Mememotion Regulation: A Quantitative Coding Analysis of Emotional Content in Popular Internet Memes

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Introduction

- Regulating emotion is a universal element of human behavior.
- Gross' process model of emotion regulation, which specifies five strategies individuals employ to modify the experience and expression of emotion (i.e., situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, response modulation; Gross, 1998), has been used extensively to examine how individuals regulate both positive and negative emotion.
- Within the context of the internet, the term meme is used to represent concepts or ideas that are spread virally on the internet. These memes often couple still or video images with text in effort to convey a complex idea (e.g., Diaz, 2013; Shifman, 2014).
- Recent research indicates the profound effects that the internet and digital technologies have on emotion regulation processes (e.g., Wadley et al., 2020) and further indicates that internet memes can regulate emotion in clinically depressed populations (Akram et al., 2020).
- There has yet to be an empirical examination of emotion regulation themes present in memes. Two research questions guide this study:

- **RQ1:** What emotions are present in popular internet memes?
- **RQ2:** Do internet memes contain emotion regulation themes?

Key Terms

- **Emotions:** The reactions that we have to ongoing relationships with our environment (Lazarus, 2000); may be positive (e.g., hope, pride, relief, love) or negative (e.g., anger, anxiety, disgust, sadness).

- **Emotion regulation:** The process by which we change "the emotions we have, when we have them, and how we experience and express them" (Gross, 1998).

Materials and Methods

- A random sample of 100 internet memes was taken from Memezar, a popular Instagram meme account with over 22.9 million followers.

- The memes included in the sample were recorded by screenshots and subsequently coded for the presence of emotion regulation behaviors, as well as distinct emotions.

- In the current sample, percent agreement between coders ranged from 91% to 100% for all categories.

Results

RQ1: What emotions are present in popular internet memes? List the following emotions and an example meme for each: 1.) Anxiety 2.) Disgust 3.) Sadness 4.) Love

RQ2: Do internet memes contain emotion regulation themes? Provide examples of at least one meme that was coded as featuring emotion regulation. – In total, four memes featured emotion regulation:
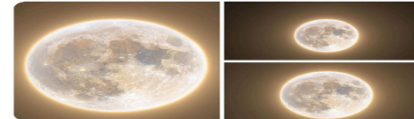
Discussion

While we coded for a total of 15 emotions, we identified only a total of seven emotions present in our sample (i.e., anxiety, disgust, depression, sadness, hope, love, and pride). It should also be noted that negative emotions were the most prevalent emotions present in our sample of memes. Memes both shape and reflect social mindsets (Shifman, 2014).

- Disgust was the most prevalent emotion with a total of three instances, while pride, hope, and depression featured only one instance each.
- We also identified only four instances of emotion regulation themes in our dataset. One possible explanation for these findings is that memes contain elements outside of emotion that may regulate emotion by means of distraction or humor, which would create an entirely new emotion altogether.

Our sampling time frame of 2020 may have led to some unique findings specific to emotions related to living through a global pandemic. Furthermore, our emphasis on only one Instagram meme account may further perpetuate this issue.

There exist many other Instagram meme accounts, and Memezar, which was used in this sample, may only represent a small subset of the possible memes that people view on the internet. Future work should examine other dates and accounts to see if the findings in the present study hold true.

References

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