

Research Paper

Memes as a Coping Tool: Exploring the Role of Meme Culture in Navigating Existential Dread

Priyanshi Nautiyal^{1*}, Ishita Chakraborty²

ABSTRACT

This research study investigates the emerging phenomenon of using memes as a coping tool to navigate existential dread. In an increasingly complex and uncertain world, individuals often experience existential dread, characterized by feelings of anxiety, despair, and a sense of meaninglessness. Meme culture, which has rapidly evolved on social media platforms, offers a unique avenue for individuals to express and manage these existential concerns through humour and shared experiences. It is a qualitative study conducted using a survey, analysed using content analysis and thematic analysis, and represented through pie charts, flowchart and diagram. To conduct this study 35 people were randomly selected and asked questions regarding dread, meaning and memes as a coping tool. This study delves into the ways in which memes are utilized as coping mechanisms, their impact on individuals' well-being, and the potential implications of meme culture in addressing existential dread.

Keywords: *Meme, Meme Culture, Existentialism, Existential Dread, Coping Tool*

In an era dominated by rapid technological advancements and ever-changing cultural norms, the human psyche often grapples with a pervasive sense of existential dread. This existential dread encompasses a range of anxieties arising from contemplating the purpose of life, the inevitability of death, and the vastness of the universe. While this existential burden has long been an intrinsic part of the human condition, the advent of the internet and its subsequent impact on popular culture has birthed a new coping mechanism: memes.

Memes, which originated as humorous, relatable, and shareable content on the internet, have evolved into a rich medium of cultural expression, transcending their initial purpose. The power of memes lies in their ability to encapsulate complex emotions and ideas in concise and often comical visual or textual formats. Through this amalgamation of humour, irony, and sarcasm, memes have become an integral part of the digital landscape, permeating every corner of social media platforms.

The origin of memes and meme culture can be traced back to the early days of the internet, with roots in online forums, imageboards, and social media platforms. The term "meme"

¹Consultant Psychologist, Apollolife

²Master's in Psychology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

*Corresponding Author

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itself was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book "The Selfish Gene," where he used it to describe cultural ideas or symbols that are transmitted and replicated through imitation.

Umair Akram (2021) conducted a study to compare the perceptual ratings of internet memes related to the Covid-19 pandemic between individuals with significant anxiety symptoms and non-anxious controls, while considering the potential mediating role of emotion regulation. The research included 80 individuals with clinically significant anxiety symptoms (GAD-7 score ≥ 15) and 80 non-anxious controls (GAD-7 score ≤ 4). Participants were asked to rate the emotional valence, humour, relatability, shareability, and offensiveness of 45 Covid-19 internet memes. Additionally, a measure of emotion regulation difficulties was administered. The results indicated that anxious individuals rated the humour, relatability, and shareability of the memes higher compared to the non-anxious controls. However, these differences were not found to be mediated by emotion regulation deficits. The findings suggest that internet memes related to the Covid-19 pandemic can serve as a potentially beneficial coping mechanism for individuals experiencing severe anxiety symptoms.

Mohamed Mifdal (2022), conducted a study in Morocco to explore how humor, particularly through memes, played a role in coping with uncertainty and danger during the pandemic. The findings revealed that Moroccans utilized humor as a means to alleviate tension, conquer fear, and alleviate worries related to Covid-19. Humorous representations served as a tool for individuals to interact with others, foster identification, and strengthen social cohesion. Additionally, humor was employed to critique individuals displaying maladaptive behavior, ridicule ineffective politicians, and expose manipulative discourse. This research highlights how memes helped a community cope their anxieties during a dark phase.

Rae White (2021), in a sociological study investigated the climate change memes and emotion through the lens of affect theory. The analysis involved a sample of 150 climate change memes sourced from various online platforms, in addition to five semi-structured interviews with Reddit moderators. The findings indicate that climate change memes serve as a medium for the public to express their emotions about climate change through comedic content.

Purpose of the Research

This research paper aims to explore the fascinating relationship between memes and existential dread, shedding light on how internet culture and its seemingly light-hearted creations can serve as coping mechanisms for individuals struggling with profound existential concerns. By delving into the psychological and sociocultural aspects of meme consumption, we seek to understand how memes offer a unique platform for expression, solidarity, and reflection in the face of existential anxieties.

To accomplish this objective, we will conduct qualitative research, to gather firsthand perspectives on individuals' experiences with memes as coping mechanisms.

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals in contemporary society grapple with existential dread and the role that memes play in their coping strategies. Moreover, this research will shed light on the broader implications of internet culture and its influence on mental well-being, highlighting the importance of recognizing and analyzing the socio-psychological impact of digital phenomena.

In conclusion, this research paper aims to bridge the gap between the seemingly trivial nature of memes and their significant impact on individuals' ability to cope with existential dread. By exploring the intricate relationship between memes, internet culture, and existential anxieties, we strive to offer valuable insights into the emerging field of digital coping mechanisms and foster a more nuanced understanding of the human experience in the digital age

METHODOLOGY

Participants

To conduct this study 35 participants were randomly selected. All participants were Indian within the age range of 18-42 years. The study involved all gender groups in India.

Materials

An online survey-based questionnaire was developed for collecting the data. The Facebook pages that promote existential memes have been selected based on their suitability for this study. The language of the questionnaire was in English. The questionnaire consists of six questions with image of the memes related to existential dread with “yes” “no” option to measure relatability, four close-ended questions and two open-ended questions.

Data Collection

The data was collected through online mode. The necessary instruction for filling up the questionnaire was specified in the questionnaire itself. All the participants were instructed to read the instruction and define their situation in the best possible way. The personal information given by the participants was kept confidential.

Process of Analysis

The study is based on qualitative method, and to analyze the data, thematic and content analysis methods were used.

RESULTS

The analysis of participants' responses yielded common themes, which were subsequently quantified to determine their prevalence. The study identified a variety of existential themes that were frequently conveyed through memes, including reflections on the absurdity of life, contemplations on mortality, and the pursuit of meaning. Interestingly, 71.4% of participants reported a reduction in their anxiety levels after engaging in memes, highlighting the potential positive impact of meme consumption on mental well-being. However, 28.6% of participants indicated that they did not experience a decrease in their anxiety levels. Those who reported no change in anxiety attributed this outcome to factors such as the lack of relatability in the memes, insufficient humour in the content, or the perceived ineffectiveness of memes in coping with severe anxiety episodes.

Following the participants' reports of anxiety reduction, a supplementary inquiry was made to ascertain the duration of this relief. The results revealed that the majority of respondents, specifically 95.7%, experienced a temporary decrease in anxiety lasting for a few minutes. A smaller proportion, comprising 3.1% of participants, indicated that their anxiety reduction persisted for a few hours, while a mere 1.2% reported the effect lasting a full day.

In exploring the broader impact of memes on participants' social dynamics, the study investigated whether sharing relatable memes influenced their relationships with friends and

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family. A substantial 80% of participants acknowledged that sharing such memes did indeed aid in maintaining these connections, whereas 20% asserted that it did not significantly affect their relationships.

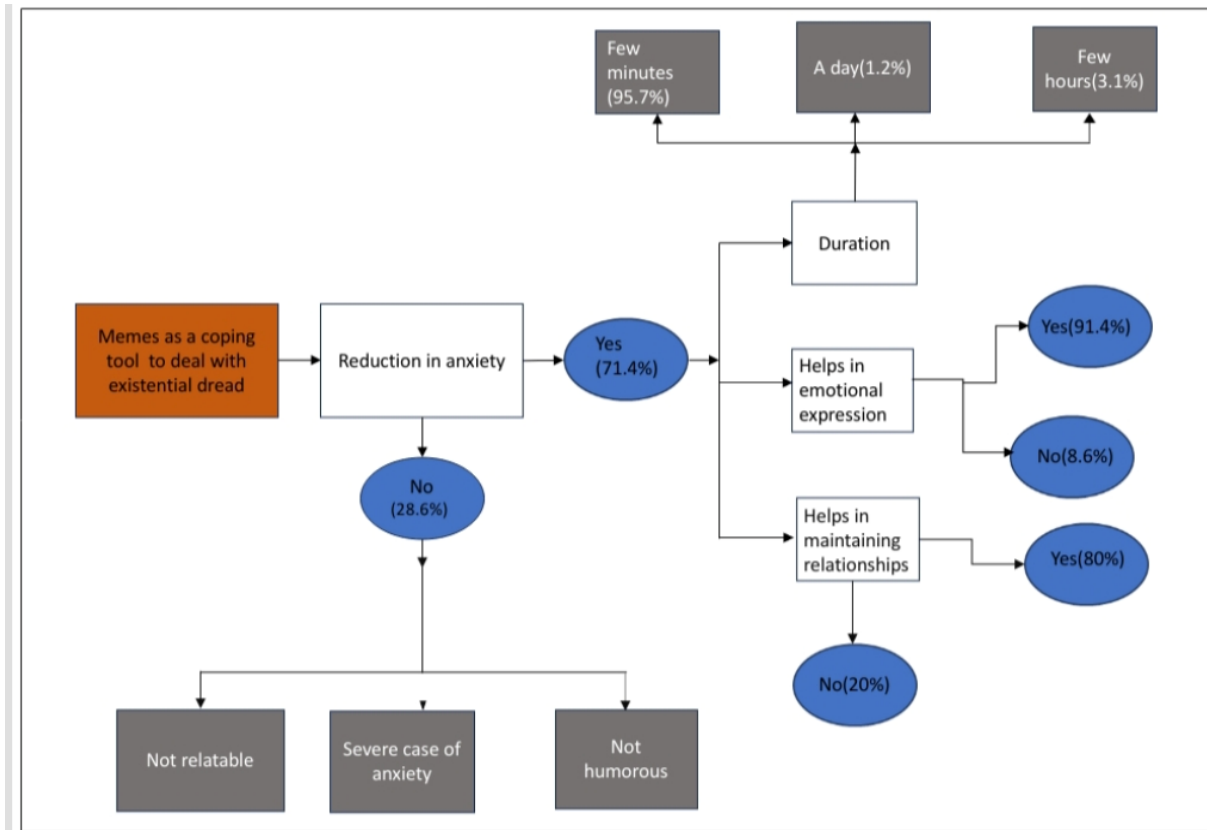


Figure 1. Indicating the participant's responses with percentages in a flowchart

Furthermore, participants were asked about the effectiveness of memes in helping them express their thoughts and emotions. The findings indicated that a significant majority, precisely 91.4% of respondents, found memes to be a valuable tool for conveying their thoughts and emotions. Conversely, 8.6% of participants reported that memes were not particularly effective in assisting them in expressing their innermost feelings.

A subsequent inquiry aimed to identify the factors contributing to participants' long-term comfort. Analysis of the responses yielded several common themes, including financial freedom, entertainment, nurturing relationships, engaging in hobbies, emotional well-being, traveling experiences, creative stimulations, self-acceptance and coming to terms with mortality. These aspects collectively emerged as significant contributors to sustaining a sense of lasting comfort and contentment among the participants.

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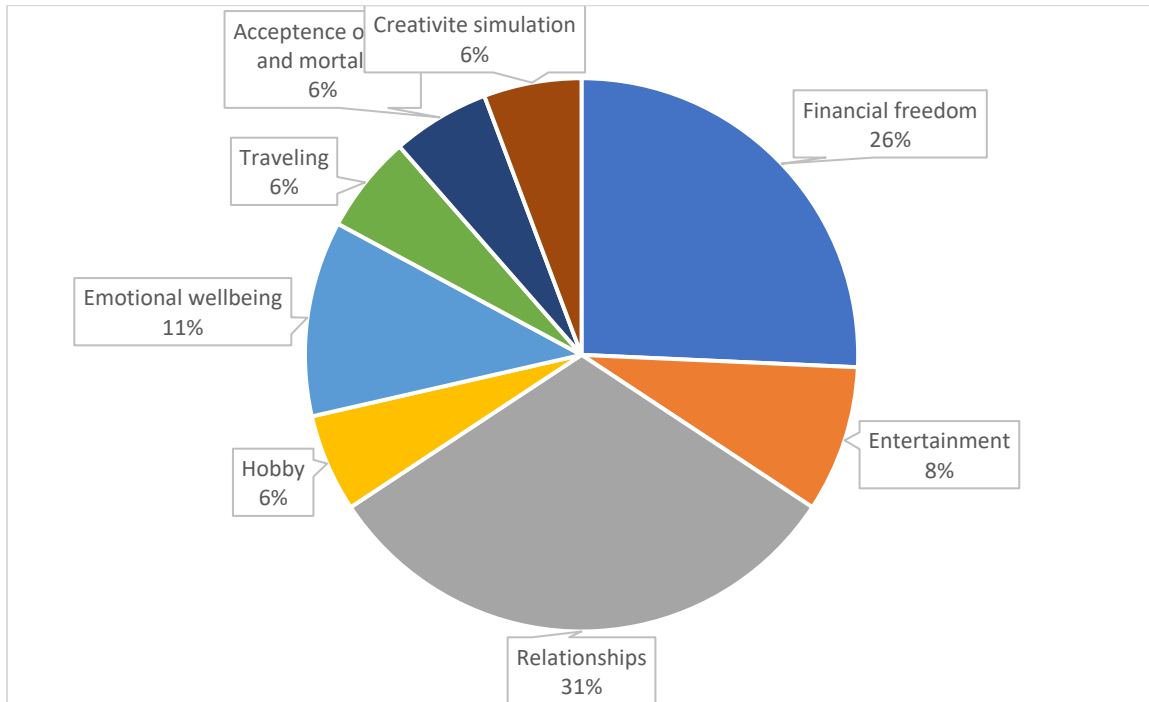


Figure 2. Summarises the salient themes found for factors contributing to long-term comfort.

Furthermore, participants were asked to elucidate the elements that imparted a sense of meaning to their lives. Upon examining the responses, distinct themes surfaced, highlighting spirituality, the value of meaningful relationships, practicing gratitude, self-acceptance and acknowledging mortality, attaining professional achievements, pursuing hobbies, seeking creative inspiration, engaging in travel, striving for self-improvement, and embracing altruistic endeavours. These themes underscored the various dimensions that imbue life with significance and purpose for the respondents.

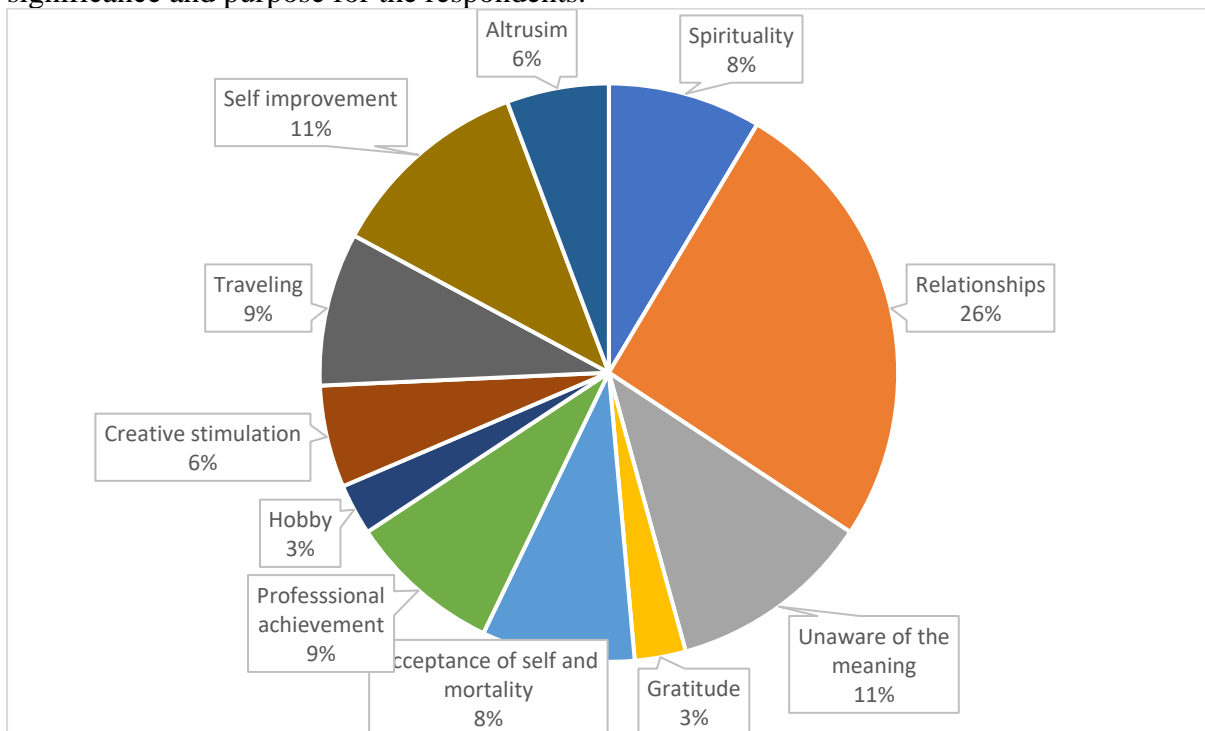


Figure 3. Summarises the salient themes found for factors contributing to meaning in life.

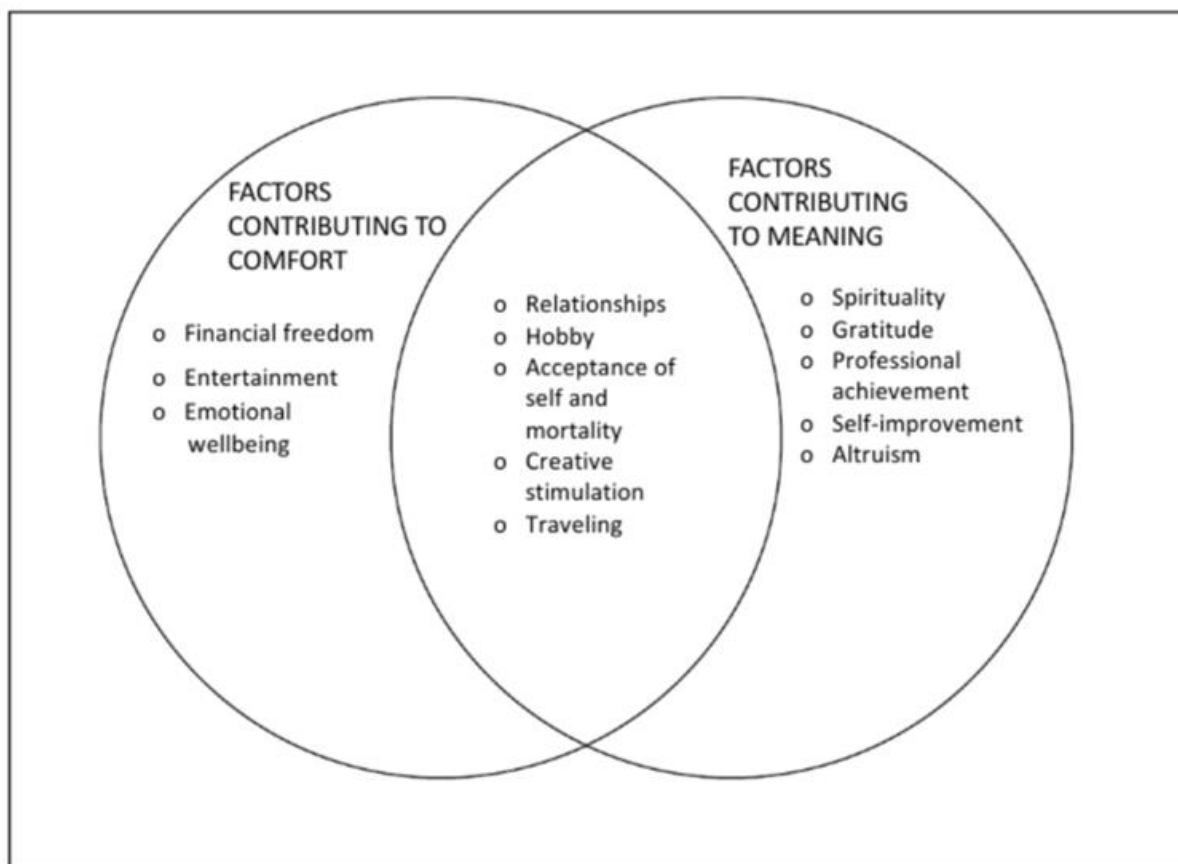


Figure 4. Summarises the salient themes found common between the factors contributing to long-term comfort and meaning in life.

DISCUSSION

Existential dread encompasses a profound and overwhelming sense of anxiety, unease, or apprehension arising from contemplation of the fundamental questions and uncertainties surrounding human existence. It represents a deep existential concern that emerges when individuals confront the challenges and mysteries of life, including the purpose of existence, the meaning of one's life, the inevitability of mortality, and the vastness of the universe. Such dread often leads to feelings of uncertainty and a sense of being adrift in an indifferent or absurd universe. It may manifest as emptiness, existential loneliness, or a profound existential crisis, as individuals grapple with the meaning and significance of their lives while navigating life's existential challenges.

The study reveals that memes serve as a coping tool for many individuals in dealing with existential anxiety, facilitating the building of relationships and the communication of thoughts and emotions that might not be easily conveyed in active conversations. However, memes only provide short-term relief. It is evident from the data that humour is an effective means to address anxiety caused by existential dread; nevertheless, it does not offer a definitive solution to establishing stability in one's life. To effectively cope with existential dread and create stability, individuals require a combination of short-term and long-term coping mechanisms.

The common themes found between factors contributing to long-term comfort and meaning in life. While factors such as financial freedom, entertainment, and emotional well-being

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contribute to comfort, they may not inherently serve as sources of meaning. Conversely, factors such as spirituality, gratitude, professional achievement, self-improvement, and altruism contribute to a sense of meaning in one's life, but they may not necessarily be perceived as direct sources of comfort. Instead, they act as guiding principles, providing answers to one's existence and direction to life.

Certain factors, such as relationships, hobbies, acceptance of self and mortality, creative stimulation, and traveling, contribute to both comfort and meaning in one's life. These factors offer both solace and purpose, highlighting their significance in enhancing overall well-being. Notably, nurturing relationships emerged as the common salient theme between comfort and meaning, surpassing all other themes by a substantial percentage. This validates the prevailing notion that humans are inherently social creatures, and the need for belongingness plays a pivotal role in shaping one's quality of life. As such, the importance of nurturing relationships should not be underestimated in one's pursuit of comfort and meaning.

CONCLUSION

Existential dread often involves a sense of profound uncertainty and a feeling of being adrift in an indifferent or absurd universe. It may manifest as a feeling of emptiness, existential loneliness, or a deep existential crisis, as individuals grapple with the meaning and purpose of their lives and struggle to find a sense of direction or significance in the face of life's existential challenges.

However, it is important to note that existential dread is not necessarily a pathological condition but rather a common aspect of the human condition. It is a natural response to the awareness of our existence and the inherent uncertainties and mysteries that come with it. Existential dread can be a catalyst for personal growth, self-reflection, and the search for meaning, as individuals confront these existential concerns and strive to find their own path and sense of purpose in life.

Many philosophical and psychological approaches, such as existentialism, emphasize the importance of acknowledging and grappling with existential dread as part of the human experience. By engaging with these questions and exploring the depths of existential concerns, individuals may ultimately find ways to cope, create meaning, and find a sense of fulfillment in their lives.

The findings of this research indicate that meme culture plays a significant role in helping individuals cope with existential dread. Through humour, shared experiences, and the expression of existential themes, memes provide a valuable tool for addressing complex emotions and fostering a sense of community. By understanding the positive impact of meme culture on mental well-being, mental health professionals and society can explore innovative ways to utilize this phenomenon as a resource for navigating existential challenges in the digital age. However, further research is warranted to explore the potential downsides or limitations of using memes as a coping mechanism and their long-term effects on mental health.

Limitations and Critiques

- Superficiality and oversimplification of complex issues
- Potential reinforcement of nihilism or apathy

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- Dependency on external validation and approval
- Inadequate coping for severe existential distress

Area of Future Research

By synthesizing existing research on memes, humour, and existential dread, this literature review contributes to our understanding of how individuals utilize memes as a coping mechanism. It highlights the potential benefits of memes in alleviating existential distress and fostering a sense of connection. However, it also acknowledges the limitations and potential drawbacks of relying solely on memes for existential coping. Ultimately, further research is necessary to explore the long-term effects and broader implications of memes as a coping strategy for existential dread.

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Conflict of Interest

We hereby declare no conflict of interest.

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