

Keeping up with the normies: Rememiotizing SpongeBob SquarePants in mental health memes

Reeta Karjalainen
University of Jyväskylä

Mental health discussions online are increasing and becoming more multimodal. Memes relying on pop-cultural references are integral parts of online cultures, and similar memes on mental health are also gaining popularity. Drawing on multimodal discourse studies, this article examines mental health memes (collected mainly from Imgur.com and Instagram and by using reverse snowball method) utilizing imagery from the cartoon series SpongeBob SquarePants. The article introduces a new analytical concept developed specifically for meme analysis: rememiotization. Building on scholarship on resemiotization and entextualization, rememiotization focuses on how semiotic resources are used and socio-cultural discourses materialized in memetic context, thus contributing to both meme studies and digital discourse studies. Exploring questions on how SpongeBob is rememiotized into mental health memes and how rememiotization participates in representing mental health issues, the article suggests that memes use different semiotic resources to represent issues related to mental health. Specifically, the memes represent how people relate to their mental health problems, other people, and treatment – emphasizing the feeling of social and societal exclusion. The paper also shows how these memes use humour to critique socio-cultural norms around mental health, de-centring the problem-talk focused discourses on mental health while representing experience-based narratives. Still, the memes pathologize and individualize mental health problems and thereby participate in contemporary diagnostic and therapeutic culture. By illuminating how people themselves process living with mental distress in memes, this paper provides crucial information about mental health not found in other contexts and offers new insight for successful mental health communication.

Keywords: Memes; mental health; SpongeBob Squarepants; rememiotization; multimodal discourse analysis

1 Introduction

Issues related to mental health are on the rise worldwide, and mental health problems are increasingly discussed on different internet and social media platforms (McCosker & Gerrard, 2021). Social media enables users to process mental health issues with peers (Lavis & Winter, 2020, p. 848) – leading social media users becoming both consumers and creators of mental health information (Valente, 2022, p. 878). Even though excessive social media use correlates with mental distress, those already suffering from anxiety or depression report positive effects of peer support and identity validation gained from social media (Moreno & Jolliff, 2022, pp. 228–229). Social media can also empower marginalized groups, thus promoting mental well-being (Charmaraman et al., 2022, p. 204). As culture and media are increasingly visualized, mental health discourses are also becoming more multimodal. Memes – commonly understood as humorous images spreading virally across different internet platforms and social media – have also become means of discussing mental health problems from different perspectives. They help to show both individual and shared experiences on treatment, diagnoses, and living with mental health problems.

The various ways memes represent mental health problems are also closely connected to wider socio-cultural mental health discourses from personal perspectives. Furthermore, mental health memes discussing diagnoses, treatments, and institutions reflect how our understandings of mental health, especially in the Global North, exhibit the cultural phenomenon of diagnostics and diagnostic language emerging into everyday life and society (Brinkmann, 2016). Mental health discourses on social media contain psychiatric and diagnostic terms while displaying pathologization of mental states and variations of human emotions (Rose, 2019). Mental health memes also reflect the growing (self-)medicalization on social media (Valente, 2022), as well as individualization and therapeutic discourses becoming pervasive even when addressing social issues (Brunila, 2014). As Brinkmann (2016, p. 80) states, “psychiatric language and its diagnostic categories have become more important for our self-understanding than ever before.”

On the one hand, these discourses of diagnostic, psychiatric, and therapeutic language pathologizing as well as individualizing mental distress encapsulate neoliberal ideas on mental health treatment, emphasizing personal healing rather than societal improvements. On the other hand, these memes participate in the gradual change of public discourses around mental health issues; while diagnostic cultures are more widespread, those experiencing mental health issues are now more widely allowed to express themselves on their own terms and give critical insight on, for example, mental health treatment. These memes, as social media discourses generally, also showcase the phenomenon of public intimacy (Berlant, 2008), i.e. the increasing tendency of publicly sharing issues that have previously been considered private with the aim of creating inclusion and emotional contact with peers.

Themes surrounding mental health have been an integral part of internet humour for years (Hokkanen, 2020). However, mental health memes have increased rapidly in popularity, virality, and number, especially in recent years presumably due to the COVID-19 pandemic, global crises and their news reports, as well as the development of digital communication methods (e.g. Aronson & Jaffal, 2022, p. 528). These memes are shared, commented on, and modified actively between platforms and numerous users. To exemplify, on Instagram, account @softcore_trauma had approximately 359000 followers in August 2024. Memes present mental health problems in various visual and textual ways almost always with a humorous tone. As this inherently multimodal nature of mental health memes clearly reaches people – showing memes’ potential for even mental health institutions (Occa et al., 2025) – multimodal analysis becomes crucial in untangling the process behind memes’ meaning-making to better understand and develop accessible mental health communication. The humorous manner mental health issues are sometimes addressed has been feared to belittle mental health problems;

however, Weiser and Alam (2022) in their research that combined questionnaires with showing memes to participants, concluded that mental health memes do not have numbing effects. In fact, memes can raise the viewers' sensitivity to mental health content – therefore, mental health memes have real-life effects and studying them unveils how people experience mental illness and how it is discussed in vastly visualizing online spaces.

Mental health memes, especially the ones that focus on mental health problems and the negative aspects of living with mental illness, are often self-deprecating in their humour (e.g. Thelandersson, 2023, p. 179) and mostly created from the viewpoint of mentally distressed people. Mental health memes offer a way to laugh at hardship and failure, and fight back the toxic positivity often prevalent on social media platforms and in neoliberal cultures in general (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3). According to Hietalahti (2016, p. 28), black humour, humour based on taboo and sensitive topics, can be used to criticize social norms. This is arguably visible in mental health memes, as they are filled with intentional othering of oneself from the happy, middle-class, and seemingly “normal” people (Bianchino, 2019, p. 38). This in-group community building is inherent to meme communication, as making, sharing, and referring to memes have been proven to be essential in online spaces focused on sharing sensitive issues (Newton et al., 2022).

While mental health memes, as well as the emphasis on pop culture in them, have gained researchers' interest (Thelandersson, 2023; Weiser & Alam, 2022), research on these pop cultural references as semiotic resources used creatively to depict mental health problems is still lacking. This paper focuses on mental health memes that use images and references from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, an American cartoon series about a living sponge and his aquatic friends shown originally on Nickelodeon since 1999. In the context of this study, I draw heavily from Thelandersson's (2023, pp. 2–4) way of focusing on discursively constructed representations of different diagnoses, general mental illness or mental suffering in contemporary (social) media culture. In order to analyse the different resources, including *SpongeBob SquarePants*, utilized in memes, I introduce the term *rememiotization* as an analytical framework encapsulating the memetic meaning-making process, drawing from both resemiotization (Iedema, 2003; Leppänen et al., 2014; Varis & Blommaert, 2015) and entextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Leppänen et al., 2014). Mental health memes are inherently multi-resourced, and as most people making and consuming mental health memes are now aging millennials or young adults looking back to their childhood nostalgically, many of the memes contain references to 1990s and early 2000s popular culture (Aronson & Jaffal, 2022). Indeed, Aronson and Jaffal argue that generational humour became an integral part of memes especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This being one of the reasons for the study's focus, I aim to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How is *SpongeBob SquarePants* rememiotized in mental health memes?

RQ2: How does rememiotization participate in representing mental health issues and materializing socio-cultural mental health discourses?

I will first define the concept of rememiotization and discuss, in relation to previous studies on memes, resemiotization, entextualization, and intertextuality, its theoretical and analytical potential in studying (mental health) memes and their humour. After presenting the data and methodology, I analyse how rememiotization participates in the memes' representations of mental health problems and touch on how rememiotization creates humour with reference to the original cartoon in relation to treatment, social relations, and illness itself. Lastly, I discuss how these representations materialize the different cultural and societal mental health discourses.

2 Rememiotization & mental health memes

Especially within linguistics and discourse studies, memes have been explored by utilizing multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), a method used to define how different semiotic modes are used to make meaning (Machin & Mayr, 2012; 2023), as memes are collaged from a whirlpool of textual, visual, and cultural resources. Wiggins (2019, p. 34) points out that an internet meme cannot exist without it referring to something else. Milner and Wolff (2023, p. 3) even argue that to reach their audience, memes have to refer to “something that’s already there” –making intertextuality intentional and inherent in their creation and meaning making. Memes do not only refer to other texts outside internet cultures, but also other memes and other internet phenomena, thus creating new meanings. In fact, memes can be viewed as a distinct genre and meme culture as its own *memescape* (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), or even as meme sub-genres and different memescapes.

The intertextuality of memes is dynamic, as memes recontextualize and transform intertextual references into new products. The process of meme formation can be described as memetization (Löfgren, 2022) or memefication (e.g. Bulatovic, 2019): i.e. the process of discourses blending into or becoming memes. However, this process is also close to resemiotization (Iedema, 2003; Leppänen et al., 2014, p. 14; Varis & Blommaert, 2015), an intertextual process of “semiotic change” in which pieces of culture are recontextualized from their original contexts and modes and made into new products with new meanings, modes, and audiences. Resemiotization, drawing from multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2023), describes how meaning and meaning-making changes in different contexts and different practices (Iedema, 2003, p. 41). Leppänen et al. (2014) examined resemiotization on social media and emphasized the role of pop-culture references as semiotic resources in multimodal online content. Memes also recontextualize pop-cultural references in both their context and meaning, while still containing some understanding of either the original context of the memes’ resources or memescape practices. This resemiotization of pop-cultural references has been studied in memes before, for example, from the perspective of linguistic humour analysis (Vásquez, 2021). Iedema (2003, p. 46) also sees the different textual and visual resources as elaborating each other; resources taken from their contexts do not displace each other, but rather reconfigure themselves. Mental health memes reconfigure both the explicit references they are utilizing, as well as the socio-cultural mental health discourses into new, experience-based narratives.

Resemiotization, being integral in memescape, is reflected in the recurring meme resources which are heavily utilized. This results in widely known meme templates (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018) arguably more famous than their original context. Therefore, some scholars would argue that creating new memes out of established meme templates should be examined from the viewpoint of entextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Blommaert, 2005; Leppänen et al., 2014, p. 6), taking material out of its original context and recontextualizing it, but without the emphasis on change in semiotic modes. Leppänen et al. (2014, p. 7) suggest that resemiotization and entextualization are closely related, complementary processes, both useful in describing the de- and re-contextualization of social media discourses especially.

Resemiotization and entextualization technically describe the meaning making of memes but arguably fall short in analysing the multi-semiotic discursive processes specific to the new genre of memes and memetic context, even when combined. Therefore, I introduce the concept *rememiotization*. Building on MCDA, resemiotization, and entextualization, rememiotization examines how semiotic resources, socio-cultural discourses, and different meme templates are materialised, while following the specific underlying traditions of online cultures and the memescape. In other words, rememiotization concerns about not only how intertextual pop-culture references, discourses, or online jokes, are reconfigured into new, changed products, but also it

examines how they are made *memetic* – how they become humorous, multimodal, and ever-malleable messages and artefacts. Moreover, unlike memetization, I argue that rememiotization considers the entextualization of memescape-specific patterns and discourses. Thus, rememiotization offers a more straight-forward approach to analysing memes, instead of using several closely related analytical tools. MCDA, in turn, links to rememiotization by offering tools on how to analyse memes *critically*- i.e., in the case of this study, to point out how language use and visual choices materialize wider mental health discourses and ideologies (Machin & Mayr, 2023, p. 12).

While rememiotization has not been a focus of research before, the process is evident in mental health related memes. For example, Kariko and Anasih (2019, pp. 3–4) state that memes utilize established meme templates to represent the varying aspects of one’s mental state, especially in student themed memes while creating absurd humour. In her book on female mental health in the 21st media, Thelandersson (2023, p. 188), on the other hand, shows how feminine mental health memes utilize pop culture imagery to critique the individualized, hyper-capitalistic society. Interestingly, in her article combining cultural mental health studies with digital folklore, Hokkanen (2020) exemplifies how even before large social media platforms, socio-cultural items related to mental health, such as different bureaucratic forms, were remixed into humorous and absurd e-mail chain letters. Divon and Krutrök (2023) show how short video service TikTok’s audiovisual trends and meme templates are used to convey war trauma in Ukraine ironically and playfully. These studies illuminate how utilizing different resources creates meaning and humour even in memes addressing dark and potentially traumatic topics. By using *SpongeBob SquarePants* as an example of extensively rememiotized resource, this paper adds to previous studies on mental health memes by focusing on the discursive process of rememiotization and explores how the rememiotization creates new memetic discourses on mental health.

2.1 Rememiotizing mental health issues – and making them funny

As most memes, mental health memes often incorporate humour in their messaging. Memes as a genre and popular meme templates rememiotized into new memes with new jokes also create a socio-cultural expectation of humour. Despite their dark topic and the high risk of misinterpretation, mental health memes are increasingly popular. Memes are folk humour carnivalizing serious and taboo issues into multimodal jokes. Instead of focusing on the problem-talk, stigma, or discussing mental health issues from a medical perspective, mental health memes, via using “low”-culture (Halberstam, 2011, p. 15) resources and references, represent mental illnesses in a grotesque and carnivalistic way, degrading suffering to something absurd and humorous.

Milner and Wolff (2023) argue that memes’ humour is distant and ironic; humour one gets from laughing at others. In mental health memes, however, the humour is created also from laughing at oneself; but still distancing oneself from the “normal” and the ideal, while also distancing oneself from suffering. Thelandersson (2023, p. 68) argues that self-deprecating humour in mental health content makes the issue more tangible. According to Critchley (2006, p. 95), self-deprecating humour can also be liberating and consoling. Wiggins (2019, pp. 11 & 134), however, compares memes to the Dada art movement parodying the elite and argues that while (dark) humour is integral to memes and used to make sense of the contemporary world, it should be viewed as an entry-point to engage in memes, used to spread the ideological essence behind memes. Therefore, while mental health memes joke about serious issues, they still participate in the political mental health discourses and represent mental health issues from an experience-based perspective.

Reconfiguring semiotic resources has been proven to be integral to humorous and playful social media content (e.g. Leppänen et al., 2014, p. 25). Furthermore, the growing

potential of humorous memes in health communication and spreading (mis-)information on health issues has been studied before (Headley et al., 2022; Occa et al., 2025). However, these studies focused on public health issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, qualitative and critical meme analysis on how rememiotization functions in representing mental health issues, creating humour, and commenting on different socio-cultural aspects surrounding mental health, is still needed. Building on these previous studies, I touch on how rememiotization of *SpongeBob SquarePants* specifically produces incongruent and absurd humour. While not the focus of this article, examining humour from the perspective of rememiotization enables analyzing how humour functions also in representing mental health issues.

3 Data & methods

3.1 Data

The data of this paper consists of 36 *SpongeBob* memes collected mainly from Instagram & [Imgur.com](https://imgur.com). This dataset is part of larger collection of data (1097 memes) collected for an ongoing PhD project between March 2020 and May 2024. Instagram was chosen for its popularity and role in mental health memescape, as it has approximately two billion active users, and while the platform filters the results under #mentalhealthmeme, there are still over 140,000 posts under the hashtag. Despite short-form video content gaining popularity, many mental health memes consist of still images with combined textual elements. [Imgur.com](https://imgur.com) has smaller userbase but is considered significant in the cultivation of meme culture and the formation of different meme templates (Stanusch, 2024). Memes were collected and selected manually by taking screenshots and saving images. Even though the data was collected from publicly available sources, ethical issues regarding informed consent and sensitive data come to play. As the data consist of memes discussing sensitive topics, the information about the posters, specific posting contexts, accounts, and other social media platform participants – including their comments – was not collected in principle at all or was cropped or edited out of the images. On Instagram, memes were collected under two mental health themed accounts, and the following hashtags: #mentalhealthmeme and #mentalillnessmemes. On [Imgur.com](https://imgur.com), mental health memes were also searched with similar tags and search terms. However, mental health memes on [Imgur.com](https://imgur.com) are mostly “hidden” in posts like meme dumps (e.g. image clusters); thus, the majority of [Imgur.com](https://imgur.com) memes were collected by going through the Most Viral, i.e. the page that displays the most popular posts of the day. Similar methods of data collection through search terms and data selection via careful examination of data samples have also been utilized before in other qualitative social media research and discourse analysis (Leveille, 2024; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018).

More intensive data collection periods, meaning days or weeks dedicated to data collection, were implemented to the process. The memes’ references to the childhood nostalgia and incongruent humour created by juxtaposing mental health issues to children’s media emerged as one of the main themes from the whole research data. However, even out of the approximately 200 memes within this thematic, memes with imagery from the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* stood out, as no other TV show or media item was utilized as extensively. Media resources other than *SpongeBob SquarePants* were singular, resulting *SpongeBob SquarePants*, represented in 36 memes in total, as the selection criteria for the present study. While this is a small number in relation to the whole PhD project data, the focus on *SpongeBob SquarePants* themed memes enables a close analysis of rememiotization of pop cultural references. Moreover, the 36 memes can be argued to represent broader trends and themes in the whole dataset, as discussed in the analysis.

In addition, the reverse snowball method (Basphehivan & Wedderburn, 2024; Särmä, 2014, p. 99; 2015; 2018) was used in data collection and selection, meaning that along with the researcher, actively collecting data by following different links and pathways, personal and random social media contacts were also utilized in the process. In other words, I let the data come to me by contacts sending memes or posting them on their social media. Thus, the original source of the memes is sometimes challenging to find, as is often the case for the memescape. Rather than utilizing automated data collection, combining these methods results in data that reflects the content average social media users interested in mental health issues encounter. These methods both enable finding mental health memes not marked with a hashtag and erases the need to filter any non-mental health themed memes that the automated methods might include. Meta platforms (i.e. media company owning such as Instagram) filter the used hashtags aggressively and memes just a few months old are at risk to be forgotten; thus, the reverse snowball method enables the collection of more varied data. Even though the algorithmic power has increased significantly, the reverse snowball method, nevertheless, allows for the systematic following and “piling up” of shifting and changing data (Särmä, 2015). This data collection method has limitations and displays the positionality of the researcher. However, my longitudinal and structured data collection has been ongoing for over four years while the same methods have been used systematically; for example, each intensive data collection period has brought at least 100 more memes. Therefore, the data can still be argued to represent broader trends in mental health memes.

3.2 But why *SpongeBob SquarePants*?

Berlant (2008, p. 30) argues that the U.S. popular culture and mass media have gained a therapeutic role in contemporary cultures. Even though mental health memes, and memes more broadly, utilize imagery from pop culture in conveying their messages and reaching social media users, children’s media from the 1990’s and early 2000’s have a special role in the memescape, often reflecting millennial humour (Aronson & Jaffal, 2022). Thus, *SpongeBob SquarePants* is one of the most popular sources for mememaking (Romano, 2019). Rice (2009) argues that *SpongeBob SquarePants* is uncommonly popular for a cartoon show, appealing to people of all ages despite its target audience. As mentioned earlier, *SpongeBob* themed memes emerged from the other memes both in number and in the creative ways they represented mental health issues.

Spongebob SquarePants is a cartoon show about the life of SpongeBob SquarePants, a sponge living under the sea, working as a fast-food chef for The Krusty Krab. In a *New York Times* article, Gold (2018) argues that many of the meme makers today watched *Spongebob* on TV as children. *SpongeBob* meme makers utilize their childhood memories of the show while also understanding and making use of the adult jokes within the show writing (Romano, 2019). These references to childhood nostalgia and making *SpongeBob* memes raunchy have led to the memes’ popularity and adaptability. Furthermore, the characters in *Spongebob* are colourful and easily recognizable archetypes. One could argue that the overly positive excitement of the main character SpongeBob, the cynical apathy of his co-worker Squidward, and the neurotic greed of Mr. Krabs, their boss and the owner of the burger joint The Krusty Krab, are ideal resources for depicting mental health issues in memes. On the other hand, combining the innocence of SpongeBob with textual elements related to depression and anxiety are prime examples of rememiotization inherent to internet memes. Then again, the cartoon also contains suggestive (usually sexual) adult jokes (Gold, 2018). Rememiotizing the imagery from the show to represent the usually more adult world of mental illness complements, therefore, the show’s own tradition.

Halberstam (2011, p. 53) argues that *SpongeBob SquarePants* also represents the careless, happy and mindlessly forgetful nature of childhood along with the ability to move past inconveniences, which is, arguably, an enviable trait for people behind mental health

memes. Suwandi et al., on the other hand, discuss *SpongeBob* from a Marxist viewpoint (2021, p. 17) and argue that *SpongeBob*, working as a fast-food chef for the greedy Mr. Krabs while still idolizing him, represents the Proletariat ignorant of their oppression. Thus, using *SpongeBob*, a character representing blissful ignorance, in mental health memes is deeply tragicomic.

3.3 Methods of analysis

To answer the RQ1 – how rememiotizing *SpongeBob SquarePants* functions in mental health memes – and RQ2 – how these memes connect to socio-cultural mental health studies – the analysis draws on multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). Multimodal discourse analysis, in general, enables examining the visual modes of texts and how they participate in meaning-making (Bateman et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2015; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 8; Machin & Mayr, 2023, 2012, p. 9; Milner, 2012; Wiggins, 2019, p. 19). I lean on Blommaert's (2005, p. 3) definition of discourse, comprising of "all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural, and historical patterns and developments of use." For this study, MCDA provides tools on how textual and visual choices in memes – for example, analysing which elements are foregrounded by salience, repetition, or saturation (Machin & Mayr, 2023, p. 19) – form meaning, symbolisms, and representations of mental health.

To analyse how different semiotic resources are used in these memes, I employ rememiotization as the main analytical framework, as it, being built on studies of multimodality, discourse analysis and resemiotization representing similar schools of thought, makes it a compelling option for meme analysis. Moreover, in the same way as resemiotization, rememiotization also examines the meanings in the change of different modes alongside the socio-cultural processes behind them (Iedema, 2003, p. 48), but specifically in memes and the memetic context. Furthermore, rememiotization enables the examination of mental health representations in relation to memes as humoristic, internet-esoteric cultural units. Regarding the different mental health discourses, it could be argued that they are memetized rather than *re*-memiotized, as something cannot be *re*-memiotized if not first used as sources for memes. However, I argue that the different discourses materialized within one meme genre, in this case mental health memes, are in communication with each other; in other words, they rememiotize the larger mental health discourses also from other memes.

Memes use imagery of the different characters in *SpongeBob SquarePants* to depict issues, feelings, and relationships related to living with mental health problems, as well as the people experiencing those issues. While it is tempting to assume that these memes reflect the feelings and thoughts of the people creating or posting them, referring to the issues presented in the memes as belonging to the meme posters or makers is inaccurate, as we cannot know what the "real people" creating, posting, or reacting to the memes are really thinking. In the analysis, I refer to the meme character representing the point of view of a person experiencing mental health issues, i.e. the character representing the "person" behind the meme, as a meme *experiencer*, a semantic role used to describe mental experiences (e.g. Landau & Keyser, 2009).

Memes address their audience in various ways and are interpreted in their contextual communities. While the focus of this article is on representations of mental health, memes are, as Wiggins & Bowers (2015) argue, products of *participatory* digital cultures created for an audience and social media participation. Therefore, as the analysis leaves out much of the contextual community information of the memes, the discursive ways in which these images themselves address their audience or display relatability are also examined from the perspective of rememiotization, as they can be considered recontextualized discursive patterns in the memescape.

4 My mental illness, normies, and therapy: *SpongeBob* representing mental health problems

I argue that mental health memes utilize their textual and visual resources creatively, as found in previous studies on mental health memes (Divon & Krutrök, 2023; Thelandersson, 2023), and rememiotize these resources into new modes. I explore how these resources are used to represent various aspects related to mental health and provide new insight to the study of mental health memes by suggesting that the memes in this dataset represent and visualize living with mental health problems through three different, although somewhat overlapping, relationships. 17 (47,2 %) out of 36 memes show the meme experiencer's relationship to mental illness or other mental health issues (e.g. symptoms). 12 (33, 3 %) memes discuss the relationship between the meme experiencer and other people or society: the so called "normies." 7 (19,4 %) memes discuss the meme experiencer's relationship with different forms of treatment, such as therapy or medical treatment. I zoom in how these relationships are depicted in a typical way by analysing the data examples below. I will also utilize MCDA to closely analyse the semiotic choices made in memes.

4.1 The relationship with mental illness

When you're getting on perfectly fine with life for once and then your mental illness suddenly resurfaces out of no where



Figure 1. Depicting the return of mental illness.
Collected on Instagram 4/10/2020.

The largest theme with 17 memes depicts the relationship the meme experiencer has with their mental illness and its symptoms, or other mental health issues. Characters, objects or other visuals are rememiotized to represent the meme experiencer and the mental illness. Figure 1 exemplifies this. The text, located above a screenshot from the cartoon in season 3, episode 52, hereinafter S3E52 "Chocolate with Nuts", says: *when you're getting on perfectly fine with life for once and then your mental illness suddenly resurfaces out of nowhere*. The first recorded use of the image as a meme is from 2009, and the original clip itself, emphasizing surprise element, was also rememiotized in various parody videos from early on (*Spongebob in Mailbox / Hi Mailman!*, 2020). The image contains two characters: SpongeBob squeezed in and peeking smilingly from a mailbox and a fish-like postal worker, holding a dark mailbag. Here, the image of SpongeBob is rememiotized to embody mental illness and his expression conveys a somewhat stereotypical representation of mania or manic enthusiasm. The postal worker looks shocked and terrified of SpongeBob, as his eyes are fixated at him while leaning backwards with his mouth wide open.

The text implicates that the meme experiencer had troubles in their life related to mental illness but was, for once, feeling better. However, the mental illness resurfaces, surprising

the meme experiencer and bringing negativity to their life. The text is written in a “you” narrative voice, which itself rememiotizes a typical audience-addressing discursive pattern in the memescape. Milner (2012, p. 9) argues that memes and participatory internet culture illuminate the era of ‘you,’ as a broad concept of participant, audience, and creator, but always emphasizing the individual – creating almost a parasocial connection between the meme experiencer and the meme audience. By drawing from MCDA and examining these linguistic choices critically, we can deduct that “Your mental illness” implies that the meme experiencer sees the mental illness as an integral part of them. The diagnosis or disorder is not specified but the text suggests that mental illness affects the meme experiencer’s life negatively. The phrase “suddenly resurfaces out of nowhere” describes surprise and abruptness in multiple words. The tools provided by MCDA inform us that this is the rhetoric trope of exaggeration and hyperbole (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 170). Therefore, there is arguably some irony, and the event is not wholly surprising, suggesting mental illness as a chronic condition with temporary states of remission. On the other hand, the phrasing may emphasize the unpredictability and negative aspects of mental illness and its symptoms. Furthermore, the image emphasizes how a mental illness disrupts the “ordinary” life by appearing in a mailbox – ruining a very mundane object. Overall, the meme challenges different contemporary discourses, discussed in detail by Rose (2019, pp. 152–153), on psychiatric recovery seen as a linear process, emphasizing the role of individual resilience. These discourses, however, as the meme also suggests, do not reflect the realities of mental health recovery.

While Figure 1 is typical in how it represents the relationship with the mental illness, unlike in the upcoming data examples, deducting from the placement of texts, SpongeBob is not rememiotized as the meme experiencer but as the representation of mental illness, and the mailman as the meme experiencer. Even though the text refers to the mental illness as a part of oneself, the meme rememiotizes the mental illness as a separate character from the meme experiencer. Personifying inanimate objects and concepts is again a rhetoric trope (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 171) which is arguably typical for the memescape – in this case, mental illness is visually depicted as an active agent. This manifests the different ways people with mental disorders position themselves in contemporary cultures and in relation to the disorder. Brinkmann (2016, p. 30), for example, discusses how one can *have* a mental illness, *be* mentally ill and also *perform* a mental illness. Aligning with this notion, the meme depicts *having* a mental illness rather than being mentally ill or performing a mental illness. This can be a coping mechanism, avoiding chronification and “patient identity” (Brinkmann, 2016, p. 34), as well as reflecting the idea that mental illness can be cured. The mental illness surprising the meme experiencer out of nowhere also supports this, while also arguably representing relapse after a remission in the mental illness.

Rememiotizing SpongeBob as the personification of the mental illness both contradicts and aligns with the character in the original cartoon, but also materializes how knowledge and nostalgia on childhood cartoons are prevalent in meme culture (Aronson & Jaffal, 2022). SpongeBob enjoys life, while being happy and positive. Therefore, him representing the mental illness can seem an odd choice. On the other hand, SpongeBob is also depicted as annoying, fumbling, and blissfully ignorant by other characters disliking him. Thus, SpongeBob can be a similar nuisance to symptoms of mental illness. SpongeBob’s grin implicates that the mental illness resurfaces out of spite and enjoys disrupting the meme experiencer’s life. SpongeBob’s vibrant character is usually used as the experiencer to emphasize the peculiarity of experiencing mental distress. Here, one of the generic characters is rememiotized to represent the experiencer. Arguably, this emphasizes how the meme experiencer has led a quiet life before the mental illness’ unexpected comeback. On the other hand, Brinkmann’s (2016, p. 83) arguments on how human suffering is nowadays compressed to individual calculable diagnostics rather than complex contexts of emotional responses are also rememiotized in the personification of mental illness.

As discussed above, mental health problems and mental illnesses are, through textual and visual choices, personified as the sole causes of suffering or things going wrong in life. On the one hand, this takes away the blame from the individual and their actions and redirects it to the mental illness, possibly making this framing comforting for people with mental health problems. On the other hand, it could be argued that mental illnesses do not form in a vacuum; mental illnesses are represented as causing tragedy rather than complex life tragedies causing mental suffering. All in all, memes under this theme represent the compression of mental health problems into an entity to be fought, rather than discussing mental health as a complex medical, political, social and psychological issue (Brinkmann, 2016, p. 25).

4.2 The relationship between the meme experiencer and the “normies”



Figure 2. Meme experiencer trying to fit in with other people.
Collected on Instagram 16/7/2021.

When you're trying to take a depression nap during the day and you hear people doing normal daily activities



Figure 3. Normies interrupting a perfectly good nap.
Collected on imgur.com 22/11/2021.

The second theme, with 12 memes, discusses the relationship between the meme experiencer and other people, exemplified in the two images above rememiotizing *SpongeBob* characters and visuals to depict this relationship. In Figure 2 (screenshot from S2E28: “Artist Unknown”) the text *People living happily without mental health issues* is integrated over a large shiny block, representing other people. *Me, pretending we’re the same* is placed on *SpongeBob*, representing the meme experiencer. Similarly, in Figure 3 (original episode unclear), the meme experiencer contrasts their mental health problems with other people but emphasizes the frustrations and challenges arising from these differences. The text above the image states *When you’re trying to take a depression nap during the day and you hear people doing normal daily activities*. The image contains two overlapping shots of *SpongeBob*. The *SpongeBob* in the background is lying on a bed with a tired and confused facial expression. The *SpongeBob* in the forefront is a translucent closeup of his face, superimposed over the background image. Here, the *SpongeBob*’s face still looks tired, but also frustrated, suspicious, and angry.

The texts in both memes express a juxtaposition between the meme experiencer and other people who the meme experiencer presumes to be “normal,” rememiotizing mental health discourses related to living in the everyday society. However, the images differ in the meme experiencers’ reactions to other people. In Figure 2, the texts suggest that people with mental disorders perform wellbeing for other people, revealing the underlying stigma and shame that still surrounds mental illness. Furthermore, by examining the linguistic choices, we see that the word “happily” is linked to mentally healthy people; thus, the meme experiencer connects happiness to other “normal” people and implies that in pretending to be normal, the meme experiencer also pretends to be happy. The meme captures the need to be part of the normal world without struggling, “to be in proximity of okayness,” argued by Berlant (2008, p. 9). Sadly, as Rose (2019, p. 180) argues, this sense of “okayness”, defined by access to everyday functions and suitable treatment is often not accessible to those who are mentally distressed. The stretched-out *SpongeBob* imitating the shiny cube also displays the masking of well-being. However, the grinning, yellow, square-panted *SpongeBob* trying to be like a shiny, smooth, and lifeless glass cube insinuates the failure in masking well-being – indeed crystallizing how inaccessible the “normal” world may be.

Figure 3 takes a different direction. A close multimodal analysis shows that, while the two images overlap, the frustrated translucent *SpongeBob* is in the forefront, making him the focal point of the image (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 56). The anger in the forefront *SpongeBob*’s face suggests that at least a part of the meme experiencer resents other people doing “normal” activities. However, rememiotizing the double-image of the two *SpongeBobs* creates an ironic contrast; the meme experiencer is exhausted, depressed, and frustrated, but in combination with the word choices, the meme also admits that a depression nap is something most people do not take during the day. The frustration arguably represents other people as unreasonable for keeping the meme experiencer awake, whereas the “normal daily activities” highlights the absurdity of feeling entitled to a quiet nap during the day. On the other hand, although arguably ironically, the meme experiencer asks for the legitimation of this private experience, normally considered unimportant – thus connecting it to public intimacy (Berlant, 2008, p. 3).

Despite these differences in reactions between the two meme experiencers, analysing the linguistic choices in the examples reveals that other people are constructed (e.g. by using the pronouns “you” and “me,” to rhetorically divide them from the anonymised term ‘other people’) (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 83), as fundamentally other in both examples. The cube in Figure 2 can be seen as shiny, awe-inspiring, and thus inspirational as well as aspirational. Nevertheless, “normal” people are painted as lifeless, cold, and unattainable compared to the lively *SpongeBob*. Indeed, the first memes, based on the original screenshot, were created to comment on the mysterious shiny monoliths appearing in 2020 (Rich et al., 2021) – thus, rememiotization of the meme emphasizes

the mystery around “normal” people. This differentiation between “normal” people and the meme experiencer is typical for the memescape, as Bianchino (2019, p. 381) argues that memes often rely on esoteric irony, gatekeeping the “normies” living outside online communities. While memes often express envy towards the normies, they also depict a feeling of superiority compared to them; “normal” people are seen as less interesting and having an easier life. However, it could be argued that this kind of “self-othering” and “othering the normies” is rememiotizing ironic memetic internet discourses by emphasizing the differences between other people and cool online people. For example, the phrase “I’m not like the other girls”, commonly used in internet circles some years ago, is now widely parodied (Peter, 2022). Thus, the rememiotization of the layered online discourses creates humour that could be interpreted in several ways.

Similar arguments can be said about the humour used in marginalized communities. According to Halberstam (2011, p. 3) people living non-normatively embrace failure and the humour inherent to failing, and thus use misery and jealousy as tools to rebel against societal norms. Brinkmann’s (2016, p. 85) argument about modern culture pathologizing not wanting to always improve oneself as suffering from mental illness is visible in both meme examples, though it is addressed in different ways. While the meme experiencer in Figure 2 wants to improve themselves but fails in their humorous effort to be like other people, the meme experiencer in Figure 3 embraces failure, similarly to what Halberstam (2011) argues, with their depression nap. Rememiotizing the tired and frustrated SpongeBob with the text juxtaposing “normal” people against the meme experiencer creates humour that illuminates how exhausting it can be for those with mental distress to survive in contemporary society.

The text in Figure 3 emphasizes depression by referring to sleeping during the day as a “depression nap”. This also insinuates how daytime sleeping and dysfunction are indeed correlated with depression (Liu et al., 2018). By stating that other people are doing “normal” activities during the day, similarly to Brinkmann’s arguments (2016, p. 85), the meme represents the societal pressure to be productive and to perform wellbeing for others during the day, despite the mental distress. Furthermore, the meme displays how people with mental health problems are often marginalized and isolated from everyday society and, as Rose (2019, p. 62) argues, social isolation itself worsens mental health. Then again, linking the diagnostic term “depression” to napping reflects the increasing role of diagnostization and pathologization in defining human experiences (Brinkmann, 2016, p. 46), as well as othering oneself via diagnostic labels, as napping is a relatively normal daily activity. Nevertheless, the meme also emphasizes public intimacy (Berlant, 2008, p. 5), as the meme experiencer shares their personal, intimate experience of napping, while suffering from depression, in the public online space.

The memes under this meme illuminate how people with mental health issues feel isolated and even excluded from everyday society. Utilizing MCDA to examine the linguistic choices reveals that other, “normal” people are made other by emphasizing their “normalcy,” while the non-normativity of people experiencing mental health issues is exaggerated by, for example, rememiotizing the vibrant characters in *SpongeBob SquarePants* to depict the meme experiencer. To conclude, these memes represent the need for problematizing and pathologizing normalcy (Brinkmann, 2016, p. 50) – what is considered “normal” (e.g. napping) in other people is turned into a mental health symptom in these memetic representations.

4.3 The relationship between the meme experiencer and treatment



Figure 4. Depiction of how mental health treatment itself can cause problems. Collected on Instagram 14/2/2022.

Seven of the 36 memes address the experiencer's relationship to treatment, professionals, and institutions. These memes materialize the difficult and ambivalent feelings the meme experiencer has about healing, asking for professional help, and the treatment methods they utilize. This is evident from memes choosing words linked to treatment, therapy being the most common, and rememiotizing visual elements to depict the patient-treatment relationship. These methods may or may not lead to healing, which makes the ambivalence even more emphatic. Figure 4 exemplifies this relationship. The meme's text, *having anxiety about going your therapist's appointment for your anxiety*, is located above a screenshot from S2E5 called "Patty Hype", depicting a zoomed-in Mr. Krabs surrounded by a blurred crowd. The foregrounding, size, and colour of Mr. Krabs make him salient, as the stand-out feature (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 54–55), thus clearly representing the meme experiencer. The text describes a tragicomic and ironic situation over increasing symptoms and intrusive thoughts about therapy. Therapy as a healing treatment is thus reconfigured and carnivalized into an anxiety increasing activity, re-negotiating therapeutic discourses but still emphasizing vulnerability, similarly to Brunila's (2014, p. 17) observations on therapization. Again, as argued by Milner (2012), addressing the meme audience as a rhetorical device and emphasizing the individual experience in meme communication, the text is written in a "you" voice.

Rememiotizing the image of Mr. Krabs combined with the text illuminates the absurdity of living with a mental illness, the frustration over participating in treatment, as well as asking for professional validation for one's (self-)diagnosed, labelled mental distress, which is typical for contemporary mental health care according to Brinkmann (2016, p. 76). Moreover, the meme depicts heightened self-awareness, engendering the constant self-monitoring essential to contemporary diagnostic cultures (Brinkmann, 2016, p. 76). Centring the frightened looking of Mr. Krabs in the middle of the crowd signals distress. While Mr. Krabs is salient, the lines surrounding the outer parts of his body are cloudy, representing anxious shakiness and nervousness. Drawing from Machin and Mayr's methods of MCDA, it can be argued that the more blurred and distorted imagery of the crowd is used as an attribute (2012, p. 53) to communicate

anxiety and especially, representing how an anxiety or panic attack can hinder focusing on one's surroundings. However, the crowd signals aggression towards Mr. Krabs, and the frightened gaze of Mr. Krabs indicates the meme experiencer's fear of other people noticing and judging their anxiety –again reflecting the pressure to perform wellbeing for other people (Brinkmann, 2016, p. 85). Rememiotizing Mr. Krabs with the text describing and bastardizing the client-therapist relationship also depicts the meme experiencer's anxieties over the therapist's reactions. This encapsulates the discourses of “doing well” and succeeding in therapy, which reflects Brunila's arguments (2014, p. 18) on how both competitive survival discourses as well as therapeutic ones are becoming more intertwined in individualized cultures, emphasizing competition and success.

Rememiotization conveys incongruent humour by linking the visuals of blurred cartoon characters and exaggerated facial expressions to the text describing an absurd situation which causes anxiety. Knowing that Mr. Krabs the character is a greedy businessman, often disappointing his clients and oppressing his employees, (Suwandi et al., 2021, p. 3) also adds to the rememiotization analysis. Mr. Krabs is potentially used to link these negative character traits to the meme experiencer, or to reflect how contemporary capitalistic cultures are partly causing mental ill-being, especially amongst the most oppressed and vulnerable people (Rose, 2019, p. 57). However, rememiotizing Mr. Krabs from the position of power into a vulnerable state also creates irony. Using such character, a businessman aiming to succeed and earn money, raises the question of class: while poverty can cause mental distress, therapy and other resources are often more easily available to people with higher socio-economic background. Moreover, Rose (2019, p. 58) argues that even mentally distressed people are expected to improve their lives through work and consumption, features that Mr. Krabs personifies; arguably, therapy can be seen as healing through consuming therapy, by being a client. In short, the meme, as many memes under this category do, emphasizes how people are expected to view anxiety as an individual problem to be fixed by themselves; to seek therapeutic help instead of considering the societal root causes for anxiety (Brunila, 2014).

Rememiotizing Mr. Krabs has a big role in depicting anxiety humorously. However, discussing the rememiotization of the screenshot as a popular meme format also illuminates the meme's humour. *SpongeBob SquarePants* screenshots are frequently used as meme templates, but this image is one of the most popular of those not including the character of SpongeBob (Gold, 2018) - evident also in the data collection. The image, whose first recorded usage is from a 2016 Twitter post resulting in rapid rememiotization into new memes (*Confused Mr. Krabs*, 2016), is usually linked to texts describing a stressful situation, and the different memes in this format depict anxiety, panic, confusion, or discomfort. The texts vary from nostalgic childhood memories (*When your mum leave you in the line and the cashier says 'next'*) to more controversial and dark humour (*When you're in public and the edibles start kicking in*). Therefore, the rememiotization in this mental health meme adds to the continuum of Mr. Krabs memes while still containing its historical context of describing uncomfortable situations, typical for both the memescape and also the resemiotization of different cultural semiotic pieces (Iedema, 2003, p. 41).

These memes and their discursive ways of representing the relationship between the meme experiencer and treatment underline how especially therapists are viewed as the authority figures and as keys to recovery and healing, even though they also depict the difficulties related to therapy and other treatment forms. This is arguably crucial information for therapists and other mental health care providers, as memes and social media contexts in general often allow accessible ways to communicate sensitive information for their users. Overall, all memes in this study show, via rememiotization, how people experience mental health issues themselves, ranging from processing the mental illness to feelings of isolation and exclusion. However, this information, despite its relevance to mental health officials, is often inaccessible to authorities.

5 Conclusion

This article explored how mental health themed memes utilize different resources, especially imagery from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, to represent mental health issues. Drawing on multimodal critical discourse studies and developing a new analytical framework of rememiotization, I suggested that imagery from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, alongside with meme templates, discourses, and practices of the memescape, are rememiotized to depict three relationships integral to the experience of mental health problems: the relationship to illness, “normal” people, and treatment. In doing so, they engage with a wide range of mental health discourses in contemporary culture. These different manifestations of mental health discourses were examined in detail in the analysis. The first relationship displays how the meme experiencer, via utilizing *SpongeBob* characters, relates to their mental health issues by personifying mental illnesses and their symptoms. These memes emphasize diagnostic language and the role of mental health issues in the meme experiencers’ lives, but simultaneously question the identity of being mentally ill, as the illnesses are displayed as separate entities from the meme experiencer. The second relationship occurs between the meme experiencer and other, “normal” people. Ultimately, these memes discuss the theme of exclusion from everyday society – they represent the desire to be “normal” and to fit in with other people, while simultaneously depicting normalcy as unattainable. Despite the need to conform to other people, the gap between people with mental health problems and other people is emphasized humorously, and normalcy criticized. The third relationship, between the meme experiencer and different forms of treatment, depicts the ambivalent feelings related to treatment and reflects how therapeutic language is becoming more prevalent in social media spaces.

While these memes represent three social and psychological relationships that those with mental health issues have with treatment, other people, and the mental illness itself, they still underline the fundamental loneliness and isolation that having a mental illness can cause. Although the memes can form communities of social media users and often address their audience, their focus and representations are always on the individual meme experiencer. Critiques against having to conform to social norms can be detected in these memes; however, commentaries on the socio-cultural factors behind mental suffering are somewhat lacking. Despite their growing role in social critique, memes are affected by individualization and other contemporary mental health discourses. They legitimize diagnostic labels, individualize mental health issues, and miss in the discussion on socio-political solutions for the mental health crisis.

Nevertheless, as mental health issues are individualized, it is crucial to examine these individual experiences and representations further. Memes participate in the intimate public (Berlant, 2008) by bringing still heavily stigmatized issues, and issues previously considered private into the public sphere. The intimate publicity of these memes can inform people that they are not alone with their experiences. Furthermore, by utilizing imagery, especially different characters from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, the memes’ representations on mental health issues are carnivalized and softened. By representing depression, anxiety, and fear of not fitting in next to cartoon imagery, the memes ask their audience to relate to and engage with them through childhood nostalgia. Moreover, *SpongeBob SquarePants* as a well-known source for meme templates allows social media users to make fun of mental health issues, usually without facing real worry. Mental health memes, while representing negative aspects of living with mental illness, de-centre the mournful problem-talk around mental health issues. Thus, although memes participate in the dominating mental health discourses, this study also contributes to discourse studies on mental health topics by bringing forth diverse, new ways of expressing and processing mental health problems in memetic format.

This paper also proved the applicability of rememiotization, drawing from research on MCDA, intertextuality, resemiotization, and entextualization, as a tool specifically

for meme analysis by showing how semiotic resources, discourses, and practices of the memescape come together exquisitely in memes. Furthermore, this article briefly illustrated how rememiotization functions in representing mental health issues humorously. Rememiotization as a forger of humour has a significant role in reconfiguring mental health discourses in these memes. *SpongeBob SquarePants* as well as socio-cultural and historical discourses on mental health are recontextualized into a new set of discourses where mental health issues are source of humour. Via this rememiotization, different juxtaposing elements are reconfigured into one humorous product. Using *SpongeBob SquarePants* to depict depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses exemplifies how rememiotization creates irony and emphasizes the role of humour in breaking cultural and societal norms and beliefs.

All in all, this study contributes to the understanding of internet memes by illuminating how rememiotization builds on and enhances earlier ways of analysing memes. Rememiotization also helps us view memes as important cultural messages, not only as jokes. Moreover, it shows how humour and childhood nostalgia (like *SpongeBob*) influence the way people process mental health online. By building on discourse analysis, resemiotization, and entextualization, and by applying them specifically to internet meme culture, rememiotization offers researchers a more focused and useful way to study how memes use images and text, humour, and memetic traditions to make meaning in online contexts.

While this paper focused on digital discourse studies, memes and their growing role in health communication have been noted, especially regarding controversial topics (Occa et al., 2025); thus, using memes in mental health communication can make people more comfortable to share their experiences. The results of this study, focusing on rememiotization and how people themselves experience mental health issues, can be applied to public health issues by health officials utilizing the themes and rhetorics detected in memes. For example, therapists, learning from this study that their clients sometimes consider therapy stressful, could utilize memes and rememiotization of pop-cultural, humoristic references in their communication to validate and relax their patients' feelings as well as equalize the therapist-client relationship. Memes are an effective tool for health communication, especially when aimed at vulnerable groups (Headley, 2022). Thus, medical professionals learning about the different ways mental health issues can be processed and addressed in memetic format is needed. This study raises important questions on how these memes and their representations, especially on the relationship to treatment and "normies", relate to the experiences and treatment of people with mental health problems – issues that are perhaps not easily expressed in clinical contexts compared to the memetic context that can provide both anonymity and community. Hence, future research about mental health memes with both larger datasets and study settings that also considers social media participants' reactions and the community aspects surrounding these memes is direly needed, as memes provide practical information on how people live with mental health issues.

These memes participate in changing the viewpoint of discussing mental health from medical experts and giving those experiencing mental health issues platforms to express their views. These views, although presented humorously, give insight on the negative aspects of the lives of people with mental health problems. They reflect living in the outskirts of normalcy, representing other people and even forms of treatment as anxiety-inducing. While mental health memes give an outlet to normalise and express mental health issues, the memes nonetheless use self-deprecating humour to represent mental illnesses as embarrassing. Mental health memes reveal us that those with a mental illness do not find the surrounding society accessible or welcoming. *SpongeBob SquarePants* might make that world more tolerable. At least he can make the "normal" world just a little funnier.

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