Relatable Oddities: The Quirky Intimacy of Mental Health Memes

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**Real™ Memes**

In a conversation between meme authors @scariest_bug_ever and @gothshakira (who have 163,000 and 52,600 followers respectively) for VICE, the pair discuss their motivations for making memes and how they receive the intimacy readers feel towards them.[1] The conversation depicts running a popular meme account as an initially cathartic experience inspired by isolating emotional situations that transforms into a conscious performance. @scariest_bug_ever writes how "the process of making [a meme] is often much more beneficial than the actual response to it. It's less important how many likes it gets and more important to purge yourself of the secrecy of an experience you didn't know was shared." @scariest_bug_ever is describing a liberating catharsis through creativity and sharing. She perceives herself to be authentically revealing experiences that have individuated her. The public nature of the memes, however, potentially limits the author's self-exposure. @gothshakira writes,

> But for real, is performing bleakness in public online spaces really authentic? I can only speak for myself and I know that although my intentions are always oriented towards being Real™, that doesn't always happen. When you have that much of a followership you inevitably alter the way you portray yourself.

@scariest_bug_ever raises the topic of intimacy, noting how readers perceive a more intimate relationship than she does.

> It's weird how depersonalized something gets when it's shared as opposed to when it's kept private. Nothing is private any more in my life after this shit. Like I get messages from followers like, "Hey! I know u have dry skin in the winter…" Like what, you remembered that I have dry skin but my mum still calls me by my cat's name?

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[1] @gothshakira and @scariest_bug_ever, "How Feminist Memes Hit the Mainstream," VICE, January 3, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/9ab4ky/how-feminist-memes-hit-the-mainstream.

This conversation touches upon the central topics of this paper: intimacy and performance in Instagram memes, specifically from meme authors who create mental health-oriented memes with a quirky aesthetic. The memes referred to here are image macros, which denote an image with superimposed text. Memes have transformed from humorous images to content that leverages serious capital: the meme account turned veritable marketing business Jerry Media boasts 14 million followers on its main account, @fuckjerry . A sponsored post on the @fuckjerry feed can cost $30,000, as of 2016.[2] In 2019, Jerry Media revealed the extent of its potential cultural and economic capabilities during the Fyre Festival scandal, in which a young man partnered with a rap star to bamboozle thousands of people out of their money and labor over the promise of living like a celebrity for a weekend.[3] Two documentaries released in early 2019 detailed the events. Jerry Media, which was involved in the promotion of the failed event, co-produced one documentary that conveniently displaced responsibility away from the company, in a stark contrast to the narrative of the competing documentary. The genesis of Jerry Media from meme account to documentarian exemplifies how what seems like a momentary glance at the screen for the reader of memes has much deeper cultural effects.

The memes of @fuckjerry are intended to be universal in their appeal; @fuckjerry often posts about drinking, aging in one's 20s, and popular culture. Memes are grounded in this universality: original memes such as LOLcats and videos like "Leave Britney Alone" have little to do with the author of the meme.[4] Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" his 1976 book

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[2] Lauren Johnson, "How an Instagram Star with a Name Like Fuckjerry Makes $30,000 Per Sponsored Post," *AdWeek*, December 7, 2017, https://www.adweek.com/digital/how-instagram-star-fuckjerry -makes-35000-one-piece-sponsored-content-174990/.

[3] For more information on Fyre Festival and the ensuing documentaries, see Josephine Livingstone, "Fyre Festival Was a Huge Scam. Is Netflix's Fyre Documentary a Scam, Too?," February 12, 2019, https://newrepublic.com/article/153095/fyre-festival-huge-scam-netflixs-fyre-documentary-scam-too.

[4] For more information on these early iterations of memes, visit Know Your Meme, an online compendium of digital memes available at https://knowyourmeme.com/.

*The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins describes meme, an abbreviation for "mimeme," as a replicable and viral entity, such as "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases."[5] Dawkins's oft-quoted description of memes is: "When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell."[6] Today's internet memes continue to have this infective nature that creates a perpetuation of the meme, mainly because memes are replicable, malleable, and humorous. Anyone with a smartphone, computer, or tablet can create their own version of a well-known meme. As arguably part of a larger shift in internet culture, and founded on the internet's tantalizing promise of anonymity, memes have spawned an aesthetic of personal voice.[7]

Amongst these memes a subculture of increasingly "niche" mental health memes has developed, and these memes themselves vary widely. While a Twitter joke about therapy often finds its way onto @fuckjerry  and the page @mytherapistsays boasts 3.5 million followers, the memes featured on these accounts are visually crisp and clean, saying just enough to appear earnest but veering away from stronger terms. Below this threshold of mainstream memes lies another type of mental health meme: a seemingly sincere mix of cramped text and quirky images. These "niche" memes are seemingly specific to only the author yet garner attention from readers for their relatability. The following example of a niche meme from a mental health-oriented account features a broken heart with wings, a cartoon figure, colloquial language, and commentary on capitalism in hot pink font. None of these elements provide explanation for another portion.

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[5] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, New ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 192.
[6] Dawkins, 192.
[7] Consider the rise of personal narratives and exploitive websites such as xoJane. For more on xoJane, see Mandy Stadtmiller, "XoJane: My Former Website's Death Was A Blessing," December 31, 2016, https://www.thedailybeast.com/xojane-my-former-websites-death-was-a-blessing.

Fig. 1. @ghosted1996, "when was the last time," Instagram, March 8, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BuwvD1Vgrvg/.

The owners of these accounts are femme-presenting young adults who share a highly ironic, self-deprecating tone.[8] These creators often follow each other and interact digitally through comments and even "collabs"—memes made together. Unlike more popular accounts, these accounts, which range in followers from 10,000-160,000, have starkly different aesthetics from each other. @binchcity (69,700 followers) features vintage advertisements; @dyingbutfine (46,300 followers) uses Barbie dolls; @ghosted1996 (65,400 followers) and @scariest_bug_ever's feeds are unspecific but decidedly weird, often featuring popular meme trends manipulated to address topics of sexuality, capitalism, and mental health. These accounts have achieved moderate success because of their "relatable" tone, a tone that performs various conceptions of selfhood.

This paper argues that mental health memes articulate a capitalist realist re-configuration of intimacy that depends upon on an author expressing various levels of identity performance and the reader validating their subjective experiences through the public format of social media. I

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[8] The authors identify in various racial, sexual, and gender terms. @gothshakira is half-Colombian and has spoken publicly about using Latina figures in her memes. @dyingbutfine identifies as asexual. One of the two creators of the account @meme.queen.satan is trans. While not explored here, the discussed affective aesthetic of quirkiness extends to these authors' memes on race and sexuality. Another example is @blacksheepmemes, an Indian-American author whose content largely focuses on race and interracial relationships.

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begin by isolating these memes in their aesthetic of "quirky," established through their seemingly random imagery, satires of postfeminism, and ironic self-depictions. This quirkiness requires the emotional labor of both the author and reader to initiate a sense of intimacy. This intimacy is constructed through the author's conflicting performances of identities and ideologies, a display of capitalist realism that projects authenticity. The layering and dissonance of these performances allow a malleable reading upon which the reader can apply their own subjective experiences and achieve emotional validation. With their increase in popularity, the memes re-produce intimacy into cultural capital as the reading of the performative layers becomes a signal that the viewer can understand a trend. In turn, as the trendiness increases, the commodification of the meme and its intimacy develops, ultimately connecting to a literal commodification of mental health in commercial society.

**The Affect of Quirkiness**

This paper draws on aesthetic affect theory to dive into the world of memes, the nascent study of which has largely focused on establishing fundamental language and characteristics of memes. Generative scholarship has also explored the political and feminist possibilities of memes. Work from Anita Harris, Akane Kanai, Jennifer O'Meara, and Jessalynn Keller explore the entanglements of politics, feminism, intersectionality, humor, and social media. The internet, Harris argues, is a liminal space between public and private in which one can create a public self—which Harris then establishes as the first step in young girls' re-creating their citizenship.[9] Harris's analysis ultimately re-encounters the sprawling nature of consumer culture as she asserts that consumer culture functions to once again undermine these public selves in the glorification

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[9] Anita Harris, "Young Women, Late Modern Politics, and the Participatory Possibilities of Online Cultures," *Journal of Youth Studies* 11, no. 5 (October 2008): 481–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260802282950.

of celebrity and consumerism. Like Harris, my analysis considers the effect of consumer culture throughout the process of meme reading. Unlike Harris, I consider the question of public and private in terms of authenticity—a pre-political process of effective affect that is fundamental in the construction of digital selfhood and intimacy. Akane Kanai argues that memes founded in imagery and textual references to womanhood create "spectatorial girlfriendship."[10] Kanai writes, "Spectatorial premise, similar to the idea of convention or 'genre' refers to the set of assumptions underlying practices of looking and interpretation within a particular medium; girlfriendship is an affective social relation which is saturated within larger postfeminist cultural narratives about feminine commonality and neoliberal normativity."[11] This paper assumes to a degree Kanai's argument but seeks to consider precisely how the formulations of intimacy and community undergirding the concept of spectatorial girlfriendship are established.

I approach this study through the lens of aesthetic affect theory, a field grounded in the highly nebulous term of "affect." In its most simple terms, I understand affect as the atmosphere of feeling—in terms of an object like a meme, this refers to both the atmosphere the author intends to project and the intuited viewer's response to the observed object. My notion of affect and aesthetic affect theory gestures to Sianne Ngai, as does my framework of "quirkiness." Bypassing the various iterations of affect and affect theory, Ngai, in her book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, writes that for her work:

> … the difference between affect and emotion is taken as a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind. My assumption is that affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; less "sociolinguistically fixed," but by no means code-free or meaningless; less "organized in response to our interpretations of situations," but by no means entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic

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[10]Akane Kanai, "Sociality and Classification: Reading Gender, Race, and Class in a Humorous Meme," *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (November 2016): 205630511667288, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672884.
[11] Kanai, 5.

powers.[12]

This denotation of affect versus emotion is particularly pertinent to Ngai's exploration of "zany," which she considers to be a post-Fordist aesthetic of affective labor. Ngai defines zaniness as "an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor."[13] Ngai argues that zaniness "is not just an aesthetic about the shrinking distinction between work and play but also the shrinking of an aesthetics capacity caused by it."[14] In its conciliatory relationship to late capitalism, zaniness, Ngai argues, "flatters the spectator's sense of comparative security, thus hailing her as a kind of phantasmagoric manager or implicit owner of the means of production."[15] This conception of affect and zaniness points towards my guiding term "quirky."

Quirkiness, I intend to show, is the affective aesthetic that establishes a sense of intimacy in its relatable oddities. Quirky appears to lie just beyond the dominant ideology, thus suggesting an alternative possibility to neoliberal ideologies; in truth, quirkiness is embedded in capitalist realism. Quirkiness, unlike Sianne Ngai's zaniness, does not cement the viewer in a superior state of security but rather bonds the actor/author with the viewer/reader in an emotional resonance. The quirky character or aesthetic embodies that which the reader aspires to: someone successfully living within dominant ideology while preserving an authenticity that distinguishes themselves, largely in terms of an awareness of the performative and hypocritical nature of neoliberal ideologies such as postfeminism. While the mental health issues that these authors face, such as depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety, are much more serious matters than

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[12] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 27.
[13] Ngai, 1.
[14] Ngai, 231.
[15] Ngai, 11.

"quirky," the memes express quirkiness in the way that the authors engage with identity performance, guided by their personal mental health experiences. Quirkiness, like zaniness, is tangled up in labor: quirkiness depends on emotional labor, but of both the author and viewer. This emotional labor produces the affect of quirkiness: ideological resistance, relatability, and intimacy. Whereas Ngai argues that zaniness has capitalist production in its foundation, quirkiness undergoes a transformation, inadvertently becoming related to capitalist production because it gains traction by seeming "cool" in its hesitance towards late capitalism. This hesitancy, the core of quirkiness, is reflected through meta-performance: a performance of a performance of dominant ideologies, such as the femininity of postfeminism. The meta-performance is at once a criticism and a capitulation to the ideology. The conflicting aspects, or hesitancy, of meta-performance is what I term dissonance: and it is the articulation of this dissonance that cultivates a sense of intimacy for the reader/viewer.

**Performing Postfeminism**

The dominant ideology these memes interact with is postfeminism within the landscape of capitalist realism. Postfeminism, as scholars such as Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie argue, describes a commercial and social manipulation of feminism in the late 1990s and 2000s that deploys characteristics of feminism against feminist goals. Rosalind Gill's collation of the core aspects of postfeminism includes "the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference."[16] Postfeminism veils archaic ideas in feminist imagery. Angela McRobbie terms postfeminism's false proliferation of feminist

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[16]  Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 2007): 148, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898.

ideology as "faux-feminism."[17] This paper assumes that these memes exist not simply within the ideology of postfeminism and neoliberalism, but neoliberalism's effective paradigm of capitalist realism. Mark Fisher, who originated the current use of capitalist realism, describes it as "like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action."[18] This atmosphere refuses the consideration of alternatives to both late capitalism and neoliberalism. Referring to capitalist realism's effective veiling of its ideological constructions, Fisher says, "You could say that effacement is what defines capitalist realism."[19] In their stark awareness of late capitalism but capitulation to commodity culture, the explored memes exhibit capitalist realism. Ironically, it is in their very display of capitalist realism that these memes develop their strand of intimacy: their conflict between refusal and acceptance of capitalism, depicted through neoliberalism's individualism and a quirky aesthetic, establishes authenticity and intimacy.

The memes of @ghosted1996 and @binchcity depict a discomfort with and a capitulation to postfeminist ideology through their ironic performative interactions with femininity. When referring to performance, I generally mean a posturing, both conscious and unconscious. Performance, in the case of mental health memes, is a process whereby multiple depictions of identity and ideology are occurring. @ghosted1996's modern rendering of femininity is created through Kylie Jenner dressed as Barbie for Halloween.

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[17] Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles ; London: SAGE, 2009), 1.
[18] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books (Winchester: O Books, 2009), 18.
[19] Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert, "Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony: Jeremy Gilbert A Dialogue," *New Formations* 80, no. 80 (November 12, 2013): 90, https://doi.org/10.3898/neWF.80/81.05.2013.

Fig. 2. @ghosted1996, "I'm shadowb\*\*\*\*\*\*," *Instagram, May 16, 2019,*
*https://www.instagram.com/p/BxirY7Igzwi/.*

As a billionaire influencer dressed as Barbie, Jenner's display of idealized femininity is two-fold;

Jenner's hands held mid-air suggest an attempt to escape the "plastic box" of femininity, yet the

deadness in her eyes and the general persona of Jenner solidifies this simply as an empty gesture.

Jenner thus *performs* discontent. @ghosted1996's displays her own performance in the text

overlaid on the image, which reads "I literally mirror everyone I interact with so if I'm being

awkward then I'm not being awkward you're being awkward." With this text, the image of

Jenner gains import; she becomes the author, dressed as Barbie to represent the author's attempt

to blend in socially. The author *performs* social interactions, through the guise of a hyper-

feminine image. The notion of public performance is iterated casually in the author's caption,

which refers to the possibility of her account having been shadowbanned.[20] The caption is also

the most "quirky" part of the meme, in which the author writes, "I've banned my shadow self

from operating at a subconscious level and am working on my insecurities and need for

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[20] "Shadowbanned" refers to when a digital platform discretely inhibits users from discovering certain content.
Essentially, the content is removed from circulation.

validation." The melodramatic language and brutal display of self-awareness construct a conflicting persona that articulates honesty.

In formulating this honesty, quirkiness often takes on the tone of irony, as seen in the memes of @binchcity, whose aesthetic of vintage ads and satiric text reflect conflicting sentiments regarding neoliberal feminism. In "remember to smash," @binchcity has edited a vintage advertisement to feature the slim model in a gown and full makeup as holding a prescription pill bottle with the text "Girls just wanna have SEROTONIN" (a play on the phrase "Girls just want to have fun" made popular through Cyndi Lauper's song of the same name).



Fig. 3. @binchcity, "remember to smash your mf medication...," Instagram, July 26, 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BltivEhHdym/?hl=en&taken-by=binchcity.

@binchcity captioned the image "remember to smash your mf medication today everyone," an earnest word of advice. @binchcity seemingly precludes herself from the feminine ideal represented in the advertisement in the juxtaposition of anti-depressants and model. @binchcity creates an ironic tone through the display of anti-depressants (used to improve serotonin levels) in contrast with the vintage advertisement of a happy model—a format not intended to address mental health. The feminine ideal constituted in the model presents a manicured iteration of the self suitable for daily social interaction. No interiority, or "defects", are revealed. At the same

time that @binchcity separates herself from the ideal through the ironic tone, @binchcity also undermines the ideal image, suggesting it is reliant on medication. The fallacy of the social self is revealed as a performance—an interpellated social construction. Quirkiness begins to be constructed at this layer because of the unabashed manner in which the authors confront dominant ideology and express their inability to conform. The authors are non-threateningly diverging from the norm, positing themselves as likable individuals willing to voice verboten sentiments.

**Meta-performance: Performing Performance**

In the prior schema, authenticity is represented through an ironic display of non-dominant/abnormal against dominant/normal. In the second layer of performance, the non-dominant, that which seeks to disrupt the dominant, becomes the target of irony and is represented as another performance. I term this performance a meta-performance. Essentially, the author's posturing of authenticity becomes a performance. The performance is often presented as the result of the digital landscape, the very landscape intended to give catharsis and thus sincerity. The digital world promises an accurate representation of self, in large part because of the anonymity the internet offers. Ultimately, meta-performance invalidates the attempt at authenticity. Through this meta-performance we can see how the digital is simply another genre of social ideology that proclaims awareness: the figure in Althusser who by saying he is not interpellated confirms his interpellation. Interestingly, meme authors and their readers show awareness of this meta-performance because it often occurs in easily identifiable terms within the digital realm.

The meme "thanks i hate it" from @scariest_bug_ever explicitly shows the awareness these accounts have of the digital realm as a performative space. In "thanks i hate it," the meme

purports to distance itself from the digital, yet the authenticity it seeks to display—in the naked bear—becomes meta-performative.



Fig. 4. @scariest_bug_ever, "thanks i hate it," Instagram, April 10, 2018,
www.instagram.com/p/BhZG__pgJiZ/?taken-by=scariest_bug_ever.

The fully-dressed teddy bear signifies the author's "cultivated and curated internet persona that may or may not at any time represent what is going on in my life or brain." The naked bear represents "the real me." The meme expresses full awareness of the digital realm as performative stage. The digital self we have seen previously, as Kylie Jenner mocking femininity and social norms, was presented as striving to reflect the author in a sincere manner. Now, the digital is used to reveal that the digital is also a performance, but a performance of the "real" person. Of course, the "real" private self that the author is showing also reads as performative: the removal of the bear's sweater results in a disfigurement of his body, through which the bear retains his smile. The image is absurd. The portrayal of the "real me," then, is equally coated in a self-protective humor that refuses authenticity despite the seeming attempt at a sincere statement: the sincere attempt at portraying the real self becomes another performance, a meta-performance.

Connecting back to quirkiness and our discussion of postfeminism, the meme "lol omg" from @dyingbutfine displays the performative ironic mockery of postfeminism coupled with the

meta-performance of the author. In the meme, the Barbie doll's ruined mascara belies the general immaculate image of Barbie and corresponds to @dyingbutfine's description of having just had a panic attack.



Fig. 4. @dyingbutfine, "lol omg bb so qt," *Instagram*, 14 Sep. 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BnthxPxHpxT/?taken-by=dyingbutfine.

The text indicates that the Barbie does not communicate any emotional or mental duress to others and instead presents a "normal sounding" exterior: one that does not express interior turmoil. The anxious figure performs postfeminist ideology. The anxious figure is revealed as a performance, or meta-performance, through the aesthetic of the meme. This anxious figure, in the guise of the crying Barbie, is the subject of commentary in the form of the author's caption that reads "lol omg bb so qt." This self-aware girlie internet language—pivotal in executing quirkiness—could be read as the message the Barbie sends, or the author's commentary on the meme. Assuming the latter, this playful caption undermines the sincerity of the meme, positioning the panic attack as something to laugh about. The meme as a whole now receives the treatment that dominant feminist ideology does: mockery. The caption distances author—as the person undergoing the panic attack— from the meme. In this separation, the meme becomes an entity distinct from the author as lived person. The author as person presents a performance *of*

masking the panic attack. The author performs the memes by creating them: curating them to be a specific aesthetic of quirkiness—in this case re-purposed Barbie dolls. The creation of the meme, representing the author's sense of their self in the digital realm, is the meta-performance.

**The Intimacy of Quirkiness**

Meta-performance, or the erosion of asserted authenticity through the posturing of a performance, is a critical aspect of quirkiness because it offers more space for the reader to identify with the meme. The intimacy experience commences through the recognition of performance and dissonance expressed in the interaction of performances and ideology. This resonance depends initially on reading the performance and/or meta-performance; it depends on the reader understanding the ideological conflict, tone of irony, and bizarre aesthetic. The dissonance and meta-performance in these memes represent the interpellated attempting to negate and separate from ideology, only to have the process of interpellation re-confirmed. The dissonance the memes create through irony, layering of selves, niche experiences, etc, reflects the attempt to move beyond or before the ideological with the non-normative experiences of mental health as their basis. Intimacy develops in this striving for differentiation and confirmation of one's choices as their own. The intimacy comes from a shared sense of self-recognition and social predicaments: do I make my own choices or are they made for me? The following meme addresses this question, stating "I hate capitalism … but I love stuff!"

Fig. 5. @meme.queen.satan, "no ethical consumption," Instagram, February 6, 2019,
https://www.instagram.com/p/BtkXJNWnl5Y/.

The caption reads: "no ethical consumption under that late capitalism and allllllllllll but also

shoes make me happier than wellbutrin." In this irony, we can see the primary performance.

Whereas the tone of the meme establishes the primary performance, in the inane aesthetic, the

meta-performance—the performance of displaying discontent with ideology—is visible. The

meme appears random and discordant: it generates a sense of being personal. Yet each aspect of

the meme adheres to the trend of low-quality memes: the cursive font, childish colors, stock

image, and emojis.

The reader gains a sense of intimacy through the aesthetic of quirkiness, which presents a

divergence from the dominant that the viewer can emotionally resonate with.  The experience of

intimacy is grounded in the sensation of identifying with the author's expressed dissonance that

the author experiences as catharsis and the reader experiences as relatable. This intimacy can

occur at either the primary performative level, where conflict with dominant ideology is shown,

or the meta-performative level, where authenticity erodes to convey the difficulty of self-

expression in neoliberalism. Within the considered sphere of mental health meme authors, the

meme authors often create highly specific memes (an example trend is the "starter pack") that

nonetheless receive a flurry of comments conveying how the reader relates to the meme. @scariest_bug_ever describes such dialogue of intimacies that her very personally specific meme instigated: "Like the ex-boyfriend memes I make are always uber-specific to people I've dated and then like 2000 people are like, 'OMG THAT'S SO MY EX'."[21] As @scariest_bug_ever indicates, the catharsis comes not from sharing a personal experience but recognizing that other people have shared and hidden such an experience. Nonetheless, @scariest_bug_ever notes the oddity of people recognizing themselves in these hyper niche memes. The paradox @scariest_bug_ever articulates, in which the author seeks to share an experience and is surprised when it is shared, is, I argue, based on the platform on which the meme is presented, namely Instagram in this case.

The public and digital nature of Instagram results in a de-personalization of content that allows readers to interpret content contingent on their subjectivity. In taking a public form that demands approval or rejection in the form of likes and shares, the meme becomes an objective display of emotional response, increasing the distance between the reader and author. Giorgio Agamben iterates this concept, writing "[language] transforms singularities into members of a class, whose meaning is defined by a common property ... the definition of the set is simply the definition of linguistic meaning."[22] Agamben founds this argument on the limitations of language. The inability of language to properly convey what is being described—how the word becomes homonym for the idea—makes language susceptible to interpretation when commonality is founded on language. The memes evince tone, which Sianne Ngai considers at length in terms of its emotive abilities. Shifting the discussion of tone from the reader to the

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[21] @scariest_bug_ever, "How Feminist Memes Hit the Mainstream."
[22] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Theory out of Bounds, v. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 9.

media, Ngai writes, "But what gets left out in this prevailing emphasis on a reader's sympathetic identification with the feelings of characters in a text is the simple but powerful question of 'objectified emotion,' or unfelt but perceived feeling, that presents itself most forcefully in the aesthetic concept of tone."[23] Building on Ngai, I have been arguing that understanding intimacy from the reader perspective necessitates a thorough analysis of the author's work: their creation of tone, displayed in aesthetic and affect. Memes, like all social media, are imbued with objectivity when they are published: they are unchangeable; nothing on the internet dies; it becomes fact. The subjectivity of the author thus meets a social objectivity.

In turn, the reader's emotive response becomes objective. For the reader, their subjectivity is objectified because the malleability of reading the meme allows the reader to implant their subjectivity onto the meme's objectivity. In short, the reader's sentiments are validated, while the author experiences catharsis. For Ngai, tone encapsulates this dialogue for the reader: "Tone is the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce."[24] While the tone of the memes invite a subjective reading that the reader re-deploys as objective, the dialectic of the meme is more a moment of intimacy rather than tone. This is because the dialectic is incredibly dependent not simply on reading the tone of irony, sarcasm, self-deprecation, etc, but also familiarity with the emotions described and understanding the reasons for the tone. Thus, the memes present a performance of tone that the reader imbibes to apply to their own personal experiences: the reader performs their subjective through the author's performance and understands this interaction as intimacy.

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[23] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), http://qut.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=3300232, 28-29.
[24] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 30.

My understanding of memes as an intensely personal experience seemingly belies some of the defining aspects of memes: their commodification and circulation of trends. To reiterate, the reading of mental health memes explored above, in which the reader experiences an emotional resonance with a meme that the author made objective, occurs on the immediate, affective level. This extension of zany relates to my understanding of the objective-subjective relationship the memes establish. Aesthetically, popular mental health memes are easily associated with "zany." However, I argue that memes produce a slight affective variation on the relationship between spectator and performer that Ngai describes. The reader of a meme, I agree, does experience a sense of "comparative security."[25] The reader, however, does not quite become the affective owner, as the meme depends on relating the meme to one's self—unlike the physical comedy of Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*, which Ngai uses as an example of the zany. While the reader can undergo a sense of control in their own potential ability to create memes, the initial relationship constituted is within the realm of intimacy, for which the reader depends on the performance of the author and the author's emotional labor. These memes are more quirky than zany in that they reflect upon ideology and selfhood yet offer relatability in their emotional resonance and validation. Quirky, in my definition, also radiates desirableness in the confidence it exudes through the frank discussion of conflict and self-awareness. In its relatability and desirability, quirky, then, is an effective aesthetic for memes because it promotes imitation and propagation. The proliferation of memes provides a potential foundation for a community because memes are an accessible and easily manipulated form of expression through which complex topics such as mental illness can be broached.

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[25] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories,* 11.

However, the ethereal nature of the memes upsets any spatio-temporal stability, thus strangling a coherent community to affirm the individual's perspective. Every Instagram user has a different "feed," or collection of photos, upon opening up the app. A meme can appear on someone's feed or their discover page (which shows photos from those the user does not follow) two days after it was posted and prompted an initial flurry of responses. A reader may only be seeing a meme because a friend sent it to them directly, thus isolating that meme completely from its author and other readers. Memes are constantly re-placed—both moved from their origin point and supplanted by another meme or conversation. Any constancy felt in reading a quirky meme is a perceived constancy, existing only in that one reader's subjectivity.[26] The community is bypassed by an uneven intimacy, that eventually leads to a sense of validation and a shared emotional state—an emotional communion and *not* a community. The cycle of a meme of the genre we've been exploring—and, arguably, social media more generally in the way that it promotes incessant speech—mirrors aspects of Agamben's idea of individuation. Agamben writes, "The individuation of a singular existence is not a punctual fact but a *linea generationis substantiae* that varies in every direction according to a continual gradation of growth and remission, of appropriation and impropriation."[27] The reading of a meme is constantly roving and evolving, as the meme itself is re-placed. The reading, then, confirms the "individuation of a singular existence" in its incessant movement.

**Commodification**

While the emotional labor of both author and reader is critical for creating a quirky intimacy that suggests community, the nature of Instagram turns this emotional labor into a

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[26] Assuming the reader is not directly interacting with the author via DMs (direct messages) or comments.
[27] Agamben, 19.

system of production. As an author becomes more popular, more content is expected; if an author is popular enough, the demand for content and emotional labor infringes on time spent performing capitalistic labor at a paying job; the author comes to seek money from their readers through direct contributions or advertisements; the author's emotional and creative labor is commodified. Paralleling the commodification of the memes is the commodification of intimacy.

The potential for community is eroded as the intimacy of memes gives way to cultural capital. The public nature and popularity of memes transforms them into a commodity of sorts. Emotionally resonating with or reading the performative layers of a meme equates to "getting it," understanding the humor. Particularly with these smaller accounts that experiment with meme aesthetics (and thus present a "cool" aesthetic), "getting it" evokes more cultural capital than a simpler meme shared on a page like @beigecardigan (3.7 million followers). As @gothshakira says in her VICE interview,

> Even if that feel [sic] has been rendered more and more palatable in 2016, it's still like, you have to have knowledge of certain meme formats and trends to understand a certain meme, to the point where there are memes being made about things like being able to send your crush a certain meme and having them "get it."

@scariest_bug_ever's "a fun old classic" engages with the question of intimacy and commodity by offering awareness of and empathy with her mental illness as indicative of intimacy.

Fig. 6. @scariest_bug_ever, "a fun old classic," Instagram, January 28, 2019,
https://www.instagram.com/p/BtLvy7uHUgp/.

The caption of "a fun old classic for the real ones" uses the word introduced as problematic in

this paper in @scariest_bug_ever's conversation with @gothshakira: "real." The caption exhibits

a common tactic established meme accounts use. @scariest_bug_ever is reposting a popular

meme and reminding her readers of their pre-existing relationship with this meme. Those readers

who recall the meme are "the real ones," establishing a sense of temporality with the authenticity

of her followers' relationship with her. More recent followers who have not previously seen this

image are excluded. One could infer that temporality is established as central to the digital

intimacy here; the temporality, however, functions in no meaningful way: those who have seen

this meme previously have not gained further knowledge of the meme or of the author. Rather,

this sense of temporality contributes to a knowledge-based intimacy: a reader knows that they

have been a follower of @scariest_bug_ever; this is a fact. This fact boosts their digital credit.

This digital credit is used as proof of intimacy with other readers. Readers frequently

leave notes describing how "relatable" the content is, or how they "feel attacked"—meaning the

content seems directed specifically to them, thus including their subjective experience in the

author's. Readers will also simply tag their friends or send the memes to friends on another

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platform. The following set of comments shows how the memes are re-distributed between readers after the author's initial distribution.



Figs. 7 & 8. @jasmine_g_d and @emilynewgent, comments on "a fun old classic,"
https://www.instagram.com/p/BtLvy7uHUgp/.

@jasmine_g_d's comment refers to a highly specific personal experience that the meme does not describe but that the reader inserts to make it applicable to a friend (whom they have tagged). In effect, this reader becomes a secondary author, perpetuating the meme. @emilynewgent and @stellamayvlad's interaction shows a common positive reaction on the part of readers to these memes; they refer to debilitating depression in a positive manner, again re-writing the meme and perpetuating the performative aspect of the quirky content. This performative depends on both users becoming proper readers of the meme in order replicate the performative ironic distance from the harsh struggles of mental illness that the meme offers. The users are, one can assume, real-life friends who share an intimate relationship in the more traditional sense of physical and emotional intimacy. Their replication of the meme's performance indicates a turn into the quirky, performative intimacy that the meme provides between author and reader.

This manner of intimacy that relies on performance has proliferated digitally since these meme accounts popularized the quirky aesthetic. In the past few years, this aesthetic has thrived, particularly among Gen Z users. In December 2017, Daily Beast published an article about the

rise of "niche memes" among teenage girls. Niche memes is, essentially, the digital term of quirky memes. The Daily Beast article tracks their booming popularity in 2017, whereas the mental health memes we have been exploring gained traction in 2016.[28] The concept of niche memes continues to grow. On Instagram, the hashtag #nichememes has over three million tags; #actualnichememes has 15,000 tags, implying a significant distinction between a more mainstream proliferation and a continued nuanced use of niche descriptions. The influx of imitations, particularly from teenagers, proves that quirkiness is an indicator of cultural capital (see Appendix 1-4).

The digital cultural capital bestowed upon both author and reader is a symptom of a wider cultural fetishization of mental illness in association with vulnerable femininity. This fetishization is also built into "quirky." Quirky signifies a confidence in being different that has been culturally construed in sexual terms. An example is the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, a fundamentally "quirky" figure who is highly desirable yet relatable; confident yet vulnerable; and the sexual prey of men.[29] The meme "O shit" from @ghosted1996 directly plays with the image of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in its use of a still image from the show *Skins*, which has famously valorized mental illness.[30] @ghosted1996 juxtaposes a still of the character Effy in artfully disarrayed makeup. "Too pretty for your own good. That's why you destroy everything you touch," an off-screen character says to Effy. Beautiful appearances are aligned with destructive tendencies.

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[28] Taylor Lorenz, "'Niche Memes' Are the Secret Clip Art Diaries Teens Are Posting on Instagram," *The Daily Beast*, December 5, 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/niche-memes-are-the-secret-clip-art-diaries-teens-are-posting-on-instagram.
[29] For background on the Manic Pixie Dream Girl phenomenon, see Hugo Schwyzer, *Salon*, July 9, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/07/the-real-world-consequences-of-the-manic-pixie-dream-girl-clich-233/277645/.
[30] Anna Leszkiewicz, "Ten Years on, How Cassie from Skins' Eating Disorder Affected a Generation of Teenage Girls," January 25, 2017, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv-radio/2017/01/ten-years-how-cassie-skins-eating-disorder-affected-generation-teenage.
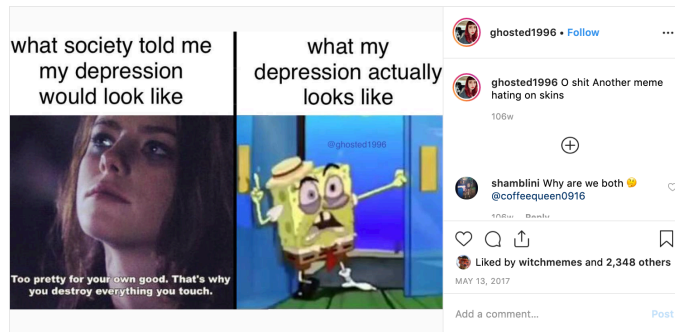
*Fig. 9. @ghosted1996, "O shit," Instagram*, May 13, 2017,
https://www.instagram.com/p/BUDAzIglINE/.

@ghosted1996's denotes this image as a societal construction, in contrast to an "accurate"

depiction of depression. This depiction is represented through an image of Spongebob

Squarepants—a children's cartoon. (The use of a child's cartoon indicates a meta-performance,

as Spongebob Squarepants is aesthetically and affectively distant from adult mental illness.) Yet,

as @ghosted1996's meme "I haven't slept" indicates, the author often succumbs to social

constructions in a digital manifestations. Using an image from *The Wolf of Wall Street*, which

depicts flagrant excess, @ghosted1996 comments on her tendency of "sending incredibly bizarre

messages to men on dating sites during a manic episode then never responding again bc I know I

can never live up to the Dangerously Quirky image I've created once I crash into a depression."



Fig. 10. @ghosted1996, "I haven't slept," *Instagram*, May 3, 2019,
https://www.instagram.com/p/BxAaN5YgBkE/.

@ghosted1996's portrayal of a manic episode displays how society constructs bipolar mania as "Dangerously Quirky," and Dangerously Quirky is a sexually desirable identity.

The increased popularity of these memes augments the cultural pressure of these social constructions of mental illness. When an author's persona is built upon mental illness, the author can feel a pressure to continue depicting their illness even when in better mental health. In the caption of a meme (see Appendix 5) that appropriates MTV's show *True Life*, @ghosted1996 articulates a common impetus to re-discover one's self through the freedom of the digital world: a trajectory that our analysis of memes has shown to be highly fallible, as the digital self is a performative social form. The caption of @ghosted1996's meme reads: "How do you heal your self? Struggling bc now that I'm much happier I'm having a difficult time making memes bc I identify so heavily with themes of suffering lol." The comments to this caption encourage @ghosted1996 to veer her memes towards positive recovery imagery. Some comments iterate her sentiments. @meme.queen.satan wrote:

> this is the most relatable post ever shit like Rowan and I spent years making dumbass memes to like, relate w people and now I have no ideas or motivation to even make content but that was a part of my identity??? idk it's confusing

This comment describes how the popularity of their meme accounts can lead the author to re-conceive their non-digital self as their performative authorial voice. The distinction between commodity and person collapses, an incredibly notable occurrence because these meme creators are not celebrities or artists in the traditional sense. This collapse is not a simple re-confirmation of consumer culture. The popularity of these memes, I argue, has contributed to a broader commodification of mental health. The collapse of mentally ill meme maker and non-digital person has emboldened the commodification process of late capitalism. Since 2016, when mental health memes surged in trendiness, mental health has become an accessory of sorts. For example,

the website Betches—which is positioned as a "basic bitch" website, and thus resides in a distinct performative space than these mental health memes—used a humorous tweet about anxiety to promote its content on calming exercises (see Appendix 6). The tweet, which is screenshotted so as to appear as a photo on Instagram, reads "How do I unsubscribe from anxiety?" Betches also features an online shop that it promotes on its Instagram. One recent item advertised is a notebook that reads "Work all day anxiety all night" on the cover (see Appendix 7). The products feature as a part of the self-care industry, a booming $11 billion sector that promotes mental and physical wellness.[31]

  This commercialization of mental health is founded on the idea of authenticity of the individual, which, as we have seen with memes, is a problematic concept. Whereas postfeminism signified the appropriation of feminist aims for the promotion of individualistic capitalist pursuits, the business of self-care appropriates individual experiences into a communal commodity, putting a price tag on a sense of belonging. The digital space of mental health memes on Instagram shows how this affect of intimacy is constructed both through the aesthetic of quirkiness and the distributive potential of memes. The increased relationship of quirkiness with consumer culture underscores how quirkiness fails to confront dominant ideologies—the products of Betches retain the spirit of quirkiness's professed authenticity, produced in a corporate setting. Rather, the relationship between quirkiness and commodification seen through these memes evinces how the digital sphere can redistribute the individual. The author shares with a reader, who consumes and re-authors the meme to their friend; the author's meme account becomes part of their identity: they feel *compelled* to create and re-enforce their persona. Capitalist realism emphasizes the individual's role; yet with these memes and their

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[31] Charlotte Lieberman, "How Self-Care Became So Much Work," *Harvard Business Review*, August 10, 2018, https://hbr.org/2018/08/how-self-care-became-so-much-work.

reconfiguration of intimacy, the individual is expanded. Different aspects of an individual

becomes different identities that must be cultivated and perpetuated. The expenditure of

emotional labor and the diffusion of identities exhausts the individual, as a person and as a

concept.

# APPENDIX

**Appendix 1**
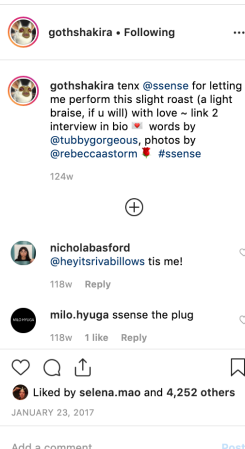This meme from @gothshakira is an early example of a "niche meme" later replicated by teenagers.
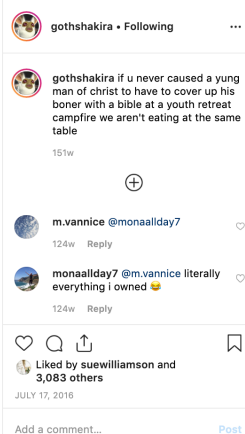


@gothshakira, "if u never caused," *Instagram*, July 17, 2016,
**https://www.instagram.com/p/BH-WVs-Bq8x/**.

**Appendix 2**
This meme from @gothshakira is an early example of a "niche meme" later replicated by teenagers.



@gothshakira, "@ssense," *Instagram*, January 23, 2017,
https://www.instagram.com/p/BPnSmc5Aabb/.

## Appendix 3

This meme appears to be from a teenage author and indicates the niche meme trend in 2019.



@ariesdust, "' s post !," *Instagram*, June 7, 2019,
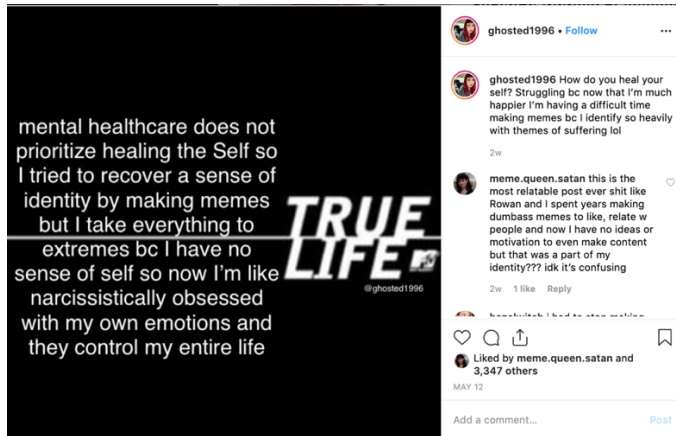https://www.instagram.com/p/ByPW399HtPY/.

## Appendix 4

This meme appears to be from a teenage author and indicates the niche meme trend in 2019.



@rintee.memes, "I make too many," *Instagram*, May 31, 2019,
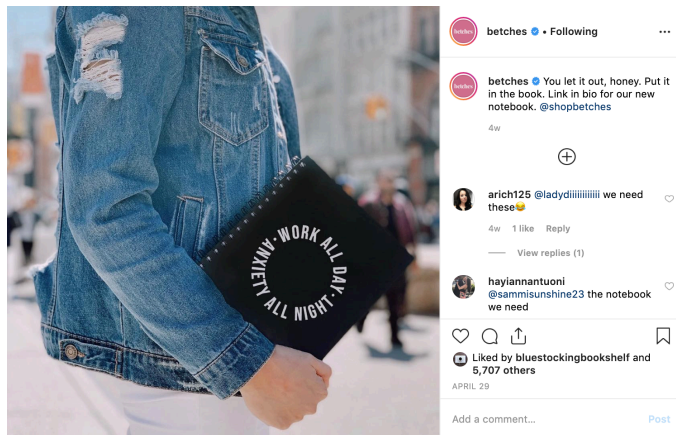https://www.instagram.com/p/ByJJLplpNUr/.

**Appendix 5**



@ghosted1996, "How do you heal," *Instagram*, May 12, 2019,
https://www.instagram.com/p/BxYLFGHgjh-/.

**Appendix 6**



@betches, "Anxious AF," *Instagram*, April 25, 2019,
https://www.instagram.com/p/BwrTza0j6uN/.

**Appendix 7**



@betches, "You let it out," *Instagram*, April 29, 2019,
https://www.instagram.com/p/Bw2JPrCDStX/