Channelling the Community: Discord Users' Understanding of Community and Mental Illness

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Abstract:

In marginalized communities, humour has been used to manage stigma in internet spaces which facilitate the gathering of individuals with stigmatizing commonalities. This thesis endeavours to show the methods that emerge from internet communities, specifically through the platform Discord, that are used to redefine how information about mental illness is conveyed and how it entails personal interaction. Focused on the way depression memes are interpreted by users of the Discord, and how the need for humour is used as a tool to distance oneself from interpersonal relationships, I have examined how the fear of being labelled mentally ill still manifests itself within a space originally intended for transgressive content. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Discord's 2meirl4meirl server, and consisting of participant observation as well as informal interviews, I argue that users, by attempting to shed from themselves their marginalized status by interacting in Discord, introduce new, but faulty, methods of stigma management.

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Introduction:

I sat in my mother's basement, browsing the internet on my computer: a stereotypical twenty-three year old still living at home. As of March 2020, COVID-19 had turned the world as we had known it upside down. Due to the first of many lock-downs, I, like most students, had gone back home to live with my parents. Everyone was isolating. I was worried about meeting others in person for fear of spreading the virus. Online, however, I was connected to hundreds of others through the 2meirl4meirl Discord server. In the absence of an offline community, I had an online community.

The name of the server, 2meirl4meirl, is an internet phrase that originated from two other slang terms, “me IRL” and “2edgy4me.” “Me IRL” is used to indicate a particular situation, meme, or piece of media on the internet which represents one's current mental or physical state (Kim, 2016). “2edgy4me” is an abbreviation of the phrase “too edgy for me,” sarcastically indicating that the content in question is meant to be provocative.[1] Combining both terms to create the phrase “2meirl4meirl” suggests that the content being so named is sarcastic, provocative, and a reflection of one's mental and physical state. Discord is a free social media platform consisting of different servers one can join based on a particular interest. Similar to a club, one joins to create friendships and bond over mutual hobbies, and engage with others through text-chat, images, voice-chat and other forms of media that may or may not pertain to the original topic of interest.[2] 2meirl4meirl's topic of interest originated from depression memes, which are humorous images that depict symptoms of mental health. I will explain the functions of the server in greater detail in the pages to come.

The main page of the server, with colourful profile icons and usernames popping up on the

1 Though I learned these terms from my ample time on the internet, these definitions can also be found on knowyourmeme.com, a website that researches and documents internet memes and viral phenomena.

2 Discord's most popular public servers include ones dedicated to video games such as Minecraft, coding languages like Python, and English, where members practice their language skills.

screen as users converse with each other, shows that the server is a lively virtual place. Individuals could be talking about anything - the latest trend, their favourite video game, how school was going, even in spite of the pandemic. I ignored most of the general conversation in the general chat. I had spent enough time on Discord already. I knew what I was looking for: memes that were “too real” or “hit too close to home” on the topic of mental illness. This is precisely what the description of a Reddit forum called /r/2meirl4meirl promised to deliver, and had done so for the past five years. I therefore presumed that a Discord server originating from the Reddit community would have a similar quality of memes.[3] The creation of the 2meirl4meirl server came about because some members of the Reddit forum decided that they wanted a more engaging way to interact with other members of their community. Discord, as a platform, is inherently more interactive than Reddit. Discord utilizes several real time chat boxes in each server, while Reddit relies on a more traditional forum format, in which one posts a thread that then needs to be continually refreshed in order to read new comments.

Despite a user-base with a supposed interest in depression memes, the memes I sought were difficult to find. Instead, I found memes referring to just about everything other than mental illness: cute images of animals and an entire channel in which users posted pictures of themselves. I was confused and frustrated for a few weeks. Where were the depression memes? Discord made sharing images and conversing with others so easy, so why couldn’t I find any of them? Instead, I found a chat room, known as a channel, inside a server in which the majority of posts were about serious issues users currently had with their lives, often due in part to depression, anxiety or other mental health challenges. Sometimes the posts were incoherent, and reading some others made me extremely uncomfortable. People’s thoughts of how they might kill themselves, wanting to die, or declarations of someone calling themselves “trash, useless, a burden” took a toll on me. Nervous, even annoyed, that I

3 As of 2021, the forum page for /r/2meirl4meirl on Reddit.com states it's been a community for 5 years.

had wandered into that channel without being at least warned of the content, I began avoiding it. There came a point, however, in which I realized that the reason I could not easily find depression memes on the server had something to do with related the feelings evoked in me by the #vent channel. Perhaps, the way I felt about #vent was how many users felt about depression memes overall.

It is common to find depression memes on many social media platforms online, not only on Discord. Humour is an intrinsic aspect of the depression meme, often acting as the vessel for a message about mental health that cannot be comfortably shared without it. Conveying implicit meaning and understanding is an integral aspect of how this particular Discord community functions, and of how I have come to understand how and why users of the server interact with each other. Much of the interaction between users is influenced by "the void" that exists in the server, known as the #vent channel. The void, understood as an empty space, a place to post things otherwise unspoken about, and a lack of community, is a focal point of the server's method to avoid the stigma associated with being mentally ill. The void is a space that the community acknowledges exists, but what takes place in the void is ignored as users pretend not to read what is posted, and therefore have no obligation to respond to or to be defined by their posts in the channel. It is significant that the void, though understood as a space that allows one to bypass social taboo by posting public messages concerning one's mental challenges, results in a user being judged.

As we will see in the pages to come, Aes, my primary interlocutor and a user who frequents the 2meirl4meirl Discord Server, understands the server as a place where one can speak freely about mental illness. Many users believe that the server is a place where the stigma of being mentally ill is lessened. They are surrounded by many others like themselves, who arrive at the Discord server because they are fearful of being judged by others in their offline lives. Over the course of this project, I have examined reasons for joining the server, the function of the void in the community, and how the establishment of this void has affected in-server interaction.

This thesis is a consideration of the community I encountered on 2meirl4meirl discord server. The people I met there came to the server hoping to somehow escape their stigmatized subject positions as sufferers of mental illness. Instead, they followed mental health memes to a community that, strangely enough, was not about memes but is focused on personal relationships. Users explained that the server afforded them opportunities for social relationships that they felt unable to access in their offline world due to a number of constraints due to mental illness. The discord community builds and guides itself under the pretence that it will be a space free from mental health stigma, a process that is achieved, at least in part, through the use of humour. I argue, however, that although users of the server often employ dark humour and the transgression of norms and taboos, thereby positioning the server as a transgressive social space- it is not necessarily an alternative form of community. Instead, like any other community, users carefully manage what they say and do in order to establish membership to certain subgroups of the server: a process that highlights the importance of personal agency in how one is, or hopes to be, perceived. In the chapters to come, I elaborate on the tension between how the server operates as a real community in which users are afforded a social life they cannot access elsewhere, and the ways in which social norms are still upheld and enforced. I come to the conclusion that while users may strive to create a community that is free to speak openly about mental illness, this is not always achieved.

The Discord Server

The 2meirl4meirl Discord server, which I will refer to as “the Discord” or “the server” is a community that exists on the social media platform Discord. I will refer to the members of the 2meirl4meirl server as “users.” Discord is advertised as a voice client, similar to Skype or Zoom where one can speak to others through a microphone, and type in chat-boxes. However, Discord is marketed toward gamers as a communication channel for either competitive or casual gaming, though it has

become appealing to a general audience.[4] The server features different rooms in which one can post or speak with others, known as channels. Channels can be either "text channels" or "voice channels." The former is a place for images, videos, web-links, and text posts, and the latter is used solely for voice communication. How one's posts are identified and categorized by others is done by navigating through the 2meirl4meirl Discord's channels. As the Discord is organized by labelled channels for what someone wants to discuss, there is an expectation of what one will post based on the context of the server. For example, the #general channel is for all kinds of conversations, while the #politics channel is specifically about international politics. These channels are all on the right sidebar, whereas the left sidebar shows the amount of users currently online, with distinct categories between regular users, moderators, and bots that perform automated functions in the server.[5] On text posts, one can "react" with "emojis," that is a small image such as a smiley face, crying face, a cowboy, or whatever else seems suitable as a response. This is typically used to show that one's post has been read, and emote a sentiment without using words. The Discord is open for the public to access as long as one makes an account for the platform. As a platform on the internet, users around the world are able to access the server, at any time of day. All channels and voice channels are open to all users to access, except for the "mod-chat," a closed channel in which the server's moderators, the users who enforce the rules of the server, can meet to discuss how they are running things.[6]

On Discord, individuals join servers based on their interests. Communities on Discord are thus formed through those common interests that users share: on 2meirl4meirl, this interest is depression memes. Though informed by the experiences of many users, and the server as a whole, this thesis replies upon the experience of my main interlocutors; Aes, Lucas, Fen, Ellie, Alex, and Mike. Each is

4 I was once a teaching assistant for a class that used Discord for its students to engage with each other online, replacing the need for Facebook groups.

5 Such functions include playing music or defining words.

6 This channel is hidden to the general public, and I did not know it existed until Aes briefly mentioned it.

between the ages of 18-27, residing in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, and each has directly experienced the symptoms and effects of mental illness. You will learn more about them in the pages to come. Despite the focus on mental health and depression, I did not ask for the diagnostic status of my participants. I came to know my informants' status by their disclosure without prompting on my part.

By taking my interlocutors' understanding of mental illness meant at face-value, without any formal discussion of diagnostic categories, the terms my interlocutors used to describe themselves are often used interchangeably in this thesis. There is slippage between the use of terms such as mental illness, mental health, depression, anxiety, and so forth, because this was how my interlocutors explained themselves to me. I chose not to categorize my interlocutors outside of the terms they used for themselves. Though terms such as mental illness and mental health problems have different meanings and contexts, they should be interpreted in this thesis as something Neely Myers (2021) referred to in her work as a "mental health concern."

Research Questions

Before embarking on this project my friends and I regularly sent one each other what we considered to be depression memes. Such memes suggest an imminent mental breakdown due to factors of stress (school, work, relationships). However, I knew that none of these people were clinically depressed, and I wondered if the usage of gallows humour when conveying messages through memes was ultimately diluting the urgency of mental health issues (Jenkins, 1994: 180). The main question during my thesis's initial conceptualization was whether or not depression memes shared honest sentiments about one's mental health. I began to experience ambivalence when receiving depression memes. I would double tap my phone screen to "like it" and then move on without actual discussion of what was currently happening in my friends' lives to make them feel that this meme was relatable. A depression meme that actively conveyed sentiments of suicide was easily considered to be

a joke, but to provide a friend in need with emotional support often felt like a burden due to the challenges involved in interpersonal vulnerability or intimacy. The thought that they may have needed mental health support often did not occur to me, and when it did, it was easy for me to distance myself from this possibility. In many ways, being able to share one's struggles in a few humorous images stunted communication and connection between friends. The usage of online social media such as Discord also created another barrier to personal engagement with others due to the disembodied nature of "online expression, anonymity and pseudonymity that results in behavioural and motivational ambiguity" (Philips and Milner, 2017; 73-72). Even though relationships between us existed offline, the usage of internet depression memes were still able to act as a barrier from further emotional connection.

As a consequence, the question that guided this thesis changed: why is there a negative association with mental illness in an online space which suggests that discussion about mental health is open, and how does this negative association, best understood as stigma, manifest itself? I understand stigmatization as an effect on one's social identity which is achieved through a pattern of revealing and concealing a person's differences from others (Goffman, 116). Depression memes are described by my interlocutors as tools to reveal potentially stigmatizing aspects of oneself to others. When carefully revealing the bad qualities associated with the mentally ill through humorous depression memes, one's life matters are communicated to others as "clownish," but individually, they are worthy of connection, "in spite of the reputation of their kind" (Goffman, 118-119). Hidden and personal problems are difficult to present in a way that do not negatively affect either the mentally ill individual, or what is understood about the mentally ill as a collective. Depression memes do not seem able to conceal nor fully embrace the classification of "mentally ill" regardless of their subversive humour.

I used this question to understand how humour, in the memes with dark implications that seemed abundant on the internet, might be a tool to subvert stigmatizing discourses on mental health or

to conceal the gravity of one's mental condition. As such, this thesis depends on memes and humour for context, but, after Chapter 1, departs from "memes" and "humour" as themselves objects for development. Rather, I focus on the workings of the community that the context of memes and humour produces. Discussions with my interlocutors about how things are *not* said, and, at the same time, that they understand the importance of things concealed, ultimately led me to classify the #vent channel as an *anti*-community. In this, I was inspired by Maurice Blanchot's concept of the negative or unavowable community. The anti-community's carefully crafted "sharing of 'something' which has already eluded the possibility of being considered as part of a sharing" (Blanchot, 1988; 8) has often been the sharing of the issues and symptoms of mental illness: suicidal tendencies, alcoholism, and other stigmatizing factors. Such symptoms are often difficult to share with others; my interlocutors certainly feared disclosure would negatively impact how they are perceived by others. However, the anti-community, which will be elaborated upon later, manages to reveal these issues without normalizing their differences with responses and further elaboration (Goffman, 123). As a Discord community with users that enjoy sharing and discussing innocuous interests and hobbies, mental illness remains something to be concealed and detached, but there is an attempt at solidarity between users through tacit understanding in a server ultimately concerning mental health.

Literature Review

Mental Health and the Internet:

The Discord contributes to real interactions with other users and becomes a part of an individual's experience with mental health; it needs to be included as a site for ethnographic findings to widen the range of factors concerning mental illness (Eller, 2016). This online environment is understood by Ian Hacking as an "ecological niche" in his description of the factors of the environment in which one allows mental illness to emerge or be constrained (Hacking, 1998; 2). The setting where

the discourse happens needs to be taken into consideration as to whether it is an effective venue for discussion on mental health. The Discord is a niche, one designed to allow its users to speak about transgressive issues without fearing the kind of judgment that is commonplace in face-to-face confrontations; it is an online accordance that allows for “reduced social risk” (Curtis, 1997; 9). To achieve this, in Discord, humour is used as a source of stigma resistance and rebellion in the context of powerlessness (Jenkins, 1994), indirectly challenging the power dynamic that comes with mental health taboos. It provides a place where transgressive elements and themes are accepted. Memes are tools for discourse capable of uncovering different pathways and contexts for discussion (Warnick, 2012). These different contexts are not just due to being a new kind of media; they function using humorous depression memes to reveal personal issues that would otherwise be hidden and conceal them from others when necessary. This use of subversive content can result in the creation of in-groups, as well as exclude those who “are 'othered' as someone who can never understand” (Hine, 2015; 85).

Richard Dawkins introduced the concept of memes in 1976 as cultural analogues to genes due to their transmission of culture that mutated as they spread ideas. He considered memes to be replicators whose success was gauged by popularity and “natural selection” (Dawkins, 1976; 192, 194). Memes have since then been translated into “internet memes' due to their ability to become viral and spread ideas quickly through the internet, a medium that facilitates their reproduction. When compared to genes once more, their spread and rapid reproduction result in mutations, which are best understood as the creation of new memes and content with similar formats that can reference older memes. Bradley Wiggins picks up on this theme: as memes are re-appropriated and sent to friends, he sees this form of expression as akin to a cultural commodity that may enact social relationships in which individuals are linked by a particular ideological practice or belief as well as a method of communication that focuses on replicating itself (Wiggins, 2019; 6). With the ability to facilitate communication, memes can become a mode in which reactions, concerns, messages, ideas, and beliefs are expressed to an audience,

creating an ever-evolving environment where one's own worldview may be packaged and delivered to others. The humour embodied in memes about mental illness explains in part how they may spread messages and ideas, and their ironic character provides a perspective on how social inequalities can be managed subversively (Carty and Musharbash, 2018). The literature suggests that those with mental illness are marginalized by mainstream discourses, and that humorous memes are the form in which an in-group or community is built to both create bonds and criticize the situation the group is in.

Philips and Milner attempt to understand identity through masks in which one constructs for oneself an appropriate identity for a certain audience (Philips and Milner, 2017: 64). With the disembodied nature of the internet, they underline the "mask you make yourself" in which an individual can present themselves a certain way, reducing social risk and disregard of the social restrictions entailed in the stigmatization of mental illness (Philips and Milner, 2017:73). In the diverse subcultures found on the Internet, a relatively new avenue of human-to-human interaction in a digitally crafted space, there are different interpretations and presentations of the self and interactions with others. The internet is a participatory space (Hine, 12); how one's mental illness is portrayed online operates under different cultural rules. It is through gaining competence in the understanding of the codes dictated by the community and individuals involved,that a user is able to operate successfully in virtual communities.

According to Giselinde Kuipers (2016), in many studies of humour, humour itself is in fact peripheral. For Kuipers, when humour is used, it often conceals a secondary meaning. When dealing with the subversive humour of depression memes, the importance lies in understanding why depression needs to be concealed. James Willmore and Darryl Hocking understand memes as undergoing a constant process of mutation to create new layers of humour or satire (Willmore and Hocking, 2017:141). As memes have been described as images that appropriate any original meaning, instead recreating the content for a new purpose, the intentional altering of them along the usage of humour

removes any association of its message with the sender. The original context is displaced while the meme's primary function serves to strengthen group affiliation, mediate tensions, and display intimacy through the unsaid (Said, 2016). Memes are massively multi-person conversations that adapt serious content, such as depression or suicide both for humorous purposes and "socio-critical commentary, and act as an impetus for that communication" (Willmore and Hocking, 2017: 145). Several users of the Discord are actively in therapy, taking medication, and many still are struggling with their mental health, but find comradery in joking about shared experiences. Preformative or not, humour in the face of death reassures oneself and others of belonging and "an absurdist existential stance" (Gandsman, 2021; 183). Users use sarcasm and humour also to present scenarios in which tensions can be released. Presenting scenarios that are impossible, or extremely unlikely, such as hoping to be killed by falling debris from space, categorizes the desire for death as a part of the impossibility. As Cardena and Littlewood suggest, the mentally ill use humour to invert negative attributes at the core of their identities, and communication at a higher level of complexity allows for an imagining of something absurd or unreal as an anticipation scenario (Cardena and Littlewood, 2006).

That many of my interlocutors understood the server as a space free of stigma led me to be curious about why they still resorted to the use of subversive humour to conceal symptoms of their mental illness. As a general rule, the server is meant to be welcoming to all who join. Within the Discord, a number of discourses on mental health emerge as each user struggles to redefine mental illness according to their own experiences and aspirations. This is to say, there is no unified consensus on mental health conditions or the management thereof; but nor is this stated as anyone's goal.

Ian Hacking's discussion of "looping effects" centres on the constant redefinition and reclassification of "human kinds," supporting the idea that one can adopt a different identity online, yet also that this new identity will ultimately redefine what is known about the category one has chosen for oneself (Hacking, 1995). This adds to the ever-expanding knowledge of what kind of person visits the

2meirl4meirl server. It can profile a user who jokes ironically about depression and self-harm, as well as one that chooses to avoid discussion about mental illness completely. Whether the one or the other is normalized, the user is unable to escape the presumption that the kind of person who visits the server is depressed. Both kinds of individuals appear to be associated with mental illness, and thereby contribute to an attempt at redefining who a mentally ill person is and what they do in the Discord. The need for a constant redefinition of the mentally ill, alongside the reluctance to be associated with this categorization suggests that the Discord is not stigma-free, despite attempts to make it so.

Understanding that Discord is an environment in which the discussion of mental health is *supposed* to be open and welcoming, I have come to see why it entertains the use of gallows humour. While depression memes continue to be created and spread by the replication of their message, there is, at the same time, a desire of the users to embrace a positive outlook of what it means for them to function as depressed or mentally ill while on the Discord. The purpose of joining a server is to seek the possibility of connection, to find a community of people undergoing similar struggles. Maintaining and developing this connection is difficult because individuals with mental health challenges feel isolated and disconnected from others (Hari, 2018). Desire for connection is in part why using gallows humour can be understood as an attempt to remove oneself from the challenges of mental illness by laughing about it. Through joking about mental illness, one perpetuates the effort to dismiss stigmatization by suggesting that there is indeed no stigma attached. Thus, I take depression memes as a social commodity in the server; as users negotiate stigma, depression memes become the means by which one connects with others. However, in order to sustain one's connection with others, the jokes and memes need to be continually dismissive of the stigma one experiences; thereby ultimately perpetuating the overall presence of stigma in the server as it becomes difficult to elaborate upon one’s mental health issues without the context of humour. I further explore this process and its effects in the pages to come.

Subversive Humour and Stigma:

Mental illness is often invisible, especially when those that suffer from it feel pressured to appear physically well (Wallace, 2010). The stigma of mental illness manifests itself through social interactions: by oneself, through worrying about the perceptions of others in daily interactions; by others who have difficulty relating to those who are mentally ill. Erving Goffman (1963) distinguishes two aspects of stigma, one in which a person is actually "being discredited" or recognized as bearing stigmatizing traits, and the other, "discreditable" in which the stigmatizing factors have not yet been perceived (1963; 12). However, what constitutes these traits and behaviours as socially stigmatizing factors are ambiguous, because they shift and evolve over time (Jensen, 2018). On the Discord, a user adopts a profile picture and a user name with any mental health issues remaining unknown until there is interaction with another user, and even then to reveal stigmatizing traits to others is a matter of choice. A user is free not to make this revelation, choosing instead to conceal these traits and be able to pass as someone without mental challenges. Although a user can self-protect from stigma by refusing to speak about their mental health, they might also choose to do the same by carefully revealing their issues through humour. Jokes can turn situations of "unspeakability" into one that is spoken (Oring, 1987; 282). Users of the 2meirl4meirl subvert stigma and create ambiguity by using humour to reveal otherwise stigmatizing issues to others without worrying how they will be perceived.

Niko Besnier (2016) argues that humour is often entangled in several layers of satire that create ambiguity in its interpretation. Using satire in a depression meme, in tandem with how a user engages with other members of the server makes it difficult to identify the user as mentally ill. When one appears to be ambivalent to the content of the depression meme, there appears to be distance between the individual and the emotions the meme is projecting. Philips states there is an "emotional divestment" when distressing issues are converted into visual jokes on the internet (Philips, 2011; Philips, 2015;118). Being removed and divested from the content creates the chance that one can be

perceived as “a normal” (Goffman, 13), and is in part why humour is used in memes to create ambiguity and thereby reclaim one's identity. “Sharing humour signals similarity - and similarity breeds closeness. Inversely, the absence of a shared sense of humour marks unbridgeable social and personal distance” (Kuipers, 2009; 219). According to Daphna Yeshua-Katz, a stigmatized person seeks sympathetic others, or “their own,” in order to receive support and acceptance (Yeshua-Katz, 2015: 1347), thereby becoming a part of a community where one is decidedly not different. Individuals arrive at the Discord server to find community. An over-identification with humour regarding the seriousness of mental health problems creates ambivalence in the discourse. The seriousness of mental health then becomes less pressing due to a desensitization of the issues at hand, especially when they become inseparable from humour (Liston, 2018). Moreover, humour has often emerged in times of trouble (Trnka, 2018: 60), and laughter is a boundary where inclusion and identification as a member of a group triggers the social exclusion of non-members (Carty and Musharbash, 2018:17). Members of the Discord have explained the idea of sharing depression memes and other forms of dark humour regarding mental health with their families did not make them feel comfortable. These users were concerned with worrying and upsetting their loved ones. When users find community within the Discord server, in place of offline relationships due to the lack of understanding from their offline friends and family, they are no longer “othered” as they were offline. My interlocutors constantly cited “the community and friendships" as the main reason behind their continued participation in the server. Able to joke together, they are “normal,” understood as acting in accordance with the commonplace behaviour of community members.

The ability to remain anonymous and distant from serious issues on the internet allows for internet users to ignore the social conventions that would be in place in a face to face conversation. The purpose of the server is to find a community that accepts one's resistance to mental health stigma; if this is not possible, however, the Discord exists as an attempt to create an environment where one

cannot be harmed by the stigma. Philips has discussed “LOLing at tragedy” in which Facebook trolls take after memorial pages and other sensitive subjects to provoke and aggressively mock the situation (Philips, 2011). On the internet, individuals can bypass social restrictions with relative safety, and this ability for individuals to control how to present themselves publicly “has a direct ambivalent impact on interpersonal relationships" (Philips and Milner, 2017:74). Though there can be users who are potentially unaccepting of the use of gallows humour, while one can ask other users to change the conversation, the Discord server remains a place where dark humour will reemerge regardless of the comfort levels of all its users. In this case, ambivalence is a way to avoid embracing dark humour as an inherent aspect of the internet that one must accept rather than find offensive. As my interlocutors have described, using gallows humour and depression memes as a way to discuss mental health issues that they otherwise felt uncomfortable to share is a way to “operationalize humour to liberate and assert the ego over its own vulnerability” (Bucaria, 2009: 27, 30). Humour and laughter create social ruptures, paving the way for discourse about uncomfortable subjects (Rehak and Trnka, 2018). Such a disruption of dominant power has been the focal point of James Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak*, in which an everyday class resistance uses tools such as false compliance, feigned ignorance, foot dragging, and in this case includes the use of concealing humour and ambivalence to generate a method of discussion for topics otherwise taboo (Scott, 1985: 289).

Grant Kien (2013) suggests that a problem in dealing with difficult situations and ideas using ambivalence, satire, or irony is that it may transform social problems into isolated incidents. Systematic problems may appear as a single experience that is diminished for the sake of humour (Kien, 2013). Stigma persists in the lives of users of the Discord who find themselves online looking for friendships different from their real-world relationships: people who understand how they feel about mental illness. Without dealing with the larger issues and barriers at hand, humour can reduce the experience of mental illness to a personal failing. The issue of being “othered” by mental health issues exists in the

Discord itself as the server contains an “absent” or anti-community, one that avoids overt discussion about mental illness. Maurice Blanchot's concept of the unavowable-community exists as a constant possibility for one to belong to an “absent community”(Blanchot, 1988; 3-4). What this entails for members of the Discord is a desire for others to be a part of their community, that is to deal with one's issues with mental health without stigma, but at the same time to have that community hidden, unacknowledged, and its membership unspoken about in order to maintain a semblance of normalcy. Admission to this community affirms that it is for the stigmatized, and they are ultimately discredited instead of embraced for being different. Analyzing Blanchot's argument, Ian James also suggests that Blanchot's term “unavowable"community is always one of absence, and withdrawal (James, 2010; 176).

Even within the server, users face the dilemma of voicing their issues. #vent exists as a channel to let one post anything they want about their mental illness, symptoms, and what they are going through, unlike the rest of the Discord. But there is a fear of being judged, and even within #vent. Aes, my primary interlocutor, remains skeptical about whether he finds that channel useful, choosing instead to keep his frustrations to himself. Remaining silent about one’s depression in real life is attached to Jack and Ali’s discussion of the “social attachment system” (Jack and Ali, 2010: 7). As one fears social rejection, a need for reassurance intensifies. I argue that the Discord attempts to create a space where one can seek reassurance, but without the fear of social rejection, in the form of the #vent channel. However, the channel functions poorly for the purpose of reassuring users in the conventional sense, there are no users actively supporting others in the chat. Reassurance in #vent comes from seeing others go through similar issues rather than direct engagement. As such, there is a reluctance of many users to post, and even when they do so in #vent, the post is largely ignored. In circles of support groups, Emily Martin (2007) argues people create new social connections that last over time, and the group members tolerate strikingly unusual behaviour and descriptions of extreme behaviour attributed

to their mental illnesses (2007; 143-144). But though there is a way to speak about depression, it is not in fact always welcomed. Posting distressing issues about self-harm in any channel but #vent would likely result in moderator intervention and removal of the post. Though perhaps there is no need for the community to be explicit when "language is essentially private and only accidentally public" (Hacking, 2002; 121), and a user is among others similar to themselves.

Methodology

My field-site was within a Discord server known as 2meirl4meirl. The server is a space where individuals who self-identify as struggling with their mental health gather for a variety of purposes, where they understand the server as a place of community. These individuals range from being in high-school to being working-professionals. Of the users I interviewed, they were typically in their first or second year of post-secondary education, around 21 years old, with one user being 27. The server is a valuable cultural site with broader social significance (Hine, 2015; 192). As Christine Hine (2015) argued, "everyday life is represented by digital environments" (2015;192). Through the three main channels I used (#general, #vent, #recovery), alongside with the other channels I also frequented (#discussion, #serious), and through interviews, I obtained a wider view of being a frequent and active member in several different parts of the server. I engaged with other users by responding to their prompts for conversation, or posted my own, where we would start our conversation about a particular movie or another innocuous topic, then the conversation would naturally develop and focus on other subjects.[7] I conversed mostly with regular users, who became my interlocutors as they were frequently online, and who I considered to consist of what made up the community. Since users could join the server, and then leave to never return, these regularly active users are who I understand as to be "the community," and though there are other regular users I did not ultimately interview, I would occasionally talk to them in informal chats in the server.

7 I once posted about how awful the weather in Canada was which generated a surprising amount of conversation.

Between June 2020 and October 2020, I conducted field observation, participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews with users of the Discord. Using the search function of the Discord, (Ctrl+F) I could look up a timeline of things my interlocutor had said, when they said it, and in what channel they posted their messages in. I used this feature frequently, as I was not always online when they were active, and vice versa. I occasionally messaged my interlocutors through their direct messages, and took screenshots in the server. My field observation and participant observation primarily focused on posts in the #vent server, posts where a user shared intimate details about their lives, or how they were feeling, and the purpose for doing so in a channel described as a place where one should not expect a response. In addition to #vent, I carefully looked at #recovery, and what kind of content was posted there, and how users interact with each other in this space. The two servers complimented each other, one where feelings of anger and hopelessness was prominent, and the other where users focused happiness and hope for recovery. I frequented #general as a neutral space to engage with others. It operated as a place where I could ask users many kinds of questions including but not limited to the significance of #vent and #recovery, if they used them, and to learn about how one acts in a server about both depression and satirical humour. In addition to asking questions, I responded to their jokes, as well as interviewed a few moderators of the server, users in positions of authority, as to what their role entails, and made myself active in the server. Doing so provided me an organic opportunity to be a part of the community, as means to make users “feel comfortable enough with [my] presence, so that I may observe and record information (Bernard, 2011) as someone who was regularly active. After October 2020, I continued to browse the server in a more relaxed manner, still occasionally messaging my primary interlocutors, and taking some screenshots.

I also conducted eight semi-structured interviews, and asked follow-up questions over Discord's direct messaging and voice calling system. These interviews were all recorded and transcribed. Given that my interests were about the personal sentiments and reasoning individuals had for sharing

depression memes, and I had questions prepared, the interviews were conversationally conducted, and my questions often stemmed from the response I had just received from the previous question. The interviews were flexible and informant driven (Bernard 2018), similar to conversations I would have with users on Discord when we spoke informally in the Discord's public channels. I also took screenshots to record what happened, and understand the context and language used so I can focus on what users say, why they said it, and what they meant by it. What was typed as a response could reveal attitudes about subjects and ideas that "may be juxtaposed to particular events taking place at the time" which can give important data to be interpreted based on the background knowledge of the social group or activity (Boellstorff et al.,2012; 165).

Additionally, online, the ability to "lurk" to simply observe what people are posting, how they are discussed, and in what context, can be very useful in seeing what ways conversation is forwarded (Hine, 2015: 57). I often lurked, as it also felt rude to insert myself into lively conversations users were having with each other. Through these methods, I was able to collect information on the ways users communicate and interact with each other in the server. Due to the prominence of the question of what is being said and unsaid in a server that relies on implied understanding of mental illness, I am also informed by Lisa Stevenson's anthropology of the possible as a tool to address things that are only half said, implied, and up to interpretation (Stevenson, 2014). Stevenson's work discussed the difficulty in interpreting vague dreams, images, and drawings "into singular and incontestable facts," relying instead on what these images could possibly mean (Stevenson; 11). I interpreted what users meant when they reacted with emojis, such as a sad cowboy, or a screaming frog to posts without any textual follow up. I needed to interpret the kind of humour prominent in the server, along with any current internet trends to deduce what these reactions were supposed to entail.

Furthermore, the concept of stigma is discussed throughout this thesis. I understood stigma as the reasoning several users had for joining the Discord, such as Aes who described his mental illness as

a “weakness” he had to hide from others in his offline life. However, this view may not accurately describe the interactions one has with other users once within the server. Rather the idea of stigma is one understood to have been brought in from the offline world, and interpreted as a basis for how and why users chose to interact with each other and how the Discord functions, despite potential other conceptual lenses being also viable for interpretation, such as shame.

Chapters

In chapter one I discuss how individuals attempt to circumvent the stigma of mental illness through depression memes. Due to the ability of memes re-purposing the meaning of their content as they replicate and spread, depression memes are often interpreted as removed from the individual that sends them. This creates space between one's personal sentiments and the actual content of the meme. Since memes are passed on in an impersonal way, they are also used as a gauge in which one can determine if the other individual would be supportive in discussing mental health issues. I then discuss how humour is used as a tool to protect oneself from stigma. Using concealing humour, one shares depression memes with “absurd realities,” such as being struck to death by an asteroid. These memes are considered humorous due to the impossibility of the situation, and as such, one is able to hide their suicidal ideations and other manifestations of mental illness within the meme.

In chapter two, I focus specifically on the #vent channel and the lack of discussion about mental health in the casual conversations of #general and in the form of depression memes. Stigma in the server itself is revealed through the avoidance of being associated with depression memes and mental illness. This creates what is known as the “anti-community,” in which the purpose is still to uphold the pretense that this server is a place for mental health issues, but without talking about it directly. I explore how absence is embraced, and in an attempt to be normalized, stigmatizing topics no longer need to be remarked upon. Avoidance and absence is then exemplified in the #vent channel, where the pretense that it is a space that acts as a void. Yet, due to the nature of the Discord being filled with

people, #vent is inherently lively, public, and full of the implicit understandings upheld in the community. I examine the contradiction between posting in a space that promotes absence and non-action, and the overwhelming desire to be acknowledged by other users.

Lastly, in chapter three I discuss the notion of recovery from depression, and how one strives to be recognized as someone recovering within the Discord. The #recovery channel highlights the server's purpose as a 'therapeutic community' to offer support for others without the guise of humour, nor an absence of community. The #recovery community exists without clinical boundaries, and users intend on using this channel to demonstrate their progress with mental health recovery to others. I expand more on the issue of stigma, even within the frame of 'recovering' as users understand 'recovery' as a tool to foster moral agency. I argue that to be seen as recovering, and to be acknowledged as 'getting better' one must be perceived as making progress through their ability to help others. One must demonstrate that their circumstances have improved due to their actions to strive toward the life they want, drawing upon their previous experiences and the experiences of others as a point of comparison. Finally, I conclude with how transgressive ways of critiquing mental illness in a way that normalizes the stigma redefines a right way to speak about mental health, this in turn shows the Discord community is not as rebellious as one would expect.

The main argument of this thesis is that despite the transgressive attitudes espoused in the server, it is ultimately reproductive of the very stigma users seek to escape in the offline world. Attempts to resist how mental health is conventionally understood demonstrates the ongoing problems with being associated with mental illness. Within the Discord, users remain stuck in a looping effect. In their attempts to reform their relationships with their own mental health and broader mental health discourses, users shift but nonetheless perpetuate limiting approaches to living with mental illness.

Chapter 1- Absurd Realities and Humour

Figure 1.1: Entering the Discord (image by author).

I feel out of place in the 2meirl4meirl Discord server. Today, the #general chat is bustling with activity. This liveliness makes me feel awkward and uncomfortable because I do not know how to jump in and chat with people. Everyone here seems to already know each other; they are friends with inside jokes and previous conversations. I, on the other hand, only have established relationships with the two moderators I had messaged in advance to tell them about my research with depression memes and humour. The context of my research makes it harder to approach these users. According to Fen, one of my interlocutors who will be introduced in the pages to come, she and other users have already had negative experiences with previous researchers coming to the server to ask them questions with intentions she described as condescending and rude. The users of the Discord are people that had always felt as if they were the black sheep regarding their mental health, unable to talk freely about their struggles to either loved ones offline, or to people that did not understand their dark humour. I did not want to be seen as someone that they had to assure that the nature of their meme about wanting to die was meant as nothing more than a joke. The stigma of mental illness and the understanding and acceptance of depression that hung over the discord server only made me feel even more disconnected: either people would assume I was just like them, or I was someone who just did not get their humour. Neither of these options were quite right. In a server created for, and made up of, those who felt different, stigmatized, or othered, I wondered if I was in fact the black sheep?

The fear of being disliked appeared to be so common in my fieldwork. From the outset of my

fieldwork, I experienced the same fear of being disliked, othered, or isolated, that had in fact led many of my informants to this server in the first place. For my research, this raised two related themes: that of isolation, as individuals who felt disconnected from others felt lonely, and misunderstood. As well as how to communicate one's suffering through humour, as a way to navigate around rejection due to stigma. Throughout this chapter, I will talk about how stigma regarding mental illness has resulted in individuals using the 2meirl4meirl server as a place to find community with others who make them feel accepted and comfortable instead of solely pathologized. Next, I discuss how the role of humour is used as an effective means of facilitating social relations (Kidd, 2009; 1422), and a means by which marginalized individuals can create distance between themselves and detach from their experience (Cardena and Littlewood, 2006).

When suicidal ideation over loneliness, inadequacy, and other symptoms of mental illness are the punchline of a joke, individuals are distanced from the serious connotations of mental health issues. What is understood as “absurdly unreal” by Susanna Trnka (2019) is when an experience is considered ridiculous enough to the point of impossibility, inciting humour at the prospect of entertaining something so unlikely, momentarily divesting it of its fearfulness (Trnka, 64). Thus, if others seem to be laughing about trauma and suicidal ideation, then perhaps they are not actually struggling with their mental health. The usage of humour creates ambiguity around the seriousness of their mental illness, and uncertainty on whether to address their well-being. Suggesting the ridiculousness of a reality in which someone is suicidal is a way to describe how one is feeling without committing to being completely honest about one’s problems. Users suggest that mental illness is generally an over the top joke when they end with an “lol”, “lmao”, or a shrugging emoji to denote humour or a nonchalant attitude after sharing an upsetting anecdote or meme. However, drawing on the experiences of my interlocutors, when they share depression memes, humour is used to obscure serious sentiments around

mental health. These memes are re-understood as being sent by someone who indeed struggles with mental health, despite being presented fore-mostly as a joke.

In this chapter, I argue that depression memes are used to express how one is feeling, but are also used to distance oneself from the social consequences of sharing memes that convey suicidal sentiments. Depression memes have been used by my interlocutors as a key tool to gauge another's reaction due to their impersonal nature (an image taken from the internet) where they are able to be disconnected from the individual sharing the meme. Using depression memes in a way where users can begin to open up to others about their mental health demonstrates a bid for connection. However, they are wary of negative repercussions that may come with sharing intimate feelings. One feels more secure when humour is at the forefront of the interaction, and thus allows one the option to emotionally divest from the conversation by claiming it is solely for humour. The possibility of misinterpreting the meme would make acceptance and sympathy difficult if the meme is seen as a personal issue or failing of the individual showing the meme. For my informants, removing the individual from the meme is important in part due to the stigma they feel still exists around mental illness, even within the Discord server.

To join the Discord, I clicked the link posted on the 2meirl4meirl subreddit. This opens up the Discord application on my computer, and a new icon is added to the sidebar. Surprisingly animated, the icon for the server flashes rainbow neon in colour when it is hovered over with my mouse cursor, highlighting the all caps text of the icon, "DUDE DEPRESSION LMAO." There is something difficult about first working up the courage to type something up in the chat box. By posting some stand-alone statement or question, not in response to anyone else and not knowing if someone that would respond is online, there is this feeling of risk that I am about to be ignored. It is a feeling of futility because I am not recognized as someone worth interacting with. In addition, I had self-consciousness around the idea

that people would assume I was in the Discord for the same reasons they were, not wanting to be associated with having a mental health illness. When coming into the server looking for a space of understanding and non-judgment regarding mental illness, 2meirl4meirl feels more welcoming for others with that commonality than it was for someone immediately met with suspicion when I explained I was conducting research.[8] The context of the Discord server is a space where depression, mental illness, and other similar topics can be discussed casually and sardonically. When users first enter #general, the context of mental illness is not apparent within the server. After being in the server for a longer period of time, particular kinds of conversations, wording, images and attitudes are eventually understood as significant given the overt link the server has with mental health through depression memes.

Over time, by being in the server, one is eventually desensitized to conversations about mental health, and seeing mental illness presented in a meme or through humour is no longer considered insensitive or worrying. Fen, one of the moderators of the Discord, told me that what is actually worrying are not the depression memes depicting self-harm or self-hate, but a user's text posts, something described as “screaming their frustrations into a void.” Depression memes are meant for engagement and humour, therefore Fen is not worried when someone is still able to joke about their mental illness through memes, as it implies it has not yet become overwhelming. What is worrying is when they no longer have the capacity to joke about their problems, and feel it is too serious or upsetting to make light of. The Discord offers a place of connection and community to individuals who find discussion about mental illness easier to have with other users due to the belief that they have experienced mental illness themselves, and thus are able to empathize with one’s issues. Having the commonality of joking about one’s mental illness allows for connection between users, however,

8My first interaction with one of my interlocutors, Fen, was met with disdain and uncertainty as she told me studying the users of the Discord “tends to make people feel like they're freaks.”

expecting humour to be used to discuss mental health reveals that there is still a reluctance to share their problems openly and honestly. Therefore, when someone is no longer able to hide behind humour, their problems are understood by others to be overwhelming. But by being no longer able to distance themselves from the seriousness of their issues, many users such as Fen become unsure about whether or not they can offer the needed support.

Fen is empathetic and reasonable, she is one of the most well-liked, interactive, and approachable moderators in the Discord. However, she possesses an air of wariness, tiredness, and resignation underneath her calm and kind exterior. She is used to the Discord and the constant ongoing mental health discussions that it perpetuates. Fatigue around hearing and talking about mental illness is a common sentiment, and is the reason why there is a special channel dedicated to it known as #vent. Despite the understanding that Discord is a place where users can talk to each other about mental health, since mental illness being a common factor that many users share with each other, the server reveals itself as a place where its users prefer others to either use humour, or go to #vent. #Vent acts as a void, a space where nothing is supposed to exist within it, and nothing they throw in can come out of it, a concept I will develop further in chapter two. Understood as a space where the user is not othered, but still able to work on their issues without judgment, the #vent channel is where everyone has agreed, based on the channel description of “do not post here expecting a response”, to act as an observer to everyone else’s otherwise highly concerning posts, and at times, incoherent rambling under the pretense that there is no judgment or engagement, only acknowledgement.

Goffman described stigma with the uncertainty of being “assessed as a criminal and nothing else” despite pleasant encounters with others coming from an awareness of inferiority (Goffman, 1963; 14). Alex shares his dark humour through either depression memes or satirical posts. Alex, a recent graduate struggling with several mental health issues, who is feeling extremely misunderstood by his

unsupportive family, uses humour to cope with his problems. He explained he has feelings of worthlessness and extremely low self-esteem, and he believes he likely deserves the hardships in his life. Despite being well-liked by most members and users he would consider as friends, he views himself as a burden to friends and family, and does not share his issues with individuals he is not extremely close with except through the use of humour. Alex will very clearly state he is struggling with "self-loathing, feeling like [he] is just missing out on the life [he] should have had," then to avoid others taking his despondency too seriously, state the answer to his problems is something nonsensical, such as "gay space communism."[9] Instances like this made it seem difficult for other users to engage with him, and Alex did not receive a response. Though it is obvious he is struggling through major issues, the humour added on to these brief moments of insight into his personal life act as a barrier for users to coax more information out of him. Straightforwardly asking for someone to listen to his problems may have resulted in a more serious, engaging response, but the humour he included was not quite enough to dismiss the topic of self-loathing, nor was it clear he needed support as he detached himself from any emotional investment. He was ignored for this statement in the chat as #general conversation continued.

Even within the Discord, mental health stigma has been internalized within one's self image. It is difficult to discuss one's problems without feeling as if one is threatening the norms and the coherence of a social unit, in this context, as friendships and engagement with each other in the server. For Alex personally, the legitimacy of his mental health is called into question by his family because he feels there is an overwhelming pressure from his family and family doctor to "grit [his] teeth and bare it." Thus for him, being online and using humour is the only viable way for him to speak about his mental health to others who might show him sympathy. But there is still a particular way of sharing one's mental health through humour in the server. Alex needs to balance the usage of humour and

9 I have never figured out what he meant by this.

emotional divestment of his issues if he wants a response from others. Unless in a particular channel like #vent or #recovery, the conversation in a channel is not typically about one's mental illnesses, or serious issues stemming from it. If mental health is introduced as a theme in conversation, then in order for it to contribute to conversation, humour must be successfully used. Gallows humour must be able to mute the uncomfortableness of any mental health issue, otherwise stigma accentuates difference and otherness, and in Alex's case, he is even ignored by others who have their own mental health problems (Hinshaw, 2007; 9). Individuals establish guides and norms to live comfortably and cooperatively among others, and those who perpetuate actions branded as unhelpful are then isolated from the rest, or ignored (Ibid.). Individuals are given responsibility or blame for violating group codes, because behaviour and emotion are believed to be under a "volitional control"(Ibid.;11). That is either mental illness remains undisclosed, or it is revealed through successful gallows humour.

Although there is a growing awareness and effort to support mental health for individuals of different backgrounds and circumstances, stigma persists in the public opinion about people with mental health problems. Individuals with mental illness are still associated by the general public with "unpredictability, dangerousness, and violence," and in the workplace, individuals with mental illness are perceived as having a lower level of competence (Dobransky, 2020; 2; Knaak et al., 2017; 112). In the healthcare industry, 33% of emergency first responders reported experiencing stigma regarding mental health, with the most frequently cited stigma-related concern being the fear that seeking mental health services would negatively impact their careers (Haugen et al., 2017; 223). In some studies, doctors have also reported continuing to work while they are facing psychological problems, and expect their colleagues to do the same (Wallace, 2010). Furthermore, despite mainstream and public effort for mental health awareness and normalization, such as with Bell's Let's Talk campaign, providing adequate support and care for those struggling with mental illnesses is still under contention.

The campaign is under controversy due to a former Bell employee being fired for handing her supervisor a doctor's note indicating she needed two weeks to adjust to the new medication for her mental health (Peters, 2018: 402). Having mental illness did not excuse her from the social responsibility one has to uphold in functioning society, to come into work as expected. Mental health is still not prioritized because of either a lack of resources, dismissive attitudes, and the expectation of operating efficiently regardless of any mental health campaign.

Stigmatized individuals such as Ellie, a student from the UK in her early twenties suffering from depression, felt uncomfortable with how mental illness is perceived by her friends.[10] Despite having the opportunity to go to therapy, the server is a more significant place for her to understand her condition as normal: having a mental illness is a common trait of users in the Discord, as opposed to being a stigmatizing issue in the real world. She prefers online spaces to fit in and better understand herself without the fear of judgment from her friends and family. In the server, Ellie is surrounded by individuals she believes cares about her and goes through similar mental health issues. Among her internet friends, she attempts to use humour to share her depressive symptoms, but humour also acts as a way to depersonalize potentially worrying situations. Whatever scenario a meme presents will always be able to be dismissed as "just a joke" or "just a meme." Since Ellie does not explicitly state that she is suffering from a particular issue, such as Alex does, she is able to hide her personal sentiments behind the meme, and never have it personally attributed to herself. A meme might reveal suicidal tendencies without requiring her or any person who shares it to be assessed in relation to it. "Internet memes can be described as humorous or satiric digital texts involving multimedia content that are repeatedly shared across the Internet" (Willmore and Hocking, 2017: 41). To this definition, I would add that this is often done with recursive meaning and a constant appropriation of the context. As I discussed in the

10 I originally approached this user because everything she said in #general had an air of bitterness and dry humour. Her openness and honesty during our interview was much different from the persona she has when posting in the Discord.

Introduction, due to the redefining of memes as they mutate, and are embellished upon by meme consumers, memes become depersonalized from any one person even when the “original” meme can be attributed to a single user. Memes about serious mental illness can remain funny, easier to share despite the personalized additions because it retains the essential core of the original to enjoy (Dawkins, 1976: 195), which is something that Ellie did not create.

Dawkins understands memes as possessing “copying fidelity” in the original concept of a meme, where one blends the meme for one’s own purpose, altering the meme for one’s own enjoyment. The fact it did not originate from the friend sharing the depression meme makes it easier to pass off as unrelated to one’s character or self. There is no personal responsibility, and the individual is not being assessed according to what the meme presents, because the entire situation is in a displaced image. Any reaction to the image is to the detached situation at hand, and one understands it is not the personal beliefs or issues of the person sharing the meme.

The distance that the Discord maintains between its users is seen as a positive aspect when they explain their reasoning for not wanting to share their feelings with their loved ones and family members. When I spoke to Ellie about the ease of sharing personal issues with the people on Discord versus the people in her real life, she said that “sharing those issues in real life feels more consequential” and comes with an intent to help or provide solutions. Whereas with the Discord, “communities are already created with the presumption that everyone is dealing with this so it’s nothing special.” As I personally experienced entering the Discord, there is a feeling of nervousness around not only being somewhere new among strangers, but with being thought of and categorized as mentally ill. One user, Lucas, who will be introduced in chapter three, describes his usage of humour as a way to “lighten up the mood...I don't want to chase the truth.” Offline, having mental illness is a trait in which Ellie feels othered by, but the 2meirl4meirl Discord feels like a haven filled with people that

understand her problems. Since depression and other mental health problems are significant topics in certain channels of the Discord, all users are aware that many of the server's members actively want to discuss their issues, but have entered the server because it was not possible to do so comfortably in their offline lives. Outside of the channels of the server dedicated to mental health, such as #vent and #recovery, serious discussion about mental health is much more sparse. More serious symptoms of depression, such as self-harm, is a topic of contention in the server, in which users will be asked to leave the #general chat to post in #vent instead. The best way to incorporate conversations about mental illness in #general is through gallows humour, which is a normal part of the server and provides a feeling of safety. Normalizing gallows humour is a sentiment that has been expressed in the memes themselves (see figure 1.2) such as ones that describe one's mental illness as the reason for their sense of humour (Fisher and Fisher, 1982).

Figure 1.2: "Using humour to deflect trauma" meme (https://i.pinimg.com/originals/17/78/3a/17783a4b4ba06bd549330b7a18dd1e38.jpg)

Ian Hacking discusses the concept of looping effects of human kinds, with human kinds defined as behaviours, acts or temperaments that are used to characterize kinds of people (Hacking, 1995: 2). The knowledge we have about people is in part because we also have internalized these classifications. Intentional action is explained through the identification of the kind of person they are, and how people

interact with their classifications can transform them (Hacking, 18). Depressed, bi-polar, anxious, and so forth, are roles one can adopt in their understanding of how they act or are described, similar to the Roles on Discord a user can actively give themselves when one clicks on their profile. Some Roles on Discord are self-assigned and descriptive, such as ones that state pronouns or sexuality, which then become visible on a user's profile when one clicks on their username. Other Roles are nonsensical phrases that intend on displaying one's ironic or satirical humour: "gay baby", "stupid lol", "pasta." These phrases are not categorical roles one understands as a way of defining individuals, instead, the purpose behind adopting silly in-server labels is to suggest that the user has a sense of humour. No matter what role one assigns to themselves, the belief that all users struggle with mental illness to some degree is assumed by the members of the server. However, having humorous labels associated with their username creates a juxtaposition between the topic of mental illness, and off-beat humour.

Clicking on their profile is an attempt at further understanding the person for other users who are interested in knowing more about this person. Regardless of the differences between what constitutes an "online" or "offline" identity, the matter of one's sense of humour is what is important, which is also apparent for others to see with the usage of these Roles. Similar to the concealing effects of depression memes or satirical text, the ability to simply be associated as a humorous individual also creates a distance from posting upsetting issues. However, due to how common it is for users to use silly and satirical labels to describe themselves, the fact they are still struggling with, and posting about their mental illness remains consistent. Having a sense of humour simply becomes another characteristic of users who suffer from depression. I have also often clicked on a user's profile to further understand what kind of person would be reacting in a certain way in the chat. While it was originally amusing to see someone who identified with "skimmed milk" and another person with "whole milk", they are both ultimately understood as individuals with mental health problems, and

being funny does not remove them from this category.

When a user enters the 2meirl4meirl Discord for the first time, other users are unsure what to expect from a new user: all they can gather is that the new user is likely "struggling with mental health." As they begin to further engage with the regulars in the server, who explicitly identify with depression or another mental illness, along with the Roles and interests one learns about through interaction in the server, new users often begin to redefine themselves. This does not take place for all users, but those who actively engage with each other for a long enough period of time, such that friendships are formed and the server becomes a regular place of gathering for them. Perhaps outside of oneself, new ways of classifying, or redefining what one understands as mentally ill also changes how they can think of themselves. Hacking states that new knowledge becomes what is known about members of the kind, who can change again (Hacking, 19). In this way, the individuals themselves, and definitions that classify mental illnesses and the kinds of people that have them, are dynamic. This dynamism, however, reveals a subtle issue with the Discord and depression memes. The plethora of labels allows for many kinds of people to be redefined as more than "mentally ill", but they are all still members of the 2meirl4meirl Discord server. In the server, users are defined by their relation to or suffering from mental illness. The depression meme that drew them in, indeed drew me in, has at its core depression, mental illness, or at least symptoms of such: users join because of the apparent association with mental health and humour. Redefinition of mental illness, or reclassification of 'kind,' in part functions to de-centre mental illness as the defining trait of a person. At the same time, however, it also fosters the sense that mental illness can target any kind of person and become a defining characteristic for them to navigate.

The Roles function neatly lists out several different labels one can have in the server. Maybe the ability for users to identify with a plethora of descriptions is why the stigma of mental health is

presumed to be less apparent on the Discord. Not only are users presumed to be open and accepting regarding mental illness, but also that being mentally ill is not the focal point in one's identity. "Sad" can be a Role alongside "DnD nerd", and knowledge of what is originally defined as depressed or suicidal is added upon with the inclusion of several kinds of people. The usage of Roles is an attempt by the users who assign them to themselves to abandon what constitutes as mentally ill as old knowledge (Hacking, 19) when individuals have struggled with the validity of their symptoms fitting within a narrow understanding of mental illness (figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: A screenshot of a meme from a depression meme page on Instagram (image by author).

The sentiment in the meme above aligns with the overall context of the Discord server: it is a group of self-aware individuals who suffer from mental health problems and understand that not

everyone needs to constantly fit into the classic stereotype of quiet and unhappy to legitimately have depression. The likeness, or capacity for other users to understand them in the server, while being different enough to dismantle any archetype or stereotype of how they should be acting or feeling dispels stigma when labels ultimately fail to completely define any one person. On the surface level, this works to dispel stigma, especially to confirm the server as a space of belonging. However, over time, redefining the stereotypical behaviour of those who have mental illness will still encompass most people in the 2meirl4meirl server. As I have mentioned above, it is commonplace to use descriptive Roles to associate an individual with having a sense of humour, and humour allows one to distance themselves from the seriousness of mental illness. Being associated as a humorous individual allows for the possibility that any text post one makes to be considered a joke, and the user does not have to rely exclusively on memes to create distance. Since most users assign themselves an absurd in-server Role, the characteristic of being funny or humorous appears to apply to a majority of users. However, the basis of the server is that the majority of users also self-identify with being mentally ill. Thus, having both a sense of humour and being mentally ill are characteristics believed to be associated with most users.

Distance from mental health is no longer created, but rather being mentally ill in the server exists in tandem with having a sense of humour. Continuing the analysis of figure 1.3, it ultimately confirms feelings of invalidation, a suspicion that one may be making up their symptoms of mental illness. The meme is representative of the fear one has when their mental illness is not debilitating, and despite being able to accomplish necessary tasks, the user still possesses an understanding that unless they are constantly affected and hindered by mental health, their issues are not valid enough for them to be considered mentally ill. In some cases, such as Alex's, these feelings manifest themselves as a fear of burdening others with what they believe to be low-priority problems, because other people may be

suffering with what they perceive to be more legitimate mental health disorders, and thus choose to hide their own problems in humour.

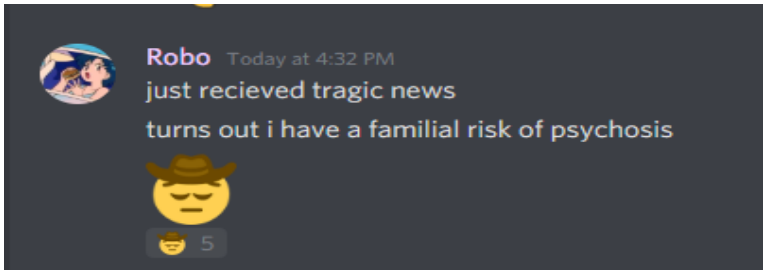

Figure 1.4: Users reacting with the 'sad cowboy' emoji to "tragic news" (Image by author)

In interviews, my interlocutors have used the phrase "too close to home" or "too real" to criticize depression memes that were too literal, blunt, and straight to the point about suffering in a scenario they themselves have experienced. It was not that the memes were poorly made, but it was a sensitive topic for the individual who wanted to gently let others know it was relatable to them in a serious and potentially uncomfortable way so that the issue would not continue to be the subject of joking. The gallows humour in these memes were not enough to facilitate joking about the content, thus it is "too real," and not funny enough. Sometimes memes or attempts at joking that are considered "too real" are ignored, but other times emoji reactions used, which are little images that convey the sentiment one has for it, also used just to acknowledge the post. In figure 1.4, a user posts news about a kind of psychosis that is prominent in his family, which is reacted to with emojis. Though the user posting about a health problem in his family has used the cowboy emoji to convey a degree of humour to ease some tensions, it is difficult to respond because other individuals (his family members) are involved. Making light of a family issue where the mental health of several people who are not involved in the server is avoided because these individuals are unable to represent themselves to server members. Thus, instead of continuing this topic of conversation, the other users have chosen to "react" with the same emoji and opt not to respond with text.

Emojis are used as a tool to respond without being intimate or engaging because they are impersonal images that were created by moderators of the server. When Alex posts he hopes for some kind of acknowledgement, “just a thumbs up or whatever,” emojis seems to be the response one receives when others do not find what has been posted to be either funny enough, or interesting enough for a more engaging response. Otherwise, the post in question may just be too serious to be able to handle. For example, a post pointedly stating that “therapy is nice, but venting in the vent channel is a lot faster and cheaper!” had 5 people “upvote it”, a system taken from Reddit, recreated with an orange arrow to act as an upvote emoji, a symbol of agreement with the post. It is easier to react with a pregenerated emoji than to use one’s own words as a response, similar to how sharing a meme is a simple method used to present issues pertaining to mental illness. Emojis do not take the place of emotions, but are general enough that several different ones can be used as a reaction to a post or meme. The need for users to distance themselves emotionally from other users are apparent in the practice of responding through emojis. A textual response creates an obligation or possibility for the original user to reply once more, in order to follow the script of a conversation. Communication between users is stunted when words require too much emotional engagement, and emojis and other images are the only other alternatives. Since emojis are not followed up with a textual response, users have come to expect that emojis end the topic at hand. Oftentimes, emojis allow users to know that their feelings have been noticed by others, but offer no further bid for connection.

In the context of stigma, memes have been used to address serious concerns in a way that uses humour to both shape and reject social responses (Marcus and Singer, 2017: 349). Different types of humour may be used for different purposes. For instance, on completely separate occasions, several of my interlocutors described depression memes as a “test to gauge someone’s reaction before you go any further” regarding their attitudes toward mental illness. Actively dispelling the humour in a depression

meme by admitting one has mental health issues is reserved for after the user is able to gauge whether it is safe to reveal these sensitive topics. Are they someone that would sympathize and be able to trust, or are they another person who would minimize and belittle their struggles? Seeing how someone reacts to less obvious symptoms of mental illness, such as memes that refer to the well-known sentiment of burnout due to personal and professional responsibility, which often share similar characteristics with depression memes, and the degree of sympathy that arises from such memes. With a range of different depression memes, from conveying basic anxiety over schoolwork, to that of suicidal ideation, one must select the proper meme to present to another (figures 1.5 and 1.6.).

Figure 1.5: Sesame Street suicide meme (https://ifunny.co/picture/X7tD6PoB7)

Figure 1.6: Work burnout meme (https://me.me/i/me-during-my-current-phase-me-during-my-emo-phase-852116088acb42b1831fffb7759de550)

To understand the usage and working of subversive humour, “working out what people think they are up to involves a close scrutiny of the means they have available for expressing and understanding themselves and their world” (Hine, 2015; 27). Carefully crafting and selecting how to present their issues, and to whom, is a task that potentially makes one vulnerable as mental illness becomes apparent. Memes provide a method of being open to others, providing a way to participate and engage with the Discord community. Vulnerability from the stigma of mental illness accentuated Alex's fear of being judged, disliked, or ridiculed, and to some users it is better to entirely avoid these

experiences. Alex has frequently expressed being lonely and misunderstood. He is also worried about how others would perceive him, which is why he avoids openly discussing his mental health problems. The Discord exists as a space where users willingly avoid speaking to others, as they post in a specific channel known as the #vent channel. As I will further discuss in chapter two, the #vent channel is a space of self-imposed isolation and constructed nothingness. It shows how people understand their internal issues as troubling to the larger group, thus moving away from them, yet how the space actually functions reveals the need for recognition from others.

Humour found in depression memes has used Susanna Trnka's (2019) idea of "absurd realities" as the impetus for laughter. It is understood to be a situation so unlikely, that imagining it happening must be a joke. The incongruent theory of humour has been defined with the transgression of logic and incongruity through humour, linking tragedy and comedy together as the phenomena that deviates from established expectations (Dadlez and Luthi, 2018: 82). From the example of the meme shown below in figure 1.7, the possibility of an asteroid hitting the earth is already unlikely, and somehow shifting the earth's position by collectively leaning into the path of the asteroid is impossible. Yet, this scenario is funny due to its absurdity, and the humour is able to mute the overarching suicidal connotations and bleakness of reality where not only does one prefer to get by an asteroid, but enough others feel the same way to participate in the leaning into the path of destruction. Even despite the punchline, the blunt statement of "to be clear we are trying to get hit," the meme does not dwell on its desire for death, because death in this situation is impossible. The humour then exists because one does not actually want to die. Stated by Susanna Trnka, "By pushing the boundaries of what people imagined to be possible, their jokes suggested that there was indeed a realm of impossibility" (Trnka, 2019: 64). The desire for an impossible situation, even with it alludes to the desire for death, does not feel like an emergency that requires immediate attention. It is presented as something impossible, thus even if the

desire for death is real, the means by which it is meant to be accomplished cannot happen. Without needing to worry about the other being burdened by an obligation to help or reassure, depression memes cultivate the open transmission of inferiorities, insecurities, and neuroticisms without the fear of being assessed, or stigmatized, by the other.

Figure 1.7: Leaning into the Asteroid meme (https://twitter.com/PleaseBeGneiss/status/1297336868309094400)

Classifying a certain scenario as absurd allows one to manage their public appearance, and the sentiment that would have been conveyed by conversations about self-harm or feelings of worthlessness is momentarily suspended outside of concern and judgment. Such scenarios are absurdly "unreal" (Trnka, 65). There is some catharsis for users in presenting stigmatizing issues, but little else is offered in terms of connection with other users when humour is again used to distance oneself from the concern suicidal ideations brings from others. As Goffman states, "the stigmatized individual may exhibit identity ambivalence when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way, flamboyantly or pitifully acting out the negative attributes" (1963; 115). To new users, posting depression memes in the most active channel may seem like a good way to receive attention from other

users. But posting depression memes for the sake of acknowledgement is redundant when the Reddit forum already exists as a space to do so, and users have also chosen to join the Discord for a different kind of engagement. As such these memes are often ignored when the conversation is not about mental health. Unlike the users of the 2meirl4meirl Reddit forum, the Discord users are looking for a community beyond seeing out of context, detached images. Since mental illness is not typically discussed in #general, simply dropping one in the chat box while other users are having a conversation is at best, lightly interacted with, or at its worst, jarring and abrupt to see.

The dedicated meme channel, #post, consists of a variety of memes, from cute cat pictures, to political memes, and video game memes, but depression memes themselves are scarce. There is no channel for depression memes specifically, and thus posting depression memes can feel isolating especially if no one responds. Though humour and shared experiences would be successful in allowing users to bond with each other, the need for humour creates a sense of disempowerment (Kidd et al. 2009; 1425). Depression memes are funny because of their satirical presentation, and it is appropriate to laugh at one's mental health if presented with humour, but to seriously discuss these problems requires effort. Fen is not concerned when depression memes are sent to her or posted in the server, because “if they were actually going through shit, they wouldn’t be sending me this.” Depression memes in the server are typically only found in situations where they can only be interpreted as humorous.

Often in the text channels, the memes posted are interpreted as simply stating some truth that others can relate to. The meme posted in Figure 1.8 (see below) was actively relevant, since the conversation around its posting was about classes in economics or marketing, then the statement, “office worker is just another term for depressed” is not currently an upsetting topic to be avoided or handled in a serious manner. Shown in Figure 1.9, the meme is relevant and does not seem out of place

despite being a depression meme. Due to its impersonal nature, and relevancy in a discussion about school courses related to office work, there was no feeling that it was “too real.” Since most 2meirl4meirl users are already suffering from depression, the humour reinforces the belief that office work is depressing, and office workers are depressed, therefore users going into this field will simply continue being depressed. Most depression memes are straight forward, such as a stick figure presented as a father figure saying “are ya bearing the weight of the full spectrum of human emotion with no chemical buffer, son?” and another stick figure, the son, crying, responding with “yes.” This is funny, at least in part due to the uncomplicated feeling or thought process it conveys. Referring to serotonin and other hormones that stabilize one’s mood, the bluntness highlights the absurdity of the situation. One should not have to feel overwhelmed by the entire spectrum of human emotion without the ability to regulate it, as the human body and brain naturally function to do so, but it demonstrates that it is indeed the case for some Discord users who relate to the meme.

Figure 1.8

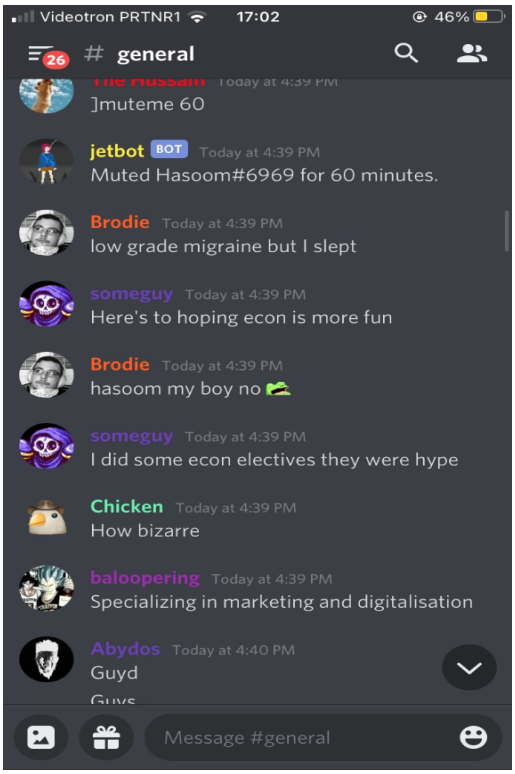

Figure 1.9

Figure 1.8 is relevant to the conversation in #general in Figure 1.9 (images by author)

Furthermore, depression memes are limited by what they can offer in terms of deep conversation about mental illness because the users who share them are actively managing themselves in relation to stigma. My interlocutors have described these memes as “the gateway” of being able to talk about mental illness. Alex considered it “a way to gauge reaction and test the waters” with how one sympathizes with the feeling of anxiety or frustration with mental health. As someone who confided in me about his fear of losing or being abandoned by his friends, he is deeply concerned about what they may think of him. With their reaction, he feels as if he would know if he is then able to open up to them further if they relate to his experiences, or otherwise be subject to indifference or even ridicule. Knowing that others recognize one’s own stigmatized identity category is apparent in understanding what makes a depression meme comical. Being able to share depression memes instead allows for him to communicate to others how he feels, but with the added comfort of being able to separate his feelings as “just a meme.”

When Alex confronts his mental illness without humour, thereby accepting his situation, he regards himself as a “bad friend” for needing emotional support from his friends when he struggles with anxiety or feelings of worthlessness. Despite being reassured he is not a bad friend, these feelings are ironically reinforced by the need to be comforted, and being told he is not worthless. A feeling of shame nevertheless surfaces as the individual realizes they othered due to their mental health. Aes, another one of my interlocutors, and Alex have both specified that their family members’ reaction to depression have been met with awkward attempts to “help” or fix the problem. Therapy has been begrudgingly suggested by Alex's family, whispered as if the word itself could bring shame and stigma upon the person recommending the need for professional help. Alex’s suffering is acknowledged by his loved ones, and the fear of judgment comes from either a misalignment of each others’ understanding

of what mental illness entails, as well as when both groups are unable to meet the expectations of each other. As I have shown, humour offers protection from these expectations when one can claim it was all a joke. Humourless individuals may assume depression memes are joking about mental illness in bad faith, but this is dismissive, especially when these users themselves hope for mental health awareness and acceptance of their own issues. However, concern does not offer comfort when the good in the other is only perceived under the pretense of suffering, not imaginatively conceived as inherent despite the stigma (Robbins, 2013:457). Moreover, posting a meme that upsets someone else would then cause him distress, and thus Alex avoids posting anything that would be taken in any other way but as a joke.

Many of my interlocutors have dwindling patience for individuals that believe mental illness is still a taboo topic, but at the same time often internalize this same stigma. Mike is a user who is well known for being in the Discord as someone who helps those who are struggling by responding to their posts. He scornfully explained how he believes depression is still viewed as a personal failing. For him, no matter how he explains his thoughts and feelings, he felt as if the other person would belittle him with phrases like, “what do you have to be depressed about?” He no longer appreciates depression memes, and describes them as “tasteless.” Mike, though he believes memes can help others begin to talk about their mental health, only sees them useful in a scenario where someone is already likely to be accepted, and memes that joke about mental health further invalidate his issues. As a tool to inform others of one’s mental health, the joke needs to be carefully used. Alex, who spoke about his family and his disconnect with them regarding his depression, understands his family as wanting to help him, but the reality of the entire situation feels too awkward for them to act. It is almost a familial failure, or burden, when their son suffers from depression. He does not share any depression memes with them because the humour is not comforting for them. The “gateway” for talking about mental health is not a scenario they want to have realized. Family members likely do not recognize the distance from others

gallows humour is trying to achieve since the content of any depression meme can be concerning to close families.

Despite the awkwardness depression memes can bring for family, my interlocutors have no issue with sharing them with chosen friends within the server. The depression meme is ultimately depersonalized from the members of the 2meirl4meirl Discord community, as none of them made the memes they share, there is plausible deniability regarding any serious sentiment to be interpreted and projected onto the user sharing the meme. By using depression memes to "gauge their reaction" to a relatable experience, there is some therapeutic function in being able to release some frustration or reveal parts of their suffering often kept to themselves. Rather than having the meme explicitly proclaim an individual's mental health issues, it is still cathartic to have that sentiment released for others to interpret. The individuals themselves are then able to either share more of their experiences impersonally through memes, or if the recipient is deemed a "safe" person, can then actively open up about their mental health. Otherwise, users who decide they are uncomfortable with sharing more details about personal problems, are able to suggest that they are simply misinterpreting them and the phrase "it's just a joke" has been used interchangeably with "it's just a meme." Alex has expressed his aversion to sharing depression memes with others who would take the memes at face value, even when presented with humorous intent. He does not want to share a meme if the other person is going to become concerned and follow up with his mental health, no matter how obviously sarcastic the meme is presented.

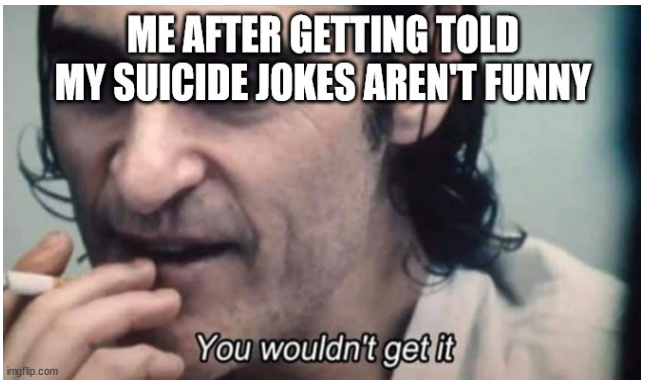

Figure 1.13: "You Wouldn't Get it" meme (image recreated by author)

Sometimes my interlocutors sent me memes during interviews, ones that best depict the sentiments they are trying to explain to me. Often, in the personal experiences they describe for me, I am asked if I understand how they were feeling at that moment, or what their thought processes were, in hopes of helping me relate to them. By sending me the meme, they are attempting to recreate the scenario where their experience could be revealed and understood by me, with the meme acting as a catalyst for whatever they experienced. They are bolstered when I tell them I do, and when I do not, they go deeper in detail or use another example so I may better relate to them. Depression memes allowed many of my interlocutors to gauge the reaction that someone important to them would have to a friend struggling with mental disorder. The context of a meme gave permission for laughter at depression since, according to Mike, the goal of a meme is to elicit laughter rather than receive a serious response. This lightheartedness is not necessarily dismissive, but each of my interlocutors are nonetheless constantly monitoring themselves when in relation to others. Someone's understanding of a meme may be entirely removed from someone else's understanding of the same meme. Memes that are able to distance the user from their emotional context, thereby protecting them from negative interpretation from other individuals, ultimately also devoid them of any emotional connection. Concealing humour results in a generic depression meme that many users can find humour in, but is not

specific to an individual, and thus best communicates the symptoms of mental illness without judgment from other users. Depression memes are then best used as a therapeutic tool, like a lens able to view mental illness without causing a feeling of otherness in the individual that shares them.

The expression of depression is based in isolation that stemmed from stigma. Without a lack of meaningful connections, people tend to retreat socially and become hyper-suspicious about social interaction (Hari, 2019: 94). This is where the Discord becomes a place for those who have withdrawn socially to go find connection. It is a medium where escape from uncomfortable social interaction can be easier because the internet can be as personal or impersonal as the user desires it to be. A lack of meaningful connection due to the barriers caused by stigma causes others to fear social interaction, or at least want to regulate interaction to prevent themselves from being hurt or judged, but individuals still desire to recover from loneliness.

I understand the gallows humour used in memes have created ambiguity and distance between users even within a server that intends on creating a welcoming community. Furthermore, how users interact with each other through comedy may be completely different every time. The way gallows humour will be interpreted or how interpersonal relationships will develop is a process that varies between time, channels, and the users involved. Moreover, stigmatization is a process that cannot be eliminated, but is instead managed daily through interactions in the Discord (Meisenbach, 2010). Participation in the server inherently creates more stigma in order to maintain it as the in-group. As Burke (1969) states, “Identification is compensatory to division” (Burke, 22). Though individuals enter the Discord at the point in their lives where they have withdrawn from others in the physical world, and the virtual space may seem like a refuge from judgment and offer connection, social distance continues through the very memes meant to circumvent stigma. In the context of the 2meirl4meirl Discord and its channels for speaking about mental illness, the #vent channel seemingly offers a space where the

pretense of its usage is as a void where one can rant about anything they want without consequence or confrontation. Though this may seem in line with the withdrawal from social interaction, the users of the Discord realize it to be filled with others like them. This space continues the feeling of distance from others, despite being an attempt at circumventing stigma among an “anti-community,” which will be expanded on in the second chapter.

Chapter 2: Anti-Community

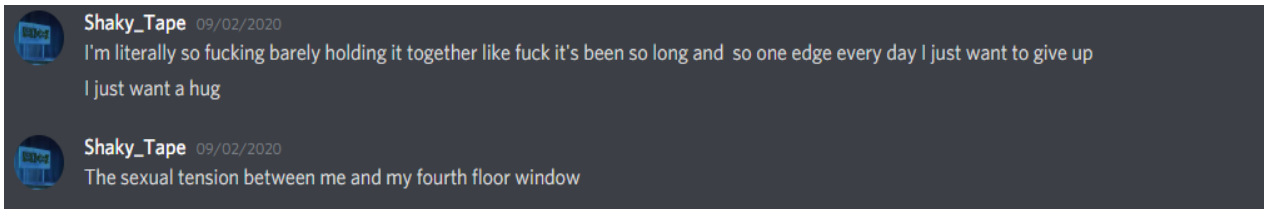

Figure 2.1. Welcome to #vent (image by author)

#Vent's channel description is "For when you want to yell at the void. Do not post here expecting answers. Banter, jokes, and memes are not allowed." Users in #vent release tensions by posting upsetting issues in the channel. Many posts allude to suicide. And yet, responding and interacting with others in this space is not expected. If more than one user is active in the channel at the same time, they often talk over each other, concerned with posting about their own issues without any engagement with the other person: it is clear, connection with others is not the object. In figure 2.1, the phrase "the sexual tension between me and my fourth-floor window" is humorous, because it evokes a sense of desire - desire for suicide. Yet because the object of desire is simply a window, the humour in this post resonates with the absurd I developed in chapter one. Again, gallows humour is used as a way to mollify concern, but posting in #vent where there is no expectation of a response then raises the question: who is the humour directed toward? Despite a lack of response, users know that other users are able to see everything they post. This is one instance that illustrates what I will develop as "anti-community" in this chapter. I define the anti-community not as a lack of community, but one that is quiet, tacit, and appears to be absent in the #vent channel. The server is made up of a group of people who relate with each other about experiences with mental health but avoid interacting with each other in the channel where mental illness is most prominent. When someone is venting (also having to come to a particular channel away from most of the user-base in #general to do so), they are avoided and vent alone. The lack of responses to posts, in fact the very existence of a channel dedicated to "vents and

venting," demonstrates that the hardships one has with mental health are still distanced from others.

The #vent channel is described by Fen and Ellie as "the void." They refer to it as such because it is a place where one can "scream," where one can post about things that are bothering them without any restraint, without the expectation of a response or answer. However, Ellie finds the void comforting because she can see others venting, and for her, this makes her feel less alone in her struggles because other users are going through similar problems. She wants to be able to post about mental illness without holding back, and without the fear of judgment. The above suggests that the unspoken agreement users have with each other regarding the absence of community in the #vent channel is actually a method of affirming solidarity through each other's shared experiences with mental health.

In Chapter One, gallows humour is used as a method of managing mental health. By using an online platform under a username, #vent is another method for managing mental health without causing concern to their loved ones in real life. Although posts in #vent are easily accessible by all users, they are written for the personal record of an individual. However, since the individual knows other users are able to see their posts, vents are occasionally written with some sort of humour to maintain the distancing effect. Combined with the expectation that one's posts are ignored, humour acts as an additional barrier from other users, #vent removes much of the impact of another user's responses.

Firstly, one is not supposed to respond to others in #vent. Though it is not a server rule, it is a social norm as stated by the channel description "do not post here expecting answers." Next, even if another user does respond to one's vents, there is no obligation to respond in return, as anything posted in #vent can be dismissed. #vent creates a space where it is common to see one's struggle with mental illness without the context of humour, managed in a way where the fear of stigma is lessened due to the very low instances of engagement. Nonetheless, Ellie gains a sense of acknowledgement from users who go into #vent and see what she has posted. Feeling as if she is removed from being judged when

posting about her issues in a space designated to do so, along with a certainty that other users will not press her for discussion is a key dimension of what I will develop in this chapter as “anti-community.” Explicit issues about one's mental illness are the only topics in #vent, but how the channel manages interaction with other users nullifies the need for concern and judgment. The Discord server uses humour to avoid direct conversation, and the #vent channel discourages user to user interaction as venting is considered intimate and personal. While it may seem that this context makes meaningful communication impossible, this might in fact be the only way for the users to talk without feeling uncomfortable.

In this chapter, I will first discuss how the interactions users have with each other in #general or other parts of the server are distinct and kept separate from their posts in #vent. Though everything posted in #vent is available for everyone to see, users typically respect each-others' desire to vent their feelings without any response, positive or negative, from others in the server. This tacit agreement to disregard vents indicates a shared understanding of the purpose and desire to express oneself without feeling the need to censor oneself. I examine how users reveal their mental health struggles to members of the server without actively conversing with each other. Rather, the act of posting about their frustrations in the kind of post known as a vent presents their issues for others to see without there being the direct recipient of the message. Additionally, a feeling of belonging is fostered by seeing users post about one's mental illness and its accompanying experiences, which then encourages other users to post similar content. This community forms through tacit understanding of how a user is expected to act in #vent through experiencing the channel first hand rather than relying on textual instruction or regular interaction between users. This channel allows me to elaborate upon what I am referring to as the anti-community. Drawing on my fieldwork in the #vent channel, which my participants and I also refer to as the void, I argue that this designated channel fulfills the need to

release tensions without the worry of being stigmatized. Posts written there are considered "discarded:" something that needed to be released and acknowledged, but not reacted to, with users knowing that one does not post in #vent expecting a response. The #vent channel creates a community based on a lack of interaction among users, and it is the absence of engagement yet recognition of similar others also venting around oneself that creates a space of understanding.

Though Fen and Ellie define #vent as a "void," #vent is only a void insofar as users make it one: the community built on the server agrees to a kind of absence in #vent, allowing it to function, most of the time, *as if it were* a void. Though the pretense is that #vent is a place free of social expectations created by the presence of others, it is only able to function as a place of catharsis and release because of the other people that make up the channel. I once asked Aes what made #vent different from writing in a diary. Aes is another student in his early twenties, currently living California with his parents, who actively attends therapy for his mental health conditions. He is a moderator for the Discord server and is thus often online. But he is also hesitant to post in #vent. To answer my question, he said that it was not the same as writing it in a notebook for yourself because other people get to see it, and as such is the preferred channel to use for many serious posts about mental health. Similarly, Ellie mentioned that while individuals often leave things unsaid regarding what is posted in #vent, she finds comfort in the rare occasions where someone will innocuously ask her how she is doing in #general, attributing this prompting from seeing her vents. Throughout this chapter, I will examine how #vent frequently fails its own community understanding of non-engagement: from a user reaching out to Ellie in a careful manner as to not upset her for responding to a vent, to how another user misunderstands the purpose of the void and attempt to respond to users posting in the #vent channel.

Information about a user in #vent, once learned, is not remarked upon as something interesting,

rather it becomes background knowledge about a user or event. #vent is understood as the channel where users go to post about anything without restraint, moreover, it is separated from the rest of the server and not brought up in other channels. Ellie states the void is a place where she can post about her depression, then leave other spaces "clean." It is not taken with her into other channels. Aes may bring up a discussion about chess he was having with someone else into #general, but this is not the case with #vent.[11] What is posted in #vent is not re-discussed in detail to among other users; rather it becomes background knowledge about a user. I have learned a lot about various regular users that I have only spoken to once or twice because of my observations in #vent. I would also never bring up my knowledge of their lives to them because they did not tell me personally, do not know that I know of their problems, and to do so would feel intrusive since these vents were directed into the void. Rather the void is a place to release one's emotional burdens to no one in particular, thus also removing the responsibility one has to respond.

On the topic of an "authentic" self online, Tom Boellstroff has described his understanding of the virtual world as a place where the one's online life was "closer to what they understood to be their true self-hood, unencumbered by social constraints or particularities of physical embodiment" (Boellstroff, 2018;121). In some regards, this is what my own interlocutors have expressed. Ellie clarified that, "satirical humour is not always satirical," then described the difficulty she has with joking to her real-life friends about her depression or sharing depression memes as she fears they will "see through" the joke. Whereas on the Discord, because she feels others are like her and understand her position, she can joke about mental health without needing to clarify she is currently stable, or worry about inviting concern over the state of her mental health. #vent, as a space, facilitates this: Ellie is unrestrained by the social constraints of discussing her mental health. There is no joke to "see through" or misinterpret as she clearly states what is upsetting her in #vent, in which she is allowed to

11 Aes really likes chess.

speak freely because the #vent channel functions to listen but not respond. Unlike Boellstroff's 'Second Life' players, one's selfhood in the Discord is not more authentic or genuine online than it is offline solely because of social constraint. Objectively, Aes and Ellie know they can speak to their friends or therapists offline, but they do not want the offers of help, discussion, or pity that accompanies the discussions with these people. #vent, however, lacks the sociability usually found in conversations with other individuals. It is alluring as a space in which to speak freely, when one feels the need to be heard and nothing else.

Both Aes and Ellie go to therapy to discuss their problems to a therapist in a clinical manner, yet Aes still experiences outbursts of emotion similar to those who choose to rant in #vent. Aes fears the possibility for others silently judging him for his mental health issues, whether that person be his therapist or other users in the Discord. Aes is the same person offline and online in regard to his hesitancy to speak about his mental illness. Though there are things he would rather keep from his parents or therapist, they are equally topics he would not have other users of the Discord learn about him, more of which will be covered in Chapter 3.

Figure 2.2: Memes that depict the feeling of being invalidated for one's mental health (image by author)

In #vent, users have frequently posted stories or experiences they have had dealing with distress in their families or significant others in relation to that user's mental health. Alex is unable to

communicate his issues to his parents. If he keeps his feelings to himself, he feels lonely and misunderstood, however he has also expressed that his parents would only berate him for his feelings of anxiety and depression if he were to reach out to them. Alex has needed to convince, almost beg, his family doctor to prescribe him anti-anxiety medicine, because his doctor was someone who believed patients with mental illness symptoms simply needed to "toughen up and think themselves out of it." This feeling of invalidation is a common theme in memes: figure 2.2 for instance, expresses resentment toward parents who understand depression as a character flaw rather than a mental illness. When presenting their issues in #vent, Ellie and Alex can avoid social complications if no one interacts with them. Unless they post, a lurker in #vent judging others negatively will never be acknowledged. Instead, Ellie and Alex have understood themselves to be similar to the others in their community, by seeing others post in #vent, they have found validation in sharing their experiences to users that describe similar sentiments and scenarios without worry.

The validation from being able to see other users in the void post their own vents also seems to be part of a broader understanding of the how the anti-community functions as a method of community despite the absence of tangible affirmation between users in #vent. Validation is not given textually in the form of a post or message, but in the sense of belonging and community in which several users are doing something similar: that is, by presenting their vulnerabilities to the void. When members of the server are collectively posting about upsetting experiences in #vent, it normalizes the action, and mental illness is perceived as widely accepted in the server despite its relegation to one specific channel.[12] The understanding of how and what to post in the Discord because of how others will respond to it extends beyond #vent. Since the Discord is linked to the subreddit, which is completely focused on depression memes, I had originally, and wrongfully, assumed that posting depression

12 That is posting about mental illness is a negative manner, as I will discuss in chapter three, #recovery is another channel where mental illness is also the focal point, but in terms of hope for recovering.

memes in the server is a way to break the ice and participate in the community. I learned this is not the case.[13] Alex once told me something as small as an emoji is all he wanted in terms of sharing memes and felt discouraged when no one would respond in this way. The desire for interaction and acknowledgement contributes to the adaptation of what goes on in #general to be able to participate in conversation. Since the anti-community manages to provide validation without needing to textually affirm users, the concept of the depression meme also loses appeal within the server.

In a brief chat with another user in #general about the state of the subreddit /r/2meirl4meirl, a user known as "Kurt", stated that they strongly disliked the subreddit because, over time, it caused them to grow to dislike depression memes.[14] I asked Kurt if they found the depression memes posted in the Discord funny, and they responded that they simply no longer found depression memes funny at all. When further prompted on why they would want to be in a similar space of mental illness memes and subversive humour at all, Kurt responded with, "Because we're not the subreddit. It's different." I recalled my conversation with Ellie, who told me what made the Discord more welcoming for her was the engagement one had with other users who understood her, and the ease of interacting with these individuals through posting several images and web-links at once while chatting in real time.[15] Aes, in his interviews, specified that he believes users of the Discord have come to expect the "serious stuff" to stay in #serious and #vent, something both he and the other moderators try to encourage. The separation of serious and not-serious content created an outlet for users who wanted to vent about self-harm and other serious content, but also acted as a barrier that protected users that did not want to constantly see and interact with mental health issues. However, Aes specified that there is an expected theme of mental health struggles regardless of which channel one is posting in. The ability to build friendships with other users who understood and expected mental illness was what made Discord

13 My posting of depression memes in #general unfortunately did not generate engagement or a response.
14 For clarity, Kurt uses they/them pronouns.
15 Reddit limits its users to one image submission every few minutes.

different, and better than Reddit for Kurt and Ellie. They did not have to hide their problems from their online community, but mental illness was also not interpreted as the defining characteristic of who they are.

Kurt felt the Discord was better for them due to the fact that depression memes and mental health were not the focal point, yet at the same time expected to be an integral part of the server, something users understood and dealt with. Expectation of mental illness in the server unites members of the Discord as marginalized people who share a common stigma, yet the separation of posts about mental illness from the #general channel shows a reluctance to be fully associated with the content found in vents. The community that does exist in #vent ultimately appears as if it is not there: no one responds, and therefore are not associated with each other. This resonates with Groucho Marx's sentiment of how "[he] refuses to join any club that would have [him] as a member." When I tried to understand the aspect of not wanting to be associated with mental illness despite the context of mental illness being a factor for the creation of the discord, Kurt became defensive and told me they no longer wanted to talk to me. Kurt seemed to want to avoid the topic entirely, and having a conversation about mental health still eluded to them having some experience in this area, even if the subject at hand is their reasoning for avoiding the issue.

Since we were in #general chat with several other users, in order to diffuse tension, I chose not to respond and told another user to "stick bug me or else."[16] Similar to someone posting a meme or link for others to click on, being 'stickbugged' ended up changing the subject. After a few off-topic sentences were posted in the chat from different users, without further prompting, Kurt continued with their explanation of why they preferred Discord: because their friends were here and they liked to chat with random people. Other users reaffirmed their preference for the Discord, and slowly but surely the

16 This entails the chopstick and an insect emoji being sent in the chat, acting like an interruption when whatever conversation was ongoing. This is based on a video that contains a stick bug dancing to music, which is a parody of being "rick-rolled," by which one sends a video of Rick Astly's "Never Going To Give You Up" to unsuspecting users.

topic changed as other points of conversation emerged. I hoped to diffuse tension by not only changing the subject, but removing myself from my conversation with Kurt by participating in something ridiculous, such as 'stickbugging', hoping it would distance me from someone who they felt was actively labelling them as a part of a mentally ill community. I was surprised it not only seemed to work, but that Kurt chose to continue explaining their reasoning despite their original attempt to end the conversation. Kurt felt the conversation around their preference for a community of users that understand and relate to mental symptoms of mental illness associated them with being mentally ill, and thus wanted to avoid the conversation. However, then continuing to explain their reasoning and being a part of the conversation would be counter-intuitive to that goal. Instead, opting to participate in another topic of conversation must have been enough to shift the focus of mental health away from Kurt who could then explain their reasoning without feeling directly questioned.

At the time, I took this interaction to be reasoning for community and belonging, why users enjoyed Discord over other platforms: it was more interactive and dynamic. Now, this interaction speaks to the deeper intricacies of how Discord operates for people who have been stigmatized about their mental health. Community in 2meirl4meirl for users like Kurt is not simply about finding people who are similar to themselves, but like the #vent channel, operate on rules of how to act without explicitly stating these rules. This sentiment can be perhaps found in the name of the server and the subreddit. As I stated in the introduction, 2meirl4meirl combined the terms “Me IRL” and “2edgy4me” into meaning “this (situation, meme, piece of media) accurately depicts how I feel, and it is too much for me to handle.” This entails a projection of oneself in the media that is shared or seen. Fen has stated that the humour in memes can be “too real” in the sense in which something is still given the benefit of the doubt for humour, but it is hitting a bit too close to the line that keeps the humour and understanding tacit. Something is relatable, painfully so, to the point where it is “too much”, as too

many otherwise unspoken details are being displayed and are a part of active discussion. It is the very name of the server, implying one is able to relate to topics of mental illness, that suggests it is acknowledged, and then brushed aside without being dealt with. The members of the server that use avoidant humour and ambivalence to bring up mental health issues exist behind the scenes, yet are parallel to the typical online community of a Discord server. As my interaction with Kurt demonstrates, when the anti-community becomes the explicit focal point of conversation, it loses its utility. The ability to be absent from conversation, to be able to not talk about one's feelings directly or in depth to another user, and not have to take responsibility for what one posts in #vent is the highlight of 2meirl4meirl. For Kurt, being associated with the server is to be associated with being mentally ill. But because they want to be in the server, Kurt, like many other users must communicate their bid for belonging in the community in tacit ways**.**

Figure 2.2: A "me" format depression meme. (https://www.reddit.com/r/BPDmemes/comments/cfrzo7/all_my_jokes_are_cries_for_help/)

Although depression memes are not as relevant within the server as I expected to be, “me” format memes (figure 2.3) echo the point above. Depression memes are detached images meant for humour between friends and individuals that offer the sender some distance from the content in the

meme. The other person knows it is an opportunity to convey sentiments one feels under the safety of the “me” format meme. Invoking Geertz’s wink or twitch (1973) in relation to a depression meme or a vent about suicidal thoughts, one person is sending a message in order to gauge another's reaction to mental illness- winking, and the other is sending a humorous meme or message to engage socially- twitching (Geertz, 312). Geertz originally used these terms to differentiate between something that can only be understood by cultural context, and in the context of the Discord, this method of distancing is understood by how and whether individuals decide to respond to posts about mental illness. In relation to my experience with Kurt, learning how to effectively communicate with the server's mental health anti-community through implicit and tacit means will result in better engagement and participation with users who would otherwise chose not to respond.

When Fen reacts to memes, either by emoji or another meme posted in response, it is because she believes that the user is ultimately not at risk of suicide. Understanding how one expresses themselves, winking is recognized over a twitch, similar to how Fen described herself as never being particularly worried by memes posted in the server, and how seeing the sentence “I want to die” does not invoke any emotion in her. She does not believe there is any pressing issue at hand and is fine with engaging in a non-serious way with the content. When one posts in #vent and is specific about their troubles, then Fen no longer feels she has the ability to interact with the user who either does not want to be confronted, or because she is unable to provide sufficient support.

As with Geertz’s winks and twitches, we could perhaps understand the anti-community, the users who perform non-action, as those working under non-winks. For Geertz, one is an involuntary reflex; the other is communicative. In the Discord, both the intent of the poster, and the audience that sees it are significant factors in how posts are received and reacted to. The in-group, those who wink to convey hidden sentiments, like Ellie who posts in #vent for others to acknowledge her suffering, but

does not hope for a response, nor does she interact with others about their vents. This may be why the appearance of depression memes in the meme channel is sparse. The act of sending depression memes is not solely for humour or distancing. Instead, users who send them attempt to be acknowledged as people who are a part of #vent, perhaps subtlety referencing their posts in #vent as they post something sarcastic and alluding to their mental health, outside of vent which creates another layer of understanding and communication when interacted with. Due to the established and well known mental health context of the server, one cannot distance oneself from being associated mental illness once in the Discord. Users can only avoid reading such topics by whether or not they choose to use #vent. Fen has been in the Discord for a long time and considers herself desensitized to most of the mental health topics that occur in the server. Though she does not post depression memes or in #vent, no one would accuse her of not understanding the complexities of mental illness. A non-wink is an understanding of why someone is using this tactic to convey messages about their coping capabilities with their mental health. To the uninitiated, this presents itself as nothing, or non-action. However, to the others who know what to look for, posting messages without looking for a direct reply is stereotypical of users who suffer from mental health and are having difficulty voicing their problems.

Maurice Blanchot argued that in an unavowable community, “the absence of community is not the failure of community” (Blanchot, 15). In anti-community of #vent, however, it could be said that the absence of community is, in fact, the functioning of the community. It is in the ways in which it is unavowable, the ways in which tacit agreement makes up a so-called void, that the community on the server is produced. The anti-community *is* a community, but it is an anti-community because it is produced through non-actions, things unsaid, things only tacitly agreed upon. #vent was not originally meant to be a community. But due to its frequent use by several users, who sometimes simultaneously post over each other, #vent became the anti-community through the continuous presence of other users

in the “void” while one continues to post as if they are the only ones in the channel.

#vent manages to be one of the busiest channels in the server. Its active user base suggests that despite the lack of active interaction between users it is largely successful as a channel. Its success is attributed by Ellie to the comfort it brings knowing that other users are going through similar experiences, which makes her feel less alone. Another well-known member of the Discord who is most often found in #vent and #serious, Mike, describes conversation about depression to be something he is wary to talk about unless the audience or setting it is in is already safe and accepting to talk about mental health. For many, the #vent channel is the setting in which one feels it is possible to discuss the issues they otherwise keep to themselves. The channel is experienced through observation, seeing that one user is able to post about a traumatic experience or upsetting event gives permission to all others that they may post similar content. Mike is rarely, if ever, seen in #general as those channels do not appeal to him. Despite his status as a regular user of the server, he does not feel like he quite belongs in the server and feels undervalued by the other members.[17]

Opening up to strangers is difficult. Even with the anonymous identities of the internet, one is offering up personal information. Ellie stated that using the voice channels was not common since users are no longer hidden behind text chat, and may feel self-conscious about how their voices sound and what information it can reveal.[18] #Vent calls for one to become vulnerable for an unseen audience. The state of the community in #vent is undetermined, one is often unsure if it is truly there, or if one is currently alone in the channel.[19] So, perhaps one must feel uncertain within the anti-community, otherwise sharing one's experiences with mental health in a serious manner does not feel as if one is being vulnerable within a community however quiet or absent it appears to be. Even just starting a

17 According to Mike, being 27 makes him one of the oldest people in the server, and he finds it is difficult to relate to other users due to his age.
18 Such as one's accent when speaking in English.
19 Especially if the most recent post was a few hours ago.

casual conversation as a newcomer to the Discord can be uncertain; engaging with others who are unaware of one's existence is difficult, especially if they have to be the one who introduces themselves first. Blanchot has understood anti-community as “inscribing [upon] itself the impossibility of the community,” of how rejection is inherently bound to community (Blanchot, 11-12). One knows about the presence of others in #vent, and never receiving a response for one's post is similar to being ignored, but also something one has to accept when posting here. Though it seems contradictory, the lack of a response is the active engagement of the anti-community when posting in #vent. One must interpret the lack of responses not as being ignored, but as quiet acknowledgement and solidarity among users. Embracing what would otherwise be seen as rejection in other channels is being a part of the anti-community, and by doing so one is free to post anything they wish without the fear of stigma. However, it is also done with purpose, unlike writing in a diary for oneself, since vents are in fact seen by others (at the very least they are seen by the next person to vent). Rejection is categorized by Blanchot as death (Ibid.), but since rejection is bound to the anti-community in a manner where one already appears to be rejected in the channel, one is not removed from the anti-community. Rejection or “death” is made uncertain when there is no expectation of response to begin with, as this absence is the community in action.

Members of the 2meirl4meirl Discord server have always cited “the community” as their reason for being in the server, yet this community appears similar to other friendships in different servers or forms of social media. Rather, it is the experience of the “anti-community” where users are involved in what makes the server worthwhile: “the transmission of the untransmittable” (Blanchot, 18) is communicating something a user would want others to know, but have not found a way to make apparent without facing rejection in other spaces. Upon further introspection, my interaction with Kurt revealed the difficult in speaking about anti-community, but also why they continued with their

explanation afterwards. The anti-community is evasive, and refuses the question of the possibility for community, but it "must speak in order to remain silent" (Nancy, 2016; 52). Initially ignoring or avoiding the questions I was asking, Kurt then essentially answered all the questions about the community and the server, perhaps experiencing the "ecstasy of communication," and negation of being isolated as the absence of the anti-community is temporarily dispelled (Blanchot, 18). But this was done after I had changed the subject, conceding that they did not wish to speak about the avoidance of mental health, and denying this community existed at all. Though the "unspoken" understanding was at the forefront of the conversation, it was sidelined as the topic was changed. When it was no longer the main focus of the #general chat, which also often has a few conversations happening simultaneously, Kurt was then able to continue to explain their preference for this community under the pretense it was not important enough to be the sole topic of conversation. In actuality, when the conversation with Kurt became a secondary conversation, it acted as an example of how concealing the fact that users prefer not to be associated with mental illness is the foundation of the 2meirl4meirl anti-community. This foundation manifests itself as the focal point of the anti-community with the void of the #vent channel. As I will demonstrate in the following pages, this void could be understood as a performance: deliberately crafted with boundaries that allow one to behave as if the others are absent, and how these boundaries are transgressed.

The purpose of the #vent channel of the 2meirl4meirl Discord is to allow users to type out what is currently bothering them, thoughts and feelings they need to get off their chest in some way. Some vents are distraught, almost nonsensical ramblings about an event; some are well typed in neat paragraphs about personal problems; and still others are lines upon lines of random key presses, such as: "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA", which, by being marked as a 'spoiler', appear as black bars until

one clicks on them.[20] As such, the contents of the channel might initially seem like an indecipherable mess. Aes acknowledges the void as a place where there is no response for many users, but for shares his hesitance to post in it since he is personally unable to remove the presence of others in #vent from the possibility they are negatively judging him. Sometimes he also wanted people to listen but not interact with him, but since the vent channel is public and open for everyone to see, he is unable to let go of his fear of rejection from other users. Community feels ambiguous when one is unsure if anyone else has read their posts, or is simply quiet because that is how the channel typically functions. #Vent can fulfill the purpose of the void. Regulars on the discord whose usernames I recognized only from seeing them in #vent, used the #vent channel as a dumpsite. It functions as a place where they could release negative feelings that had been building up in a way that both detached them from their issues. Most users had a common agreement with each other that simply knowing that others were going through similar things regarding mental health made them feel less alone; something easily demonstrable by #vent existing as a place where troubled users go to. Acting as an archive, messages remain in the channel, constantly updating #vent with new messages even if one is not actively in the server at the time of posting, thus becoming records of one's posts that anyone can access.

In this void, under the pretence of isolation, the suffering released here is something meant to be shared among other users. Elizabeth Dunn (2018) stated that "What creates nothingness is the negation of a positive expectation" (2018: 114). Aes does not want help from others from the 2meirl4meirl server. He is often absent, elusive to find active in any of the channels even if he is currently online the Discord platform.[21] Similar to the usage of memes, the #vent channel carries no real expectation of acceptance or understanding. The impossibility of rejection from a void leads to a space to bring these feelings of inadequacy or frustration to light, and then to discard them. Aes's desire to keep others at

20 Originally used to cover up plot lines of new movies, TV shows or other forms of media for individuals who were planning to watch them, spoiler bars are often used in #vent to hide sensitive and potentially triggering material from other users. In this case, I am not sure why "AAAAAAAAA" needed to be spoiler marked.

21 I often "ctrl+f" to search for his name and recent posts to see what he has been up to for my fieldwork.

arm's reach even in the #vent channel, by rarely posting, and avoiding the rambling on that other users often do, appears to be an attempt to avoid any possibility of hurting others, or setting himself up for disappointment when others do not react the way he expects. The void is a creation intended for all users of the Discord to have a domain where one feels free to post whatever they want to.[22] #vent acts as a common space where even moderators, including Fen, are occasionally seen venting about their own personal lives. While mental health causes significant impairment to a person's life, Stephen Hinshaw (2007) has suggested that the stigmatization of people with such disorders brings additional problems and struggles to face, producing problems in several domains of life (2007;141). Without the additional burden of confronting other users, the void also acts as an isolated space where one can avoid others to both protect themselves, and prevent one from upsetting any other users who do not want to see mentions of suicide or feel obligated to respond to users who would otherwise seem to be gesturing for a response.

The void is almost comical to observe when two users are actively venting at the same time, or better yet, when one realizes their faux pas of beginning to vent in the middle of the other's post, pausing, posting an apology along the lines of "oh, sorry, you first", then followed by a continuation as if nothing had happened. Moderators will lightly remind the users who are beginning to vent in the general chat to kindly move over to #vent, not wanting to see the wall of text, meaning the series of messages posted in rapid succession that blocks others from being able to converse. One of the most alluring aspects about using #vent to talk about mental health issues is the fact that users can be in the channel, see it, even interrupt it, and still agree to not acknowledge one's vent. Emmanuel Levinas explored the idea of proximity as not a state, but a "null site" overwhelming the calm, closer and closer until it becomes the subject (Levinas, 1991: 82). One is surrounded by all these other users, yet also

22 The subject of censoring triggering content in #vent has been debated in the channel #meta_discussion, where server related requests are made. Despite some users advocating for all potentially triggering content to be spoiler tagged in #vent, or even suggesting for the creation of a new "trigger warning" channel all together, the moderators ultimately decided #vent would remain the only channel where nothing would be censored.

exists also as one entity in the confines of the #vent channel to another onlooker or user. Every rant or vent is seen by others. #vent is supposed to be without any individual responsibility, burden or guilt as it is tossed into the void. Aes hopes that his vent can be shared without harm, whereas Ellie simply hopes to be able to be understood by others. They both understand that #vent cannot entail an individual being completely removed from other users since they hope their posts are noticed by someone. One sits and waits if someone else is taking their turn, with the #vent channel being superior to a diary or confidant only because the isolation is only a facade. In reality, several users are staring at the words simultaneously intended for everyone in the channel, but also absolutely no one.

The possibility of another's presence in the channel allows for the next user to experience the same hope of having their negative emotions released into the world, to be see even though one is asking for the opposite by discarding thoughts and feelings into the void. It is not just screaming into the void, but being a part of the void, and having others scream at this entity that one is a part of. Everyone has the opportunity to be the main subject in #vent. Obligation, responsibility, and debt are thrusted upon those who enter #vent, assigned to them from the context of the channel. A vent post that existed before one even entered the channel will be acknowledged when it is read, fulfilling the desire to be recognized that the post carries from the user that submitted it. Implicit understanding surrounds this space, and as soon as a user enters #void, they become part of the void, and yet at the same time retain their individual consciousness for when it is their turn to vent. This space is impassive, almost like ambivalence and allows for a co-existence without any privilege. The void is supposed to be equal and without judgment because the void is composed of those who fear being judged themselves and see themselves as the subject of the memes.

The single word response, "same" in response to another user's vent does nothing more than acknowledge, sympathize and validate, without taking priority away from the original post. It is perhaps the ideal response from users in the void. With others in #vent, Ellie simultaneously feels a

need to be recognized, while passively fulfilling that need for the others in the channel simply by being in #vent. The void is not isolating but collectively individual, and paradoxically, everyone is on their own, being the only one active in the void made up of several users. Ellie knows that the others understand her here. Knowing that others seek acknowledgement the same way oneself does, in an altruistic, yet ultimately reciprocal way due to the two-way nature of #vent, allows one to provide comfort for others.

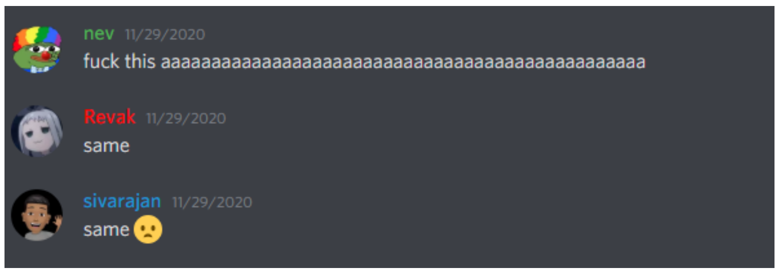

Figure 2.3: Users responding with "same" to a post of frustration (image by author)

"The proximity of the Other is accompanied with obligation, the face of the neighbour comes with an unexceptional responsibility" (Levinas, 88). Whether the users recognize it or not, they are bound to the other users in the #vent void, as that is how the channel operates. Because this void could only function with the fact that there are several people co-existing together within the channel, the pretence of absence in #vent falls through when not only are there several other users, but each of them are considered what makes up the absence. Being a virtual space, the isolation is by design due to the anonymity of the internet. Whatever significance comes from making oneself vulnerable online, or obligation one bears for their fellow server member comes with an acknowledgement in the back of the mind that the person is simply a part of the void that was meant to function this way. Friendships are not sought out in #vent, what is said in #vent stays there. Posts are supposed to disappear from sight, but is often retained as background knowledge of a user, something normalized and learned to be expected of them. Aes fears the possibility of hurting others, but the more commonly seen issue is at

the other end of this exchange: users typically do not want to read something distressing when they want to alleviate their own bad feelings, and thus do not engage with other users venting.

Acting as a staple of the anti-community, the absence of interaction between users in #vent is what makes it work as intended. Others do not acknowledge one's vent outside of the channel, and in the channel itself it is very rare, though not unheard of, to have someone reply or start a conversation on a post. Stated earlier, Mike does not quite feel accepted in the server, with his reasoning for this feeling to be his age and his fatigue around joking about mental illness. I believe it is important to mention he often responds to other users in #vent. Unable to understand #vent as the space that others use as a void, it becomes a place of frustration for Mike, and one of discomfort for the user he speaks to. Though responding to other users in #vent is not breaking any explicit rules, and helping others is encouraged in the server, talking to others in #vent is contrary to the purpose of the channel intended for uninterrupted venting.

Having one's issues with mental illness minimized is hurtful, and something Mike adamantly believed commonly happened when opening up to others without the use of humour in person. He uses humour offline as a form of distancing and social detachment, but does not seem to do so in the server. Unlike the other regulars I have become familiar with; seeing their usernames talk about video games, television, music or whatever current topic is trending in #general; Mike is most familiar for his attempts at being a sympathetic voice that speaks in the more serious channels. He is also personally no longer burdened by his mental health struggles, and does not look for support from other users. At some point, he found that advice from strangers on a media platform did not actually help him in his personal life, but has decided to provide the same for others. As he developed other tools for figuring out how to manage his life, he became interested in helping others in the server, not only because he felt obligated to, but because he believed he could offer more helpful advice than other users. Mike personally does not have an issue with being associated with mental illness in a server he already

understands to be about depression, but he does not realize that his responses in #vent can be jarring to other users who do not want to do the emotional labour involved in dealing with mental health during their venting.

Mike has tried to interact and build rapport with other users, but also seemed to misunderstand the purpose of #vent as he offers advice to users while they are venting. His eagerness to address and solve the hardships of other users, particularly users younger than him, created an inability to connect with other regulars. In our interview, Mike claimed he was happier now and no longer struggled as much as he once did with his mental health, but that he still hung out in the server because he wanted to be close with the people he genuinely liked. He confided in me that he, unfortunately, felt like he was not a valued member of the community. I believed he felt this way because he could not relate to the users who were still in high-school or the university undergraduates who had problems that were no longer relevant to his own life. He described that he felt the problems of many individuals in the server were “pointless” as they were things that “could be solved with more life experience”, thereby invalidating the issues that teenagers experience that can affect their mental health. Mike's understanding of the #vent channel showed a discrepancy between how he and everyone else used the channel. Mike found it difficult to be a part of the void and seemed to reject the entire context of the channel as place to vent about mental illness freely, without an expectation for a response.

Mike is unable to be a part of the anti-community. When he sees a user struggling in front of him, he claims he feels compelled to find a way to alleviate their suffering. To do so, he asks them how they are feeling, and then offers advice from his perspective. Whereas Mike is unbothered by confronting aspects of depression, his responses closes the gap that other users have attempted to create between themselves and their mental health. Some users are polite to Mike and briefly chat with him, but then excuse themselves and leave the channel. Mike believes that by providing advice to users in #vent, he has fulfilled an obligation to be help others by recognizing their issues, comforting them, and

then offering his own experiences as a template to follow. However, the main purpose of #vent is not to find a solution to the problems at hand, but to have the possibility that one's suffering will be acknowledged by members of the server that are going through similar issues. As stated above, all that needs to done to feel acknowledged or validated is that their vent is posted in the channel, because there can be no doubt that *somebody* will see it. Mike, in his own way, does provide acknowledgement, but it is also done in a way where the other user is forced to confront the fact that they are being judged (though not in a malicious way on Mike's part), which is something they wanted to avoid, and the purpose of #vent is unrealized.

Mike is also frustrated by users who do not seem to follow his advice, or do not understand his perspective as an adult that has experienced, and overcome, similar issues a younger user is currently struggling with. Since users do not come to #vent looking for a concrete solution, Mike's efforts in #vent are ultimately wasted. But he feels as if he must try to help others, from a place of good intention, but exactly as the type of person who does not understand the other person wants non-judgment, and an absence of interaction. Mike's experiences of offering consul ultimately feels overwhelming or taxing because as a being he is hostage to his responsibility to the Other (Levinas, 125). Burdened to be immersed in the negativity of the #vent channel, and as well unable to truly solve any problems because Mike's advice can be rejected, the void is a nightmare for him. The responsibility Mike holds himself to is attached to his hopes to help others achieve what he achieved in terms of bettering his mental health, but his behaviour is the opposite of what the #vent void was established for. A user in the void strives to discard their issues, whereas Mike's insistence on "helping" is not only resurfacing problems users wanted to be rid of, but doing so in a way where he has a voice of authority about something he likely does not fully understand.

On January 5th, 2021, I found out that Mike left the server a few weeks prior. Suddenly and without warning, he just left, leaving several confused users behind. Though there are about 1700

members in the Discord, only a fraction of that number are really active.[23] Even less are properly engaged and active enough in the server to be known as regulars. Mike's departure was largely unnoticed. Though a handful of people were online at the time of his departure, no one seemed particularly interested that he had left. His departure has been commented on since on a few occasions since Mike had been a well-known member that is fondly remembered by a few users. Some speculated he was a "nonce" after the last interaction they had with him was about "pedophiles being bad" followed by him commenting "lmao" and immediately leaving.[24] Mike was the person who told me he felt like a black sheep among his real life friends who did not understand the context of his dark humour in relation to his mental health issues. When we spoke about how he did not feel valued by the community in Discord, it felt as if he was again the black sheep of the server, even if other users liked him. Perhaps he was someone who was simultaneously able to understand the desire to keep mental health issues from the broader audience of individuals offline who did not understand dark humour, yet possessed an inability to realize the anti-community needed to be upheld in #vent, albeit in a different manner. Mike's inability to be a part of the anti-community, and keep his understanding and desire to help others tacit in #vent did not aid him in his connection with other users. Unfortunately, Mike did not leave 2meirl4meirl on a positive note, however leaving the server is not uncommon. Users who decide they no longer need the community in Discord also leave once they feel they have reached a point of recovery. The concept of recovery and how one is seen as 'achieving' recovery will be explored in chapter three, and the #recovery channel will be seen as the antithesis of #vent when users form a "therapeutic community."

23 This figure was last reported in the summer of 2020 by Aes.
24 Defined by the Urban Dictionary Bot in the server, a nonce is a UK slang word for a pedophile.

Chapter 3- Recovery and Moral Agency

In Chapter two, I assessed the 2meirl4meirl server as having a distinct "absence of community." I argued that the use of depression memes and treatment of mental health issues constitutes an *anti*-community. The anti-community is most prominent when users attempt to avoid the stigma around their mental illness, notably in the agreement to not acknowledge the content in the #vent channel. However, another channel on the same server, a mere two rows down in the side bar, functions in an opposite way. #Recovery operates as a place in which to engage with others specifically on the topic of recovery from mental illness. Users interact with each other and act as a traditional support group, with the channel description "For sharing details about how you are doing on improving yourself or happy details about your life you just want to share!" Unlike other channels that revolve around posting about hobbies, memes, and other interests, or #vent that discourages conversation all together, #recovery specifically highlights posts about the progress in bettering one's mental health. #recovery is much less active than #vent, and consists of individuals posting about steps they are taking to improve themselves, their mental health, and their relationships with family and friends. Moreover, #recovery acts as a place of motivation and feedback as other users respond with simple messages such as "great work" and "i'm proud of you."

In this chapter, I explore recovery as a state that is strived for by my informants. Lucas, who will be properly introduced later, chooses to post steps he has taken to better himself in this channel, and partake in the support group where peer to peer relationships are developed. Discussions on how one is improving, or even stagnating with a plea for advice are often met with sympathy and discussion. I will argue that the purpose of #recovery is to reaffirm personal progress in recovering from mental illness, and for users such as Lucas to be recognized as a moral agent. What is moral is based on local notions of what is "good" (Myers, 2021). To be a moral agent is to be one that has

chosen to improve themselves, and take action to do so, whether or not this change has occurred yet. To be recognized as possessing moral agency is defined by Neely Myers as being seen as a "good person" worthy of intimate connection. This is achieved by taking action to be recognized as someone on the path of self-betterment, or recovery. Often, the most concrete way to do so is to actually be on that path (Myers, 2021; 32). Lucas and Aes, and other interlocutors actively working on recovery, hope for acknowledgement from either their personal friends and family, or from their Discord friends as they strive for self-betterment. Acknowledgement can come in the form of simple "good job" messages found in #recovery. It is also seen when one is able to provide support to another user who is asking for help, which suggests the individual who is able to provide this support is "further along" the path of recovery. The concept of recovery goes against the commonplace stigma that mental illness is a transgression—"a violation of collectively agreed upon social, moral and legal boundaries" (Ibid.). The #recovery channel is seen as a space of mutual support, without the fear of violating social norms commonly felt in real life. Despite posting about relapses, and frustrations, as long users are still seen as making the choice to improve their lives, the understanding of "moral agent" persists. Later in the chapter, I will discuss how "recovering," and "moral agent" can fail to translate to others in #recovery because of pervasive offline social norms that find ways to manifest in the Discord.

Myers understands recovery as a "shared humanness," where the "recovered" disclose their experiences to those struggling to form a trusting relationship (Myers, 2015; 128). Sharing narratives helps one understand oneself through another's life, "shifting misconception to a new understanding" (Myers, 128). Ultimately, individuals in the Discord interact with each other to make themselves feel better. Sharing narratives is one part of the larger process within the community. The community could be thought of as a "therapeutic community" because of the Discord's ability for individuals to undertake both the roles where one can simultaneously provide advice to others and be the one who

receives support. Myers argues that intimacy can be used to foster moral agency: individuals hope to be seen as a good person, for both helping others, and overcoming their own problems (Myers, 148). Myers's definition of moral agency includes being attempting to achieve a "good life" through having "both the intention to aspire to and access to resources to bring life plans to fruition" (Myers, 2016; 427). #Recovery allows users to attempt this kind of moral agency. I define the therapeutic community as Discord's ability for a two-way conversation about mental illness that offers peer to peer comfort, resulting in being able to speak freely to each other without clinical boundaries. These conversations allows others to see and reaffirm one's progress toward recovery. As one gives advice to others, they are acknowledged as someone who possesses the intention to aspire to a better life and is currently in the process of doing so. They have gained access to necessary resources to improve themselves, confirmed by sharing their newly gained knowledge with another. On the other hand, the one asking for advice is also demonstrating a goal to improve themselves and are actively acquiring the resources to be seen as a moral agent. The relationship that develops from the therapeutic community is ultimately one that is intimate; as each individual learns about the other's mental health issues, and steps they have taken for recovery. Through the therapeutic community, moral agency is developed through the negotiation of recovery.

When one helps another user in a worse situation, one experiences the role of being "recovered," not as a process that has been completed, but as a state of progression in one's mental health that is more advanced than the individual being helped. The "recovered" or the one helping the other user in this exchange is seen as a "good person." Being recovered is understood and striven for by users in #recovery through constant progress in improving their mental health state to the point where they can help others, as well as by showing their willingness to support other individuals in their times of need. The process of recovery, and what it means to be "recovered" is taken as a way that allows for

an analysis of why my participants interact with other individuals in #recovery. I will illustrate the exchange users have with each other, and how one can experience "being recovered" in relation to another. For example, Aes, because of his issues with mental illness and substance abuse felt that he was a failure. He started drinking when he was thirteen and tried several times to quit drinking but failed do to so, struggled with heroin addiction, and was generally unhappy. He knew he was abusing substances to cope with his poor mental health, which only reaffirmed his belief he was a "bad person, and a lost cause." After working on re-framing his thinking through therapy, by accepting good things about himself, Aes learned to stop dwelling on his previous failures. If he was acknowledged by others that he had improved his life and mental health, his own belief that he has gotten better would be reinforced. Though Aes does not frequently post in the server beyond some discussions about chess, he once had a significant conversation with another user who was struggling. This other user was looking for help with his problems, and Aes felt he was qualified to respond since he had already experienced very similar issues, and felt he overcame them. He wrote up a post in which he demonstrated significant improvement in his mental and physical health, quitting drugs, drinking, and self-harm, which exemplified possessing moral agency. He was honest about his all his relapses, and how negative he felt about them, but because of a "conscious decision to stop letting myself get bogged down in how my brain *had* been operating," he managed to reach a point where "[his] good days are so indescribably better than they were."

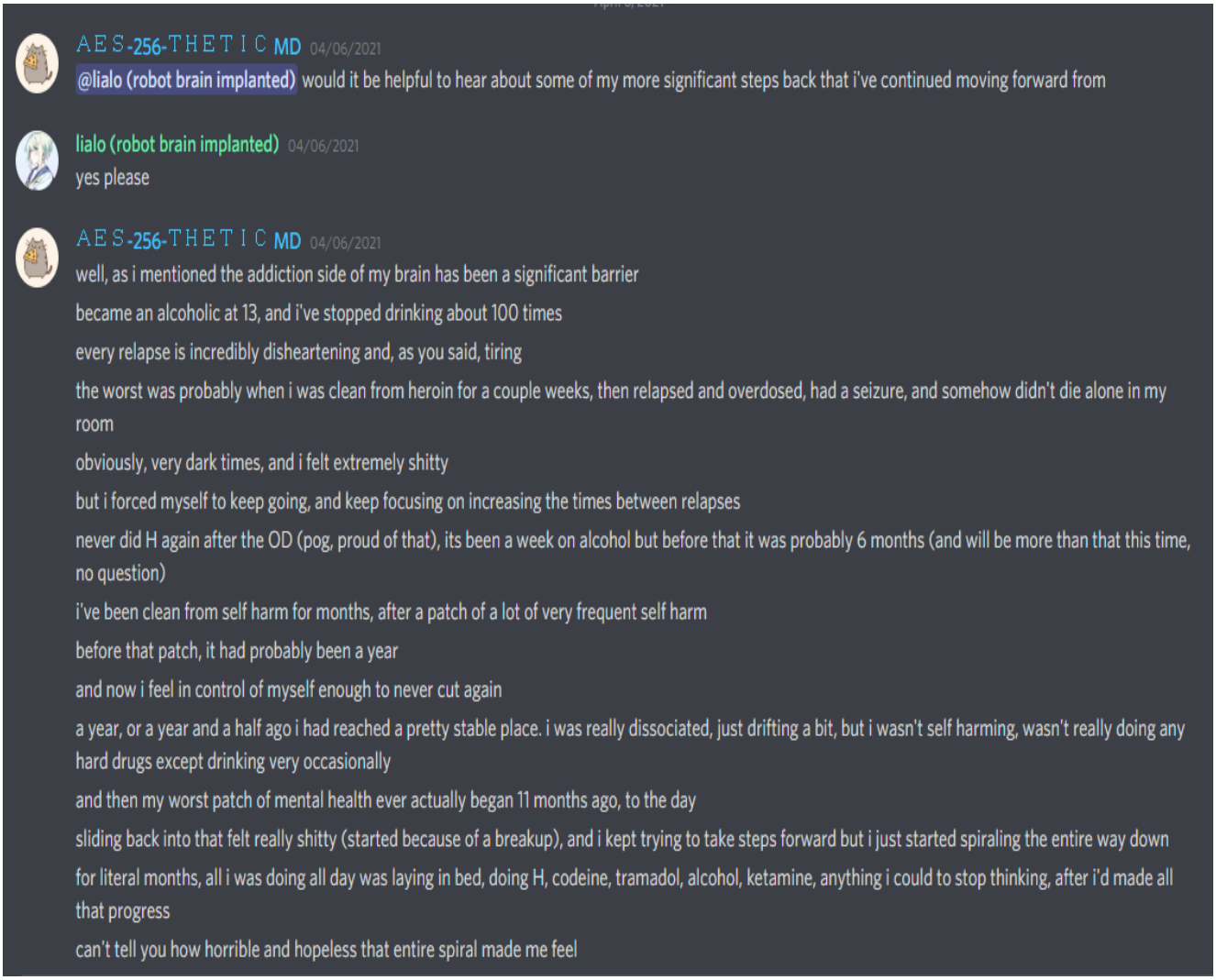

Figure 3.1 Aes's Post Part 1

By letting go of previous guilt for past failures to improve himself, Aes becomes capable of continuing on his journey of recovery. In the previous example, he shared his experiences with a user in distress and adopted the role of the one giving advice by reassuring the other person. He was seen as confident, encouraging, and recognized as legitimate since he has already gone through similar situations. Embracing his previous failures for others to learn and grow from was a way of showing those struggling that they can better themselves just as he did, and simultaneously reaffirmed his own progress when he was seen as someone who managed to provide advice to another. In their responses to Aes's post, the other user compared Aes's experience with accomplishments in their own life. They

admit they are still not quite able to help themselves, or take meaningful steps toward recovery, unlike Aes, who is seen as “good” or someone to strive to be like in this situation. Aes's example of recovery in the #recovery channel, with the purpose of demonstrating steps one takes to better themselves, highlights Aes as someone who has done so. Recovery is a tool used to develop moral agency. Though Aes is at times successful in cultivating moral agency through recovery in the manner described above, I will also discuss how sometimes he is not. As I will show, his ability to help others is often severely limited in the Discord. This contradiction demonstrates how recovery as perceived by others can be misinterpreted.

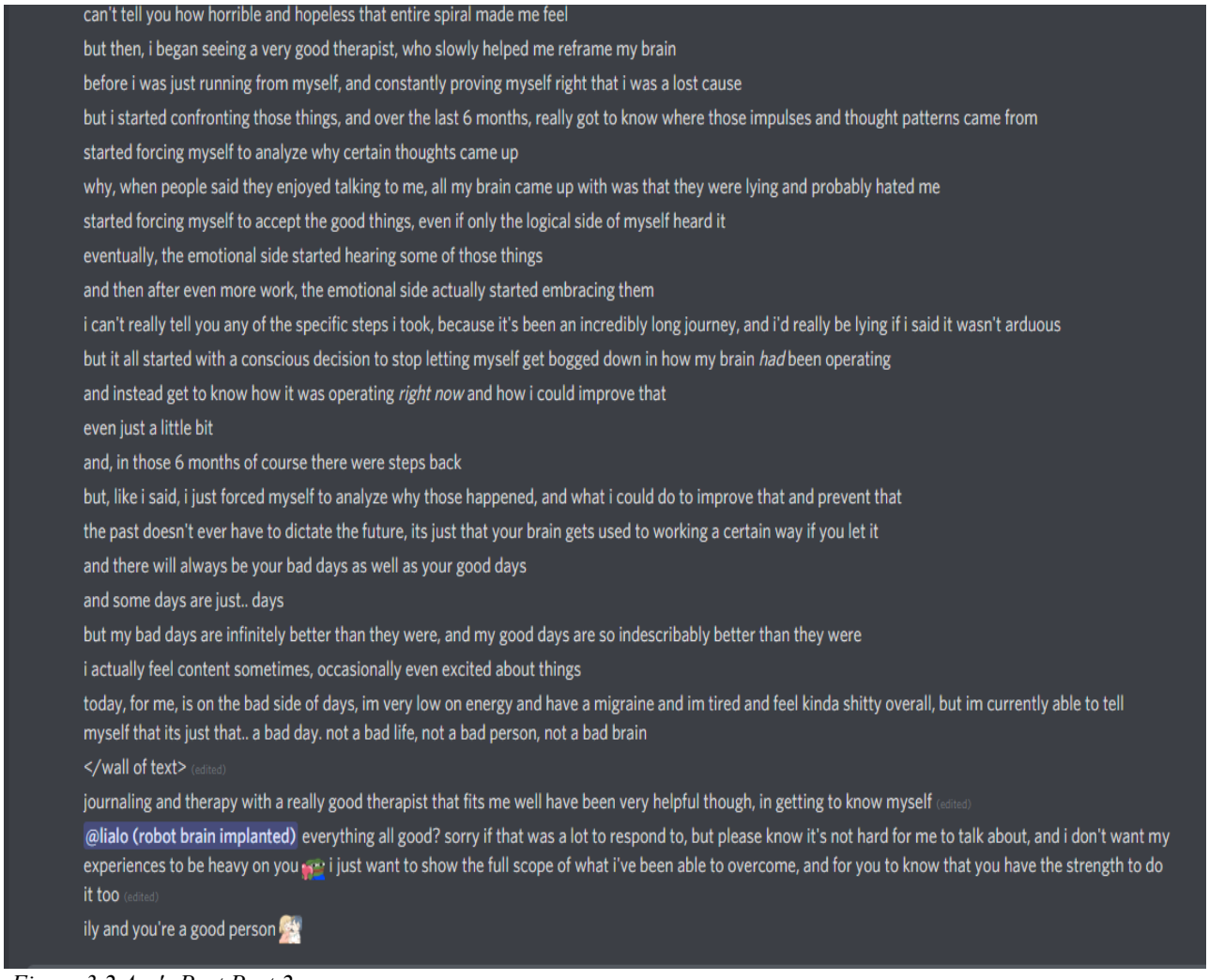

Figure 3.2 Aes's Post Part 2

Aes originally believed he could use the Discord as a substitute for burdening his close friends and family about mental illness. His worry behind sharing his feelings with his family is that they would feel obligated to help him, or feel that due to being close friends or family, it was a failure on their own part that he is struggling with mental illness. This fear has now extended to the users of the Discord, and Aes avoids discussing his problems completely. As stated above, the therapeutic community is meant to be a two-way discussion among peers. Aes does not participate in both avenues of discussion, he only occasionally offers his advice, and does not seek help from others. His hesitance to ask for peer assistance removes him from the full experience, and the therapeutic community does not successfully function as support group if he does not find emotional support. Instead, Lucas is someone who often attempt to develop intimate relationships through both sharing and learning from recovery stories.

At the time of our interview, Lucas was 19 years old, had recently become a moderator, and just starting his first year in nursing school. Lucas is a very positive person, especially in comparison to my other interviewees. He often felt keen to help his friends. Understanding how mental illness symptoms present themselves, he wanted his friends, and others, to know that he did not feel burdened by learning about their mental health problems. Members of the community understand it as a place in which recovery is possible. Recovery feels more easily achievable when the users of the Discord have a common experience of mental illness, and already understand how to interact via the peer-based care of the therapeutic community (Myers, 2016; 128). Lucas feels he has made much progress in terms of mental health recovery, and because he spends his time in the Discord as support for others rather than for his own needs, feels no awkwardness or judgment in discussing the failures and frustration that come with talking about one's mental illness, and how one strives to be better despite the challenges. Because of Lucas's experiences, I argue that #recovery, where one can actively discuss issues pertaining to mental health, is used as a method to achieve recovery. By messaging others, and having

them reaffirm the decisions and choices one makes are good, moral agency is fostered and encourages progress on their path toward recovery. Lucas feels validated when he is recognized as “good” defined in this argument through the Discord community's understanding as someone who has taken steps to recover from their mental illnesses. Moreover, the idea of working toward recovery in order to be considered a functional person by one's community is a generalized understanding of recovery that is dominant outside of the server, thereby showing ways the server reinforces outside understandings of mental illness among users.

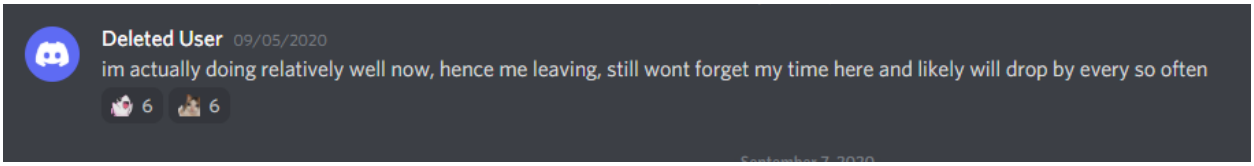

Figure 3.3: A user's goodbye in #recovery. However, the deletion of their account suggests they have not "dropped by" since. (image by author)

In the past, Aes has left the server, only to return later. When regular users leave the server, they often post a small farewell message in #recovery before they go. The message often explains they have found themselves in a better mental state, and implies they no longer need the comfort in being validated by peers from the therapeutic community. For example, one user states simply, “I'm actually doing relatively well now, hence me leaving, still won't forget my time here and likely will drop by every so often.” Aes is often very critical of himself for his mental health problems, but even though other users are going through similar experiences, and post about them publicly, he does not view them in the same critical lens in which he views himself. The fear of being viewed as a failure by his family and friends is due to having mental illness rooted in his own self-perception. He occasionally leaves the server because he believes that even in the Discord, other individuals may still consider him a failure. Aes feels he is somehow worse than others when he needs comfort during a difficult time, though he would never think less of his friends coming to him with their own issues. He prefers to share his experiences once he has overcome his most recent problems, and feels mentally stable, rather than have

others see the shortcomings in the overall progress he undergoes with recovery when it occurs in the present. Afterwards, there is no issue with admitting to relapsing in his recovery story, but reaching out to others in the middle of his struggles is something Aes avoids.

Instead of belittling himself for issues he would never judge or dismiss, Lucas understands he is also deserving of the same kindness he gives to others. He understands that difficulty and setbacks are part of recovery and can be acknowledged as good due to the desire to strive for a good life. In doing so, even with his setbacks visible, he also recognizes himself as a person with both the intention to improve, and some tangible evidence that he has done so in comparison to the people he is helping. There appears to be different ideas of recovery in the community, one where setbacks are proof of moral failure, believing that recovery is a linear progression, and one where relapses are part of the progress.

The 2meirl4meirl server finds ways to be a place where people can be and feel as if they are good as they re-conceptualize their understanding of mental illness within a frame of recovery. Hardships with mental illness are not solely understood by users as a struggle when someone like Lucas is able to provide reasoning for why those experiences result in personal growth. Users make a deep connection with others; share intimate feelings and know that their friends are there to support them. In one post, a user shared their suicide attempt, and slow recovery since, ending with how “it’s done, I’m getting better, I’m getting therapy. It gets better.” Then they thanked their Discord friends, stating “If it weren’t for you four, I would’ve died long ago, or been a hell of a lot worse. I love you all so much, and I swear, we will all get better together.” One of their friends responded with, “Will always be here for you, love you too.” #Recovery is a space of belonging due to the intimacy that exists within the channel, and a space where a person's actions can be recognized by others as “moral” in order to achieve such intimacy (Myers, 2016; 428). Developing intimate relationships allows #recovery to

become a space where most things can be freely said. This allows people to recount upsetting events, or setbacks as not failure, but a difficult step toward recovery. Rather than have one's sense of moral agency be eroded with a suicide attempt, one preserves their moral agency by having the opportunity to be held accountable (Myers, 2016; 435), and in this case, come out "better." Their friends in this space become witnesses to the progress they have taken, and previously negative experiences are examples of where one once was struggling in terms of mental health, and how one has "recovered" in comparison with some self-reflection.

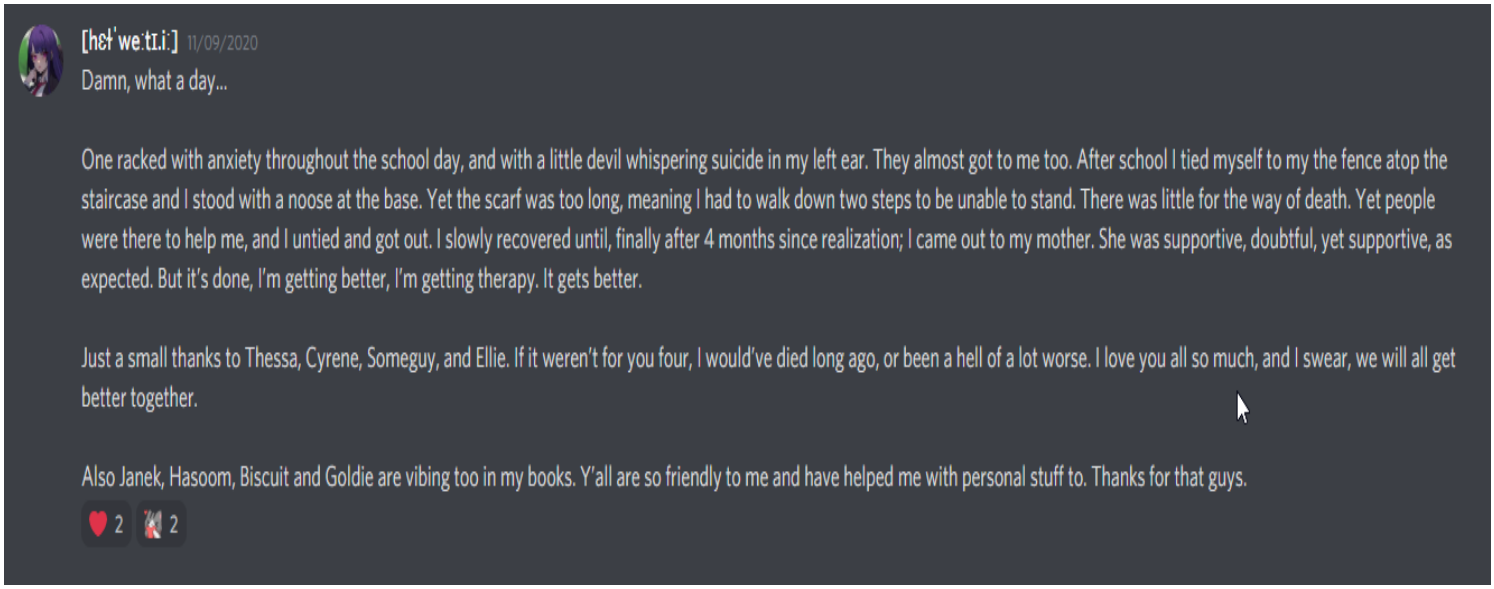

Figure 3.4 User's post to friends in #recovery (image by author).

The therapeutic community consists of users untrained in professional mental healthcare, but are supportive due to mutual recognition based on similar circumstance. Lucas expressed distress at the inability for others to take part in therapy due to the high financial costs do to so in the United States, as opposed to his country of Sweden. He said it broke his heart to see others unable to afford a therapist. Lucas adheres to a certain path of recovery, starting from the diagnosis, to getting expert help, and then achieving and working on the on-going state of being "recovered." Although making it clear he is not a professional, Lucas takes it upon himself, when he feels he is qualified, to step in and help others. He does this by encouraging them to talk about their feelings, what they think they should do, and offer his

own advice and experiences. When a user was upset they felt their “depression was gone” one day and then back the next, Lucas shared his thoughts on how he believes it is okay to have relapses and failures, as these experiences still suggest progress. He tried to help others rethink the idea of depression “being gone and now it's back” with “this moment where I feel okay is proof I can be okay.”

Lucas's interpretation of #recovery is an attempt for users of the Discord to fit into the well-known structure of a support group. #Recovery is for those that care about improving their mental health and their progress to better themselves, and to find mutual support among those that frequent the space. The few regulars in #recovery strive for recovery and hope to be able to see progress in themselves. Validation from other users working toward the same goal reassures them that they are doing well. Lucas, who possesses the resources for therapy, shares the knowledge he has gained of how to clinically manage mental health to others without access to professional resources. Mental health support is sought after, and Lucas is willing to be the person that actively engages with those that need it. He understands he is not a mental health professional, but due to the financial barriers for therapy in North America, he wants to assist his friends and other users in #recovery by passing down some of the thinking he has learned from personally going to therapy. Going to therapy is praised by nearly everyone in the #recovery channel, as the desire for therapy shows active initiative in improving one’s mental health and is considered to have a higher chance of success in one's recovery due to the professional guidance of a licensed therapist. By Lucas's understanding of progress and recovery, getting expert help is the proper and best way to manage mental illness. The belief one needs therapy to better their mental state is perpetuated in recovery as even the act of seeking out a therapist is highly valued by the community.

In tandem with going to therapy, both finding support and providing it to others makes Lucas feel more motivated to continue his own recovery. He offers advice to others, which can include going to therapy, or more simple coping mechanisms such as performing breathing exercises when one feels

panicked. He also receives similar advice for the issues he shares with others and finds comradery in the exchange of information that progresses both parties toward recovery. This channel is focused on encouraging others through their issues, even if they relapse in some way, whether it be drug use or self-harm. Oriented toward progress and positive experience, #recovery is not a channel meant for venting, ranting, or discouraging posts. Lucas strives to be a person someone can talk to when they need it, as he "remembers days where [he] did not have someone to talk to, and [doesn't] want anybody else to feel the same way."

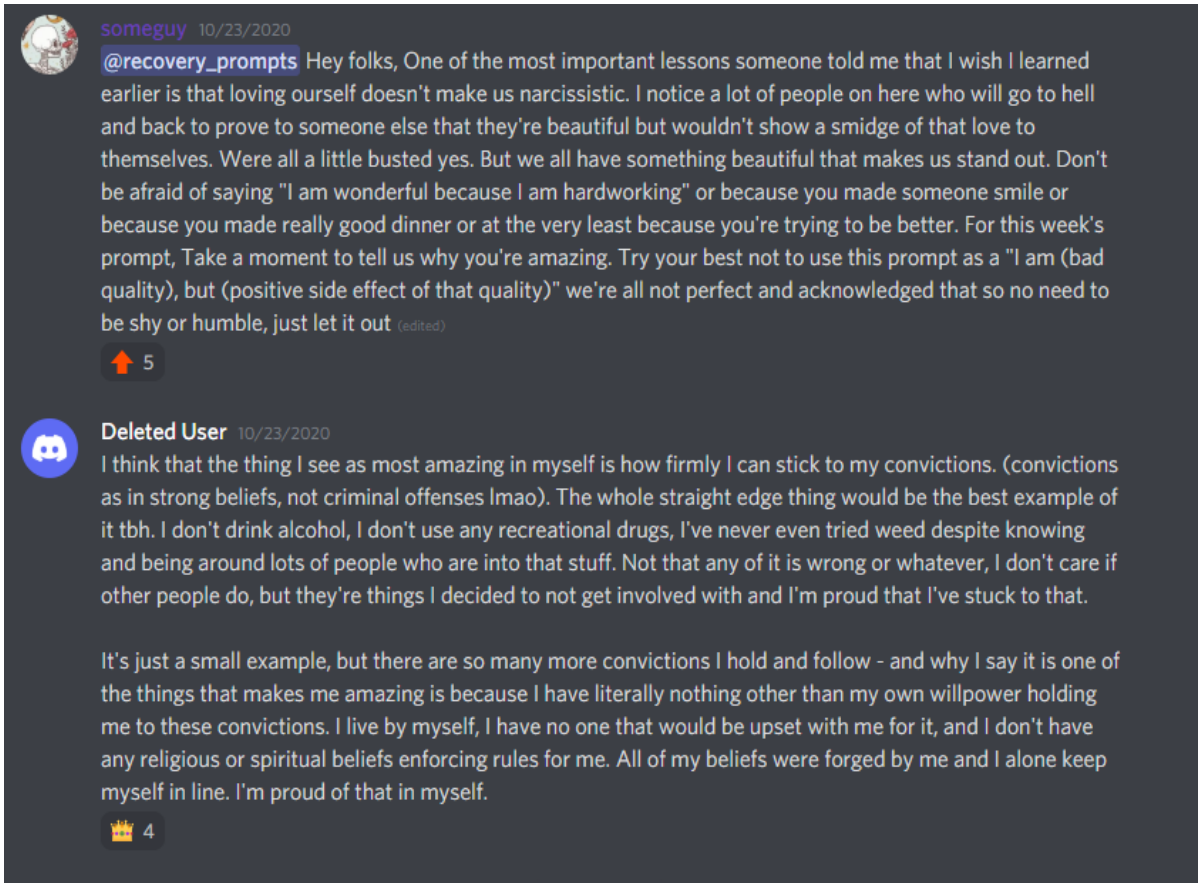

Figure 3.4: An example of a recovery prompt (image by author)

#recovery is often used for the tag "@recovery_prompts", as well as to post an update on one's life at the current moment, typically on a positive note. Tagging is a feature in which users subscribed to "recovery_prompts" will be notified when someone posts something with that tag. This tag consists

of a user reflecting on how they have improved in some way or a lesson they have learned from their experiences, followed by others posting similar experiences relating to the prompt. The #recovery channel is the antithesis of #vent. Recovery_prompts is an initiative users take in their recovery as it often asks the reader to reflect, and then share their next steps in bettering themselves. In regard to dealing with a second lock-down and how being isolated can make one lose motivation to achieve one's goals when there is a lack of feedback, Lucas once posted a prompt asking users to "reflect on the ideal person you want to be, and tell us about something you can do to get a bit closer to them." Though Lucas's care for others is unconditional on any factors regarding who they are, or what they are experiencing, both he and the channel description ("for sharing details about how you are doing on improving yourself") imply a push toward self-betterment. The act of engaging with each other is a process of reflective self-formation (Laidlaw, 2018; 179). Both Lucas and the user he is interacting with suffer from mental illness, and how they understand the other as "recovering" or "recovered" needs to be done in relationship to each other's progress with their mental health. Without the clear hierarchy of power that one would have in a clinical setting between therapist and patient, how they understand who is the one capable of providing help is based on who possesses more moral agency; that is who is further along the road of recovery. As the one who has done the work on themselves, gone to therapy, and is supporting the other, this is usually Lucas. He is able to establish himself as a listener, a supportive friend, sympathetic, and non-judgmental. Because of this ability to do so, he is able to earn the respect of others and further practice being a moral agent (Myers, 2015; 153).

Unlike #vent, in which posts are never about something good that has happened or is happening, #recovery contains more introspective posts about experiences that seem to show improvement about some aspect of a user's life such as celebrating two years of sobriety, fixing one's sleep schedule, or something as small as finding the motivating to clean one's room. However, the posts are sparser, with upwards of two weeks between new posts at times. In comparison, #vent feels like a

torrent of posts, constantly updating while #recovery is more like a trail sign, signposting that a user is slowly but surely making progress. Progress consists of users posting about their decision to pursue therapy or that they feel as if they are slowly feeling less isolated in their lives, actively taking steps to build interpersonal relationships. Lucas encourages the ones that involve other users taking the first steps to speak with a mental health professional or a general practitioner for anti-depressants. He enjoys encouraging other users, motivating them, as well as being surrounded by the positivity that comes from hopeful posts toward recovery.

Lucas practices his ethical concern for others with his words of encouragement and support when he feels he is qualified to give it by offering gentle reassurance. In order to help others find a way to be happier, to be "more comfortable with [their] condition," he focuses on making others feel as if they fit in and belong. Recovery focuses on one's ability to make choices to better themselves and consequently be witnessed as "getting better" (Myers, 2015; 9). Rather than concede to the stigma of mental illness, though it is more commonplace to discuss mental health in 2021, Lucas avoids the narrative that mental illness is something one cannot work to manage. He believes that there should be more therapists, and everyone should make the choice to go to therapy. In the same way one cares for their physical health by going to a doctor for a check-up, a therapy session helps to maintain one's mental health. However, this is a choice he cannot make for others, and he attempts to guide them to this conclusion instead. Building one's intention to "help people develop or claim resources needed to do so" alongside the goal to become a moral agent is the key drivers of mental health recovery (Myers, 2016; 438-439). Lucas insists on taking care of others, especially others who do not take care of themselves in a manner he believes is acceptable for recovery, such as drug abuse. His intention to help others is ultimately also a choice for his benefit as he solidifies his position as the person who has the resources to help others. Being known as the user that can help others users reinforces his hope of

being seen as good by others, and therefore feel as if he is good.

Similar to others who have suffered from depression, many members of the 2meirl4meirl server have experienced a disconnection from others. Fen has stated that a lot of people just do not have the openness to understand depression memes because there is already a barrier to talk about depression normally and openly. Lucas lamented his time in high school, when mental illness was avoided as a discussion topic, even when a memorial was held for someone who committed suicide. He recalled his teachers refusing to speak about suicide and mental health, rather re-framed the event around an anti-bullying campaign. Opportunities to develop one's moral agency exists through developing a "mundane morality" through ordinary sentiments and interactions within social spaces and discourse (Myers, 2016; 438, paraphrasing Sayer, 2011). #recovery emerges as a community dedicated to normalize mental illness. As Lucas states, "this discord was so different from the other one I was in. This one was alive...they really care about my feelings." The concept of isolation during depressive episodes has been examined by writer and journalist Johan Hari as a disconnection from other people. Hari realized that attempting to treat the isolated self for depression does not often work. Connection is a cornerstone of recovery and necessary for one's psychological needs. Instead of doing something for oneself as feelings of depression begin to feel unbearable, the act of doing something for another stops the "slide downward" (Hari, 2018; 200). Helping strangers is more than a way for the others to benefit from one's emotional support, or a way for the person providing the help to feel arrogant or better than another. Similar to the people who struggled with depression that Hari interviewed, realizing a deep desire to reconnect with others, and then engaging with their issues allowed them to "stop obsessing about me so much. I had other people to worry about" (Hari, 215).

My interlocutors have suggested that when they connect with another person on an emotional level, they have found that forming intimate relationships becomes easier, and it is through these

friendships that the recovery is also bolstered through the support of in-server friends. Lucas is a kind person, he does not help others for his own selfish benefit, and his goal toward moral agency is not necessarily a conscious comparison where he judges someone he is helping as “less recovered.” Even so, there is a clear distinction between the recovered person, that is the person providing help on the basis that they have experience in what the other person needs help with, and the one asking for help. The difference between the roles of the one giving advice, and the one receiving advice, exemplifies how one can be able to achieve moral agency by being able to help the other. The one asking for help is vulnerable and the other has a responsibility when engaging with others in relation to mental health. Lucas's identity of “recovered” takes form not only in an aware self-confirmation that he is doing better than he once was, but also by signifying that he is responsible for someone who is worse off (Levinas, 1991; 80). In that case, he must be capable, and aware that his guidance directly influences the other user's recovery. When Lucas offers his support, he becomes responsible for the effect his support may have on the other user, and his advice should be genuinely helpful in some way. If Lucas's advice is considered irrelevant or unhelpful, his own progress with recovery can be called into question. He may be considered disingenuous with his desire to help others, or whether or not he even possesses the expertise and experience to manage mental health issues. Moreover, the user who was vulnerable and asked for advice may retrain from doing so with him in the further, or even more drastically, refuse to participate in #recovery, negating the purpose of the therapeutic community.

#recovery is a timeline of progress toward mental health stability. The importance of “caring for yourself” as an active action, shown in #recovery, is an ethical practice of then bettering and improving oneself to the point where mental illness is manageable. Support that is provided based on empathy and community is a key concept for recovery that builds and preserves moral agency (Myers, 2016; 439), but it is ultimately up to the individual to find a way to cope with their condition. The concept of moral

agency is contingent on the individual responsibility, stressing actions taken on by the self, in order to be acknowledged as recovering by others. Lucas is content with his own personal therapy sessions outside the server, combined with helping others who are not doing as well as he is in the Discord. By caring for others, he manages to also reassure himself of his own mental health, and find fulfillment in participating in the recovery of others.

Individuals who have reached a point of stability in their lives are capable of sharing their recovery stories. Aes occasionally offers his advice on situations he feels knowledgeable and helpful in, typically in avoiding substance abuse. Others choose to leave the server, either no longer needing the therapeutic community that 2meirl4meirl offers, or no longer wanting to stay within the environment of overt mental illness. Perhaps they have found support outside the server, and as some of the messages detail, they are doing well. As the server was a place where the tacit knowledge of mental illness and suffering among users was appealing, seeking refuge in the Discord was an attempt for Aes at shielding their loved ones from the burden of their issues. Sometimes, the server is enough, and in those cases, it works fine. However, despite the well-meaning intentions of users like Lucas, there are limitations to what the therapeutic community can provide.

Fen, and many others, specified “we are not professionals” regarding the therapeutic community the 2meirl4meirl Discord and its ability for users to receive a casual, peer to peer form of therapy without clinical boundaries. Professional therapists and psychiatrists are ultimately held in the highest regard for therapy for the #recovery community, and the users of the Discord often disclaim that while they are willing to listen and help, they should not be held responsible for real medical and psychiatric advice. Despite the purpose of the #recovery channel, where one is validated by other users for their personal recovery, there is still a fear one's progress will be invalidated. If one is recovered, and the knowledge that the work on their mental health had enough merit for others to accept, there

would not be a need to disclaim their advice as inferior to professional expertise. The two types of help, one from the therapeutic community and one from expert therapists should not be compared because it is obvious they are two different models of mental health management. Professional help is clinical and while progresses one on their road toward recovery, does not create the moral agency that comes with peers viewing them as a person to emulate. With the amount of users who have gone to therapy, taken medication, and been a part of a structure common understood as the main course of action for mental illness comes with an attempt of re-creating that environment in the Discord. #Recovery focuses on the desire to "get better," despite access to mental healthcare being a barrier for many. Users post about improving themselves with therapy and medication when possible, and improving interpersonal relationships, but has major flaws that render some unable to participate fully.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Aes enjoys the community of 2meirl4meirl, but does not partake in the #vent channel any longer. As a moderator of the server and therefore someone with the ability to ban others from it, he was one of the first people I approached for my research. He was eager and excited to help me, because he thought mental health support, especially for men, needed more resources. As I have stated before, the Discord server is used as a space where individuals are able to share transgressive experiences they otherwise could not offline without feeling judged or fearing a negative response. The therapeutic community is supposed to allow for freely sharing one's experiences with recovering from mental illness to cultivate intimacy. However, despite also trying to achieve his own idea of moral agency in becoming recognized as good in tandem with helping others, Aes once upset another user to the point of leaving Aes somehow violated the boundaries of an already transgressive space. Having gone through a relapse also felt like a moral failing on his part, because instead of getting better, he ultimately had a meltdown, relapsed, and upset others. The after effects of this experience has resulted in him being extremely restrained with his posting, and he engages less with users due to the significant possibility of others realizing he has not been able to achieve recovery.

Aes believes sharing his experiences with users of the Discord's leaves him more vulnerable to be scrutinized than it does to help him. During a bad mental stint, Aes vented about his issues with self-harm and drug abuse, specifying he was “sitting on [his] bathroom floor bleeding, feeling bad about [himself], and [his] choices, and felt the need to shout into the void about it.” Aes wanted some company, and so he went on 2meirl4meirl to be among his internet friends, people who could relate to his depression. However, though he just wanted to get that experience off his chest, he felt he ultimately overshared because he neither felt better afterwards, nor was he able to maintain the idea he was worthy of intimate connection when he was ultimately reported by another user for sharing this incident.

The therapeutic community is supposed to be able to offer advice based off of similar experiences, but even though Aes recounted the circumstance surrounding his heroin addiction, how that led to an overdose, and how ill he was feeling now, no one came to offer him help or comfort. Though this post was likely most suited to be posted in #vent, it was instead posted in #general, and therefore came with the consequence of being actively engaged with by others. Even though Aes told me he meant to have posted about this event in #vent, and understood he was in the wrong about the categorization of the post, being reported for its content deeply upset him. Being reported while he was in a vulnerable state made him feel as if his experience was inherently bad. Besides the report, the lack of support or helpful engagement in a channel where sharing these events could easily be interpreted as plea for help reaffirmed his belief that he did not deserve help. In addition to his physical symptoms from a heroin overdose, his mental stability was extremely fragile. He felt like a failure for not only abusing heroin, but for overdosing and causing his mother to panic about his well being. His experience with the overdose led to a few difficult days of where he needed to recover, since he was feeling mentally and physically exhausted after his heroin overdose. He felt suicidal and was self-harming, and

the middle of his self-harming, he also was posting on the Discord about the reasons that led him to hurt himself. Aes now believes that posting about his personal issues was a mistake, because it is clear to him that users of the server is incapable of offering the kind of support he needs.

To anybody reading his posts at the time, Aes was obviously not on the road to recovery. Instead of finding sympathy, or companionship, Aes was essentially reported to another moderator who told him another user was uncomfortable reading about these events, and was caught off guard by the severity of the issue. This report was not filed with the intention of bringing attention to someone who was in need of help, rather it was one that suggested Aes had done something wrong. From Aes's experience, after being in the server for several years, he believes most users do not have experience with how to deal with explicit mentions of drug overdose and with self-harm. Suicidal ideation is typically talked about in a hypothetical scenario, not as a present issue, because outside of #vent where one does not get a response, other channels do not tolerate explicit content as it can upset others. This was the case with Aes's experience. Posting about one's current act of self-harm also does not belong in recovery because it is not considered as making an effort to better oneself. In #recovery, one is most likely to find posts about self-harm in the past tense, and how one has taking steps to refrain from continuing to do so.

Aes explained that he uses the Discord for “an outlet for things I can’t or don’t want to tell people in real life,” alluding to members of his family, and, ironically, includes his therapist. He is reluctant to be vulnerable with others in a position where they can judge his progress with recovery from a position of authority; a position where they do not need to reveal any of their own issues to Aes in a way that would make them mutually vulnerable. Professional therapy is unlike the therapeutic community where there is a lack of clinical boundaries as communication is a mutual exchange between peers. Although he participates in therapy to receive help for his mental health, he feels as if

he does not benefit from sharing his thoughts with his therapist. Aes does not think his therapist would understand his experiences, and reasoning behind the decisions he makes because they have not revealed they have had similar issues. Aes does not share intimate details about his mental health with his mother or his therapist since he values empathy as a factor for sharing his emotions, and neither appear to be empathetic toward him. He worries about forcing a burden of responsibility upon his family to make sure he is mentally stable, and being involuntarily committed into an institution if he is not careful about what he says in therapy. Despite his efforts to improve himself, he has been unable to be recognized as someone recovering. Though he also believes his current therapist would give him the benefit of the doubt and have a proper conversation together before ruling him a risk to himself, he is still wary of expressing his thoughts and feelings completely freely. When speaking with a mental health professional, the exchange of personal experiences is a one way avenue, for Aes alone to receive help. His hesitance to share his problems is not only because of the likelihood of being misunderstood, but also the other person is also not in need of mental health support, and gains nothing from Aes being open to them.

Being reported as a result of his post disrupted the original idea that the Discord could be a place where he could avoid feeling guilty for burdening others, and keep his personal issues away from the people who mattered the most in his life. Afterwards, he realized that the Discord is another medium where he needs to still be concerned with whether he is seen as a threat to himself. By upsetting someone else on the Discord, he believes his attempts at taking part in sharing his emotions and experiences is harmful. The supposed therapeutic community did not react in a supportive way to his failures, his relapses, it returned in the form of confrontation by another user (who had a negative reaction to it), and Aes felt that the way he was engaging with others through the server benefited no one. The therapeutic community is seen to be flawed due to the lack of support, and sharing his

experiences does not result in a cathartic release when he feels guilty for upsetting someone else. Because of this incident, Aes is incapable accepting himself someone who is recovering since he is not progressing in a linear fashion, and believes his setbacks are rooted in a deeper failure he possesses. Furthermore, after his bid for connect was ignored, Aes also realized that the therapeutic community was not a two-way peer based support group. He could help others, but his attempts at reaching out for support was seen as problematic, therefore unproductive in being recognized as someone helping themselves, or worthy of fostering an intimate relationship with. Myers described people seeking recovery as needing the "social bases of self-respect," that is a relationship with other people that can reaffirm oneself as good during their recovery. What is valued by others, the perceptions of others that one possesses good qualities is used to build up one's own base for self-respect, that allows one to reorient oneself toward recovery despite relapse (Myers, 2016; 436). Unfortunately, the Discord's therapeutic community did not offer Aes a solid foundation for self-respect, instead reporting him and confirming his suspicions that he was a failure. This event happened years ago, and he still refuses to post #recovery for support, worried he might burden someone else.

Aes did not act in a way that he thought would be against any rules, or cause harm. He operated under the same guidelines of how he would judge others as a moderator. He often went unchallenged, given his authority to warn, mute, and ban rule-breaking users from the server. More importantly, he possessed the trust of other moderators and users that he was only doing what was best for everyone's enjoyment of the server. However, his understanding of what constitutes a post on the process of recovery was challenged when he realized his bid for support from the server's therapeutic community was being rejected. The issue is he was not recognized as someone working toward recovery, rather he showcased a mental collapse for all to see. Unfortunately for Aes, disclosing his struggles to others did not foster intimacy with others, and he felt further isolated.

Recovery is presented by one's capacity and intention to live the kind of life they aspire to live (Myers, 2016; 428). After Aes's failed attempt at participating in the peer to peer experience for recovery within the Discord, he is somewhat ashamed, and frightened, to try to again. Worried about concerned users potentially calling the police to check in on him, he is unable to bring himself to share his issues again. He originally wanted to post his problems and life updates so that other users were aware of them and he could be held accountable for his recovery. Knowing that someone else knows he is mentally unwell would help him refrain from acting upon his harmful impulses as to not cause concern for the other person. "[Venting] doesn't serve much purpose to share with other people than just getting it out of my head, and just inflicts the pain of knowing that stuff on other people which isn't my aim…there's a constant fear of imposing my experiences onto people in a harmful way." Unlike his fear of involuntarily being committed by his therapist, Aes's hesitance to reach out again stems from his fear and worry of being shamed or reproached for making people uncomfortable.

During my time in the Discord, I have never seen Aes ask for support, and I have only ever seen him post in #vent one time. His vent was one line, "Finally found new blades, nice and fresh", as a reference to self-harm, with an emoticon of Pepe the Frog smiling and holding up a thumbs up.[25] Wary of his previous incident of over-sharing, the vent attempted to be non-offensive by being short and vague. He knows being oversharing his negative feelings would harm any image of "getting better." Unsure how to engage with the therapeutic community, Aes posted in #vent to avoid a bid for emotional connection that could backfire on him once more. When I messaged him to ask him about his vent, Aes described how his mental health was deteriorating, but simply does not feel able to post and elaborate on serious content in the Discord. Since sharing his feelings in depth has already failed once, Aes would rather forgo any further bids for intimate connection and support in the Discord than

25 Though Pepe the Frog has been recently associated as an Alt-Right figure during the events of the 2016 American election, it did not originally have racist or anti-Semitic connotations. Many variations of Pepe memes continue to exist without reference to the Alt-Right.

be seen as someone struggling with recovery.

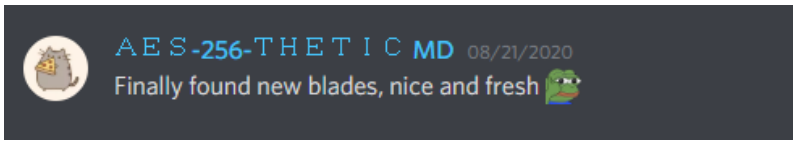

Figure 3.6: Aes's vent (image by author)

Aes felt especially vulnerable to being scrutinized for bad behaviour due to his role as a moderator. As a moderator, he is in a position of authority in the server, yet if others do not see him as someone capable of taking steps to recover from their mental illnesses, he feels invalidated. A moderator is a user that is a regular, active member of the community, and they become someone other users can to turn to. They are considered to be reliable and dependable, if not for personal needs then to at least uphold the server rules. Aes felt it was contradictory, even embarrassing, to be an authority figure moderating the actions of others when he is well-known and prominent in the server, but also failing with the linear progression of recovery. At the time of that incident, he did not have any intentions or beliefs that his post was going to upset someone. Due to his active moderating, where he reads reports and scans the channels for rule-breaking behaviour and messages, he genuinely believed his posts were acceptable, though extreme, and within the parameters of the server rules. His reported post was ultimately forgotten about, as Aes did not face any disciplinary action, and there were no other repercussions beyond his personal feelings of guilt and regret.

Previously stated, though the pretense of sharing memes would suggest that the Discord is a space that allows for transgressive engagement of mental health taboos, the therapeutic community that emerges in the Discord is incapable of handling all the challenges that result from mental illness. My interlocutors consistently made known they were not mental health professionals: not only do they not have the training to handle someone in the middle of a mental spiral, but they have no professional

obligation to step in for someone pleading for help. Members of the community are not beholden to someone in need of help, nor do they promise to make an effort to help every single person that chooses to share their feelings, and there is no one forcing any interaction to occur. In Aes's case, no one felt as if they could help him: in fact, as we saw, the user who reported Aes solidified the belief that he could not really be helped. Aes told me he felt comfortable sharing his experience with me, and no one else, because "it's primarily in the name of research, I feel less like I'd be burdening you by being fully open." Since he regards me as someone fully accepting, or even seeking out those transgressive elements of the community for my research, I would not be someone who would reject him for his failure with recovery.

As stated before, one of the initial draws of the therapeutic community in #recovery has been to be able to freely express frustrations about one's mental illness or everyday life in a place where they felt as if others would not judge them. Nonetheless, as James Laidlaw states," humans are self-evaluating"(Laidlaw, 184). The established pretense of non-judgment does not eliminate the sense of judgment that comes from within oneself. Even within the space of the therapeutic community, in which one's efforts are often directed toward the establishment of intimate relationships, one is necessarily describing to oneself exactly what it is that one is doing: this self-description is always at least implicitly evaluative (Ibid.). While my interlocutors readily share when they are about start to see a therapist or go on medication, they seem to refrain from posting those smaller, less obvious moments that may be involved in their recovery process. Or, they discredit the importance of these smaller things; brushing off the significance of taking a shower or cleaning a room as "not much." As users of the Discord construct what they post, they both consciously and subconsciously select the right phrases and tone to use. Informed by the context of the therapeutic community, users evaluate and self-describe themselves in relationship to the same people they strive to connect with. It is through this process that each user hope their actions, and their post about these actions, will be recognized as moral. Posts are

crafted in a way for this outcome to be most likely (Myers, 2016; 428). However, even as one attempts to clarify themselves in the process of recovery as properly moral, these attempts may be misunderstood, scrutinized, or rejected.

For instance, when Aes's post was reported, either he had failed in properly presenting his needs to the therapeutic community, or they completely misunderstood his situation and what he intended as a reaction from other users.[26] Instead of receiving emotional support, he was recognized as someone who was posting content that was too upsetting for the community of even a mental health Discord to read. The need to be mindful of how an emotional post made under distress will be perceived by other users signifies the limitations of the therapeutic capabilities of the server. One can be vulnerable, but only if this vulnerability is expressed in accordance with the version of recovery, and progression toward that goal, established in the server. The relationship between recovery and relapse is apparent through failure: by relapsing, it was clear Aes had failed with his goals of recovery. The inverse is that failing to relapse suggests one is currently on the path of recovery. However, this is only one understanding of recovery, which is dictated by one's perspective of what progression means. In terms of linear progression, Aes was unable to construct the image of someone in recovery, but in understanding that recovery is in fact, a collection, or assemblage of experiences in which one can craft their own life narrative, Aes would be able to be seen as using his relapse as another stepping stone in his recovery (Myers, 2016; 433). By knowing how and why he failed before, he could have more experience in how to improve himself moving forward, and to post this understanding in #recovery could be construed as someone who has already made progress since their relapse.

#recovery works as a method of managing oneself in relation to others. As I have argued, the therapeutic community can allow users to develop intimate relationships online that allow them to feel connected to others. As Aes himself stated, he hoped it would keep him accountable in his actions. For

26 Maybe even both possibilities could have added to the misunderstanding.

many users, including Lucas, the therapeutic community helps each other, and they are able to progress with recovery, and the moral agency in striving to “live a good life.” Having other users assess Lucas as “recovered” is validating for him, as is comparing his progress in recovery to that of the other users. But he doesn't use this comparison only to his own benefit, he also validates others who strive for recovery using the same methods; or in other words, he fully participates in the therapeutic community. #recovery continues to be the same it always has been, sparse with regular posts, but full of hope and plans to improve oneself. Users have come and gone, but a continued small group of regular users persist and continue to support each other. One finds validation within #recovery among their friends and others who are like-minded, as long as one is able to follow the agreed upon progression of what recovery entails.

Conclusion

In mid-May of 2021, I reached out to Aes. I had not heard or spoken to him in a while, and at the time, I was hoping to clarify a few of the things I had been thinking about in relation to our interviews together. Uncertain how to break the ice, and whether he would even respond, I started by wishing him well, and that I hoped he had been doing alright. After a few days without a response, I felt a little saddened, but understood why he may not want to bother with talking to someone he briefly knew over the internet. To my surprise, two weeks later, he apologized for missing my message and told me he was in fact doing extremely well. He was "doing far, far better than [he] had been. Just busy, and having some trouble not disassociating, but leagues happier now." He gave me the detail and clarification I was looking for, and I was happy to hear he was doing well. I followed up with a few more questions, but he never responded. I believe Aes has realized he personally is not able to achieve recovery by being in the server, due to the limits this space has for his ability to deal with his mental illness.

The server is not as transgressive and taboo breaking as Aes would have liked to believe due to the looping effects that redefine mental illness, and recreate stigma. The looping effect's push back against the initial stigma of mental illness is not enough to eliminate the feeling of otherness, hence the need to redefine categories of mental illness and how it is managed. Given the months that have passed since our last interaction, it seems unlikely that I will be hearing from Aes again. Doing a quick search of his most recent activity in the 2meirl4meirl server, I found that he has not posted or had a conversation in any of the channels since mid-April. He has in the past taken breaks from the server, explaining that he does not have the "bandwidth" to see the issues everyone is dealing with. He has told me sometimes he needs a break from the overwhelming negativity associated with the server that he cannot always handle and needs to distance himself from it in order to feel better. As such, I would not be entirely surprised if Aes were to pop up in the server once more – but I wouldn't hold my breath.

Hacking has suggested that though we may believe we have the choice to change our current state of affairs, or think we have choices to make, many of these choices are in fact responses to our circumstances (Hacking, 2004; 286). Possessing the means to go to therapy, Aes also chose to join the 2meirl4meirl Discord server due to the loneliness and disconnection his mental illness created between his loved ones in his real life relationships. But many users do not necessarily have the option to participate in both therapy and the Discord. Many individuals face a financial barrier that prevents them from seeking professional therapeutic help. The 2meirl4meirl Discord is understood by many of its users as a transgressive space, a place where one can joke about suicide, and break other taboos around mental illness, but many of the same ideas of how one should manage their mental health that are prominent outside of the server still remain dominant even within it. Individuals still find it difficult to share their struggles with mental illness with others, and others still do not want to see conversations about depression, as shown by the creation of the #vent channel used to maintain a facade that no one is watching, and the avoidance of depression memes in #general. Though the Discord user has made the choice to join the server, the circumstance by which they have come to the conclusion to join 2meirl4meirl was likely also a part of a response to their situation: whether they had friends to speak about their depression with, or if they were lonely and had no where else to seek community, and even within the server, there are rules on how and where one can share their personal issues.

In Chapter One, I discussed how individuals use humour to remove themselves from depression memes or distressing anecdotes. Despite the supposed transgressive nature of the Discord, themes of suicide and self-harm remain contained in depression memes that are carefully chosen and sent to particular people. Memes are used this way to gauge reaction toward mental illness both conveys serious feelings, yet evades personal responsibility as the meme exists as an inter-textual, independent image separate from an individual. Absurd humour was used to avoid any admission of having mental

illness, understanding that the sentiments conveyed in the meme are not quite the same as one's own, thereby redefining what is known about members who are mentally ill. However, as the type of person who is in fact depressed changes to one who sends a new kind of meme, new knowledge in turn becomes a part of what is known about individuals who are depressed and send memes, thereby creating a looping effect from which one cannot escape (Hacking, 1996, 19). Depression memes often tried to obscure suicidal ideation with humorous connotations of depression that could easily dismiss serious sentiments as absurd, and therefore not possible. Absurd possibilities attempted to shield individuals in the server from the stigma of mental illness, able to play off their often genuine feelings as a joke, however these types of memes and kinds of people become re-categorized over and over as depression memes, and as individuals suffering from mental illness.

The looping effects of human kinds, that is, classifications of kinds of people they describe, ultimately create reactions that enable individuals to re-describe themselves (Hacking, 1996, 368). In Chapter Two, avoidance of being associated with mental illness despite membership in a mental illness Discord server illustrates the "anti-community." I discussed how the anti-community is not the absence of community, but one that does not have to refer back to one's mental health in order to be understood. Rather, understanding of one's experience with depression and other disorders is implied. Tacit knowledge operated under a series of "non-winks", or non-action in the communication between other users. Instead of being classified as a part of a Discord server that discussed one's mental illness, intentional avoidance of this category allows one to simply be a part of an "ironic, satirical server." The understanding that one did want to speak about their mental health issues, but chose not to in order to avoid being associated with mental illness was an experience that several users went through in the server. Despite what seemed to be a collective agreement to ignore one's issues, #vent operated as a way of subtlety recognizing others who were having issues, as if communicated properly, though not overtly, one could be understood as someone who empathized with another's struggles due to their own

mental health.

In Chapter Three, recovery acts as an overarching category to name a number of strategies of striving for moral agency. In a similar strain as to how one hides in #vent when sending posts they fear would categorize them as “bad”, a burden, or failing in some way due to their fear of being judged and stigmatized, #recovery operated by viewing those same issues through the lens of striving toward a good life. Individuals hoped to be removed from their vents, but to be seen in their recovery prompts, so that others may witness their progress in improving themselves. In the context of #recovery, there were two conflicting models of what recovery entailed, highlighting the importance of how one responds to circumstance. Though relapse was considered failure for Aes, the classification of what is considered recovery can create a feedback loop where relapse is used as motivation, or a benchmark for recovery. Thus, there is no fixed idea of what should recovery entail, and #recovery limits how one can progress with recovery due to the server's user-base praising the clinical structure of therapy, and linear progression. The tensions of mental health appeared in the Discord as a transgressive internet space that often accepted many kinds of people going through different issues and phases of their mental illnesses, yet was also a place where transgression of said space was possible. The facade of an edgy, alternative, dark humour based server hoped to critique the issues of mental healthcare with a reformation of mental health practice. Beginning with a subversion of stigma, depression memes were used as an attempt to normalize mental illness in casual day to day life, but even within the Discord they were associated with a general understanding of mental health that lacked the emotional depth many users wanted and needed. A community of individuals who use the dark humour in depression memes to communicate their needs is not as rebellious as one would think when it appears as if individuals are still trapped using the language of mental health.

Tom Boellstorff had argued that virtual worlds become communities over time (Boellstroff, 180). Indeed, the Discord server at the centre of this thesis is a community; with all its cliques, norms,

flaws, and boundaries. The Discord community did not manage to create a space where all were welcome or able to speak freely and without fear, despite it's intention to do so. Being participants of the offline world, users retained their knowledge of how to be and brought it into the server, which recreated all the stigmas that previously were offline. Though the focus is on mental health, and individuals hope to be able to find compassion and friendship because of mental illness, rather than in spite of it, these communities are inherently similar to one's real life.

I am unsure if Aes will return to the server. I once asked him if he would ever completely leave 2meirl4meirl, which he responded was unlikely because of his friendships there, but it was possible. Although I am merely speculating, it seems different this time. This is the longest he has been away, and his explanation is that he is busy with his life and feels he is at his best seems promising. Stating the reason that he has left before as being overwhelmed by the server's negativity, leaving him drained of the capacity to deal with both this environment and his own issues, the 2meirl4meirl Discord server is likely not the best fit for someone needing a proper space to better themselves. Though users suggest an alternative notion of recovery and attitude toward individuals that otherwise feel stigmatized in daily life, the language that attempts to normalize mental illness can be representative of mental health today despite its desire to escape from it. After years of participation in the 2meirl4meirl server, perhaps Aes has decided to leave this environment permanently, and is on a path to recovery that is better for him. Stigma persists in the server, and though the Discord is a community where one can find real connections and friendships, virtual worlds are easier to leave than material ones. When one does not find what they had hoped to find, or perhaps moves on from the need the Discord served, one can disappear.

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