

Final Essay

Beautifully tragic, tragically funny : Depression memes on Tiktok

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With increased isolation during the pandemic, the short video platforming site TikTok became extremely popular. On TikTok, users could record themselves and lip-sync to audio clips and songs from popular culture or simply themselves talking. Paul(2022) states with its advanced algorithm, TikTok is faster than any other platform at detecting interest. Furthermore, he describes TikTok's platform spirit, where everyone can express intimate and private things and encourage others to do the same. Therefore TikTok deviates from other social media platforms described as 'relatable', 'authentic', or 'close to home' by its users. Thus due to the platform's affordances, TikTok became a place for users to share their mental health struggles, specifically depression, during a vulnerable and isolated period. Users share their shortcomings with depression through various forms of memetic content, creating a subculture around depression memes. Although the depression meme culture existed way before TikTok.

McCosker and Gerrard(2020) explore hashtag depression in Instagram under three categories: Inspiration, embodiment, and play. 'Inspiration' orients around a visually and lyrically aestheticized treatment of depression. 'Play' refers to ironic, edgy, typically funny content generated around depression. Lastly, 'embodiment' refers to content more connected to the real-life experiences of the user.



Figure 1: An example of an Inspiration post (McCosher and Gerrard, 2020)



Figure 2: An example of a Play post (McCosher and Gerrard, 2020)



Figure 3: Example of an embodiment post (McCosher and Gerrard, 2020)

These three categories of depression memes are also prevalent in TikTok. 'Inspiration' generally includes a quote from a film or a TV show with a sad song in the background and aesthetic pictures that go along. With 'play' users use a trendy meme format or audio to express depression in a humorous way. Lastly, users show how depression affects their daily life, which can be classified as 'embodiment'.

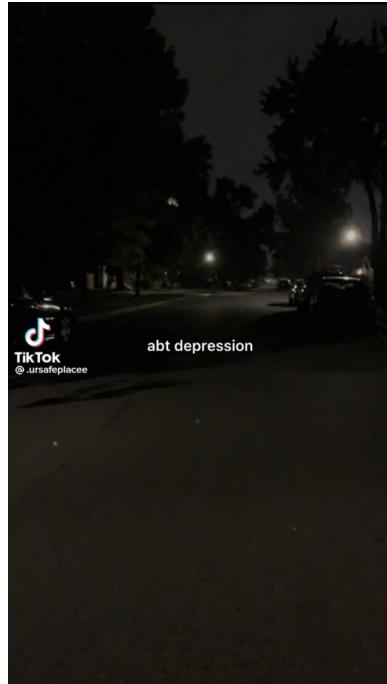


Figure 4 : An example of an Inspiration post on TikTok <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYbcyXbY/> (@.ursafeplacee, 2022)

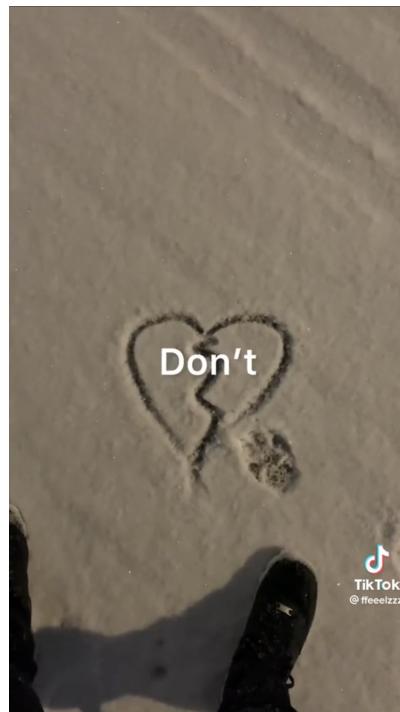


Figure 5 : An example of an Inspiration post on TikTok <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYbcxkXe/> (@ffeeelzzz, 2022)



Figure 6 & 7: An example of a Play post on TikTok <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYbgPuuQ/> (@lautareascasual, 2022)



Figure 8 : An example of a Play post on TikTok <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYbgNDm7/> (@laylamackiex, 2022)

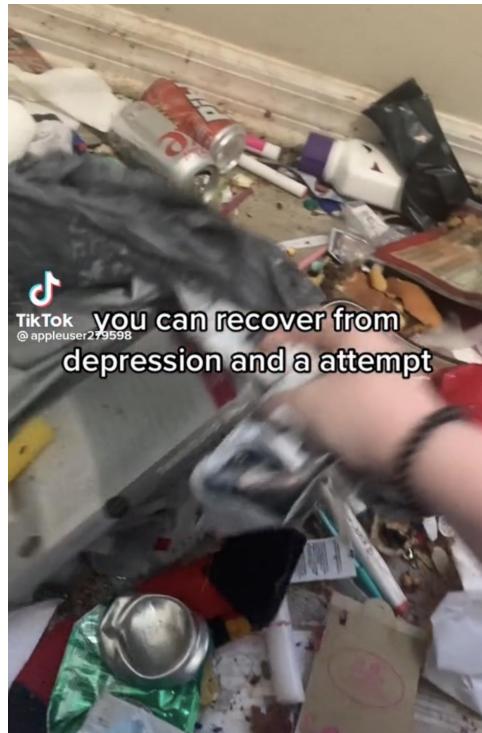


Figure 9 : An example of an Embodiment post on TikTok <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYbg1e8H/> (@iamkennyirl, 2022)



Figure 10 : An example of an Embodiment post on TikTok <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYbcDea9/> (@your.tiktok.therap1st, 2021)

Why do people communicate their feelings with these humourized, aestheticized, and sometimes personal posts? Turkle's framework helps to understand the reasons behind the emergence of depression meme culture, why people share their struggles online, and its consequences.

Turkle(1995) challenges the traditional definition of identity. She states that identity has multiple personalities, and the identity we express online is a saturation of some of those personalities. Turkle(2012) explains we cannot fully know and understand everything about ourselves or others due to real-life limitations. Therefore we turn to our saturated selves on the internet to find an answer. Accordingly, users can explore their identities more easily with their 'saturated selves' since real-life constraints are absent. Our saturated self is carefully curated by gathering words, images, videos, songs, and other content corresponding to our interests. In addition, users ask questions, re-post each other, explore hashtags, and share their stories. Therefore our saturated selves are colonized by other users as we are in each other's brains as voices and images, and our saturated self includes each other. According to Turkle(1995), 'saturated selves' like to be together, and virtual spaces offer emotional safety for users to expose and accept their shortcomings. As these 'saturated selves' come together, subcultures and communities emerge. Schellewald demonstrates that due to its advanced algorithm, users appreciate mindlessly scrolling through their algorithmic representation of themselves through other people's posts. Consequently, TikTok provides a safe space to explore different parts of our identity, share our struggles, and feel less lonely.

Turkle(1995) communicates that what we share online manifests our saturated selves. On TikTok, depression memes embody and represent people with depression. Therefore, it allows the users to express their mental struggles in a humorous, aesthetically acceptable, and relatable way. It provides an easy way of understanding and coping with emotions. Producing and consuming depression memes do not bring direct confession or confrontation. Consequently, it is a lot more accessible than talking to someone within a network or to a licensed professional. Turkle(2012) frames that being and being with 'saturated selves' can help us see what we are missing in real life, however, due to the lack of confrontation, consequence, accountability, and responsibility subcultures like depression memes create echo chambers in which everyone is only venting without creating meaningful connections and being responsible for each other. Turkle(2012) expresses that this could potentially lead to withdrawal from real life. Therefore, she strays away from calling these subcultures communities. McCosher and Gerrard(2020) stand with Turkle(2012) and state that depression meme cultures offer visibility and a voice for people struggling with mental health through curation instead of collectively emerging. The writers claim that it is more suitable to establish this subculture with its deliberative profile management and careful aesthetic curation through memetic content, thus as curation of saturated selves rather than a coherent sense of community.

Chateau(2020) comments that this memetic curation protects from recuperation by dominant ideologies about depression but also creates an ambiguity that generates that risk. Especially on platforms like TikTok where any type of content can blow up relatively fast. The ambiguous, funny, beautifully tragic representation of mental health through

memetic content makes depression mainstream, maybe even trendy, and promotes the notion that "everyone has depression". As a result, by engaging with this type of content, the users label their struggles and negotiate their identities by trying to conform to specific quirks and practices to be "depressed enough".

In conclusion, depression memes allow TikTok users to express themselves in a non-traditional, relatable, humorous, and aestheticized way and be in a space with people who go through the same thing. However, depression memes can cause withdrawal from real life and exacerbate feelings of loneliness. Depression memes offer visibility that goes against the dominant narrative about depression. Although, the affordances of TikTok depression memes could possibly contribute to that dominant narrative creating wrong awareness and visibility.

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