining how memes can establish a productive framework requires a consideration of some of their Discourses; the cultures and the discursive practices that cultivate and propagate within these. Finally, I examine how meme/culture can combine such affordances and cultures, towards a sustainable positive model of resilience and care.

It is worth noting that the memes inserted in this thesis (as Figures) are a combination of memes I myself have sent whilst dealing with depression, popular memes I often saw (and continue to see to this day), as well as exemplary memes that best help visualize my arguments.

## COPING THROUGH TRAUMA WITH MEMES

This section addresses **how the unique multimodal affordances of memes enabled them to be a coping tool through my struggles with trauma and depression [RQ1]**, by analyzing (a) *Affordances, Humor, and Emotion of Memes*, (b) *Spreadability and Connectivity through Complex Emotions*, and (c) *The Potential of Creative, Multimodal Production*.

I begin this section by explaining the general essence of current day memes, why this is important and how this has helped contribute to the general power of memes. This introduces the importance of the affordances of memes, as well as some examples of the humor and emotion expressed and evoked by memes. In reference to these ideas, I discuss how the nature of memes (in conjunction with certain features of social media platforms) allows them to increase their spread and gives them the power to connect netizens. Finally, I discuss how these characteristics give memes the potential for creative, multimodal production, and how this is greatly valuable in respect to their merit as a tool towards coping.

Before analyzing the value of memes as a coping tool, it is important to note why they are particularly prominent digital artifacts. Often viewed as simple manifestations or forms of online humor, memes can actually be apt indicators of (recent and current) cultures and zeitgeist. While they can keep track of popular cultures in our societies, they are often also responsible for cultural shifts and movements as well.

### **Figure 3:**

*A comparison of the contrast between a meme from 2012 and a meme from 2019.*

Mem  
es  
in  
2012



Mem  
es  
in  
2019



**Figure 4:**

*Meme calendars for the years 2017 and 2018.*

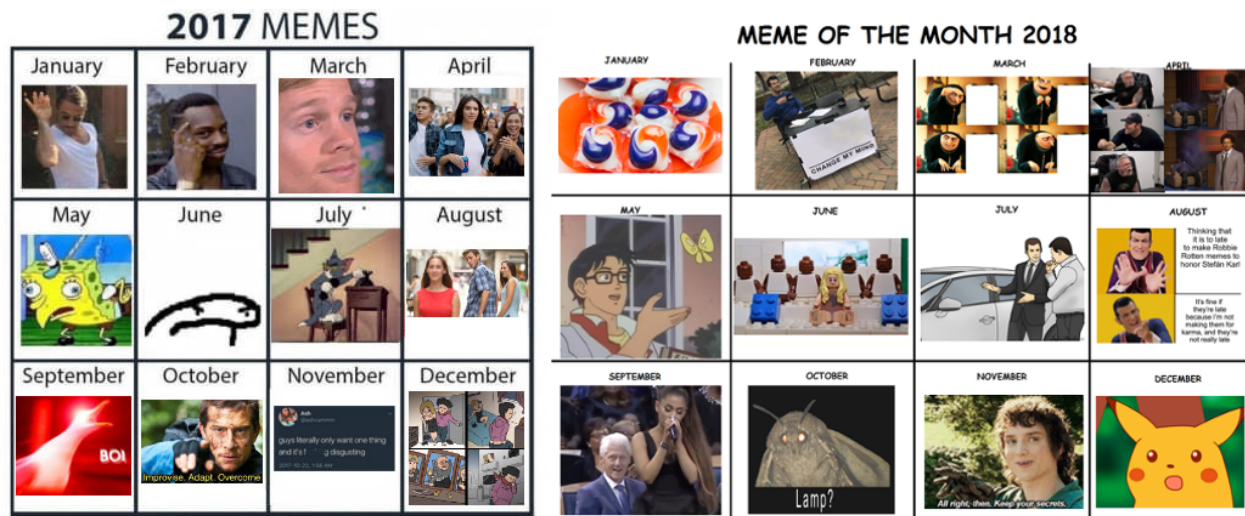


Figure 3 illustrates how the style/format of online/meme humor has changed in seven years to become much more absurd and surrealist. Furthermore, in recent years, memes regarding such quick-shifts in meme trends have also emerged. In other words, through “meme calendars”, the most popular trends can be tracked and recorded from month to month (see Figure 4). (Note that while meme calendars and their monthly assignments can vary based on the discretion of the creator, different calendar iterations generally tend to agree with one another.)

The shift in meme humor towards absurdism can in many ways be considered a reflection of shifts in societal structures and systems, and how these changes have impacted the younger generations that adore and generate memes the most. Throughout the years, North American economies have become more unstable, unpredictable, and substantially less favorable towards the working class. This has resulted in making typical milestones (i.e. marriage, homeownership, raising children, retirement) less easily attainable for younger generations. Life and growing up is already a wonky and unpredictable experience, yet as certain milestones become more inaccessible, this lack of relative structure greatly contributes to exacerbating feelings of hopelessness and meaninglessness. To cope with these feelings, younger generations may often resort more to absurdist and nihilist forms of humor to cope with the perception of their lack of power and control in life.

Furthermore, societies are becoming more conscious: Activist movements have been on the rise in recent years, and the political views of younger generations are much more left-leaning than older generations. As economic inequalities highlight other rampant disparities in our societies, these socially conscious generations try to push back more and more against harmful systems and structures. In terms of humor, this means shifting from humor that punches down (e.g. humor at the expense of marginalized communities, humor based in racism, sexism, prejudice, harmful stereotypes, etc) to humor that punches up (e.g. humor at the expense of those with power, wealth, status, and control in society). As well as punching at nothing (completely absurd humor), or forms of expression at the expense of the self. The latter can be through self-deprecating humor; or else, humor that pokes fun at the lack of control in one's life due to the many structural and systemic inequalities rooted in society.

Moving away from strictly cultural aspects, technological shifts have also contributed to the absurdity and chaotic nature of memes. Social media “formatting” has provoked a great shift in what constitutes comedy as well. These platforms are ideal for “quick” and visual humor – the exact kind of humor memes offer best. No matter the exact format (visual, audio-visual, etc), memes offer easily, quickly digestible content. Making comedy “quicker” reduces the need for a (joke) set up, a narrative, or build-up – meaning that these formats can jump straight to the punchline, which can be much easier to do through visual forms of humor. These kinds of formats, influenced by societal shifts, give leeway to more creative and more absurd opportunities for humor.

These ideas are important to note as they have heavily influenced the creative multimodal styles and many themes of the kinds of memes we see today, as well as helped cultivate some unique and (even) progressive meme cultures. In addition to such cultural and technological shifts, the distinct characteristics and affordances of memes may have had a hand in elevating them from simple internet jokes to valuable digital artifacts.

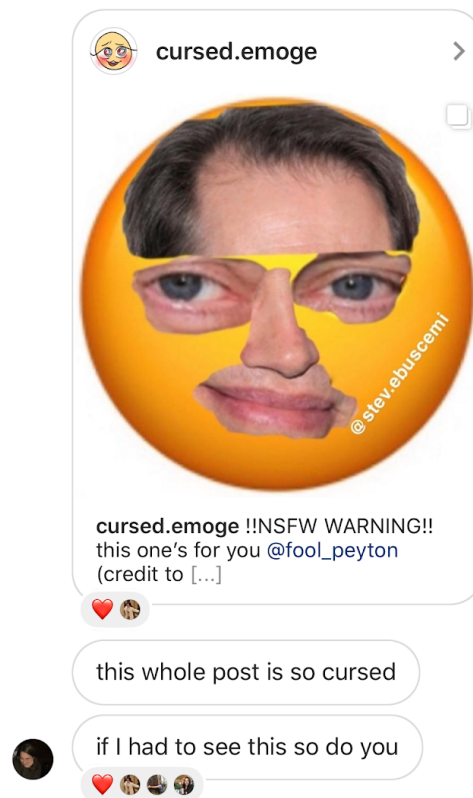
### *AFFORDANCES, HUMOR, & EMOTION*

For the sake of this study, we will consider affordances as properties of an object (in this case, the object being a meme) that netizens can interact with. Properties meaning the possibilities that memes offer for action. This would include things that we can do with memes due to their inherent nature and characteristics, and ways that we can manipulate or customize them for our own interests. This definition is derived from Gibsons' (1977) affordance theory, which argues that affordances are an object's properties allowing for the realization of action possibilities.

I find memes to be particularly valuable as they offer a range of possibilities that other forms of literacy cannot, or cannot offer as effectively. Memes allow for quick delivery of emotions, thoughts, experiences, and ideas through multimodal means. They can also be used in the place of words for expressing specific emotions. As mentioned, they are apt indicators of shifts in times and attitudes, and they are unique units of cultural transmission. Part of their ability to spread so quickly and widely is due to the fact that they have developed alongside the very social media platforms that facilitate their spread. However, they also spread so successfully due to the messages they convey. Whether for general humor, relatable content, self-expression, shock value or otherwise, there are many reasons to share a meme; and their material affordances usually enhance this. Figure 5 is a screenshot of a group chat I have with my closest friends, and we often share “cursed” (extremely bizarre, absurd, or even unpleasant) images with each other due to their shock value. We share these kinds of images by stating: “If I had to see this, so do you” – allowing us to bond over our shared discomfort. This is a fairly common practice in the general meme Discourse. In fact, for some members of the meme Discourse, the more absurd, nonsensical, or shocking a meme is, the more valuable or entertaining it is – and the more likely it is to be shared and spread.

**Figure 5:**

*A close friend who insisted our group share the discomfort caused by a meme she found.*



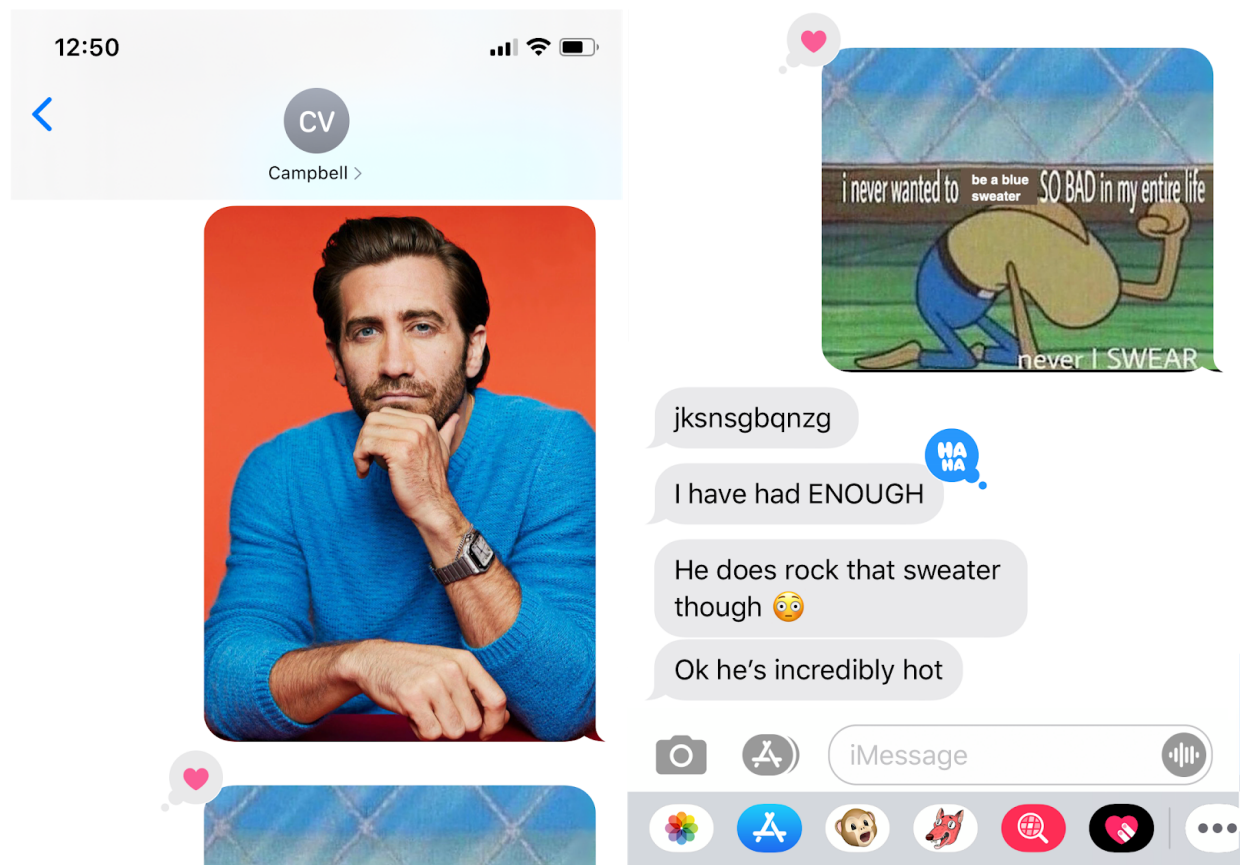
Going further, material affordance refers to the possibilities that memes offer due to their multimodal aspects. For example, expressing convoluted feelings in one compact post (consisting of at least some visual context, usually alongside an expressive caption). Visual-textual combinations generated with memes can be satirical, sarcastic, or ironic (to name a few), and this is often achieved through a juxtaposition of absurd imagery paired with a simple (oft relatable) caption. While the disconnect between their visual context and captions may seem jarring, these are very deliberate decisions by the maker of the meme to create images that emphasize whatever message they are attempting to convey. The visual aspect of these artifacts can also greatly help such messages and jokes become easier to perceive, digest, and understand. Furthermore, memes can be created or remixed in practically any desired manner, essentially providing endless possibilities of creation and configuration. (See Figure 6 for an unnecessary



example of meme-use in action. The meme – edited by yours truly – was used to express to my friend, in a roundabout way, that I found Jake Gyllenhaal in a blue sweater to be quite dashing.)

**Figure 6:**

*Using a nonsensical meme to communicate with a close friend.*



*Note:* There really is no reason for this image to be included in this thesis; I just wanted an excuse to put a picture of Jake Gyllenhaal in here.

When I first sought out memes as a method for coping, I did so because of their humorous nature and their ability to make even the most painful subjects laughable. The memes I engaged with most, often poked fun at the symptoms and feelings brought on by depression and anxiety. Many of these memes were surprisingly very specific to my own experiences with these afflictions. Thus I was not only able to laugh at these jokes, but I was also able to relate to them. In a way, I was “self-medicating” with memes and trying to laugh my immediate pain away. For



example, in the early stages of my depression/anxiety, I found it impossible to sleep at night due to my overactive brain forcing me to relive the traumatic memories that had induced my condition in the first place. As time went on and I continued to lose sleep to this kind of restlessness, staying awake and being forced to be alone with these thoughts would trigger nightly meltdowns. Figures 7 and 8 aptly demonstrate my situation in this regard, but also allow me to laugh about a condition that absolutely wracked me. Figure 7 depicts the internal battle of the need to sleep versus the inability to do so. It implies that the “dark version” of oneself (i.e. the depressed self) would encourage negative attitudes, such as fixating on sad or traumatic memories and suffering from these. Figure 8 suggests that the individual’s own brain is commanding and causing their tiredness and suffering – which is generally the case regarding overthinking and restlessness caused by anxiety and/or depression. (I say generally because I have suffered from both trauma-induced depression and an iron deficiency, and while they both ruined my life in their own unique ways, the anxiety I experienced due to depression was very different from the anxious symptoms induced by my iron deficiency.)

**Figure 7:**

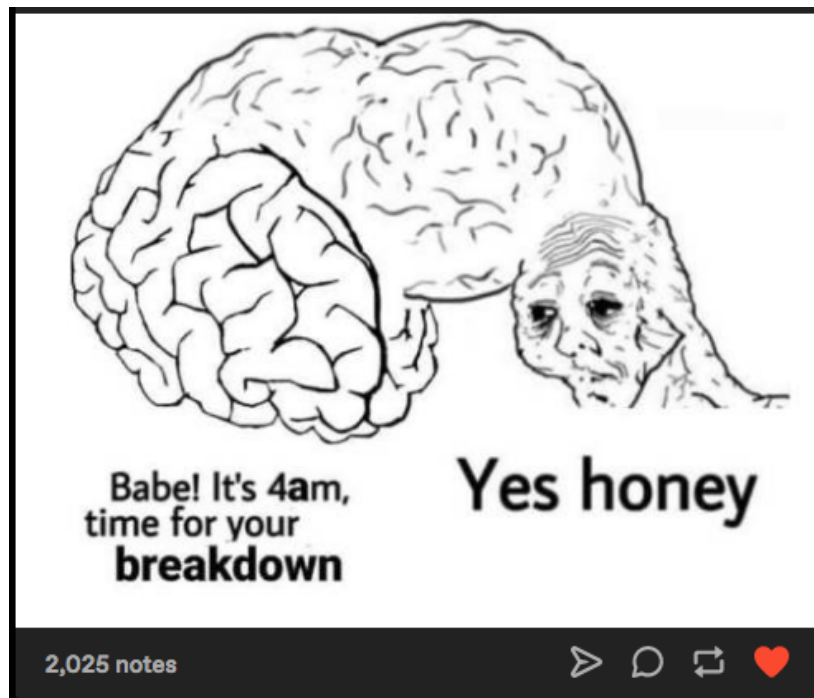
*A meme of the dark (evil) version of Kermit the Frog encouraging his sadness and suffering.*

me: i need to go to bed  
me to me: stay up thinking about sad  
things and suffer



**Figure 8:**

*A meme of a tired man being reminded by his brain of his regularly scheduled breakdown.*



One of the reasons memes can be so powerful is due to the fact that they are able to express such specific, relatable emotions so efficiently. For example, Figure 9 suggests that an individual being woken up from a depression nap would feel very much like a battered and deteriorating puppet-doll, being poked at with a stick. Naturally, as I began to lose sleep at night, I would make up for it by passing out during the day; so I would send this meme when loved ones would call to check in on me and wake me up from my daytime slumbering. It was a convenient, low-effort, non-verbal way to signal to them why I would have low energy and responsiveness during such calls. I often used memes in place of explicit verbal communication due to the fact that I was too tired to engage in lengthy conversations (which often provoked very emotional responses from me that further tired me out). As well, since English is my third language, I often struggle(d) to express myself fully, clearly, or eloquently: Time and time again, memes have allowed me to succinctly surpass this language barrier.

**Figure 9:**

*A meme depicting a battered Elmo (Sesame Street Muppet character) being prodded with a stick is akin to an individual being woken up from their “depression nap”.*



*Note:* These kinds of memes rely on their imagery to truly convey the emotion of their message.

**Figure 10:**

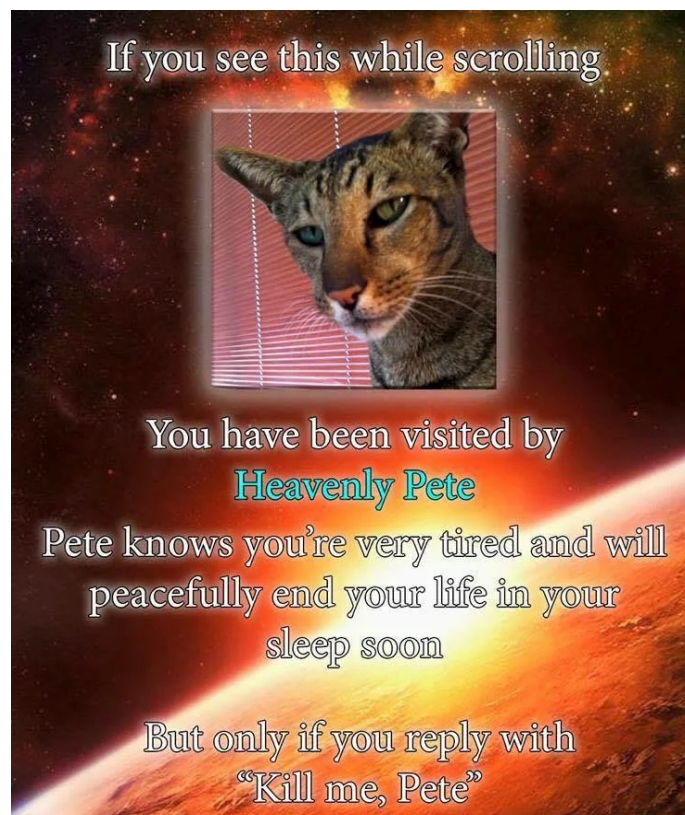
*A meme showing Kermit the Frog falling down a seemingly endless stairwell.*



Interestingly, while memes helped me put a bandage on my depressive symptoms, they also forced me to acknowledge my unhealthy situation and my need for deeper forms of coping and care. If I saw a meme and found it funny, it compelled me to ponder why. If I laughed, surely it appealed to some part of me; either my values and beliefs, or else my feelings and experiences. By acknowledging that I enjoyed a certain meme because it was pertinent to my situation, it also made me acknowledge what that situation actually was. The imagery of Figure 10 suggests that scrolling (endlessly) through memes can be similar to throwing oneself into a bottomless abyss, especially when this is done in lieu of addressing one's problems and struggles. A meme like the one in Figure 10 would open my eyes to the fact that simply using memes indefinitely – and not seeking a tangible form of help – would ultimately be unproductive and counterproductive. (Figure 10 is also an example of the meta nature of memes and how there seems to be a meme for any sentiment or experience – even memes about engaging with memes.)

**Figure 11:**

*A meme showing a cat named “Heavenly Pete”, who will end one’s suffering if they so wish.*



Occasionally I would find myself bemused by particularly dark memes, with themes and ideas edging towards suicidal ideation (see Figure 11). When I would reach points where I felt drawn more to these darker memes, I would force myself to take a step back and re-evaluate my options for care, rather than indulge further in (potentially) harmful themes and ideas. Generally, seeing such specific memes that I could directly relate to greatly helped me feel less alone in my situation. For one, they confirmed that my feelings were not unique – someone else in the world had felt similarly, to the point that they felt compelled to publicly broadcast these sentiments in meme form. This (albeit removed and faceless) form of empathy greatly reduced my feelings of misery and hopelessness. In spite of the anonymous nature of the Internet, due to the nature of social media it was quite easy to quantify this feeling of solidarity. Often on these posts there would be (hundreds of) thousands of likes and shares, which signalled to me that there were plenty of people (all over the world) who could relate to my feelings and empathize with me.

**Figure 12:**

*A meme suggesting it is anomalous for a person with mental illness to have an “okay” day.*





Another example: I would feel massively guilty when I would have good days, as this made me consider myself an imposter of sorts – that perhaps my depression was not as bad as I felt it to be, because I was still able to have good days. Seeing the meme in Figure 12, with over 200,000 engagements, I found it greatly reassuring that these feelings of guilt were not uncommon! And this dissipated my uneasy feelings and eventually allowed me to enjoy the good days, without punishing myself into feeling awful again in order to “legitimize” my suffering.

Whenever I saw any meme that resonated with me, I would always look at the level and kind of engagement it had received. The higher the numbers (indicating likes or shares), the more validated I felt because it indicated to me that a massive number of people could empathize with me and/or were dealing with similar emotions and situations. This made me feel much less alone and oftentimes more inclined to speak on my issues, due to newfound confidence that my feelings were not so terribly extraordinary that they would provoke alienating responses from those I would choose to confide in.

**Figure 13:**

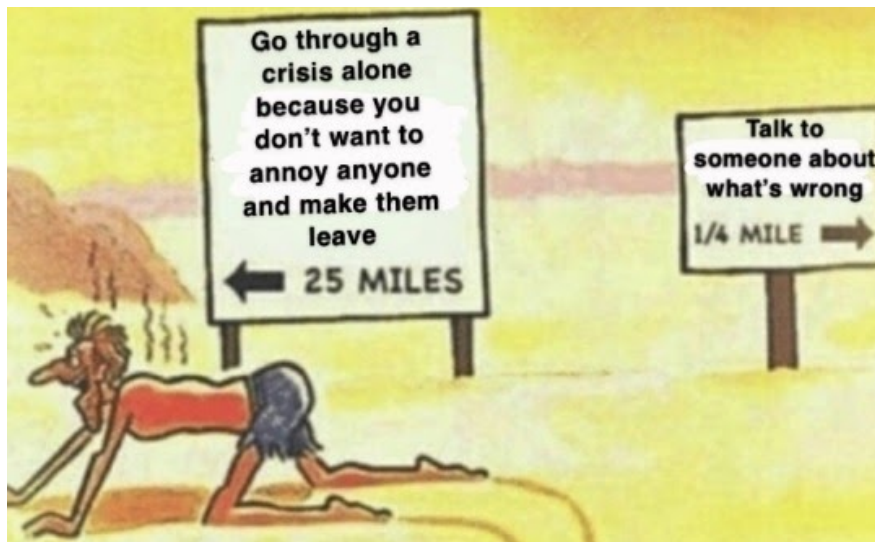
*A meme showing how unprovoked waves of sadness tend to hit unsuspecting individuals.*



With over 120,000 engagements, Figure 13 describes the unpredictable feeling of grappling with depression, wherein waves of sadness will often hit the individual with no provocation or cause – indicating that hundreds of thousands of others experienced this very phenomena. Though memes allowed me to indulge in validation, oftentimes they also forced me to confront my own situation – namely the fact that I was not actually addressing my issues (refer back to Figure 10). And while numbing my (surface level) pain with humor helped, I knew it was not nearly enough to genuinely recover. Similar to Figure 10, memes such as the ones from Figures 14 and 15 forced me to admit to myself that I needed external help – and this was an important stepping stone towards recovery. The early stages of my depression had completely drained me of energy, so while I would see these kinds of memes, I would only internalize them. Eventually, after taking in dozens upon dozens of such memes, I was pushed to a point where I no longer wanted to ignore my situation and I could admit (to myself at least) that I needed to seek more productive coping responses. While my own brain hounded me to my breaking point with traumatic memories and anxious thoughts, in some ways the memes I had internalized cushioned the blow. They forced me to be aware of the unsustainable precarious nature of my situation. But they also had given me ideas on how to proceed when I did reach these breaking points. Memes soothed me at the peaks of my suffering, and in some ways prepared me for my relapses, while also acting as gentle “along-the-way” reminders of the need to make real efforts towards genuine change and betterment.

**Figure 14:**

*A meme showing a man opting to seek an inconvenient (yet appealing) solution to his problems.*



**Figure 15:**

*A meme implying the feelings of guilt onset by discussing one's mental health with friends.*





Figure 14 shows how the much better solution would be to seek treatment; however, for many struggling with depression, this is a much more daunting task than simply keeping to oneself – which ultimately (for better or for worse) can greatly reduce the risk of troubling those they care about. Similar to Figure 14, Figure 15 explains why so many individuals who struggle with mental illness (such as [trauma-induced] depression) refuse to seek comfort in or express themselves to friends – out of fear of negatively impacting their friends’ well-being and these precious relationships. So, these kinds of memes encouraged me to push back against my anxious overthinking, and open up to friends I trusted. Furthermore, I was able to use the humorous nature of memes as a way of expressing myself to such close friends. Through memes I was able to share the ugly realities of my deteriorating condition in a way that I felt lessened the blow. This in turn helped ease my own guilt regarding sharing the burden of my illness. This practice allowed me to lessen my feelings of loneliness as well. Although most of my friends could not fully relate to the specific situations I shared, they could at least empathize more deeply. As well, conveying my feelings multimodally often helped trigger a greater emotional understanding in my peers. This made me feel more safe and more willing to open up. I could even use memes to explain why I did not want to open up to my friends in a way that was less offensive than simply ignoring their kind messages or their attempts at socializing with me.

#### *SPREADABILITY & CONNECTIVITY THROUGH COMPLEX EMOTIONS*

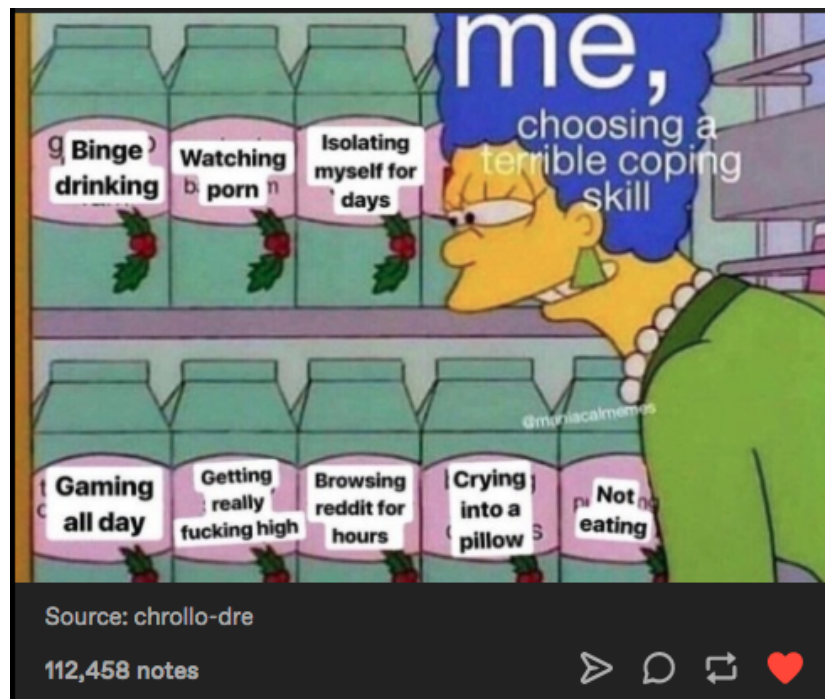
One of the most important affordances of memes is how easily they can be shared and spread. They can be one of the most accessible forms of literacy, in both a sense of distribution and comprehension. As mentioned, being able to loosely quantify how many other people felt the same feelings I did greatly helped me feel less alone. Their format (usually visual, sometimes audio-visual) is ideal for posting on social media sites. These platforms allow this kind of content to be spread so quickly and so widely, that their distribution is often referred to as akin to the spreading of a virus or a wildfire – nearly unstoppable.

However, their formatting – especially their multimodality – can particularly contribute to their ability to be spread so effectively. For digitally-inclined populations, multiliteracy is expected; furthermore, meme-literacy is also often expected. Literacy is generally (superficially)

defined as the ability to read and write. In this thesis, I define meme literacy as a multitude of skills and abilities. For example: being able to interpret, understand, and reference a meme; being able to identify remixed memes, as well as being able to remix and create novel memes; being able to communicate via memes by using them as substitutions for verbal/textual communication, or else parroting common catchphrases and punchlines in daily life contexts. To summarize, to be meme-literate means to be able to interpret, understand, reference, repeat, remix, and create memes – in online and offline contexts. Furthermore, involvement in meme Discourses and cultures is crucial for developing meme literacy skills. To clarify: Memes often combine visual references (usually a picture, sometimes a video) with an expressive caption. These images can be novel or referential to other memes, which is part of the reason memes can be so baffling to those outside the culture and unaware of such references. However, for those within the culture, remixed memes can be even more powerful than the original source material.

**Figure 16:**

*A meme showing a variety of unhealthy coping habits to choose from.*



**Figure 17:**

*An edited version of Figure 16, this time showing a selection of healthy coping habits.*



Figure 16 was an image that I saw during the early stages of my depression. Figure 16 expresses how the individual can choose between varying coping habits that they know to be unhealthy or harmful. This meme implies that despite this awareness, they are apathetic. While I found the image humorous and could relate with certain points (not eating, isolation, crying, browsing Reddit for hours), truthfully it made me very uncomfortable as well – because I did not agree with some of the unhealthy coping methods listed (e.g. drinking, smoking/getting high, etc). This discomfort signalled to me that a part of me was still hopeful for finding positive, productive methods of recovery. Figure 17 is the edited revision of Figure 16 that I happened to see a few weeks later. This version is more uplifting and more popular than the original – which I found encouraging. Figure 17 is an example of the positive elements of meme culture peeking through; i.e. seeking to reduce harm and to encourage those in need of coping habits or mechanisms to seek healthier, productive, positive options. The fact that I had first seen the original meme (Figure 16) made the revision (Figure 17) much more impactful and enjoyable.



In certain corners of the Internet, memes are even remixed with the purpose of establishing in/out group dynamics and pseudo-membership status within the meme community. If one were to spend enough time on the Internet, and thus manage to keep up with both new and old meme trends, they could grow to feel validated and accepted into a community that highly values complex meme literacy and comprehension. However, more popular memes – and certainly those expressing common feelings and experiences – rely on pictures that can convey specific but widely relatable sentiments. “A picture is worth a thousand words”, as they say, and memes are capable of expressing thousands of words worth of feelings in a single post. The use of visual content that can be quickly understood and empathized with, is generally more effective than attempting to explain these things through long, convoluted texts. For example, Figure 19 shows three variations of a single reaction image. The way these have been edited – to markedly show increases in anxiety – has proved invaluable for me; not only in terms of expressing spikes in my own anxiety, but also to dramatize some of my texts. (Figure 20 exemplifies the latter.)

**Figure 19:**

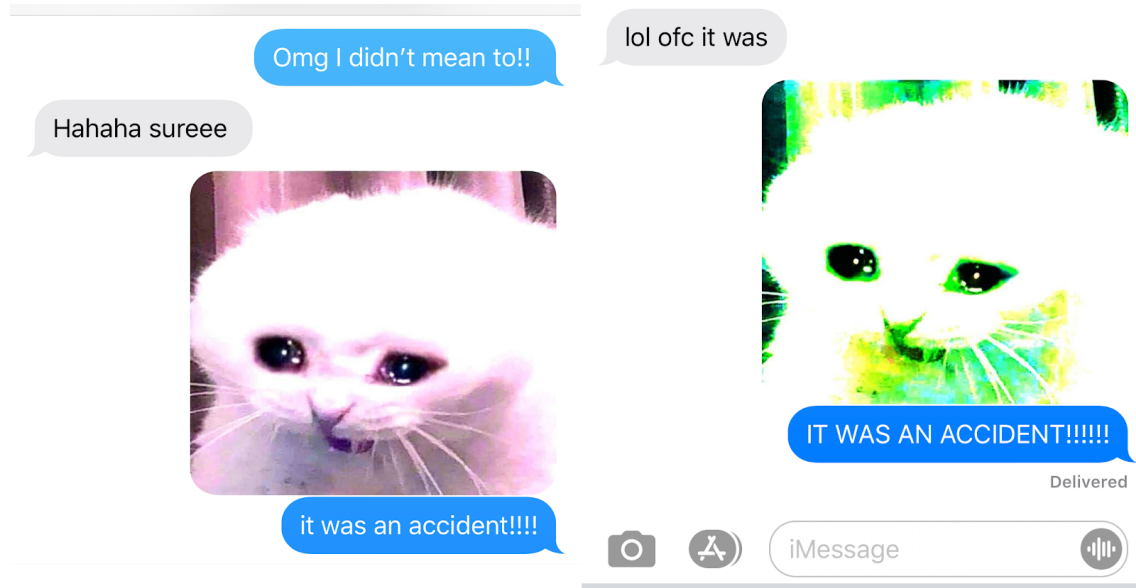
*A series of cat reaction images, depicting increasing levels of distress.*





**Figure 20:**

*An example of the images from Figure 19 in use.*



Similarly, Figure 21 is the exact series of pictures I repeatedly use(d) to express to friends that I had spent a night crying my eyes out in bed; I generally send them either unprompted or alongside texts to emphasize my emotional suffering. I find the third image (the exhausted cat) to be the most important, as it expresses the consequences of this kind of meltdown; i.e. the feeling of exhaustion, combined with the soreness and burning of the eyes experienced the next day.

**Figure 21:**

*A series of images depicting very specific (somber) emotions.*

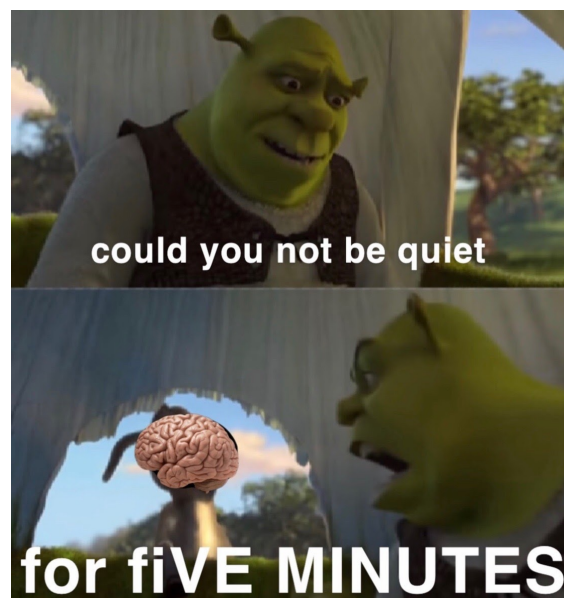


My friends would understand these images, but they would also laugh. This was vital for me and helped much more than sorrowful sympathy – I never wanted to upset my friends nor to dwell in my emotions, so being able to laugh things off with them greatly helped.

The ability of memes to convey a message quickly and coherently is an asset that greatly helped me (still does!) during my most vulnerable moments. At such times, I may be unable or unwilling to express myself – either due to shyness or guilt of oversharing, or the fact that I simply could not capture my thoughts clearly through words alone. In those cases, I could either share memes that articulated my feelings succinctly (such as Figures 19 and 21), or I could create my own custom meme and use very specific imagery to convey my very specific thoughts (see Figure 22, a meme I made to express my frustration and exhaustion towards the incessant intrusive thoughts my brain would oft subject me to). Over time I shifted from sending memes I found online, moreso to sending memes I would create myself to communicate to my friends the very specific contexts and feelings I was dealing with. Sometimes I would even make memes about my situation just for myself – allowing me to make light of my pain and have a laugh at my own expense. This was not so much self-deprecating humor (which can be quite detrimental), but rather an ability to view a very bleak situation in a more cheerful light, with less gravity.

**Figure 22:**

*A meme expressing the frustration of dealing with an overactive, overthinking mind.*



### THE POTENTIAL OF CREATIVE, MULTIMODAL PRODUCTION

At its core, a meme is a multimodal artifact. The multimodal affordances of memes allow them to express even the most abstract sentiments, in a way that I believe can evoke greater understanding and empathy. Multimodality can allow memes and their audience to indulge in a more creative form of humor than traditional comedy. Generally, meme enthusiasts are quite multiliterate, and this skill increases the more time spent interacting with such diverse and novel forms of humor and literature. In a similar vein, the more time spent engaging with meme cultures and Discourses, the more adept at understanding (but also creating) these multimodal artifacts. In some ways, participating in meme Discourses can allow members to increase their creativity: Memes are a way for creators to express whatever they wish, however they wish. This form of creativity can boost one's mood (as I have always felt creativity does), but may also allow individuals to think more flexibly. Outside of the Discourse, memes are usually shrugged off as absurd forms of humor; but for members of the Discourse, these can double over as powerfully useful tools for self-expression.

#### **Figure 23:**

*McGill-themed meme account expressing gratitude for their followers and other meme accounts.*



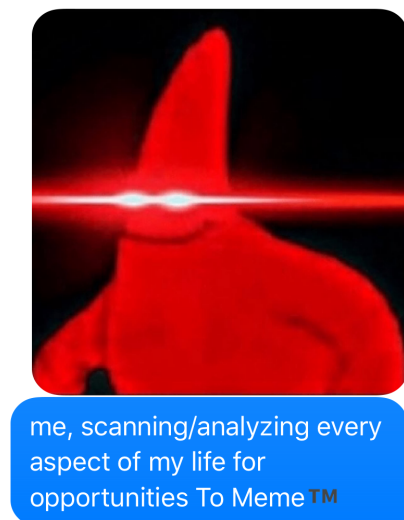


For example, in Figure 23, both the posted meme and the accompanying Instagram caption express the gratitude this [meme] account holder has for their platform, other meme accounts (perhaps also within the McGill meme Discourse), and their student followers. I personally considered that this gratitude stemmed from the ability [for the student running the account] to express themselves through the memes they craft, and the ability to be heard, seen, validated, and empathized with by other [McGill] students who share similar feelings.

Flexible thinking and creativity can be crucial coping mechanisms during trying times (Thorson et al., 1997). For me, the ability to think more flexibly has allowed me to find humor in nearly any situation. With this shift in mentality, I also began to see the world more creatively. Going back to Gibson's original view of affordances, I began to see my environment around me (and everything in it) as an opportunity for creativity and humor. I found this shift in outlook to be a meme worthy opportunity as well: Figure 24 below is a screenshot of a text I once sent, to visually express how I felt that I went through life, viewing everything in the world around me as an opportunity for humor (thus the glowing "laser eyes"). This is another example, similar to Figures 19, 20, and 21, where simple uncaptioned images can aid individuals fulfill their specific self-expression needs. I soon propelled myself with this kind of mentality, navigating through life by basing my decisions on outcomes that would bring me the most laughter or joy.

**Figure 24:**

*A text message (sent by me) regarding how I go through life, looking for creative opportunities.*



As I began to see everything in my environment in terms of their unique affordances, I began seeing more opportunities for creativity. And as my capacity for creativity grew, so did my interests. I began investing more time and energy in new hobbies that would allow me to actualize the silly ideas I formed in my mind. Two such hobbies were embroidery/sewing, and weightlifting. Though these may not seem like inherently “funny” hobbies, I knew that the more skilled I became in these fields, the more I could achieve – meaning greater opportunities for creative applications of these skills. In order to accomplish this, I had to immerse myself in the communities and cultures of these activities; I began exploring new, diverse Discourses. But I also chose to actively dive deeper into my beloved meme Discourses and cultures.

## THE ROLE OF DISCOURSES & MEME CULTURES

### IN PRODUCTIVE RECOVERY FROM DEPRESSION

This section addresses **how meme Discourse (and cultures therein) provided a framework which allowed me to pursue a path of productive recovery [RQ2]**, by analyzing (a) *Meme Cultures and Recovery*, (b) *Feminist Meme Cultures and Recovery*, and (c) *Reconceptualizing Recovery and Resilience in Meme Cultures through Sick Woman Theory*.

In this section, I quickly discuss how the general meme Discourse encompasses an abundance of diverse subcultures. Specifically, I give insight into the positive, feminist meme cultures (with tenets and ideologies very similar to those of Sick Woman Theory) with which I was primarily engaged, and how such cultures contributed to my productive and positive reconceptualization of recovery and resilience.

At their core, Discourses can be regarded as communities of people sharing similar interests. The reason why I choose to refer to meme and hobby groups as Discourses is due to the specialized literacies and discursive practices involved. For reference, discursive practices are specific behaviours (or norms or identities) performed within a culture. For example, in polite societies, holding the door for the person behind you and letting them walk through first may be a discursive practice. When weightlifting, asking someone “Can you spot me?” means to ask someone to watch over you as you bench press (lifting weights while on your back) in order to make sure that you are safely able to lift these weights without risking personal injury. In meme Discourses, I believe that discursive practices essentially boil down to meme literacy: i.e. being able to understand, repeat, identify, reference, remix, and create memes.

What initially appealed to me about (meme) Discourses was the fact that these are made up of like-minded people, with similar beliefs, goals, and attitudes. There was often a sense of understanding and solidarity within these cultures. The memes I engaged with were pertinent to my situation, meaning that the people who could understand and appreciate these memes would be capable of empathizing with my experiences. Yet these Discourses did more than just poke fun at depression and anxiety – they also contained pockets of positivity and encouragement. I chose to go deeper into these kinds of Discourses – rather than more negative, self-deprecating ones – and I allowed these to guide me towards more optimistic and motivational ideologies.

Thus it was not simply memes as artifacts that allowed me to recover productively, but also (especially) the specific cultures within meme Discourses that allowed me to frame my situation more positively, and later form a framework towards recovery that genuinely worked for me.

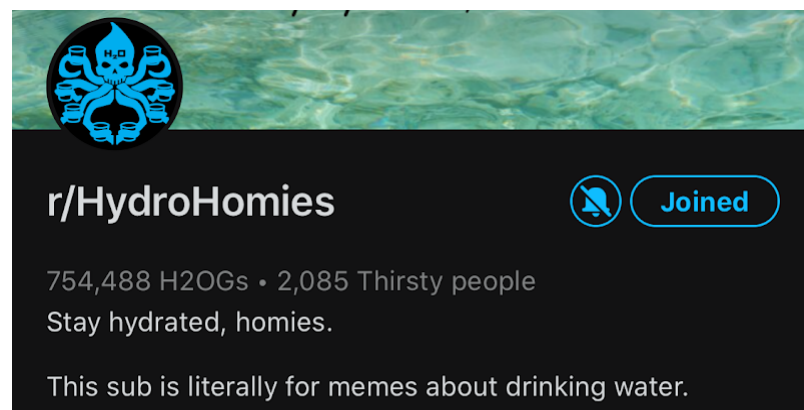
### MEME CULTURE & RECOVERY

Different subcultures can grow under the umbrella of a Discourse, and often do. These cultures cultivate and grow within Discourses, serving as the bases for in-group and out-group dynamics. In other words, when like-minded people with common interests (and/or goals, beliefs, etc) gather and form communities within Discourses, these communities may then cultivate and propagate specific cultures, which are further upheld through discursive practices. Within the general meme Discourse, there are a multitude of specific subcultures.

Subcultures can, for example, grow from specific interests and content; they can even stem from political alignments and social issues. They can form through niche interests, even topics that are not inherently funny. Figure 25 is an example of such a phenomenon, showing an example of a culture emphasizing the importance of water consumption. Figure 25 is also an example of a subculture promoting positive lifestyle choices through memes: “Hydro Homies” are encouraged to stay hydrated, and to avoid unhealthy drinks such as sodas, and alcohols.

**Figure 25:**

*The subreddit “r/HydroHomies”, a forum on Reddit dedicated to memes about staying hydrated.*



(Note that for the sake of this paper, I will focus on more left-leaning and positive meme/cultures. However, pockets of toxic cultures obviously exist on the Internet and they are also capable of spreading their harmful rhetoric effectively through meme/culture.)

When in a vulnerable state, people tend to seek out company or activities that comfort them the most. For me, this activity was browsing memes online – especially in more left-leaning groups and spaces. And while my companions were anonymous and I never directly interacted or spoke with anyone in these online spaces (I preferred “lurking”), I was nonetheless a part of such communities. Though my membership in these kinds of Discourse spaces had started years earlier, isolation and loneliness pushed me deeper into these spaces. I viewed these corners of the Internet as “safe spaces”, thus it made sense for me to delve deeper into these cultures when seeking comfort or reprieve from my misery. The more I used memes to sooth my soul, the more invested I became in meme culture and Discourse; and so, the deeper I went into the specific cultures that comforted me the most. Even as I followed more meme accounts, my social media feed did not necessarily become more diverse. By oversaturating my own feed with a massive influx of very specific, positive and feminist meme cultures, I engaged in a “new” kind of meme literacy practice: rote-learning. The more of the same (or similar) ideas I saw, the more I internalized these and eventually practiced them in daily life. (Contrariwise, by seeing varying opinions on specific topics, I was able to increase my perspectives and develop a multi-faceted and more holistic view of the topic at hand; this allowed me to increase my capacity for critical thinking regarding the digital media I intake.)

At the time, I felt very empty on the inside: In a lot of ways I felt I had lost my personality and my essence. The result of an empty husk of a human immersing themselves in very specific spaces is that they may develop and curate a new personality that is mostly made up of said cultures, their ideas, and their ideologies. (I state this as a hypothetical, but it is what happened to me.) For me, what began as a shallow response to distract myself from my own sadness, became an internalization of progressive cultures which granted me a new personality and a goal of long-term efforts in the name of self improvement and betterment. The meme Discourses I immersed myself in touted much of the same ideas as expressed by Sick Woman Theory. More specifically, notions of respect, empathy, kindness – towards the self and others

– were emphasized and promoted. As well, I felt these meme Discourses often pushed for the destigmatization of mental illnesses and emphasized the importance of collective care/solidarity.

### FEMINIST MEME CULTURES & RECOVERY

As my meme consumption increased, I noticed I began leaning towards memes that expressed or taught feminist ideologies. A lot of the meme/culture I chose to engage with was based around notions of respect, empathy, and harm reduction. Though my enjoyment of meme/culture began with depictions of mental health and illness I could relate to, these messages were often interspersed with other messages seeking to destigmatize mental illness (particularly depression and anxiety), as well as other disabilities. A lot of the memes I saw encouraged those who struggle with their mental and emotional health to speak on these subjects and seek therapy. It is also worth noting that these kinds of cultures looked to shift away from the demonization of [mental] illness, while also maintaining a sense of accountability – emphasizing that struggling with mental illness does not make you a monster or bad person; regardless, it is also not an excuse to (deliberately) perpetuate harmful behaviours onto others. Many of these memes also highlighted the importance of seeking legitimate therapy, rather than relying on untrained peers as pseudo-therapists (see Figure 26). Notions of empathy and care towards the self and others were also promoted. Some memes encouraged simple matters of respect (Figure 27); others tied into feminist ideas and social justice movements, seeking to push back against harmful behaviours and structures in order to promote kinder, more respectful societies (see Figure 28). Figures 26 to 32 are examples of a variety of memes found in these kinds of meme cultures.

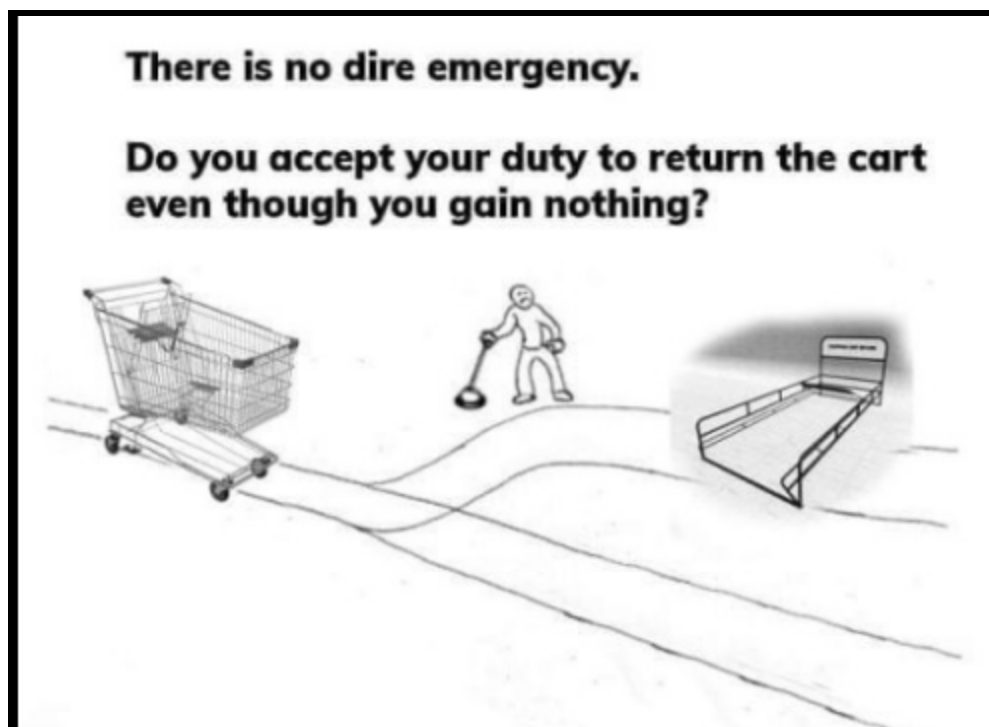
**Figure 26:**

*A meme about realistic expectations regarding sharing emotional baggage with loved ones.*



**Figure 27:**

*A meme based on the philosophical Trolley Dilemma, regarding social respectfulness/politeness.*





**Figure 28:**

*A meme discussing prejudice against African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a form of anti-Black racism, alongside another iteration of the same meme – this time about transphobia.*



**Figure 29:**

*A dark meme revised to shift away from suicidal ideation.*





**Figure 30:**

*A meme about supporting one's friends (and their passions) with surprise gifts.*

when your friend is talking about  
something new they like and you're  
making a note for gift ideas



**Figure 31:**

*A meme regarding combating a friend's depressive isolation tactic with love and support.*

When you see your homie start to  
isolate themselves so you go to give  
them support



**Figure 32:**

*A meme depicting that despite life's hardships, beautiful things can bloom from one's efforts.*



As mentioned, Figure 26 is an example of a meme that understands the limitations of friendship towards mental health struggles: While we may want to help and support our friends as much as possible, sometimes we must establish boundaries and insist that certain issues can only be tackled through therapy or similar means. Some memes, such as the one in Figure 27 emphasize the importance of every-day consideration, even when there is nothing to gain; it can also be seen as an example of positive behaviours/discursive practices encouraged by meme Discourses (i.e. notions of politeness, kindness, and respect). Other memes, such as the ones shown in Figure 28, show how one meme format/template can be used flexibly to express multiple differing messages – in this case, important concepts/tenets of feminism/social justice, such as pushing against anti-Black racism and transphobia. Similar to Figure 17, Figure 29 is an example of a popular practice within uplifting meme cultures: editing over memes with negative messages in an attempt at harm-reduction. Figures 30 and 31 are examples of memes promoting notions of kindness, emphasizing the importance of explicitly caring for and appreciating one's friends. Figure 32 is an example of a positive, encouraging meme; recognizing that life is full of struggles, yet one must never give up – for good things can happen regardless of bad situations.

These are just a few examples of the kinds of memes that helped me reframe my mentality, and seek positive, sustainable forms of coping and recovery.

When a person seeks to enter a Discourse and become a member, they may tend to agree with the tenets and beliefs of the Discourse. Thus they are more susceptible and willing to take in and emulate the ideas, ideals, and ideologies within these spaces. The greater and deeper the involvement of a member within these kinds of Discourses, the more they become indoctrinated with these ideologies; and subsequently take these values from their online spaces into their offline practices. (This process works similarly with toxic and harmful cultures.) Subsequently, deep involvement in Discourses may trigger a shift or growth in attitudes and personality, wherein they change their lives and lifestyles (to varying degrees) to reflect these ideologies. These changes may then be reflected in their everyday lifestyles and their treatment of others: i.e. how they choose to move through and engage with society and social issues.

This is the exact process I myself underwent: The platforms and accounts I engaged with were part of left-leaning and feminist spaces. My presence in these spaces began as a youth, and thus loosely molded my views and beliefs as I grew up. So when I returned to these spaces, I already agreed with and enjoyed the content I took in. And when I was in a vulnerable position with essentially no life or hobbies (barring staring at my phone), I pushed myself deeper into the online spaces and content that made me feel safe and happy. These happened to discuss depression and anxieties in ways I could relate to deeply, further pulling me into such spaces. The deeper I went, the more subcultures I found; but the ones I particularly gravitated towards were more positive, and promoted strategies towards productive recovery. I took the ideas I found in these meme/cultures and I used them as a framework for recovery. This framework was not just made up of coping strategies however, but also contained the blueprint for the [feminist] identity that I wanted to grow into. Thus I began making specific changes and daily conscientious choices to achieve this kind of personal growth and betterment. Over time, these decisions became hard-wired into me, and I continued making these choices post-recovery as well – which has allowed me to both become an overall resilient individual, but also to develop strategies allowing me to continuously reinforce this kind of resilience.

Due to the depth of my membership in meme Discourses, the nature of my meme literacy evolved from private-space practices, to practices I adapted for everyday-life contexts – both online and offline. I wound up rote-learning messages from feminist meme/cultures and I internalized these to the point that I projected and parroted these ideas/learnings in offline contexts. The deeper I dove into these kinds of Discourses and cultures, the more I felt I genuinely understood and appreciated the ideas I was enacting. And in many ways, it forced me to “upgrade” my membership to reflect this kind of growth. Thus when I began creating my own personal content, it concurrently forced me to think and self-reflect more critically. For example, one of the most valuable lessons I took to heart from these kinds of feminist cultures was to practice harm reduction (e.g. the kind of language I used). I began analyzing and correcting my daily actions and words to ensure these were not harmful to others (or myself). This ranged from policing my own self-deprecating thoughts, to curbing acts of microaggressions and other insidiously harmful behaviours. Another example: I stopped allowing myself to indulge in any thoughts of self-deprecation or suicidal ideation, even “joking” thoughts, which are not uncommon in meme Discourses. “Catchphrases” and punchlines such as “I hate myself”, “I’m trash”, “I want to die”, even my beloved “Kill me, Pete” (Figure 11) were all soon banned from my internal repertoire. Not only would I no longer use such phrases so nonchalantly with my friends, but I would also not allow myself to internalize these kinds of thoughts. Insead, I pushed more positive mantras onto myself; and once I became accustomed to being kinder to myself, I moved on to being outwardly kinder to others.

I also began actively unlearning other kinds of harmful habits and vocabulary: I unlearned a lot of inconspicuously racist, prejudiced, and ableist language and behaviours that I had not previously considered to be problematic. I sought out literature that would help me think critically about these habits, but also to learn how to leverage my own privileges to help others and become a better citizen to those in my community. I quickly took to the importance of anti-racist work, and the importance of critiquing and dismantling the very deliberately harmful institutional structures of white supremacy that have been embedded into our societies – especially those which, since their conception, have been set up to ensure the failure of anyone who is not a cisgender heterosexual, white able-bodied male (i.e. the exact opposite identity to

the Sick Woman). (On an aside, I have not written this point with the goal of virtue-signalling; I am simply indicating that this kind of work takes conscious effort, sincerity, and commitment. And prior to my trauma-induced depression, I was living a life of instant gratification and indulgence – so being a better person was not really at the forefront of my teenage desires/goals.)

### RECONCEPTUALIZING RECOVERY & RESILIENCE IN MEME CULTURES THROUGH SICK WOMAN THEORY

Resilience, as we know it in the West, has come to be based upon a flawed, shallow notion of “self-help”; insisting we must get ourselves out of any conundrum we face – no matter how difficult that may actually be – and we must go at it alone. Sick Woman Theory pushes against this bootstraps notion of resilience by insisting the exact opposite: that we should not go through our struggles alone, and that we need communities of support and collective care to truly be well and safe. Feminist theories such as this one have also cultivated cultures that emphasize the importance of harm-reduction: respecting the space, emotional capacity, and mental health of our friends, and encouraging that we refrain from using the people around us as free therapists. (Refer back to Figure 26 as an example.)

Sick Woman Theory also discusses the delegitimization of the Sick Woman’s pain: Anyone who does not share the privileges of a straight white male is unlikely to receive the treatment they want or need. This point deeply resonated with me; an individual who sought professional help, but had their trauma-induced symptoms reduced to nothing more than menstrual cycle symptoms. Similarly, I was offered cookie-cutter solutions to my affliction (e.g. arbitrarily being placed on medication), instead of resources for seeking emotional support and/or viable on-going help for my [ever-evolving] problems.

Due to their feminist backings, the meme/cultures and Discourses I engaged with offered similar truths to Sick Woman Theory. While they promoted messages of (individualized) self-care, they also touted the importance of caring for your friends and forming strong, respectful relationships with them. They encouraged seeking help (from friends, family, loved ones, and therapists) for mental health struggles, and emphasized that these ailments should not be delegitimized or disregarded simply because they are non-visible impairments.

These kinds of ideologies and teachings are often learned within Discourses, and then emulated and presented externally. Through discursive practices, these ideas are implemented within members; and through quotidian practices in external contexts, these messages can be spread (and even taught unto others not yet in the Discourse, or newer members of the Discourse). By spreading these messages, especially to younger generations (who are generally very fond of meme/culture), members can take it upon themselves to try to change their behaviours. They can even go so far as to pushing for structural changes to our societies, pressing towards more positive, respectful, and empathetic models of equity.

On an aside, while we may be quick to judge youths and their uses of social media, it is important to remember that many of these are children who have not fully learned empathy. Though there can be obstacles to teaching empathy in the age of social media (e.g. internet anonymity, echo chambers, a general lack of accountability and critical thinking), real empathy is often gained through human connection and experiences. If these experiences happen to occur online or due to digital cultures, that should not make them any less valid! But I digress.

In the same ways that I learned to unlearn harmful language and behaviours through meme discourse (for example, learning about more subtle, insidious forms of ableism, transphobia, [anti-Black] racism, etc), I also learned to unlearn or move away from harmful behaviours that would worsen my mental state. As mentioned, though there are memes that often use harmful and self-deprecating punchlines (e.g. “I hate myself”, “I’m trash”, “I want to die”, etc), there are also memes that counter these mantras – insisting that individuals should not repeat these phrases to themselves, so that these ideas do not become embedded in one’s psyche. Once I made the active decision to stop internalizing these kinds of thoughts, I perceived a visible shift in my mood. This became a kind of discursive practice for me, in terms of how I interacted with myself, and this simple act became a very important habit of mine. The less I allowed my mind to wander into and indulge thoughts of self-deprecation, the further I moved away from possibilities of suicidal ideation, and instead towards notions of hope and recovery.

In terms of collective care, meme/culture hammered into me the importance of appreciating your friends and not being afraid to reach out to them – while emphasizing the importance of respecting their limits. I slowly began opening up more to friends, and this



allowed them to better understand my situation without becoming overwhelmed. From that point, they adjusted their strategies to help me as much as they could. For example, one friend invited me to stay with her and her flatmates for a weekend, which greatly helped me become re-accustomed with socializing, and helped me expand my social network. The positive experiences I gained from this trip actually allowed me to overcome the loss of my appetite and to resume taking care of myself in basic ways. Another friend (upon the return of my appetite) would wake me up every morning, drag me to the gym, and force me to eat a healthy, nutritious post-workout meal with him until it became my own independent routine. One friend, upon better understanding my condition and the help I wanted, took me to McGill Counselling Services, forced me to book an appointment, and to follow through with the commitment.

When I first sought out professional help, I went to McGill Mental Health because I thought that was the one and only place to start. When confronted by a psychiatrist who belittled my experiences and showed no interest other than medicating me, I found myself quickly deterred from seeking these services ever again. However, the experience was much different when I applied for a counsellor. While I did have to undergo vetting and tell my story (yet again) to an administrator who would assess my situation and *then* assign me a counsellor; and while I did have to (once again) wait several weeks until my first appointment, this time was somehow less soul-crushing. Probably because it was the first time an adult responded to my situation with genuine empathy, instead of discomfort or apathy.

But for one glorious moment, the sun shone down upon me, the angels began singing, and God himself came to tell me “Rest now, my child. All will be well. Help is on the way.” – and for the first time in months, I had hope anew!

Just kidding. I was still very much dead on the inside.

But in the end, being assigned a counsellor who actually cared about my situation and approached my recovery in a way that worked for me was invaluable. It also helped that my counsellor was young, understood meme culture, and accepted my use of it during our appointments. I would often use memes to express myself to him when I was verbally unable to do so. Using humor to express myself helped dispel feelings of shame and embarrassment, and it made sessions where we discussed particularly difficult issues much easier to process.



## DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES OF RESILIENCE & CARE THROUGH MEMES

This section addresses **how partaking in meme/culture throughout my recovery allowed me to develop and maintain sustainable practices of resilience and care [RQ3]**, by analyzing (1) *Resilience Through Flexibility and Humor*, and (2) *Feminist Ideologies of Care Engendered Through Memes*. Here I explain how meme/culture shaped me productively and pushed me towards developing the mindset and strategies needed to pursue my goals of long-term personal betterment, ultimately leading to my lasting resilient character.

So far I have shown how memes can help one cope through their ability to generate and spread humor; as well, I have shown how the affordances of their multimodality provide an accessible outlet for self-expression. I believe opportunities for creativity (and self-expression) can help an individual increase their mental flexibility and approach their life problems through a multi-faceted lens. I have also shown how meme/culture and members of the Discourse can establish a sense of solidarity (often visibly quantified) through shared experiences and feelings. Through Discourses specifically, I speculated how meme/culture can help an individual learn to cope and recover from their ailments through feminist ideologies promoting personal and societal betterment. Thus, equipped with both the affordances of memes as artifacts and meme Discourse cultures, a person could acquire the mindset to want to improve themselves, and maybe even their community or society. With this kind of immersion, over time, a person may likely see a personality change; personal growth is often provoked by positive influences.

### RESILIENCE THROUGH FLEXIBILITY & HUMOR

The first thing that could happen to someone engaging in meme/culture is that they may cultivate a very specific sense of humor. This of course depends on how deep one is involved within meme/culture and Discourses. Those with only a shallow membership in meme Discourses generally enjoy simpler, straightforward memes; those involved more deeply with meme Discourses have spent enough time around meme/culture to acquire a wide spectrum of meme knowledge and extensive meme literacy. This can increase understanding and appreciation for more abstract, convoluted memes and their jokes/punchlines.

**Figure 33:**

*A screenshot of a meme and ensuing discourse discussing generational differences in humor.*



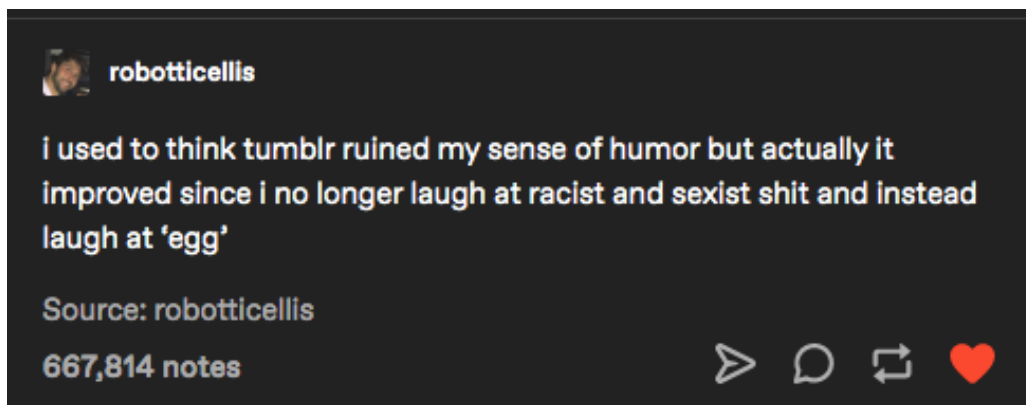
We may be inclined to believe that younger/newer generations – by nature of having grown up with an expectation of being “Digital Natives” (Prensky, 2001) – have a more abstract view of comedy. This may be due to their willingness to delve deep into meme Discourses, and desire to increase their meme literacy – rather than any arbitrary factors related to age. In Figure 33, the comments underneath the original image go further into the perceived divide in generational humor, and classify these differences by art movements. This example of discourse that can stem from even the most absurd memes, showcases one instance of the intricacies of meme/culture that can further dispel the notion that memes are simple “internet jokes”.

I have generally noticed that the people in my life who enjoy more absurd memes tend to lean towards leftist and feminist ideas. There are even memes that allude to this, mentioning that these kinds of people can find greater humor in everyday life and do not have to resort to jokes based on harmful prejudices; rather they can laugh at the abstract and at anti-humor. Memes can provide a less toxic form of humor that does not punch down. In some ways memes may even be able to double over as aids to social justice movements, by punching up and making jokes about

the systemic inequalities and harmful structures of our societies – both bringing awareness to these and calling for the reform and/or abolishment of such structures. While those outside of meme Discourses may be inclined to mock the absurdity of meme/culture, the statement expressed in Figure 34 highlights the importance of memes replacing problematic or harmful forms of humor, with more creative and absurd forms of humor.

**Figure 34:**

*A screenshot of a text-post expressing how Tumblr warped the user's sense of humor positively.*

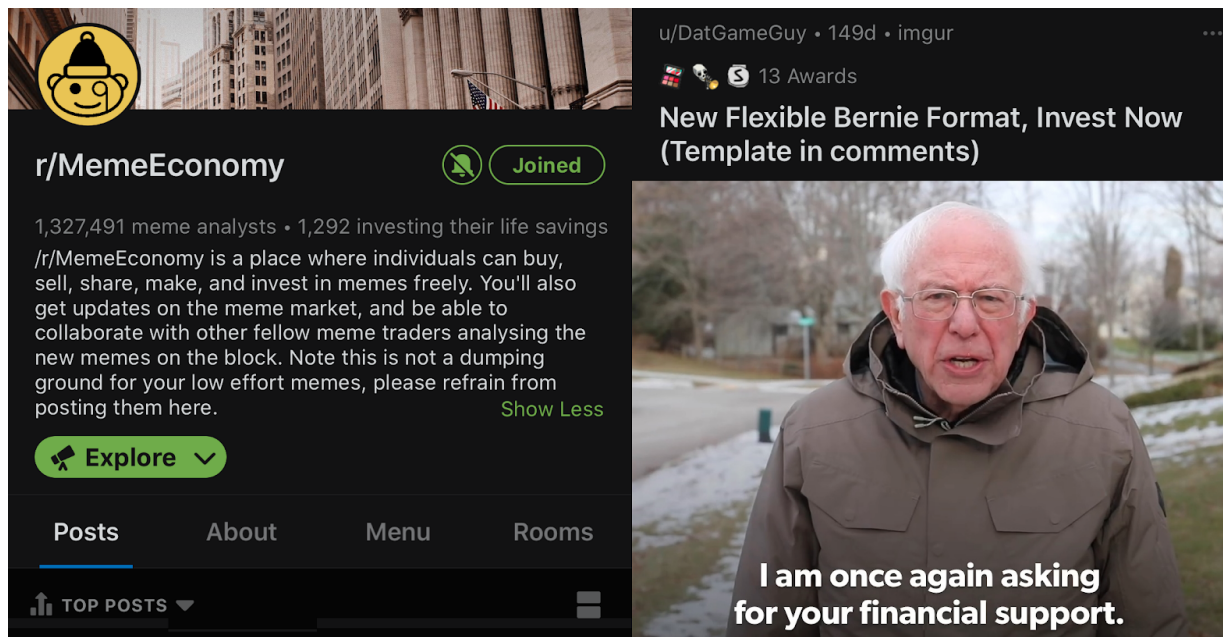


Regardless of political teachings or leanings, those who can enjoy more absurd forms of humor are more likely to find humor in the everyday, mundane aspects of life. For example, I do not need fantastic events to amuse myself or make myself happy. Instead, I try my best to view life through a more optimistic lens, no matter my situation. I base most, if not all, of my decisions on which would make me laugh the most; and some of my happiest moments have been spent daydreaming, as this is a space where my creativity and aspirations have no limits. (Usually, I will then take the silliest – yet most achievable – ideas I dream up, and translate these tangibly into reality.) For me, the stepping stone to this kind of thinking began with a budding interest in meme/culture. I have sent and made countless memes in my life: to express love for my friends and family, to tease them, to remind them to take care of themselves, to voice my frustrations against my academic experiences, to make light of certain traumatic experiences I have endured, and even to make the most mundane stories more compelling. The more I used

memes to communicate, the more memes I amassed – saving the most applicable ones for frequent use, and the most versatile ones for future use. (Refer to Figure 35).

**Figure 35:**

*A satirical forum on Reddit where memes are capital assets in an [imaginary] stock market.*



*Note:* Ultimately the goal of this subreddit is to assess the value of a particular meme based on it's capacity/viability to be used to make jokes.

From Figure 35, r/MemeEconomy is an example of an online space specifically made to curate the most versatile meme formats. The greater the comedic potential a meme format can provide (i.e. the greater its capacity to be captioned, edited, remixed), the more valuable the meme is. I often browse r/MemeEconomy to find meme formats I would like to customize for myself later. But sometimes finding a meme format is not enough: Perhaps there is no existing image to correspond with the punchline in your head – so you would go out and create your own meme template! Eventually, you may start seeing nearly everything in your life as an opportunity for humor. This may seem to be an extreme or unlikely situation, but it is what I experienced. Whenever I saw an opportunity to make myself laugh, I took it. I began basing my (non-life altering) decisions on which choice would elicit the most joy/laughter. And these decisions

brought me great joy, but they also gave me stories. I was living life again, and this time it was fulfilling and interesting. (Ask me about The Milk Story™ or Coffee Perhaps™ sometime!)

But this creativity soon moved outside of meme Discourses and I began seeing other opportunities for creativity in my personal projects, art, and story-telling; I even sought ways to make weight training more engaging and fun. (For example, in addition to general weight and bodyweight training, I started doing exercises that would increase my physical flexibility – because I thought it would be funny and fun to contort my body in unusual ways.) And so, in addition to my meme “hobby”, I now had other interests and activities to help me occupy my thoughts and time. Most importantly of all, by using my sense of [meme] humor to find opportunities for creativity in these new hobbies, I managed to maintain interest and consistency in doing these activities. This further helped restructure my life and push back against the apathy that my depression had instilled in me. I now had two invaluable skills in my road-to-resilience tool pack: (1) a more flexible way of seeing life, thinking, and problem solving, and (2) greater determination, passion, and joy. With new hobbies, I became dedicated to improving my skills in these, and so I did not immediately lose interest in these activities. I pursued them, and I was able to see noticeable changes in a very short amount of time to my abilities. Seeing noticeable, trackable improvements contributed to my overall motivation – in terms of keeping up with my hobbies, as well as recovering from my depression and pursuing overall self-betterment.

Far more important than any hobby however, was the fact that I had the passion to pursue these activities at all, and I had the determination needed to improve my skills and abilities. The deeper I engaged with these activities, the more motivated and encouraged I was to improve. This was an important personality shift and trait that would ultimately help me in my journey to resilience – I no longer felt empty and helpless; I had drive and passion again. In the same vein that I wanted to be better at the things I enjoyed, I wanted to be a better person overall. Through persistence and hard work, I reached a point where my personal changes manifested visibly and were commended by those around me. This fed back into motivating me to improve myself and became a cycle of positive reinforcement. Productive, positive feedback loops such as this one were an important part of my framework for recovery. Another type of loop I maintained for myself was one where I forced myself to go to the gym, in order to force myself to eat (healthy),

which in turn forced me to go back to the gym (and so on and so forth). Though maybe not super creative, these loops were a way for me to “cheat” at keeping myself healthy during times where sheer willpower would have failed me.

### *FEMINIST IDEOLOGIES OF CARE ENGENDERED THROUGH MEMES*

Now equipped with flexible thinking and persistence (such as creating positive cycles for myself and maintaining them), I became more conscious of the kind of content I was taking in through meme/culture. What started as a passive coping response, simply viewing memes and having a small laugh to myself, turned into taking every opportunity to make myself laugh. Soon, I began engaging with more diverse topics: I no longer focused all my energies on memes about the symptoms of depression and anxiety, but rather on messages regarding how to cope with these illnesses, how to be better to myself, my loved ones, and my community – and even more absurd forms of humor, of course.

My isolation and loneliness ultimately proved to be a positive factor in my personal growth: Having few (dispersed) friends left meant there was no peer pressure to push me to conform to the expectations of any specific group (like I had felt with my previous friends). And of the few friends I kept, they had stuck by me through my worst moments; I felt pretty confident they would not leave me if I decided to engage with the few interests that brought me happiness. So I delved deeper into these communities, beliefs, and d/Discourses. The deeper I went, the more these ideas resounded within me. The more I agreed and empathized with these ideas, and the more ingrained they became into me, my personality, and my life choices. When you are in a vulnerable state, you can be more susceptible to indoctrination. I was fortunate that the spaces on the Internet I perused were focused on positive intrapersonal and societal improvement.

And so, as meme/culture gave me the capacity to care about things once again, I started caring about myself, my loved ones, and my community. I started taking a deeper interest in bettering myself. I did not want to just “get better” and go back to the way I was before – I wanted to be a better person. I wanted to be kinder, more respectful, more mindful, more caring; I wanted to make a positive change in my circles and community. And the more I wanted these



things, the deeper I dove into these d/Discourses that taught me how to do these things, and thus the better equipped I was to accomplish these goals.

For example, through memes, I learned about microaggressions and how to not perpetuate these. I learned about systemic inequities and inequalities set up in the infrastructures of our societies, and why it was important to use my privileges to push back against these. I learned about the importance and value of respect – towards others and myself. (“Well, duh!”, but tell that to my jejune teenage-self.) As a particularly sheltered individual with few experiences (“life lessons”) to learn from, I found these online tidbits of knowledge – in highly digestible meme form – to be invaluable towards the foundations of my new, improved identity.

Through memes, I also opened myself back up to the idea of seeking therapy, and conceded to the efforts of a close friend to sign me up for counselling services. Except this time I did not go to a psychiatrist; instead I sought out a psycho-therapist. (This came at the advice of my friend who better understood my emotional needs once I opened up to him more honestly.) Prior to my involvement in mental health d/Discourses, I did not actually realize there was a distinction. I assumed seeing a psychiatrist was seeking therapy; I was wrong, and it crushed and demotivated me.

The meme/cultures I engaged with emphasized the importance of finding a therapist who would work well with me. I was lucky that I was able to request a younger therapist – I did not want a repeat of my experience with the much older, emotionally-removed psychiatrist. And the relative closeness of our ages and maturity helped tremendously, as he was much more empathetic – but more importantly (for me), he was meme literate. For particularly emotional events I struggled with, I would choose to create humorous slideshows about such happenings and my responses to these. So once again, memes gave me a voice and allowed me to communicate my thoughts comfortably. Engaging this practice in a serious, professional setting, and having this form of communication accepted as valid, further consolidated in my mind the power and value of memes.

Meme/culture allowed me to reach a point where I could express myself creatively, but also use this creativity to boost my own mood. It allowed me to better recognize and acknowledge my own situation and struggles, and offered me tangible solutions. Through



meme/culture, I created a “goal identity” and identified the strategies that would allow me to form a solid framework and structure towards achieving this goal. By the time I resorted to professional help, meme/culture had allowed me to reach a point where I viewed my life not in terms of my short-term trauma, but rather the much bigger picture – I was now seeking therapy with the goal of continuous personal improvement.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

Much earlier in this paper, I mentioned that resilience has a multitude of definitions, but existing literature generally agrees that resilience is the ability to better adapt to adversity and stressful situations (Werner, 1985; Isen et al., 1987; Block & Kreman, 1996; Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Luthar et al., 2000; Beasley et al., 2003; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Curiously, existing literature has also discussed the benefits of a positive social ecology, strong networks of support, and flexible thinking towards achieving resilience (Thorson et al., 1997; Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011; Yusoff & Othman, 2011; Murray et al., 2013). Since there have already been plenty of positive studies on these topics – then what was the point of this paper?

Regrettably, more and more, it seems that we are seeing scientific research discarded in favor of capitalism and [oft flawed] political opinions. We may only loosely understand what it means to achieve resilience, or how to do so. Meanwhile, we are predominantly used to the notion of bootstraps resilience (Ungar, 2011), regardless of the fact that the expression itself does not make sense, as it is (1) literally physically impossible to pull oneself up by bootstraps, and (2) this expression has historically been used to describe attempting absurd, futile tasks (Zimmer, 2005; Popik, 2012). Further, sometimes it would seem that the notion of this kind of resilience has become overly normalized in our societies. By this I mean that those without privilege and wealth are expected to overcome adversity; surviving, not thriving, is the expectation.

So while the factors leading to resilience, supported by research, may seem like common sense, they do not make up the framework or mentality for resilience promoted in our societies. Sick Woman Theory emphasizes this greatly: Capitalism not only dictates what is "healthy", but denies care for those it deems to be "sick". All the while further traumatizing them, by rendering security (e.g. housing, food, treatment, etc) inaccessible for many. Even worse, capitalism persuades those who directly benefit from it that individualism is king. As a result, we seem to have found ourselves living in very selfish, materialistic societies. We are seeing now, during a global pandemic, that certain people are so unwilling to care for (the health and safety of) others

in their community, that they deem matters of public health to be political and wearing a piece of fabric on their face to be an infringement on their personal rights. Even my ex-psychiatrist chose capitalistic gain over providing genuine care. In fact, I once emailed him with a very serious, time-sensitive concern; he simply responded by asking me to book an appointment. When I told him I was unable to do so, as I was not in Montreal, he never replied and never contacted me again. He made it abundantly clear that my well-being was never a concern for him: He would get paid regardless of my recovery.

There is much to be said of the many insidious ways in which capitalism discriminates against those it does not specifically benefit – particularly those living with disability. And while capitalism may seem inescapable, there are still many ways to protest against it – Sick Woman Theory is one such way. In my case, I reconceptualized achieving resilience and practicing care by choosing to reject a very capitalistic, materialistic, solitudinal view of these things. Instead, I resorted to an unconventional palliative (meme “therapy”) which introduced me to ideologies promoting community care, strong support systems, positive social ecologies, and gave me the ability to find moments of happiness even in misery.

By rejecting individualism, I managed to form excellent support networks. I managed to form these strong relationships through my beloved feminist meme/cultures, which taught me to think and act less selfishly. Through meme/culture, I also developed a very strange (but flexible!) sense of humor. Meaning that while I am simply Living My Life™, indulging in opportunities to be creative and create happiness and humor, externally, I seem like (and I am!) a cheerful, carefree, and confident person – all attractive traits that seem to draw people in.

When coupled with the ways in which I explicitly show genuine care, it is relatively easy for me to bond with complete strangers and make friends wherever I go, thus constantly expanding my networks. By choosing to redefine care as a concept external to the tenets of capitalism and one more attune to the ideas of Sick Woman Theory (emphasizing the importance of communal care and positive social ecology), through the unique and absurd nature of meme/culture, I created for myself the kind of mindset and personality that scientific research – not selfish capitalist ideology – has proven to positively contribute to genuine resilience.

## PERCEIVED OUTCOMES OF RECOVERING WITH MEMES

**Figure 36:**

*Journey to Resilience (visual “timeline”).*



Through the above mentioned skills and mentalities (namely, creativity, flexible thinking, thoughtfulness, a healthy sense of humor, and the essential tenets of feminist theory), there can be a positive shift to one’s personality and identity. This positive shift can be viewed as a form of personal growth that ultimately leads to better intra- and interpersonal relationships.

A better intrapersonal relationship greatly helps with coping on an individual level. Depression can be incredibly hard to overcome because it is often paired with anxiety, placing greater insecurity and stress on the individual. One may endure feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, fear, apathy, and all sorts of other negative beliefs that can greatly hinder personal

growth and improvement. However, when one has a healthier relationship with themselves, it can be easier to dispel these anxious thoughts and instead focus on tackling the fatigue of depression. Anxiety can hinder oneself from making important life decisions. In my case, I found that a lot of my own anxiety was rooted in (and amplified) my insecurities. Through an improved interpersonal relation, I was able to shift my mind's focus away from these debilitating thoughts.

Equipped with a more flexible mindset and [non-harmful] sense of humor, I try to view my problems more optimistically, humorously, and creatively. I find that when doing so, my anxiety towards these matters lessens – allowing me to make better judgements. Thus, instead of feeling helpless when faced with a challenge, I am able to reflect on how to best tackle the issue at hand – usually in non-traditional ways. Flexible thinking is a great asset in life, but especially when confronted with obstacles. Problem solving is an incredibly important skill to develop, and oftentimes poor problem solving skills (especially when paired with anxiety) can make a person freeze, overwhelm them and render them unsure of how to proceed – thus trapping them in their problem and prolonging their short-term and/or long-term stress.

For example, I once desperately needed a professional headshot – however, I did not have the funds or the time to find a photographer. The only camera I had at my disposal was the one built into my phone – but then I did not have any kind of tripod or way to take the photo hands-free. Thus I fashioned myself a make-shift stand out of a bottle of rose water, a paper towel roll, and a few elastic bands (MacGyver would have been proud). With the elastic bands, I secured my phone to the paper towel roll, which I had placed onto the bottle of rose water for stability. I had my camera with a stand. I used my headphones to take the picture, as the volume buttons can control the camera shutter button. Through this unconventional solution, I managed to take a photo that was both aesthetically and professionally pleasing! (I also got a great story to go with my picture!) A silly example, no doubt, but the power of flexible thinking and creativity can be invaluable – particularly when left with few or no options.

Through creativity, a person can cope on a surface level – from expressing themselves through memes, to taking up a creative project to refocus their energies on – and these bursts of creativity can feed back into the person's mood, increasing their overall energy, creating a kind of positive feedback loop. On a deeper level, having an inclination towards creativity can allow

one to confront their daily challenges and problems with greater ease and greater options – they do not have to abide by traditional forms of thinking, and can tackle tasks by thinking outside the box. However, being able to cope on an individual level is not enough, as Sick Woman Theory reminds us. We need collective care and networks of support to create sustainable models of resilience. Meme/culture can help with this too by improving interpersonal relationships.

Being able to form and maintain strong interpersonal relationships greatly helps an individual amass a collective, network of support. In turn, this kind of support feeds back into the person's resilience. Again, Sick Woman Theory emphasizes that we should not have to endure the burdens of our pains alone, and that we need others (i.e. friends, family, loved ones) and that we need kindness and support to help us cope with our afflictions. Naturally, with the ability to form better interpersonal relations, comes better support. Because a person could have many friends and acquaintances, but these friendships may not necessarily run deep or be meaningful. If there is not a strong connection and/or reciprocal support in these relationships, there is little to no care – collective or otherwise. Meme/cultures can greatly help develop relationships through an increased sense of humor and even increased confidence provided by personal growth movements. These relationships can also be kickstarted through Discourse ideologies – finding like-minded people within a shared Discourse is much easier than approaching a stranger with which you have nothing in common. By creating relationships within an established community, it can be sustained through this shared interest. It can even promote personal growth more effectively; allowing people in these relationships – sharing the same values and beliefs – to hold each other accountable to the basic tenets of the ideologies they share, thus allowing them to encourage each other to pursue continual improvement and betterment.

With time, as these relations grow stronger, there may be an increase in confidence: If you have a solid system of support to rely on, you can then allocate more time to pursuing other relationships, thus expanding your networks. However is it not simply the size or spread of the network that matters, but the strength of these connections. Through the feminist teachings and values promoted by meme Discourses, individuals know they have a responsibility to be excellent to each other. Being able to hold oneself accountable greatly contributes to building stronger relationships and working on continual personal betterment.

Meme d/Discourses pushed me to be a better person: one who has passions and pursues them, one who seeks to be kind and helpful wherever possible, one who cares deeply about people and causes. Through these new ideals, my relationship with myself vastly improved. I became self-assured and genuinely happy; I had real passions and excitement in my soul. I found myself laughing at things that are not inherently funny; I even started making most of my decisions based on what would make me laugh the most. I owe this flexible sense of humor and creativity to my love for memes. Through extended and extensive subjection to meme culture, oft nonsensically absurd, I was (and am!) able to find reasons to be happy even in the banal.

On an aside, I do not mean to suggest that my resilience (or indeed, resilience in general) is defined by happiness. Nor do I suggest that achieving resilience means becoming indomitable. Truthfully, since my sophomore year, I have endured many more traumatic events and situations; and there have been many days where such events landed me back in bed, despondent and inconsolable. There have been days where I reached my absolute breaking point and vowed to fully give up – because I felt I could not handle the pain of picking myself up just to fall back down again. Despite this, I have never spent more than a day or two in such anguish. (Generally, I find myself back on my feet after a good hearty cry.) My body may still react to trauma in horrible ways – this may be inescapable by nature of being human – but by nature of the strategies and networks I have developed for myself, it has become practically impossible for me to truly give up. No matter how I may feel when I am in the depths of my misery, my resilience has proven itself time and time again through the strength of my mental resolve. But I digress.

By being able to find humor in everything, I was no longer afraid to put myself out there. People were once again drawn to me, but even more so than before, because I radiated true confidence and happiness, and carried myself in a very carefree way. I was able to make friends (or, at the very least, friendly banter) wherever I went with practically anyone I met. My interpersonal relationships began to flourish; and finally, one day, I met my best friends.

One of my close friends, who had helped me through the deepest trenches of my depression, invited me to join him at the library. It was the end of the semester and exam season was right around the corner. I personally loathe studying in libraries and public spaces – so I declined his study invitation, but compromised by saying I would stop for a quick hello. When I



arrived, he was sitting with two strangers. Noting this, I quickly told them I would not stay long as I did not want to interrupt their studies. One of them piped up and replied: “Oh we’re not studying, we’re just looking at memes”. Instantly piquing my interest, I whipped out my laptop and my extensive meme collection. They were in awe at my assortment of memes (and my meme literacy), and we spent a good hour sharing memes and laughter. Drunk on euphoria, I made a group chat for us to share memes and little else. Very soon afterwards, my close friend added another meme-lover (who I had been aware of but not acquainted with) to the chat.

The semester ended, and over the summer we continued exchanging memes – but we also began sharing our stories and getting to know one another better. By the time September rolled around, we felt like life long friends – even though we had only met once in real life! Since that fateful day in April, our friendship has only grown stronger and more resilient with time. We still send memes daily, we still make custom memes for each other (See Figure 37). We make time for each other and we provide endless succor to one another. It is an incredible network of support, tested and true; and no matter how bad things get (in the world and in our personal lives), we are always there for each other.

In a bit of a perfect loop, my journey started and “ended” with memes.

**Figure 37:**

*The “Face with Tears of Joy” emoji remixed with a friend’s facial features.*



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSION**

This thesis auto-theoretically outlines my experience with neoliberal institutions of “care”, how these failed me, and how I used meme/culture to cope with trauma-induced depression and anxiety. I explain how in the early days of my Suffering™, I used memes to superficially cope with humor (i.e. using memes as a bandage fix). Soon-after, I began maximizing the benefits of the multimodality of memes towards self-expression, by creating memes specific to my own situation – both to help lighten the situation for myself and for the few friends who knew of my struggles. As I got more creative and expressive with my memes, my interest in pursuing other creative projects spiked. I soon took up creative hobbies, and even turned the most mundane tasks into opportunities for creativity. This newfound disposition towards a flexible mindset focused on deriving humor from everyday life greatly boosted my mood and gave me the energy to rebuild and restructure my life and soul.

Unfortunately, this alone did not help me tackle my underlying issues and trauma. Fortunately, the meme cultures I was directly immersed in preached many of the same notions as Sick Woman Theory, and emphasized the importance of developing and maintaining strong inter- and intra-personal relationships. I took this kind of ideology to heart and completely rebuilt my character and personality; I was now choosing to recover with the goal of being better than I was before my trauma, and not just simply returning to a pre-existing notion of emotional stability. Through feminist ideas and ideologies, I pushed for personal betterment and succeeded in becoming a more creative and resilient individual. Through this creativity, I established positive feedback loops for myself (i.e. productive systems/structures that would force me to maintain healthy habits), and through my improved personality I quickly gained the confidence to form new relationships. I initially sought out those in the same or similar meme Discourses as myself, and this allowed us to bond and form friendships very quickly. Through time, memes, and shared ideologies, these friendships deepened into meaningful, lasting relationships. By the “end” of my journey to resilience, not only had I created good coping strategies on an individual level, but

more importantly, I developed a very strong network of support to fall back on during particularly stressful times or relapses.

Thus I reconceptualized “bootstraps” resilience for myself with the ideas touted by Sick Woman Theory (and other feminist ideologies found in the meme Discourses I engaged with), and achieved a very productive recovery from my post-traumatic illnesses through improved intra- and inter-personal relationships. (Refer back to Figure 36 for a more detailed outline of my personal journey towards recovery and resilience.)

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIETY & FUTURE RESEARCH

### *SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS*

At its core, Sick Woman Theory is a form of protest against a capitalist, white-supremacist society. It protests against the structures and systems which constantly dismiss, diminish, and delegitimize those without the privileges of being white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, neuro-typical, wealthy men. As Hedva asserts: Sick Woman Theory is not only a form of protest, but also a form of survival. In turn, the kind of "meme therapy" I have discussed in this paper, was my own form of protest against a system that continued to disappoint and discourage me. It was how I survived in the face of an illness that stripped me of nearly everything. In a similar way that social media platforms have given a voice to marginalized communities, who have so often been ignored in favor of amplifying predominantly white, male, upper-class judgements, meme/culture is a novel way which similarly provides opportunity to those who would otherwise not be able to speak on their experiences. Furthermore, meme/culture allows these experiences to be voiced through more creative, persuasive, moving, and accessible means and methods.

Although I gave up on many traditional types of help, I never gave up on myself (even if this was not always outwardly apparent). While staring at my phone for 12 hours a day may seem counterproductive in theory, it was a better alternative to staring at my wall and getting lost in my thoughts. And although my retinas may have temporarily suffered to some extent, this was a small price to pay to get my spirit back (and then some). I chose to indulge in my online habits, which are so often criticized and judged as unhealthy (i.e. being glued to a screen, taking in

copious amounts of digital content) – but laughing to myself in my room, was a lot less harmful than sitting in a room with a mental health "professional" who belittled my pain, and it was much less harmful than coping through substance abuse, as many university students (and even full-fledged adults) tend to do.

And through my immersion in meme/culture, I came to realize that my experiences with a cold, uncaring system were not at all unique; and my use of meme/culture towards coping and healing was really not so unconventional. As global economies continue to grow only for the benefit of the upper-class, shrinking the middle-class to nothingness, and affording even fewer opportunities to the working-class, more and more individuals who struggle (especially with mental health) must resort to novel forms of coping, care, and survival. Using meme/culture therapeutically is one such method of coping that will likely grow more popular, as traditional forms of "care" become increasingly inaccessible and uncaring.

Unfortunately, while “laughter as medicine” is not a new concept, meme/culture continues to be so often marginalized. I have personally borne witness to several studies, flaunting goals of "destigmatizing digital culture and media" – yet these same studies refuse to grant meme/culture any true respect or legitimacy. Despite how often meme/culture is mocked or belittled by those outside of the Discourse – by those who cannot understand its absurdities, its idiosyncrasies, its unquities – it has often proved itself to be more therapeutic and vastly more accessible than typical or traditional forms of help, which more often than not reinforce the reality of how neoliberal, capitalist societies are so devoid of true care. When you lack access to systems and resources, or else, those available to you simply do not work, you must improvise.

While the cultural impacts of meme/cultures are only beginning to be noticed, memes and their applications will continue to evolve in our societies in increasingly impactful ways. In the same ways that efforts are being made to destigmatize struggles with mental illness, society would also benefit from destigmatizing meme/culture, shifting away from the view that memes are simply vapid humorous images, and instead moving towards the reality that they are legitimate, complex units of culture and communication worthy of exploration and serious consideration. Whether for good or bad, meme/cultures are responsible for creating and changing cultures, and societies would fare well to keep up with these shifts.

## RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Despite so much research regarding the integration of modern technologies and classrooms, there seems to be no real interest in understanding why certain digital tools and online cultures appeal to the youths in our classrooms, rendering these research attempts relatively underwhelming, shallow, and ineffective. Before any potential specific research can be undertaken, meme/culture is in need of greater respect and consideration – particularly by those outside the Discourse. Once meme/culture is given the appreciation it deserves, there are a plethora of research possibilities:

For one, the concepts of this particular study could be investigated through a more scientific, quantifiable setting: For example, an investigation into the short- and long- term effects of meme/culture on one's brain (to be tracked through neuroimaging). Furthermore, researching the benefits of meme/culture in conjunction with feminist therapy/counselling: Many members of the meme Discourse have already taken to expressing their traumas to their therapist through memes and humor. Contrariwise, it is worth investigating the effects of indoctrination into negative and harmful meme cultures – and ideally, how to counteract these kinds of hateful cultures and spaces.

Another example: Four years ago, I proposed a paper investigating the in- and out-group dynamics of how certain memes have been re-appropriated as alt-right dog-whistles (e.g. the re-appropriation of Pepe the Frog by white supremacists, turning a once beloved character into a symbol of hate). While I had proposed this analysis from a linguistic lens, memes and politics have grown increasingly intertwined, and there are many interesting connections to be made regarding how memes both track and influence political movements. In this field, memes are not always "beneficial": For example, there has been much criticism regarding the memeification of tragedy, and how this often delegitimizes and disrespects the severity and impact of the tragedy.

In the field of linguistics, there have been studies on how memes have influenced language; and these studies must continue, for language is constantly evolving, and the rate at which memes now evolve continues to expand the boundaries of traditional communication. This year I proposed a paper regarding an investigation into how meme literacy (particular rote-learning and parroting meme phrases) has managed to emphasize the in- and out-group

dynamics of meme Discourses, but also how (within such Discourses) meme literacy is used as a basis of connection. For example, how in modern relationships (platonic, romantic, or otherwise), memes are often regarded as a quantifier of compatibility; and in cases where two people do not share the same depth of membership in meme Discourses, efforts can be made to reduce such disparities in order to increase connectivity.

In terms of marketing research, it would benefit brands and corporations to genuinely understand meme/culture and thus why these kinds of Discourses will not easily allow memes to be used for capitalistic gain. The memes of today lean more towards opposing capitalism, which is why they can be very ineffective and alienating when used so superficially by those with no real care for meme/culture. Similarly, by studying the cultural shifts and movements evoked by meme/culture, there can be greater understanding of the principles and the values of newer generations of consumers, and in these ways use meme/culture to appeal more successfully to such specific demographics. Perhaps corporations could go even a step further, and execute real change instead of preaching performativity for the sake of profits. (This seems an unrealistic expectation in a world where shareholders are valued more than workers, but a girl can dream.)

These are just a few possibilities for projects that I myself have had an interest in pursuing. Nevertheless, once academia treats meme/culture with less condescension, many insights into developing online cultures and motivations (and subsequently, how these transfer to offline practices) can be uncovered and explored.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While auto-theory has proven to be invaluable towards this account, it is also one of the glaring limitations of this paper: This is a highly specific personal experience, and while it has shown the benefits of meme/culture towards recovery and resilience, it is also the best-case-scenario and ideal outcome of what could happen – not a guarantee of what will happen. At the end of the day, perhaps more than anything, it was through my own personal strength and the support of a handful of wonderfully caring friends that I was able to make such an improvement in such a relatively short amount of time. Also, not everyone has internet access, or has an interest in memes, or is able to take hours out of their days to immerse themselves in

Discourses. As mentioned in this account, I had many privileges and much luck that others simply do not.

However, steering away from the distinctness of this account, there are many other reasons why it would be foolish to consider meme/culture as a new frontier for care. Namely, because meme/culture does not always have a positive impact. I quickly mentioned the existence of harmful meme cultures and Discourses (i.e. white-supremacist, anti-semitic, prejudiced ideologies), and while their negative impact is obvious, well-intentioned memes and discourses are also greatly capable of harm. In the same way that memes can provide a voice to the voiceless (or to those who struggle with words, as I often do), they can also amplify messages that really should not be spread. For example, is mental illness truly being destigmatized? Or is it perhaps being over-normalized to the point of romanticization? At the same time that meme/culture can open up discussions to these important topics, it can easily whitewash and downplay their severity. One such way has been through the over-normalization of anxiety, and how this has come to be conflated with general stress – when these are two very different afflictions and experiences. As well, there is the issue that of the wide array of mental illnesses, depression and anxiety are the most common and generally least stigmatized. Schizophrenia, Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) – these are just a few serious conditions still surrounded by harmful stereotypes, notions, and stigmas.

Similarly, another massive issue with meme/culture is that it has shown the tendency to steal from and appropriate Black cultures, and even promote racism – even if this is done inexplicitly. Though memes can be reasonably considered as an act of protest, are often used to unpack trauma and even disseminate useful information, there is still a matter of intent versus impact to consider. Sometimes content intended to spread information or create conversations, actually draws attention and respect away from these issues. Sometimes they reinforce the very structures and struggles they were intending to push back against. For example, the memeification of Breonna Taylor, wherein seeking justice for her death was memed into a catchphrase – an unforgivable, disrespectful act that further highlighted the massive issue of misogynoir in our societies. Sometimes there is such an attachment to the idea of virtue



signalling one's "goodness" (especially through memes), that this obsession glosses over the meme-maker's ability to perceive the underlying selfishness of their well-intentioned act.

So in the end, it comes down to a matter of intent versus impact; and meaningful impact needs to be prioritized over superficial intent. Memes can absolutely be used to bring attention and power to important topics, but it can also take a tremendous amount of accountability and work to utilize memes in a productive, meaningful, and mindful way. Unfortunately, a rampant rise in narcissistic trends and a lack of critical thinking may be the ultimate limitation of meme/culture – and indeed, any form of digital information or media.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

I came. I saw a ton of memes. I conquered my depression.  
(Give or take a few stumbles and steps.)

Depression and anxiety are not afflictions that fight fair, and when attempting to cope with these in a system that does so little to provide genuine productive care, it is often necessary to find new or novel ways of navigating the enveloping exhaustion onset by [mental] illness.

In this thesis, I have detailed how the resources I had access to failed me, and how I had to resort to a somewhat unconventional form of coping. Memes and meme culture proved themselves to be the therapeutic framework I needed to achieve recovery and resilience. Through memes I coped with the crushing symptoms of depression and anxiety that plagued me, and through meme culture I completely rebuilt myself and my relationships – both inter- and intra-personal. Such practices ultimately allowed me to establish and maintain a network of supportive friends, as well as positive and productive coping mechanisms – resulting in a better, more confident, more resilient, and genuinely happy version of myself.

Though it is not uncommon for individuals nowadays to cope with their depressive symptoms through meme/culture (especially as traditional therapy continues to be financially inaccessible for many), this novel practice has rarely been given the legitimacy it deserves, due to the abstract and sometimes completely absurd nature of modern day memes. Through this thesis I have shown the merits of this kind of practice, particularly when partnered with the

ideological tenets of Sick Woman Theory (that are often practiced in meme/cultures), as a modern-day approach towards using laughter as medicine.

Yet, perhaps more importantly, this thesis has sought to contribute to the efforts of legitimizing the value of memes and meme culture – across a plethora of disciplines. As digital media and cultures evolve, these continue to provoke shifts in offline cultures and literacies.

Language, for example, continues to be creatively morphed – particularly in online spaces. In texting, we have moved from short-form jargon, to incorporating emotion into our texts through emojis. Now, individuals are increasingly resorting to expressing themselves through memes to communicate particularly specific, abstract, indescribable feelings – even in serious, emotional contexts, such as traditional therapy. Meme literacy has even quickly become its own form of social currency – the greater your knowledge and ability to communicate through memes, the more desirable you and your amity could be (particularly for other members of the general meme Discourse).

Once respect is given to these increasingly prominent forms of digital culture, we may truly begin to track how strongly they can impact and create cultures within our societies. Memes as artifacts can be created or re-iterated seemingly endlessly, meaning their cultures can also morph and sprout endlessly. I have only suggested a few research topics for the fields of linguistics, political science, marketing, and psychology, but the opportunities for studies regarding meme/culture are boundless – limited only by the imagination and genuine consideration of the researcher.

And while there may be a desire to continue to infantilize meme/culture, as it is prominently enjoyed by younger generations, we must break down such pretenses of intellectual superiority and admire memes for the flexible, powerful multimodal artifacts they are.

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