

# #Therapymemes: Instagram against mental health stigma

*#Therapymemes: Instagram osasun mentalaren estigmaren aurka*

#Therapymemes: Instagram contra el estigma de la salud mental

Meritxell Soria-Yenez\*, Martí Domínguez, Lucía Sapiña  
Universitat de Lleida  
Universitat de València  
Universitat de València

**ABSTRACT:** *Memes are powerful viral tools for raising awareness about issues like mental health. This study aims to discover what features characterize mental health outreach memes and to know what the perspective of mental health professionals is. This study analyzes the characteristics of 132 mental health memes and 39 professionals were surveyed to assess the reception of them. The mental health memes examined depict situations in a first-person, aggressive, and self-destructive manner, often employing exaggeration and sarcasm. Graphic humor serves as a valuable ally in raising awareness and breaking down mental health stigmas.*

**KEYWORDS:** *humor; graphic humor; mental health; Instagram memes; health.*

**LABURPENA:** Memeak osasun mentalaren inguruan kontzientziatzeko tresna biral indartsuak dira. Azterketa honen helburua da osasun mentalari buruzko memeak definitzen dituzten ezaugarriak identifikatzea eta psikologia eta psikiatriako profesionalak haien erabilerari buruz duten iritzia ezagutzea. Ikerketak 132 meme aztertu ditu eta arlo horretako 39 profesional inkestatu ditu. Azterketak nabarmentzen du osasun mentalari buruzko memeek egoera zehatzak modu oldarkor eta autosuntsitzailean deskribatzen dituztela, lehen pertsonan bizitako esperientzien bidez, eta gehiegikeria eta sarkasmoa erabiltzen dituztela. Umore grafikoa aliatu baliotsua da kontzientziazioa sustatzeko eta osasun mentalaren inguruko estigmak hausteko.

**GAKO-HITZAK:** umorea; umore grafikoa; osasun mentala; Instagram memeak; osasuna.

**RESUMEN:** Los memes son potentes herramientas virales para concienciar sobre la salud mental. Este estudio tiene como objetivo abordar qué características definen a los memes sobre salud mental y conocer la opinión de profesionales de la psicología y la psiquiatría sobre su uso. El estudio ha analizado 132 memes y ha encuestado a 39 profesionales de este ámbito. El análisis destaca que los memes sobre salud mental describen situaciones de manera agresiva y autodestructiva, vividas en primera persona, y empleando la exageración y el sarcasmo. El humor gráfico es un valioso aliado para concienciar y romper los estigmas de salud mental.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** humor; humor gráfico, salud mental, meme Instagram; salud.

\* **Corresponding author:** Meritxell Soria-Yenez. Universitat de Lleida. Pl. de Víctor Siurana, 1 (E-25003 Lleida-Cataluña-España) — [meritxell.soria@gmail.com](mailto:meritxell.soria@gmail.com) — <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2913-7583>

**How to cite:** Soria-Yenez, Meritxell; Domínguez, Martí; Sapiña, Lucía (2026). «Therapymemes: Instagram against mental health stigma»; *Zer*, 60, 205-219. (<https://doi.org/10.1387/zer.28219>).

Received: 2026-01-30; Accepted: 2026-04-08.

ISSN 1137-1102 - eISSN 1989-631X / © UPV/EHU Press



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## 1. Introduction

Memes have evolved from simple cultural transmitters to replicators of various elements, including language, religion, science, fashion, and music, among other aspects of human culture (Vélez, 2012). Since Richard Dawkins coined the term «meme» (1976), fifty years have passed, during which these units of cultural transmission have become everyday elements for users of virtual platforms and social networks (Bueno Olivera, 2021). Over this time, their capacity for imitation, circulation, and transformation has fostered a shared cultural experience (Shifman, 2013), making memes a vital means of reinterpreting societal challenges (Flecha Ortiz *et al.*, 2021) whether in positive (Samson & Gross, 2012) or negative (Dubicka & Theodosiou, 2020) ways.

The evolution of memes is closely linked to the Internet. As Lankshear and Knobel (2019) explain, in the 1990s, common meme practices used software like Photoshop to mix images, videos, and animations with captions. From around 2005 onward, the creation and dissemination of memes became widespread, thanks to improvements in broadband and user-friendly applications for generating and sharing content on social networks. This led to the emergence of «Internet memes», which represents a new form of communication where participants easily create, modify, and distribute content (Holm, 2021; Pian-tavinha, 2022).

A meme is more than an image, video, or text; it is a cultural expression that generates reactions and spawns new memes through imitation (Bueno Olivera, 2021). Memes are integral to daily life, particularly for those active on virtual platforms and social networks. Many of these memes—whether humorous, political, or sporting—are shared by users and often go viral because they embody contagious patterns of cultural information that convey the key actions and mentalities of a social group (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). The replication of memes is described as a three-stage process, consisting of assimilation (something that can be represented), expression (emerging from memory and taking physical form, such as a photo or video) and transmission (the person uses a stable physical medium to spread the message) (Davison, 2012).

This exchange of memes also extends into the realm of mental health and psychological well-being (Hernández-Cuevas & Cruz-Bermúdez, 2021), confirming the effectiveness of audiovisual methods. Certain emotions, thoughts, feelings, experiences, events, and relationships are often more easily expressed through multimodal means than verbal communication alone (Manikonda & De Choudhury, 2017). Consequently, memes provide a valuable avenue for addressing commonly stigmatized topics, such as mental health issues.

### 1.1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMOR AND MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health problems are the leading cause of disability worldwide (PAHO-WHO, 2019), particularly affecting adolescents—an audience that predominates on social media platforms like Instagram. As Revuelta *et al.* (2023) point out, individuals with mental health disorders often face stigma (Goffman, 2006; Link & Phelan, 2001), which hinders their ability to recognize their issues, discuss them openly, and seek help. Increasing visibility and awareness of mental health by explaining its causes or appointing ambassadors to share their personal experiences can help reduce this stigma (Soria-Yenez *et al.*, 2024).

The persistence of stigma surrounding mental health has been widely documented, not only in terms of social attitudes but also in relation to structural discrimination and human rights violations (World Health Organization, 2024). Increasing visibility and awareness of mental health—through educational strategies, public campaigns, or the involvement of ambassadors sharing personal experiences—has been identified as a key mechanism to challenge stigma and promote more inclusive attitudes (Soria-Yenez *et al.*, 2024). In this regard, communication plays a central role, as media representations and public discourse contribute to shaping social perceptions of mental illness, either reinforcing or reducing stigma (Muñoz *et al.*, 2011; Pescosolido *et al.*, 2010; Sieff, 2003).

Some evidence shows that, despite the persistence of negative perceptions, there are emerging positive trends associated with greater openness to discussing mental health difficulties and seeking professional help (Zissi, 2022). These shifts are closely linked to changes in communication practices, particularly within digital environments where new forms of expression and interaction are constantly evolving.

As meme culture evolves, it becomes increasingly evident that many memes address mental health issues. By laughing and joking about their struggles, both those affected and the professionals who support them share their daily challenges and symptoms with others online (Kariko & Anasih, 2019), similar to trends observed with other illnesses, such as cancer (Sapiña & Domínguez, 2021).

The effects of humor on mental health have been the focus of numerous studies. Proponents of its positive function, such as Samson and Gross (2012), argue that positive humor is more effective than negative humor in regulating emotions when confronted with unfavorable imagery. Other research indicates that many individuals with psychiatric vulnerabilities report positive experiences when engaging with memes (Akram & Drabble, 2022). Similarly, Gardener (2021) highlights the potential benefits of interacting with memes about depression for those experiencing its symptoms. Akram *et al.* (2020) also asserts that humorous depression memes can benefit, mainly employing adaptive emotion regulation strategies. This research supports the notion that memes can serve as a valuable tool in stressful situations, using humor to mitigate negative effects (Flecha Ortiz *et al.*, 2021).

However, research by Jadayel *et al.* (2018) highlights that memes about depression may incite some individuals to inflict physical harm or develop suicidal thoughts. This perspective is echoed by the UK Royal College of Psychiatrists, which found that mental health memes can contribute to social contagion and pose a threat to public health (Dubicka & Theodosiou, 2020). While some professionals and media outlets argue that Internet memes related to mental health problems have negative consequences, empirical evidence does not consistently support this claim (Akram & Drabble, 2022).

Understanding the opinions of those affected by mental health issues and the health professionals who care for them is crucial for advancing our comprehension of memes' role in this context. It is necessary to determine whether memes, similar to mental health metaphors (Coll-Florit & Salvador, 2023), can benefit health professionals, public health communicators, and the family and friends of individuals diagnosed with a mental disorder.

## 1.2. WHY INSTAGRAM?

Social media comprises online platforms that prioritize communication and user interaction (Gupta *et al.*, 2021). Social media has become an important alternative source of information to traditional media (Yoo *et al.*, 2020). For example, anxious individuals (with social phobia) may find it difficult to communicate face to face and therefore prefer online communication to real-life communication (Andreassen *et al.*, 2016). The way mental illness is represented in the media strongly influences how society understands these conditions (Wagner & Temmann, 2025).

This is the reason why this study is focused on social media, especially on Instagram for three main reasons. First, its emphasis on visual content is significant. While this characteristic is shared across social networks, Instagram specifically encourages photographic expression. The platform provides a space for users to share images that convey their experiences with mental health issues, seek support, and disclose sensitive information about their emotional struggles (Manikonda & De Choudhury, 2017).

Second, Instagram plays a decisive role in shaping young people's culture, identity, and perceptions of the world. The app serves both entertainment and identity construction purposes (DeCook, 2018), which are crucial aspects in the analysis of mental health memes. Social media have emerged as significant alternative sources of information compared to traditional media (Yoo *et al.*, 2020). They enable young people to interact and socialize without needing for physical contact (Hernández-Cuevas & Cruz-Bermúdez, 2021).

Thirdly, Instagram provides an opportunity to examine how individuals affected by mental health issues document aspects of their daily lives within a predominantly visual context and how they present these experiences online (Highfield & Leaver, 2015).

Consequently, Internet memes warrant further exploration by their very nature and methods of generation and dissemination (Benaim, 2018). Despite their popularity, the individual motivations for observing and sharing mental health memes remain poorly understood (Akram & Drabble, 2022).

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- RQ1. What features characterize mental health outreach memes shared on Instagram by professionals, and what is their style?
- RQ2. What is the purpose of mental health professionals in creating or sharing these memes?
- RQ3. How do other mental health professionals receive these memes?

## 2. Methodology

To gather the sample, we studied 11 accounts of mental health professionals from various countries, each with over 10,000 followers on Instagram. The selection of accounts was based on a purposive sampling strategy aimed at identifying influential profiles related to psychology and mental health on Instagram. Specifically, the inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) the account self-identifies as belonging to a mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, therapist) or is widely recognized as a credible disseminator of mental health content; (2) the account actively produces and shares memes or meme-like content related to mental health; (3) the account demonstrates sustained activity during the period analyzed; and (4) the account has a minimum of 10,000 followers, ensuring a baseline level of visibility and audience reach.

The relatively wide range in follower counts—from approximately 10,000 to over 8 million—responds to the intention of capturing heterogeneity within the ecosystem of mental health communication on social media. Rather than focusing exclusively on highly prominent influencers, the sample was designed to include both macro and micro accounts, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of how memes are constructed and circulated across different scales of visibility and audience engagement. By incorporating accounts with varying levels of reach, the study aims to better reflect the complexity of meme-based communication in the field of mental health.

Their follower base and engagement levels also suggest that these accounts act as reference points within their respective online communities, making them appropriate sources for studying patterns of interaction, communication strategies, and the dissemination of mental health-related messages on social media.

The chosen hashtags include: #memesmentalhealth, #mentalhealth, #mentalhealthhumor, #mentalhealthmeme, #mentalhealththerapist, #originalmemes, #psychology, #psychologyhumor, #psychologymemes, #psychologytherapist, #therapist, #therapisthumor, #therapistmemes, #therapy, #therapyhumor, #therapymemes, #psychology, #psychologyonline, #memespsychology, #psychotherapy #mentalhealth, #therapy. The selected hashtags were chosen to maximize the discoverability and relevance of the content within social media environments where discussions on mental health, therapy, and psychology are highly active. Hashtags such as #mentalhealth, #therapy, #psychology, and their related variations target broad communities engaged in evidence-based conversations about psychological well-being and therapeutic practices. Meanwhile, tags like #mentalhealthhumor, #therapisthumor, and #psychologymemes specifically address online subcommunities that use humor and memes as accessible tools for psychoeducation, stigma reduction, and community support. Incorporating

both general and humor-focused hashtags allow the content to reach diverse audiences. The identification of accounts through hashtags was conducted using a multilingual approach. Specifically, searches were performed in both English and Spanish, as these are two of the most widely used languages in mental health-related content on social media and allowed for the inclusion of accounts from diverse geographical contexts. Overall, the use of multilingual hashtag approach contributed to capturing a more diverse and representative set of accounts involved in the production and dissemination of mental health-related memes.

To understand a meme, recipients must share a common socio-cultural background, including experiences and values, and be familiar with the cultural context in which the meme appears (Tudor, 2022). In this analysis, we sought profiles demonstrating a solid understanding of the primary concerns of individuals affected by mental health issues, publishing content that balances humor with rigor. For this reason, we selected accounts belonging to psychology and psychiatry professionals. The selection of images was conducted in February and November 2023 (Table 1).

TABLE 1  
Analyzed Instagram Accounts

	February 2023	November 2023	Country
@mytherapistsays	7,9 M	8,2 M	USA
@psychotherapymemes	146,0 K	149,0 K	USA
@mentalhealthfunnies	53,1 K	56,3 K	USA
@counseling_memes	40,0 K	46,3 K	USA
@enconsultaconmipsicologo	37,5 K	61,3 K	México
@yourtherapymemes	34,3 K	34,2 K	Brasil
@mismemespsicologicos	31,4 K	35,4 K	Spain
@memes.psicologicos	14,2 K	13,9 K	Spain
@psicologiaporlasdudas	13,7 K	13,4 K	Argentina
@Psicovlog	11,0 K	11,1 K	Spain
@iopsychmemes	9.369	10,1 K	USA

Source: own work based on data from the sources consulted.

The memes were gathered in two distinct periods: January–February and October–November. The first phase occurred in two parts: from January 9 to 15, 2023, coinciding with World Depression Day on January 13, and from February 13 to 19, 2023, one month later, resulting in the collection of 78 images. The second phase also occurred in two parts: from October 8 to 15, coinciding with World Mental Health Day on October 10, and from November 6 to 12, one month later, yielding 54 images. In total, the analysis includes 132 memes.

These images were analyzed using Martin *et al.* (2003) classification of humor styles. Taecharungroj and Nueangjammong (2015) also applied this framework to investigate the humor styles of memes on Facebook. In this study, we employed the same framework to examine the memes collected from Instagram (Table 2).

TABLE 2  
Humor styles and types in memes

Humor style	Description	Guidelines
Affiliative	Presents funny scenarios, jokes, or witty remarks to entertain others and enhance relationships.	The meme creator describes another person's situation positively.
Self-Affirming	Humorously reflects on one's life, finding amusement in incongruities and maintaining a light-hearted perspective in adversity.	The meme creator shares their situation positively.
Aggressive	Expresses humor without regard for its impact on others, delivering remarks that may offend or alienate.	The meme creator portrays another person's situation negatively.
Self-Destructive	Aims to elicit laughter at one's own expense through humorous and derogatory remarks.	The meme creator describes their situation negatively.
Type of humor	Description	Guidelines
Comparison	Joins two or more elements to create a humorous situation.	This meme compares two or more objects.
Personification	Attributes human characteristics to animals, plants, or objects.	This meme personifies animals, plants, or objects.
Exaggeration	Magnifies something disproportionately.	This meme seeks to exaggerate an element.
Wordplay	Utilizes linguistic elements to create new meanings that induce humor.	Language plays a significant role in this meme.
Sarcasm	Flagrantly ironic responses or situations.	The meme conveys an intention different from the sender's true meaning.
Nonsense	Features absurd characters or situations that provoke laughter.	This meme is humorous due to the absurdity of its elements, such as characters or scenarios.
Surprise	Humor arises from unexpected situations.	This meme includes unexpected elements, culminating in a surprise ending or resolution.

Source: own elaboration based on Catanescu & Tom (2001), Martin *et al.* (2003) and Taecharungroj & Nueangjammong (2015).

Additionally, we reviewed the «likes» for all the published memes, as memes achieve success when they go viral (Shifman, 2013).

To address the second and third research questions, this study included two semi-structured questionnaires: one for the professional authors of the analyzed accounts (Group 1) and another for mental health professionals outside the sample profiles (Group 2). This approach aimed to understand how these memes are received by those working in the same field. The first questionnaire was distributed in both Spanish and English. For the second group, since the professionals were from associations in Catalonia, the questionnaire was provided in Catalan to better align with the language and context of the respondents.

The study included two distinct survey groups with complementary objectives: (1) mental health professionals who actively create and share memes, and (2) professionals not directly involved in meme production. The questionnaire administered to both groups is included in the Appendix section. While the core structure of the questionnaire was similar in both cases—focusing on perceptions of memes in relation to mental health, their potential benefits, and associated risks—some questions were adapted to

account for the specific profile of each group. In particular, meme creators were asked about their motivations, content creation practices, and intended communicative goals, whereas non-creator professionals were asked to evaluate memes from a more external and professional perspective.

The inclusion of these two groups aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, combining insights from content producers and from professionals who engage with mental health communication without actively generating memes. The survey targeting non-creator professionals was limited to Catalonia due to considerations of accessibility and proximity, which facilitated recruitment and data collection. This approach is consistent with exploratory qualitative research designs, where the objective is to obtain in-depth insights rather than statistically representative samples.

In Group 1, the individuals responsible for the profiles were contacted, and the questions were sent to them via direct message on Instagram (with five reminders sent between September and December 2023). Following these reminders, four respondents replied in Spanish (accounts @enconsultaconmipsicologo, @psicologiaporlasdudas, @psicovlog, and @losmemesdepsico), while two responded in English (@mentalhealthfunnies and @counseling\_memes). These Instagram interviews, which included more than half of the participating accounts, provide valuable insights into these professionals' perspectives on how they incorporate memes on their Instagram accounts.

This reasoning was supplemented by the questionnaire sent to mental health professionals outside the accounts analyzed (Group 2). After reaching out to various associations, 39 responses were collected. The questionnaire was distributed between December 2023 and March 2024 to professionals from the Col·legi Oficial de Psicologia de Catalunya, the organization Salut Mental Catalunya and its Ponent delegation, the Associació Catalana de Professionals de Salut Mental, and the Associació Catalana d'Infermeria de Salut Mental.

### 3. Results

The results provide evidence that more than 82% of the analyzed memes exhibit a negative function (aggressive or self-destructive), while only 18% demonstrate a positive function (affiliative or self-affirming). Notably, the majority—55%—focus on expressing the creator's own situation, compared to 27% that address a third party (see Figures 1 and 2).

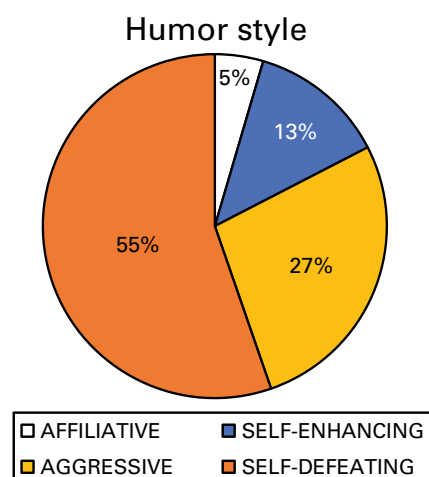


FIGURE 1

Analysis of humor styles used in the 132 memes analyzed

Source: own work.

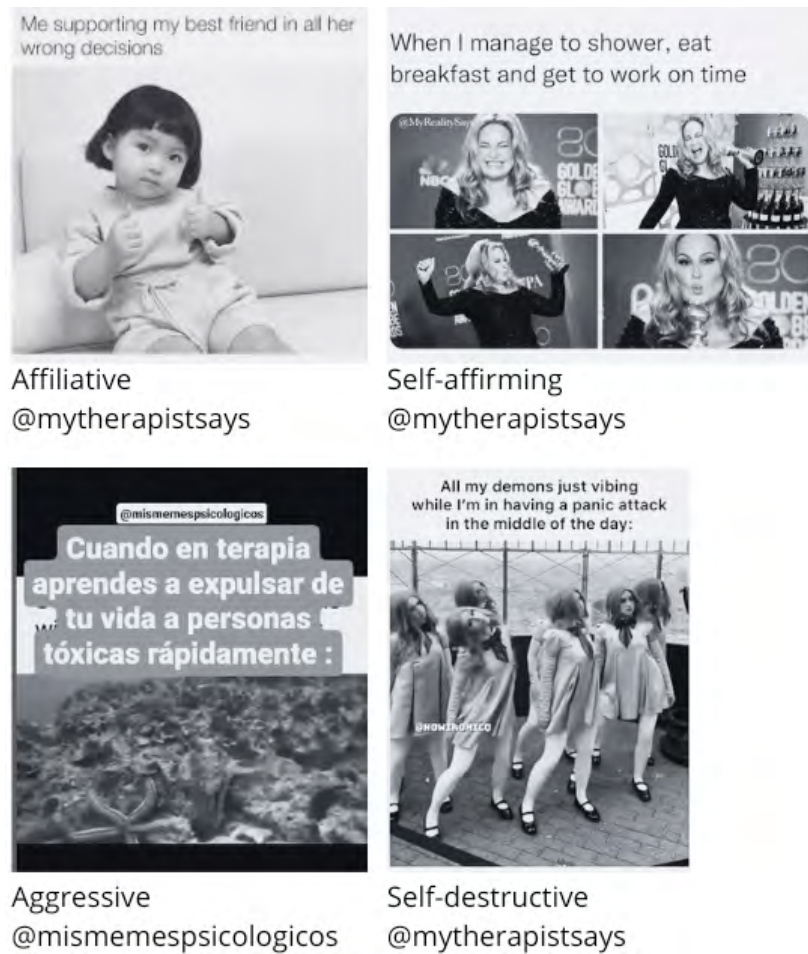


FIGURE 2

### Examples of the four humor style memes

**Affiliative:** On the top left, @mytherapist says: «Me supporting my best friend in all her wrong decisions.» This meme exemplifies a positive and humorous perspective.

**Self-affirming:** Top right @mytherapistsays: «When I manage to shower, have breakfast, and arrive on time for work.» This meme also reflects a positive and cheerful tone.

**Aggressive:** Bottom left @mismemespsicologicos: «When you learn in therapy to kick toxic people out of your life quickly.» Negatively and aggressively, the author discusses the expulsion of toxic people from their lives.

**Self-destructive:** Bottom right @mytherapistsays says: «All my demons vibing while I have a panic attack in the middle of the day.» This meme uses a similar tone to reference oneself in a vulnerable situation. Source: Instagram.

In addition to their descriptions, the analysis of the memes examined the types of humor most used. Exaggeration and sarcasm dominate the 132 memes analyzed, accounting for over half of the total (54%). In contrast, other humor styles, such as puns (11%), nonsense (10%), and comparisons (10%), are under-represented, with even fewer instances of surprise (8%) and impersonation (7%).

Notably, the memes featuring these predominant humor styles tend to be the most viral, garnering the highest number of likes. The account @mytherapistsays, which boasts 8.2 million followers as of November 2023, features the four memes with the most likes. These memes showcase well-known individuals (such as singers or actors) or animated characters. The most liked memes often capitalize on current events and celebrities (e.g., Rihanna and the Super Bowl, Valentine’s Day) and thematically link food to anxiety. It is important to note that the @mytherapistsays account does not publicly display likes for posts published in October 2023, making this information visible only to the account owner.

### 3.1. THE VIEW OF MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS CREATING OR SHARING MEMES

Mental health professionals who use memes on their Instagram accounts (Group 1) cite three primary objectives raising awareness about mental health issues, providing visibility and reducing stigma, and creating a space for lighthearted humor. Notably, 67% of those surveyed create their own memes, often drawing inspiration from current events or well-known figures. These memes aim to engage and resonate with audiences, evoking smiles and often incorporating famous quotes from films, series, or general culture. It should be noted that not all the memes analyzed were originally created by the account holders themselves. As is common practice on social media platforms, many content creators share or repost memes produced by other users.

By creating these humorous content pieces, professionals aim to address mental health, whether conveying a positive message that highlights people's daily lives or employing a more satirical approach, such as dark humor. Sometimes, they simply intend to share a nonchalant topic while mentioning mental health without disseminating a specific message. These professionals target a broad audience without specifying age. Notably, 67% focus on individuals interested in mental health, including both professionals and patients (see Table 3).

TABLE 3  
Summary of responses from mental health professionals using Memes on their Instagram profiles  
(Group 1,  $n=6$ )

Account	Gender	Age	Origin of Memes	Basis for Text Selection	Desired Characteristics	Target Audience
@enconsultaconmipsicologo	Male	42	Original Creation	To spark interest and sensitivity	Positive mental health messages (visibility, daily experiences)	Indifferent
@psicologiaporlasdudas	Male	21	Original Creation	To bring a smile to the recipient	Focus on mental health, of any kind	Indifferent
@losmemesdepsico	Male, Female, Non-binary	23	General Internet Search	Famous quotes (movies, series, general culture)	Fun and related to mental health	Individuals interested in mental health
@psicovlog	Male	38	General Internet Search	To spark interest and sensitivity	Fun and related to mental health	Individuals interested in mental health
@mentalhealthfunnies	Female	43	Original Creation	Famous quotes (movies, series, general culture)	Satirical take on mental health (dark humor)	Individuals interested in mental health
@counseling_memes	Male	33	Original Creation	All of the above and real-life experiences	Fun and related to mental health	Mental health professionals and patients

Source: own work.

### 3.2. MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS OF MEMES ON THIS TOPIC

Meanwhile, mental health professionals surveyed through professional associations and entities (Group 2) confirmed that the vast majority—95%—have encountered mental health memes on social media. According to 74% of respondents, these memes can help alleviate tension and distract individuals dealing with mental health challenges. This perspective reinforces the perceived utility of these humorous images, as 64% of the 39 surveyed believe that they contribute to reducing stigma. Additionally, a significant 69% feel that sharing these memes allows patients to connect with others in similar situations.

In the case of Group 2, respondents offered varied perspectives on the motivations they believe professionals share for using memes. Specifically, 32% think they share memes to raise visibility for mental health issues, 23% to create a space for easygoing humor, another 23% to raise awareness, and 9% to foster group cohesion. Conversely, 13% believe it would be better not to disseminate these images:

Practitioners advocate using positive messages in mental health memes to reduce stigma (see Figure 3). They emphasize the importance of using personal narratives, often speaking in the first person, to create relatable and impactful content.

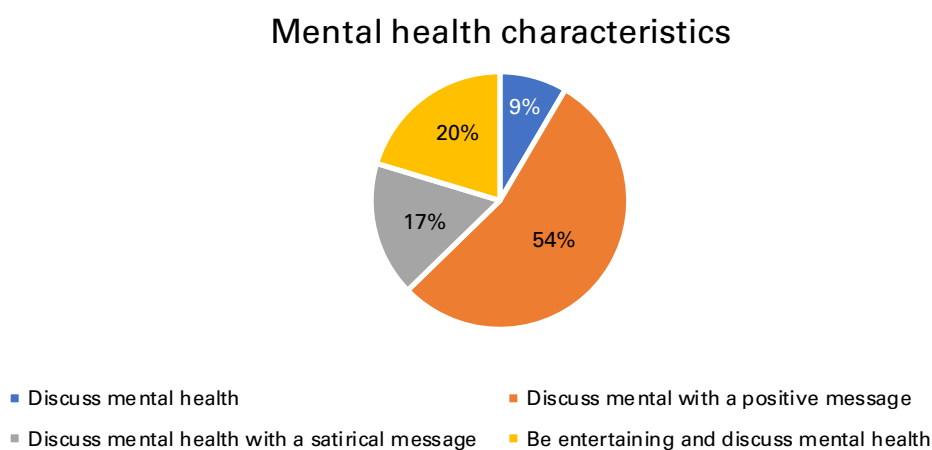


FIGURE 3

Characteristics of memes for reducing mental health stigma according to the mental health professionals surveyed (group 2,  $n=39$ )

Source: own work.

## 4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze the characteristics of mental health memes shared by mental health professionals, to examine their objectives in creating or disseminating them, and to assess how these memes are perceived by mental health professionals. The findings provide answers to these three questions.

In first place, mental health memes shared on Instagram exhibit three defining characteristics: a predominance of negative portrayals (self-destructive or aggressive styles), the use of first-person narratives, and the incorporation of exaggeration and sarcasm. This finding supports the idea presented by Kariko and Anasih (2019) that individuals prefer to make fun of themselves rather than at the expense of others, as they often relate to similar experiences shared by many. Mental health professionals largely concur

with two of these characteristics. Specifically, the psychologists and psychiatrists in Group 2 emphasize the significance of using first-person language in these contexts, as well as the effectiveness of sarcasm. Furthermore, these professionals also highlight the use of puns and personification as valuable techniques.

However, the reality observed and the opinions of professionals present a significant contradiction regarding the style of humor that should be used in memes. Seventy-two percent of professionals advocate for self-affirming messages that convey a humorous and positive outlook on life. They emphasize the importance of maintaining a positive message rather than resorting to satire or discussing mental health without a noteworthy context. In contrast, our sample predominantly reflects numerous self-destructive and exaggerated situations.

While this initial analysis reveals memes' characteristics, the second part illuminates their functions, answering the second and third research question. One key function is sharing memes on Instagram which fosters community, as it exposes situations and experiences that resonate with others facing similar challenges. This perspective is widely held among mental health professionals who share these images on Instagram, as well as 69% of the professionals from the organizations surveyed.

Another significant function of memes is their capacity to alleviate tension and divert from pressing matters. This perspective is endorsed by 74% of the professionals from the surveyed organizations and associations. Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight the necessity of educating and raising awareness about mental health, which is recognized as the leading cause of disability globally (PAHO-WHO, 2019). This emphasis on education and awareness emerged as the final function identified in the study.

Understanding the perspectives of experts will enable content creators to incorporate these insights into their memes, should they wish to enhance the visibility of mental illness and reduce stigma. They could also refer to the decalogue (Soria-Yenez *et al.*, 2024) developed for visual content creators, which can guide them in depicting mental illness more respectfully and naturally.

Memes are phenomena that rapidly gain popularity or notoriety online, often overshadowing the original image or video from which they originated. Since the global surge in social media usage, they have become integral to our daily lives (Boa-Sorte, 2019). While memes may appear simplistic or frivolous initially, they encapsulate symbolic values embedded within a complex cultural context (Boa-Sorte, 2019). Understanding this aspect of digital culture necessitates a nuanced comprehension of humor and its various forms.

These results are consistent with those found by Akram and Drabble (2022), who point to the potential of memes as a tool for emotional regulation. However, our study extends this perspective by showing the opinion of mental health professionals.

Future research could be enriched by incorporating the patients' perspective. While this work primarily focuses on the sender—the mental health professional—understanding patients' views on these memes, including their perceived benefits in breaking down barriers or reducing stigma, it could provide valuable insights that complement the current results.

## 5. Conclusion

This research underscores the significance and value of mental health memes. It demonstrates that sharing these memes can help alleviate tension, and distract from problems, and foster connections among individuals facing similar challenges. The main contribution of this work is to describe meme's characteristics and functions and to examine how they relate to the views of mental health professionals. This description may help creators understand the significance of creating memes and how to take social responsibility.

These findings have some implications for mental health communication strategies. If appropriately designed, memes could be leveraged as tools to promote awareness and reduce stigma. However, their use also requires careful consideration to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes or trivializing mental health conditions.

An apparent tension emerges from the findings: while the content analysis indicates that a significant proportion of the memes can be classified as having a negative tone (e.g., aggressive, and self-destructive), both psychological and psychiatric professionals support the notion of shifting away from aggressive and self-destructive themes toward more positive (affiliative and self-affirming) messages. Rather than representing a contradiction, the results suggest not a contradiction but a shift: from the widespread use of negatively framed humor towards a more intentional and reflective use of memes as tools for awareness-raising and stigma reduction. This underscores the importance of developing guidelines for meme creation that preserve their communicative effectiveness while promoting more positive and responsible representations of mental health.

This study may pave the way for future research into using memes to evaluate the portrayal of different illnesses or parts of daily life. As Wagner and Temmann (2025) mention, future studies should increasingly focus on users, their perceptions, and their general mental illness-related social media practices. Nonetheless, graphic humor has emerged as a valuable tool for informing and destroying stigmas, and it should be embraced with greater frequency.

### Distribution of work and authorship order

Task	Signatory 1	Signatory 2	Signatory 3
Conceptualization	X	X	X
Content curation	X	X	X
Formal analysis	X	X	X
Funding acquisition	X	X	X
Research	X	X	X
Methodology	X	X	X
Project administration	X	X	X
Resources	X	X	X
Software	X	X	X
Supervision		X	X
Validation		X	X
Visualization	X	X	X
Writing: original draft	X	X	X
Writing: review & editing	X	X	X

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