

Memes as Political Narratives: Dismantling the Cultural Stigma of Borderline Personality Disorder

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Abstract

Contemporary society considers media and social networking as active agents to negotiate counter-discourses against the dominant power structures. Apart from the numerous studies on memes as having a positive impact on mental health distress, there are scant number of studies pertaining to an exploration of memes as a way of dismantling the cultural stigma of borderline personality disorder. By exploring the recent trends associated with social media memes, the paper analyses the growing trajectory of BPDmemes as healing political narratives in popular culture. Looking at how memes portray the mental condition of BPD, it proposes that memes can influence public consciousness, create community spaces of empathy and help to reconsider the cultural discourses on mental illness. Examining a variety of memes and comments, the paper reveals that online spaces become a potential tool for dismantling the cultural stigma associated with BPD. Furthermore, the implication lies in a more effective understanding of the nuances of using dark humour in BPD memes.

Keywords: BPD; Cultural stigma; Healing narratives; Meme culture.

Introduction

In the contemporary digital culture, memes have become a popular form of media representation through which people share their connected experiences, beliefs, opinions and even cultural ideas. Contrary to the dominant culture, the digital space witnesses the emergence of a meme subculture that has the potential to propagate counter-ideologies and discourses in favour of the marginalised groups. Alice Marwick in an article titled "Memes" quotes Limor Shifman who defines them as "cultural informa-

tion that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon" (12). Though memes are generally images with humorous captions, the widespread acclaim of memes in online platforms proved that they can also reproduce messages, information or diverse opinions on a relevant subject as a means of social and political commentary. Nadia Farah in "Memes as a Tool for Resistance Towards Hustle Culture" put forward Hariman's view that "memes can also be considered an expression of digital participatory democracy or participatory digital culture, allowing the public to democratically and satirically express, assess, and analyze socio-political situations and discourses." (176).

While the digital culture renders myriad ways of looking at a particular topic, memes expand their function by enabling themselves as a site for the expression of trauma and mental illness. Existing forms of dominant discourses consider mental illness as pathological and this decontextualize its further inspection. As a result, the real causes are often left unrecognized. Additionally, this perception stigmatises those individuals in the public realm as they are often perceived as people causing harm in the society. To counter this, the paper analyses select BPD memes from Instagram pages like @learnbpd, @borderlinepd_awareness, @borderlinejournal and @bpdworlddd. It uses media content analysis to explore the healing and resistant powers of BPD memes. Additionally, select comments from specific pages like @learnbpd, @borderlinejournal and @bpdworlddd which have considerable followers are also taken to substantiate the arguments and provide counter-statements.

Exploring the interrelation between mental health and social media establishes a fascinating link unidentified in the clinical and academic narratives related to mental health. Apart from the progressive attitude of the society towards various health problems, there are certain mental health conditions like bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, schizophrenia etc that are still cast aside to the margins. Hence, the traumatic experiences and dissociated existence of such individuals are often ignored by the people who label themselves as 'normal'. This reinstates a dichotomy of normal/abnormal that favours the hegemonic power structures to reproduce authoritative control over a particular section of the society. It often happens by way of considering certain illnesses as solely pathological, thereby denying the various causes that contribute to its effect.

Akram and Drabble in "Mental Health Memes" asserts that in social media like Instagram "many pages are dedicated to sharing memes related to the symptom experience of specific psychiatric disorders" (2) and "on-

line social media pages and forums dedicated to mental health memes are often comprised of a large user base" (2). For instance, an Instagram-page @borderlinepd_awareness is followed by almost thirty thousand individuals and another page @learnbpd currently has almost more than forty thousand followers. Nicolescu in "Visual Postings: Looking for 'the good'" says that "The huge popularity of memes suggests that this is the prime way in which many people relate to bigger issues, be they moral, intellectual or social" (68). To be more precise, memes have the ability to alter the discourses on mental illness by providing it as a narrative trope of healing. This is opposed to the mainstream domains of narrative expression of health and mental illnesses.

In an article written by Anoushka Rajesh and published by an online healthcare journal called Fit states that "According to a survey conducted by The Live Love Laugh Foundation in 2018, 62 percent of the survey participants used terms such as retard, crazy, mad and stupid, when asked to describe people with mental illness." This notion of perceiving mentally distressed people as threatening and crazy often stem from the images propagated by medical terminologies.

Considering the medical definition of BPD under analysis, borderline personality disorder is defined as a mental condition characterised by identity disturbance, frantic efforts to avoid abandonments, unstable interpersonal relationships, feeling of dissociation, suicidal or self-harming behaviours etc (Carlin 24). Brought into the terminology of psychiatry in the 1930s, the term 'borderline' describes a personality state between neurosis and psychosis. At a point when the symptoms of BPD overlap with several other disorders, it is significant to identify and analyse other factors like the role of culture, family conditioning, and trauma in contributing to this extreme mental condition. This is most often ignored as studies suggest that clinicians regard borderline persons as manipulative and attention-seeking and hence not needing any real treatment. This reveals the stigma and lack of concern associated with BPD and stipulates the fact that the mental condition is often overlooked by society. It is at this juncture that the emergence of online memes proves to be significant. Oline platforms like Instagram and Tumblr offer a reliable space for the individuals with BPD to share their experiences and make themselves visible.

BPD Memes as Exposing the Intricacies of Normal v/s Abnormal

Instagram pages like @borderlinejournal, @borderlinepd_awareness, @learnbpd, @borderlineartistsnetwork etc contain memes and artworks

on BPD mostly posted and shared by people with similar mental conditions. The stories reveal the unstable existence of individuals with BPD as shared through the memes in humorous ways. It also accentuates that making mental illness visible can also include more than mere representations of self-injury images or emotional distress. Rather, it is also their human concerns, desires and needs that they express through hashtags and shared memes. For instance, a bpd meme in an Instagram page @borderlinejournal says "When the borderline is borderlining" which is followed by a few slides that narrate one's traumatic experience of having a borderline condition. Here, the words reflect the existential dilemma of a BPD diagnosed individual who discovers it demanding to live an uncertain life. Another one in the same page exclaims with an image "When you only wanted to get a few things off your chest, but instead let 23 years' worth of anger out and now everybody is crying". These are two of the numerous examples that give a picture of how memes depict the psychological and emotional distress of persons diagnosed with bpd. Nautiyal and Chakraborty in an article titled "Memes as a Coping Tool" suggests that "Even though feelings of disconnection and purposelessness are prevalent, people have discovered memes as a way to vent out their feelings, thoughts and opinions with one another" (3564).



(fig. I & II @borderlinejournal. "Everyday relationship in my early 20s" Instagram, 11 Oct.2023.)

BPD memes created and shared through posts express the tussle between the person's body who is suffering from borderline condition and their bor-

derline feelings including frustration towards others who often consider them as outcasts. Two memes shown above in figure I and II were posted in an Instagram page known as @borderlinejournal and shows the classic symptom of the mental condition, which is, fear of abandonment. Individuals with BPD diagnosis will make frantic efforts to avoid abandonment while simultaneously distancing themselves to prevent being hurt. Being under the constant fear of being rejected by people around them, people with this mental condition will adjust to situations even when they are right. At this juncture, they are taken for granted and abused. Thus, to avoid being left out, they comply to become what others want them to be rather than relying on their true self. This constantly leaves them in the midst of shame and guilt as if they are to be blamed. These memes given above depict how this conditioned feeling of shame and fear can make them confuse their own definition of themselves with that of others. As a result, society's definition of their identity becomes their norm of normalcy.

To a certain extent, mental health is not an internal phenomenon, rather it is the environment that shapes it. Natalie Ann Hendry in "New Ways of Seeing" asserts that "Unlike other mental disorders like depression, the legitimacy of BPD as a diagnosis is controversial and stigmatized, with BPD often perceived – even by mental health professionals – as an individual character flaw (mostly of women) rather than something people experience as an illness or as a way for them to make sense of pain or trauma." (319). In what follows, the paper asserts that memes expose the cultural disgrace and healthcare asymmetry that exists in illness conditions like BPD.

Looking at the cultural disgrace, a closer evaluation of certain BPD memes unravels the deep-rooted cultural conditioning enabled by the society to be considered 'normal'. An example of this can be a meme in @borderlinejournal that expresses in an image with a caption "when I'm having an emotional crisis but still trying not to be a burden". This feeling of being a burden to others stems from their understanding that overt expression of emotions is unusual and malformed. Existing in a culture that fosters and admires self-reliance, manifestation of emotional distress can be threatening as it exists outside the codes of normality.

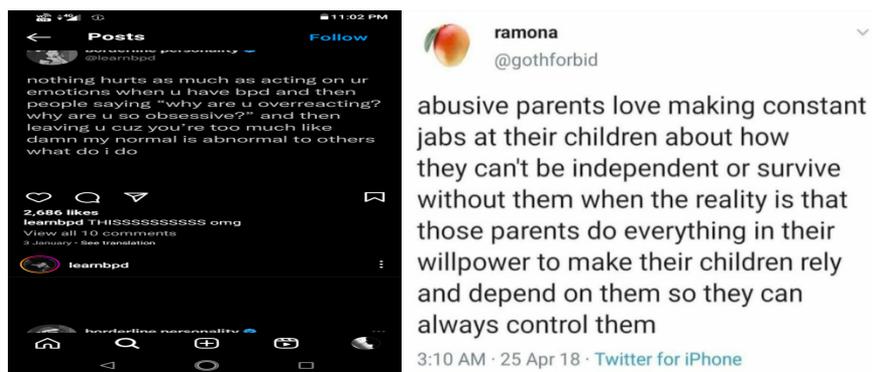


Fig. III&IV @learnbpd. Instagram, 11 Oct.2023.



Fig. Vholistic.bpd.cptsd.recovery.Instagram, 11 Oct.2023.

Choudhary and Gupta in their article Culture and Borderline Personality Disorder in India states that “Although cultural influences are seen in almost all mental health conditions, the development of a personality that is psychopathological is, in itself, a cultural phenomenon” (5). Figure III and IV are meme posts shared by an Instagram page called @learnbpd, where the first meme outlines the convoluted feeling experienced by an individual with BPD. It is true that development of a person’s identity

attains its fulfilment in the social and cultural context in which an individual sustains. In certain cultures, like eastern cultures, expression of strong feelings is usually discouraged. Thus, a family, which is part of a larger social system, conditions a growing child in such a way that the expression of grieving thoughts is almost discouraged. This leaves them feeling that their existence remains invalid. This is further reaffirmed in another BPD meme in the same page that says "For many people with BPD, we never were able to express ourselves, constantly being told that our feelings, thoughts, opinions and looks were not valid. Nothing about us has ever been valid in any ways, shape or form." Studies conducted by Beiser in 1987 claims "that extremes of idealization and devaluation can be fostered by cultures where authority figures are revered without any questioning" (qtd in Choudhary and Gupta 5). An individual growing in such a constrained, conditioned environment encounters an interpersonal crisis and are forced to repress their feelings of helplessness and agony.

To this extent, the memes are helpful as they point out how it affects the people with BPD. This is analysed in terms of how they lack self-confidence and the audacity to do things on their own. It is already proven in a study conducted by Paris in 1996 which claims that "some traditional cultures, like India, provide protective factors that suppress the overt expression of BPD symptoms" (qtd in Choudhary and Gupta 5). In such a society BPD is often regarded as an overreaction to normalcy as it is exposed in figure V. Exclaiming this through memes unearths significant questions regarding the complexities associated with the binary existence of normal v/s abnormal. It also exposes how normalcy is linked to one's culture and identity. Additionally, there are memes that elucidate the emotions of BPD with the same intensity. As a result, these memes become relatable to others having similar conditions of BPD. This helps them to gain a sense of validation that stems from the feeling that they are not alone in their struggle. Further, it aids in regulating their emotional turmoil.

This also advises how clinical psychiatry of the west propagated misdiagnosis through the universal identification of medical symptoms of BPD, without considering the fact that certain symptoms like interdependency and abandonment fears are culture and gender specific. The same statement is further supported in the research conducted by Loranger and others in 1994 which asserts that "DSM diagnoses should not be utilized universally without considering the cultural aspects of the individual because the cultural context plays a significant role in shaping the development of a person's personality. The cultural context often determines the presentation and manifestations of symptomatology" (qtd in Choudhary and Gupta 7).

Family: "Why are you like this?"

Me: "Why did you emotionally abuse and neglect me my whole life?"



Fig. VI&VII@borderlinejournal.Instagram,11 October.2023.

Meme- driven discourses on the anomalies of false childhood conditioning.

Emotional abuse and neglect from parents during the early years of childhood can also impact an individual's life in their adult years and are more likely to develop signs of BPD. Memes that share contents related to the emotional abuse and neglect as reasons of BPD also reflect on the authoritative and false parenting styles. In this way, memes that talk about this become grassroots actions that connect the personal to the political. By enabling discussions and open conversations among people who have similar conditions of parental neglect, these digital spaces of memes provide polyvocal expression that initiate meme-driven discourses. This is revealed through the memes in figure VI and VII that talk humorously about the impact of false conditioning. An authoritative form of parental love that demands dependency is a suppressive form of control which is not direct. These traumatic experiences which foster signs of emotional instability and a dissociative identity can also be the cause of an individual's borderline condition. Through this, they call attention to the trauma arising from a lack of emotional support and healthy nurturance. At this juncture, these memes can be deemed political for the way it exposes and challenges the real causes that is often left untreated in mental healthcare. This emphasises one specific aspect of political memes as it is pointed out in the book *Memes in Digital Culture* "political memes are about making a point – participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there." (Shifman 120).

Memes as Pathways of Resistance and Healing

Although memes have the possibility of creating social hierarchies between people who experience it and people who don't, the meme posts and related comments on it have the potential to establish affinities and recognition for those people who are otherwise derided. This provides them an opportunity for healing that is paired with resistance. In a meme shared by @borderlinejournal, it says "you deserve love after years of abuse even if you still have symptoms of trauma" to which a comment is "let it rain on some days, Let yourself shiver on some cold nights, So when it's spring you'll know why it was all worth going through..." Another meme in @borderlinepd_awareness expresses in words "I feel everything, all the time. It's exhausting. But it also makes me passionate which is beautiful." This transparency involved in the process of articulating distress becomes a pathway for those individuals to transform their vulnerability into healing and strength. Apart from this, these memes also provide resistance through an exposure of their own negative coping mechanisms. To delineate it more clearly, there is a tendency among the individuals diagnosed with BPD to rely on negative coping mechanisms that include alcoholism, fantasy, and romantic obsession among others. Unlearning these mechanisms can be challenging for a person who is already in mental distress. At this point, memes that talk about this can be beneficial for them as it minimises their burden.

Apart from that, creation and sharing of these memes empower them to form a community network that helps each other beyond the geographical barriers of space and proximity. For example, An Instagram community called @bpdhumans created by Maheema and Milana from India a few years back, now accumulates a community of almost 5000 followers and such an initiative took birth when these two women were diagnosed with BPD. The virtual platform provides a space for them to share their personal stories, overview of facts and fiction through memes, posts and articles. Thus, these digital spaces do not merely render a visibility that gets confined to visual images or videos, but also provide them with empathy and a sense of belonging in a society that largely stigmatises them. A comment by @holistic.bpd.cptsd.recovery to the personal story of an individual states that "It's essential to remember that a diagnosis doesn't define your worth or who you're as a person. Your journey is unique, and it's ok to seek support and understanding. Your determination to share your feelings here is a positive step." Validating comments like these can enhance their sense of well-being and prevent their feeling of having an estranged existence. Moreover, there also BPD memes that advises healthy

coping mechanisms, specially that deals with interrelationship issues. A comment to a similar post in @bpdworldd addressing the relationship dilemmas in BPD said that "It feels like it healed something in me, this whole post felt therapeutic." By trying to identify oneself through those shared experiences, others are also offered a therapeutic way of dealing with it. In this way, the experiences of BPD persons which are otherwise discarded as manipulative become socially visible.

Susan KCahn in *Borderlines of Power* quotes Herman who states that borderline has been called little more than a "sophisticated insult" and according to Cahn "Diagnosed with BPD, one becomes simply "a borderline." Since the term does not describe a specific state or behavior, like depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder, "borderline" functions as a metaphor, employing an indeterminate descriptor to create systemic order where there is none" (3). By exposing the complexities of a false system, these memes on BPD calls for a systemic change in healthcare and conditioning.

Although memes on BPD are widely disseminated in digital spaces like Instagram, it shouldn't mask the possibility that memes about illness, if not articulated properly can amplify the stigma surrounding the conditions. For instance, memes shared without a proper understanding regarding the causes of splitting mechanism in BPD can prove to be harmful as it only reinforces already existing false notions. A comment to a post on splitting in a page called @bpdworldd that only highlights the effect of the condition states that "This is also a huge stigma. There's a reason to this reaction, and from the outside it may seem like it's from out of nowhere, but each person with BPD goes through a huge thought process before reacting like this in a matter of seconds. I feel this graphic is super harmful." It makes evident that such memes that deny the causes of splitting can have debilitating impacts as it demeans and trivialises the vulnerability of such people. Moreover, there also chances of false interpretations of memes due to the figurative uses of language. The adverse consequences of this include trivialising and obscuring the reality of death from suicides pertaining to borderline diagnosis. Considering the benefits associated with these memes, it is also mandatory that one should also be aware of the ethical issues associated with the sharing of such meme related contents. As digital spaces for memes create fluid networks for voicing out one's opinions and criticisms against a specific content, there are chances that one can be publicly condemned by others who oppose the former's views. This can happen with contextual humours of BPD that may not seem coherent and logical to people from other contexts. At this

point, that should be considered with more caution as this can have personal consequences for those diagnosed with BPD.

Despite these consequences, these platforms render a space for fellow people with BPD for a reappraisal of their concealed feelings of shame and guilt, thereby giving them a pathway for an unapologetic life. Usually, popular culture and established narrative forms of expression related to borderline condition showcase the life of such individuals from the perspective of the others surrounding them. As a result, the portrayal of BPD persons through the panic and bewilderment of the outsiders around them label the latter as the victim who is suffering. This further sidelines the existence of individuals with this mental condition. Such a negative portrayal is reconsidered through these online platforms that provide a space for the individuals themselves to narrate their experiences. Considering the fact that digital spaces like Instagram can mediate mental health activism through memes, counter-arguments can also be made through further systematic studies that vividly explore how these memes contribute to the creation of new online hierarchies.

Conclusion

In a postmodern world where almost all people rely on technology, it is crucial to understand the role of social media and online platforms in creating a novel space for healing. Discourses on mental health and illness, particularly with regard to personality disorders like Borderline reconsider the concept of a therapeutic culture in ways that question the traditional ways of healing. Exploring online memes of illness urges the world to re-examine the image of mental disorders created by clinical psychiatry and how it is perceived by the public. Analysing the online memes from select Instagram pages and related comments to borderline personality disorder revealed that the medicalisation of BPD overlooks other factors fostering its symptoms. Exploring those memes created by individuals with BPD unearthed how those hidden traces of culture, social conditioning and abusive parenting contribute to extreme behaviours in borderline condition. To be more precise, emotional abuse including neglect, conditioned love and over dependency during the developmental years of growth thwarts an individual's identity formation. Various Instagram pages like @borderlinejournal, @borderlinepd_awareness, @bpdworld, @learnbpd, @bpdhumans etc that propagates such contents affirm the need for more polyvocal expressions of personal experiences. Examining these BPD memes and related comments also made evident that it has the potential to perpetuate grassroot activism by fostering empathy and

resistance against exploitation. The study also underscored the emerging role of meme-driven discourses as a novel way of narrative healing. A closer analysis of the media content in memes also disclosed how these digital spaces transform into community spaces of mutual sustenance and empowerment. Along with assuaging their sense of isolation and marginalisation through mutual sharing of personal experiences, these memes also help in raising public consciousness. Thus, by better understanding how these online spaces help people with BPD to develop self-knowledge and bring about social misdiagnosis of their emotional experiences, better ways of therapeutic healing can be ensured for them.

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