

## Exploring Trivialisation of Mental Health Issues using Internet Memes in Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of the present study was to explore the perceived sensitivity towards mental health issues in young adults using internet memes showcasing those mental health issues and to investigate whether providing sensitising information through video intervention would have an impact on perceived sensitivity. The definition of Internet Meme was operationalised as a visual representation that recontextualizes references from popular culture in a funny or satirical manner. A total sample of 245 was collected using a snowball method of sampling from the age group of 18-22 years old individuals who were residents of India. A two-group experimental design was followed. Experimental group was administered an intervention (video) followed by a web questionnaire which measured perceived sensitivity towards four mental health issues - Anxiety, Depression, Eating Disorders and Suicide using a Likert rating scale. The control group was only administered the web questionnaire. After scoring the responses, the data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics (Mann-Whitney U test). Results showed that the experimental group had higher perceived sensitivity on the dimensions of Anxiety, Eating Disorders and Suicide than control group. There were no significant differences between the two groups on the dimension of Depression. These findings indicated that the designed intervention used to sensitise the participants was effective for all dimensions except Depression. Limitations and future implications were discussed.

**Keywords:** *Internet Memes, Mental Health, Mental Health Sensitisation, Social Media*

Merriam-Webster (2004) defined social media as “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content”. Social media is a collective term for websites and applications which focus on communication and interaction. Social media culture can be broken down into three core components -communication,

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socialization, and change. These components are present regardless of the social media platform.

The term meme, as widely used as it is today, was first coined by Dawkins (1976) in a context that was independent of technology. He referred to *meme* as a cultural analog of the biological gene, i.e., the basic unit of cultural transmission. However, since the early 2000s the term has been adopted in the Internet culture in order to describe certain “remixes and imitations of found media content”.

The intermingling of the term meme along with its mode of transmission, the Internet, has given rise to the term “Internet Meme”. Burgess (2008) defined an Internet Meme as “a faddish joke or practice that becomes widely imitated”. Davison (2012) gave a definition that defined the Internet Meme as “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission”. Milner (2012) defined memes as “multimodal texts that facilitate participation by reappropriation, by balancing a fixed premise with novel expression”. *Multimodality* refers to the ability of memes to infuse together different forms of media such as still images, audio, video and text.

For the present study, the definition of Internet Meme was operationalised - It is a visual representation that recontextualizes references from popular culture in a funny or satirical manner.

Over the years, researchers have given their own perspective on how memes operate and the components they consist of. Dawkins (1976) gave three characteristics for memes to be *widely received and circulated* - *Longevity*, the duration a meme lasts; *Copy Fidelity*, the extent to which the meme can be accurately copied and *Fecundity*, the speed at which the meme can be copied. Davison (2012) proposed that memes can be broken down into three components - *Manifestation* (the observable phenomena or the media), *Behavior* (the action made to create the meme), and *Ideal* (the idea expressed).

The modern internet user sees the Internet Meme as “a vessel of communication, a signifier of the comedic zeitgeist, and a device for channelling the inherent anxieties of youth.” This perception has led to the emergence of an online meme culture where memes are omnipresent and have made their way into everyday interactions on social media and provide a diverse range of information.

### ***Psychological Impact of Memes***

Social media is flooded with Internet Memes on different topics that have become fairly influential, thus they ought to have a psychological impact on people.

“... Internet memes, with their signature eccentricity have become the new generations’ method of coping.”, as quoted by Nuvo Magazine, it has been seen that humour works as a coping mechanism in managing stress (Fay, 1984).

Therapist: and how does that make you feel?

"I am not very good at describing my emotions, maybe you could just hold up a bunch of meme pictures until I see one that I would normally comment the word "mood" on?"



*Image 1: Internet Meme from Instagram*



*Image 2: A meme shared on a private facebook group about Bipolar and Borderline Personality Disorder*

Various online communities exist that cater to specific issues or concerns faced by that community. For instance, a number of private groups exist on Facebook which share memes based on their experience of a particular mental health disorder. Another factor that promotes the existence of these communities, as argued by Miltner (2014), is the desire for 'participatory culture' in online activity. The idea underlying behind the co-creation of content is that it allows previously voiceless members of online society to speak in new forms of humour (Rintel, 2013).

Internet Memes have increased the exposure to multiple versions of a meme within a short span of time. This repetition generates a sense of familiarity that adds to the congeniality of Internet Memes. There is a plethora of Internet Memes which employ dark humour.

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Continued exposure to such memes may lead to normalisation of viewing grave issues in a trivial or indifferent manner. This effect is more likely to be observed among younger generations as they engage more with such Internet Memes. “This seemingly normalized behavior of minimizing serious matters for the sake of humor can be related to desensitization linked to the media.” (Sanchez, 2020). Desensitization is a process in which the emotional reaction to a stimulus decreases after prolonged exposure.

Psychological interventions are defined as a relationship aimed at promoting a better adaptation of the individual to a given situation and thereby optimizing his or her personal resources in relation to autonomy, self-knowledge and self-help. (Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, Symonds & Alliance, 2013). These can be administered through various mediums such as videos, quizzes, role-play, presentations, etc. Video is considered to be an effective, easy to use and promising tool which can be employed to destigmatize mental health issues in young people (Janoušková, et. al 2017).

Casey et al. (2018) conducted a research which aimed to study whether Internet memes have the potential to normalise undesirable behaviours such as trolling, body shaming and bullying, and a lack of emotion which may be indicative of a larger apathy with regards to such practice. This study was conducted on 11- to 15-year-olds and tried to gain perceptions of the risks and benefits of using technology. With the prevalence of social media as a source of knowledge among young people indicates that Internet memes may be playing a part in a general apathy towards behaviours that ridicule individuals and groups and the risks that this poses to future generations and our youth are noteworthy.

Jadayel and Medlej (2018) studied glamourization of mental disorders on social media. Focus group discussions and case studies were the chosen method of data collection. The results revealed that many teenagers and young adults see mental disorders as “relatable, normal and desirable, while people actually diagnosed with any mental health disorder might get a false impression that what they are experiencing is normal and common”. It was also found that older health professionals had minimal knowledge about the related threats existing on social media. Further, the study states that glamourization of mental disorders appears to be irreversible and evolving with time.

Karthika and Ranjith (2018) conducted a study that focused on how Trolls are used as a Platform for infotainment, by analysing Public Service Commission trolls on Facebook. The study mainly aimed at analysing whether trolls are informative in purpose and whether they are accepted among individuals. The result showed that trolls also stand for information dissemination and not only to satirize or mock an individual or issue, hence, it is educating as well as entertaining at the same time.

Robinson, Turk, Jilka and Cella (2018) conducted a study whose aim was to identify attitudes towards psychological and physical disorders by analysing tweets related to them on the social media platform - Twitter. 1300 tweets were randomly selected for each disorder to be analysed thematically. Among the five psychological disorders, schizophrenia was the most common to be stigmatised whereas obsessive compulsive disorder was seen to be the most trivialised. The study concluded that mental health stigma was common on social media.

Janoušková, et. al (2017) conducted a systematic review to understand the effectiveness of video intervention in reducing stigma among young people between 13 and 25 years.

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Thirteen bibliographic databases were searched. There was no exclusion based on the date of publication. The findings suggest that video is a promising destigmatization tool among young people; however, more studies in this area are needed. There was a lack of evidence for interventions outside of school environments, in low- and middle-income countries, and studies which looked at long-term outcomes or measured impact on actual behaviour and implicit attitudes. The review generates recommendations for video interventions targeted at young people.

Winkler et. al (2017) conducted a study to assess whether short video interventions could reduce stigma among nursing students. A multi-centre, randomised controlled trial was conducted. Participating schools were randomly selected and randomly assigned to receive: (1) an informational leaflet, (2) a short video intervention or (3) a seminar involving direct contact with a service user. The results suggest that the effect of short video interventions was considerable and stable over time.

Hwang and Hollingshead (2016) conducted a study on 14 common terms, used in everyday language, with the potential for stigmatising mental illnesses in society; where they evaluated the awareness of mental illnesses that can help discourage impulsive uses of the pejorative senses of the words. It includes 14 stigmatise words from twitter forming two data sets- Keyword Based Data & User Based Data comparing them between mental health aware (MHA) & mental health unaware (MHU) users and analysed the data through Sense Inventory for stigmatising words. The findings indicate that MHA users use stigmatizing words less frequently and tend to structure their language so as to avoid applying the derogatory sense of the stigmatising words less often than their MHU counterparts. This demonstrated a degree of sensitivity towards stigmatisation of those with mental illnesses.

Reavely and Pilkington (2014) conducted a study on stigmatizing attitudes in the community using hashtags depression and schizophrenia. The majority of schizophrenia tweets aimed to increase awareness of schizophrenia or reported on research findings. The majority of tweets relating to schizophrenia were categorised as supportive or neutral. Tweets on depression were largely supportive or neutral. The results of the study can help in raising awareness against stigmatising attitudes.

Internet Memes help in understanding various issues in layman terms, on the flipside they sometimes tend to trivialise these issues for the masses and/or end up glorifying them to the extent that it ends up becoming a matter of humour. This trend is highly prevalent in memes relating to mental health and Psychological disorders.

As discussed above, memes have surpassed their usage as entertainment and have entered other domains of communication. The decision of using Internet Memes was based on their salience on social media platforms, their plentiful consumption and their psychological impact remains a lesser explored topic in research. Another reason was to investigate whether providing appropriate psychoeducation about the given issues would make a difference in the perception of Internet Memes. The form of intervention was chosen as video because they are more engaging, accessible and time efficient. The sample was chosen from the age group of 18-22 years as they are more likely to engage with this form of media.

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### Sample

The total sample of the present research was 245. The method of snowball sampling was used for collecting the samples. The participants were subjected to the inclusion criteria of belonging to the age group of 18-22 years. In addition, they had to be a resident of India.

**Table 1: Showing the number of female and males participants in both the groups**

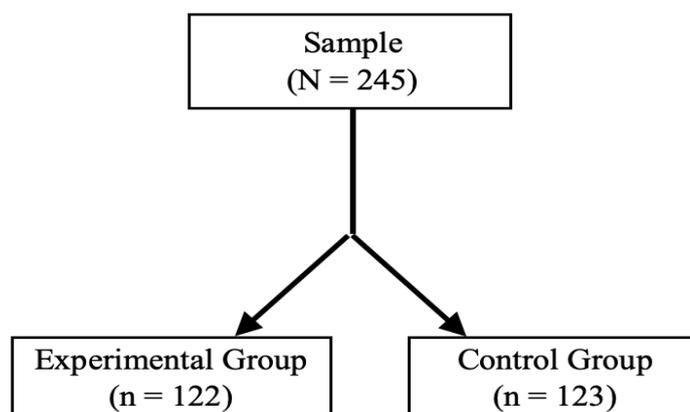
Group	Female Participants	Male Participants
Experimental (n = 122)	70	52
Control (n = 123)	65	58

### Objective

- To explore the perceived sensitivity towards mental health in young adults using Internet Memes showcasing those mental health issues.
- To investigate whether providing sensitising information through video intervention would have an impact on perceived sensitivity toward mental health issues in young adults.

### Design

A two-group experimental design was followed. The experimental group was given the intervention in the form of a video while the control group was not shown the intervention. The diagrammatic of the design is given below.



**Fig 1. Representing total sample of young adults aged 18-22 years**

### Instrumentation

- **Web Questionnaire:** The questionnaire contained 4 dimensions- Anxiety, Depression, Eating Disorders and Suicide. Each dimension has 2 memes each and the web questionnaire contained 8 memes in total rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale consisted of the options - Very Serious (1), Serious but Moderately Funny (2), Neutral/Did not understand (3), Funny but Moderately Serious (4), Very Funny (5). The internet memes were selected by browsing through the platforms of Instagram and Twitter.
- **Video Presentation:** The data used in the intervention video was collected through publicly available statistical data, news reports and online articles. The video was

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divided into six segments. The first segment was about the incidence of mental health. The next four segments talked about each of the four dimensions of mental health issues and attempted to debunk certain myths surrounding them. The last segment concluded with the general scenario surrounding mental health around the globe.

### Scoring

The score of each dimension was calculated as the sum of scores of the two memes in that dimension. The highest score would be 10 signifying minimum perceived sensitivity and the lowest would be 2 signifying maximum perceived sensitivity. Thus, higher the score the more pronounced would be the desensitisation towards the mental health dimension.

Likewise the total perceived sensitivity score was calculated by adding the scores on each of the four dimensions. The highest score would be 40 signifying minimum perceived sensitivity and the lowest would be 8 signifying maximum perceived sensitivity. Thus, the higher the score the more pronounced would be the desensitisation towards the mental health issues.

*Score on Anxiety + Score on Depression + Score on Eating Disorders + Score on Suicide = Total Perceived Sensitivity Score*

**Table 2: Showing lowest and highest perceived sensitivity scores**

Perceived Sensitivity Score	Lowest score	Highest Score
Each dimension	2	10
Total	8	40

*(Total) Score  $\propto$  1/Perceived Sensitivity*

### Procedure

The aim of the present study was to explore the perceived sensitivity towards mental health issues in young adults using internet memes showcasing those mental health issues and to investigate whether providing sensitising information through video intervention would have an impact on perceived sensitivity. For this purpose, the definition of internet meme was operationalised as a visual representation that recontextualizes references from popular culture in a funny or satirical manner.

Four mental health issues were chosen as dimensions- Anxiety, Depression, Eating disorders and Suicide to be studied. These dimensions were decided on the basis of their salience across several social media platforms.

Sample for the study was collected through the snowball sampling method. A total sample of 245 was collected from the age group of 18-22 years old individuals who were residents of India. The experimental group consisted of 122 participants, out of which 70 were females and 52 were males whereas the control group consisted of 123 participants, out of which 65 were females and 58 were males.

A two-group experimental design was followed where the experimental group was administered a web questionnaire along with an intervention (watching a video) whereas, the

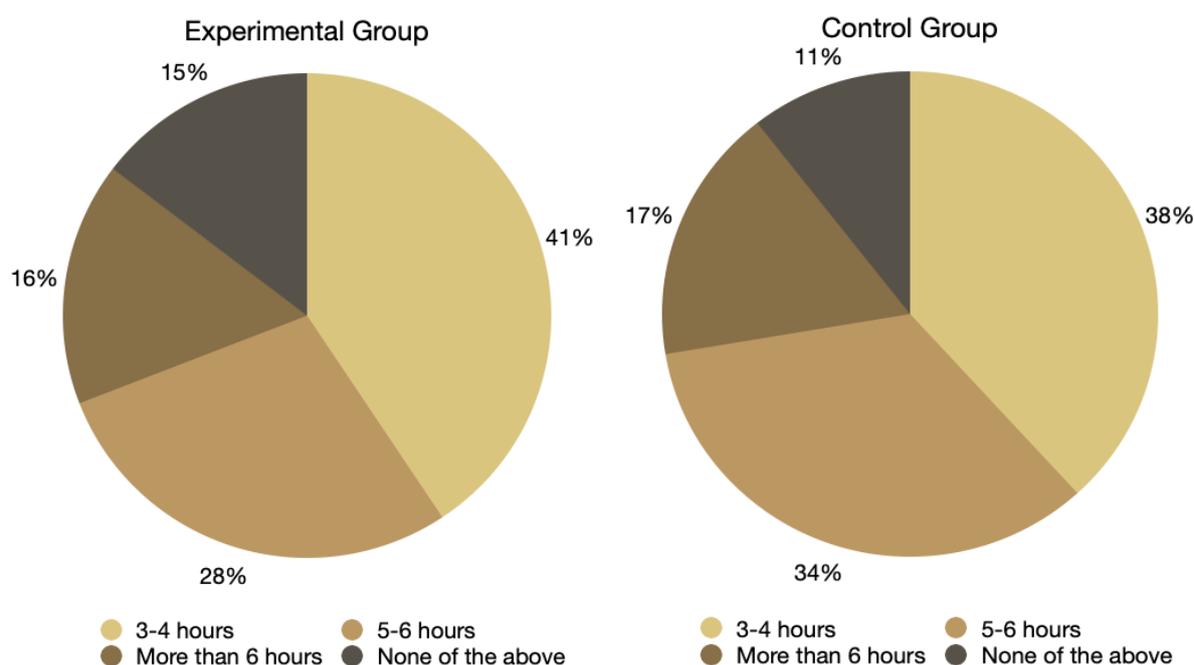
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control group was only administered the web questionnaire. In the web questionnaire the participants were asked to rate internet memes on a five point likert scale. There were a total of 8 memes, 2 belonging to each dimension. The intervention was in the form of a video which talked about the four mental health dimensions in detail along with the general scenario of mental health around the globe.

The data collected through web questionnaires was scored using the scale mentioned. After scoring the responses, the data was analyzed using descriptive (Mean and SD) and inferential statistics (Mann-Whitney U test) with the help of SPSS software.

### RESULTS

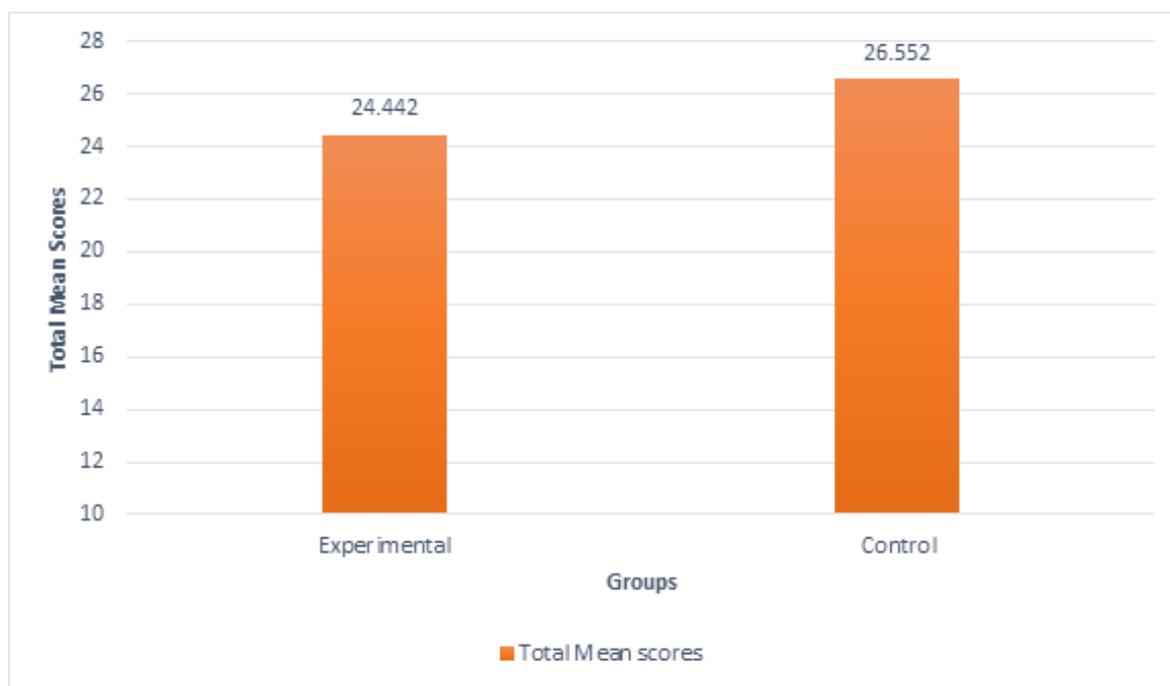
To explore the perceived sensitivity regarding mental health of young adults and for fulfilling the objective both descriptive and inferential statistics are used to analyze the data.



**Figure 2: Pie charts representing the time spent per day on social media platforms by experimental and control group**

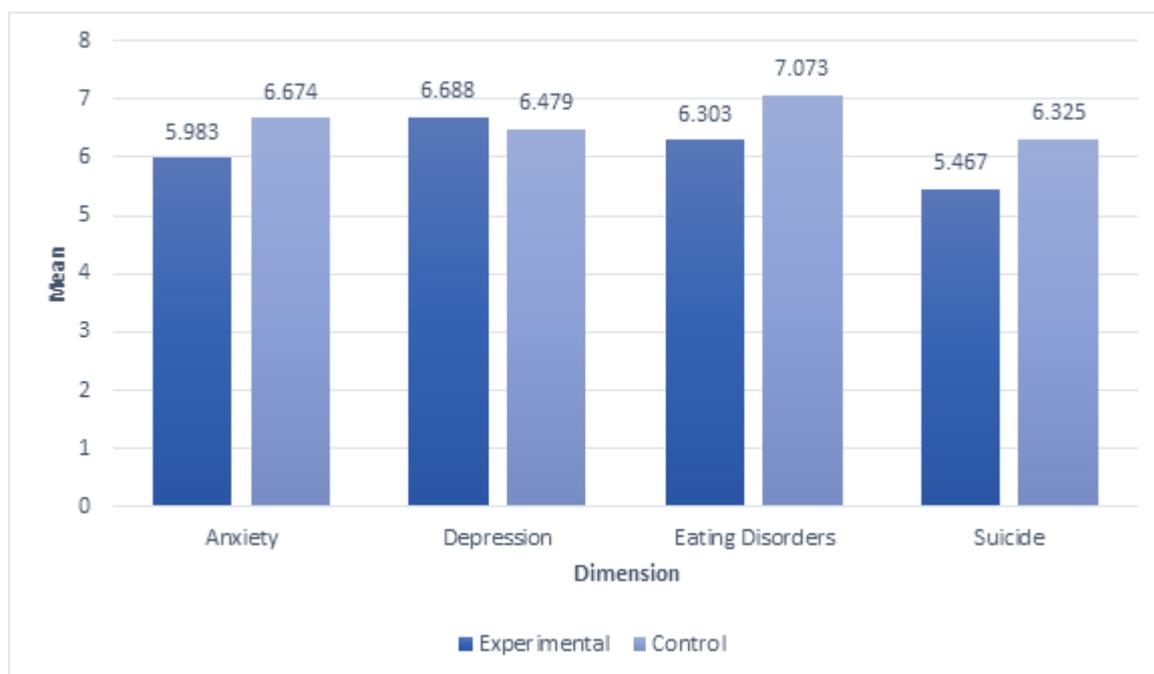
Figure 2 shows that in the experimental group a total of 41% of people spent 3-4 hours, 28% people spent 5-6 hours, 16% people spent more than 6 hours and 15% people spent either more or less time than the above mentioned time slots. In the control group a total of 38% people spent 3-4 hours, 34% people spent 5-6 hours, 17% people spent more than 6 hours and 11% people spent either more or less time than the above mentioned time slots. It was observed that both groups have similar patterns of time spent on social media.

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**Figure 3:** Graph representing mean of total scores by both the group

Figure 3 shows that the mean of the total score was higher for the control group than the experimental group. This shows that the experimental group has higher perceived sensitivity than the control group.



**Figure 4:** Graph representing means of score on the four dimensions in experimental and control conditions

Figure 4 shows that mean was higher for the control group on the dimensions of Anxiety, Eating Disorder and Suicide whereas mean was higher for the experimental group on the dimension of Depression. It means that the experimental group has higher perceived sensitivity towards mental health issues (except depression) than the control group.

**Table 3: Shapiro Wilk Test for Normality**

Tests of Normality		
	Dimension	Shapiro-Wilk
		Sig.
Control Score	Anxiety	.000
	Depression	.000
	Eating Disorder	.000
	Suicide	.000
Experimental Score	Anxiety	.001
	Depression	.000
	Eating Disorder	.001
	Suicide	.006

It was observed that p value is less than the 0.05 therefore the null hypothesis that the data is normally distributed is rejected. Since the data was not normally distributed, a non-parametric alternative of t test i.e., Mann-Whitney U Test was used to analyze the data.

**Table 4: Mean, Standard Deviation and Mann Whitney value of the four dimensions in experimental and control group (df =243)**

Dimensions	Experimental (Mean ± SD)	Control (Mean ± SD)	p-value
Anxiety	5.983±1.970	6.674±1.799	.006
Depression	6.688±2.124	6.479±2.147	.428
Eating Disorder	6.303±2.288	7.073±2.012	.008
Suicide	5.467±2.105	6.325±2.182	.003

It was observed that the p-value of Mann-Whitney U test is statistically significant for the dimensions of Anxiety, Eating Disorder and Suicide ( $p < .05$ ). It was inferred that there is a significant difference among the two groups. However, the dimension of Depression does not show significant difference ( $p > .05$ ) among the two groups.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to explore the perceived sensitivity towards mental health issues in young adults using internet memes showcasing those mental health issues and to investigate whether providing sensitising information through video intervention would have an impact on perceived sensitivity. The definition of Internet Meme was operationalised as a visual representation that recontextualizes references from popular culture in a funny or satirical manner. Social media is a collective term for websites and applications which focus

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on communication and interaction. It is flooded with Internet Memes on various topics that may have a significant psychological impact. Frequent exposure to Internet Memes that present mental health issues in a casual and nonchalant manner may lead to trivialisation of sensitive topics. Internet Memes use humour and humor has been a well-known coping mechanism (Fay, 1984). People, especially the younger generation, indulge in making and sharing Internet Memes as it gives them the opportunity to speak up on matters important to them. It also gives them a chance to connect with people facing similar issues. Therefore, such Internet Memes may help some people in understanding and coping up with mental health issues better, however, they may also lead to desensitisation towards the same for others.

For the present study, four mental health issues were chosen as dimensions - Anxiety, Depression, Eating disorders and Suicide - to be studied. A total sample of 245 was collected using a snowball sampling method from the age group of 18-22 years old individuals who were residents of India. The experimental group consisted of 122 participants whereas the control group consisted of 123 participants. The tools used were: Web Questionnaire and a Video Intervention. The medium of Intervention was chosen as short video because videos are a promising destigmatisation tool among young people (Janoušková, et. al 2017) and short effective video interventions are relatively cheap, conveniently accessible and easy to disseminate (Winkler et. al, 2017). Experimental group was administered an intervention (video) followed by a web questionnaire and the control group was administered only the web questionnaire. The web questionnaire was scored using a 5-point Likert scale and the score indicated perceived sensitivity towards the respective mental health issue. After scoring the responses, the data was analyzed using descriptive (mean and SD) and inferential statistics (Mann-Whitney U test) with the help of SPSS software. The Shapiro Wilk Test of Normality was used to test whether the data was normally distributed, where it was observed that the p value was less than 0.05 ( $p < 0.05$ ), hence, the null hypothesis that data was normally distributed was rejected. Since the data was not normally distributed, Mann-Whitney U test, a non parametric alternative of t test was opted for analysis.

Fig. 2 represented the time spent per day on social media platforms by the experimental and control groups. It was observed that both groups had similar patterns of spending time on social media. Thus, the time spent on social media may not have a significant impact on the perceived sensitivity scores of participants.

As seen in Fig. 3, the mean of total score was higher in the control group than in the experimental group indicating that the control group had lesser perceived sensitivity. This difference in the score may be attributed to the intervention administered to the experimental group.

For the dimension of Anxiety, Eating Disorders and Suicide, Mann-Whitney U test revealed that there was a significant group difference between experimental and control group ( $p < 0.05$ ). The mean score of the experimental group was lower than the control group showing that the experimental group has higher perceived sensitivity towards these mental health issues. This could probably mean that the intervention given to the experimental group was effective to some extent. This could also mean that when provided with appropriate sensitizing information about mental health issues, it may help in raising awareness amongst young adults.

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For the dimension of Depression, Mann-Whitney U test revealed that there was no significant difference between experimental and control group ( $p > 0.05$ ). The intervention may have been ineffective because depression as a topic has been widely talked about, thus, people already have preconceived notions. These preconceived notions may make it difficult for them to consider the information presented in the intervention. If this information presented was discrepant with their existing notions, they may have not engaged with it. Another possible reason could have been that they may have invested comparatively less attention to the information presented about depression since they already felt they knew much about it. This is consistent with findings that adolescents and young adults have high baseline knowledge about depression in comparison with other “lesser known” mental health disorders. (Tay, Tay & Klainin-Yobas, 2017)

In the present study, data was collected using the method of snowball sampling which may have limited the generalisability of the results to a wider population. Deductive method was used for designing the questionnaire which might have impeded certain lines of inquiries. Responses may have had the element of social desirability. Moreover, the possibility of successfully carrying out the intervention, i.e. watching the video, was entirely dependent upon the participants’ discretion. The responses may have been influenced by unusual circumstances created by the covid crisis.

For future research, more mental health issues could be explored. A comparative study on the basis of age groups or gender could also be administered. An alternative study design could be implemented. More methods of data collection could be used and subsequently triangulated for more comprehensive results. Random sampling methods could be used for better generalisability of results. The findings of the present research could be used to deepen our understanding of the relationship between Internet Memes and mental health and subsequently, help policy makers to design more comprehensive mental health policies and future interventions. If we employ a long term perspective, short video interventions can be introduced in targeted social media algorithms towards people who interact with such material frequently.

### CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to explore the perceived sensitivity towards mental health issues in young adults using internet memes showcasing those mental health issues and to investigate whether providing sensitising information through video intervention would have an impact on perceived sensitivity using quantitative methods. The data was analysed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The results show that experimental group showed higher perceived sensitivity on the dimensions of Anxiety, Eating Disorders and Suicide than control group. There were no significant differences between the two groups on the dimension of Depression. Thus, findings indicated that the designed intervention used to sensitise the participants was effective for all dimensions except Depression.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

Intervention Video - <https://youtu.be/jt29rCw3JtU>

### **Appendix B**

Web Questionnaire - Web Questionnaire.pdf

Link: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y8gaZbx3f1luxkegQBLIbr1mwHchXBstU/view>