



Scroll and Laugh to Survive: An Overview of Stress Coping Among Meme Lovers

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ABSTRACT

Stress in adolescents can be understood as an adaptive framework in which adolescents develop coping strategies, one of which is through memes. The purpose of this study is to determine the influence of memes in reducing and managing stress experienced by adolescents. The subject of this study consisted of one participant based on the criterion of an adolescent who uses memes as a stress coping mechanism. The data collection technique used a structured interview with a deductive thematic analysis approach. The study concluded that memes can reduce the stress experienced by the subject, based on the divergence aspect observed when the subject watched memes to distract from the stress they were experiencing. In the convergence aspect, the subject felt a connection with the memes viewed; the subject felt that the memes were highly relevant to their situation; and the normalization aspect was marked by the subject feeling that memes could help them calm down and alleviate negative thoughts due to the humor in the memes viewed. Memes are highly effective in reducing the stress experienced by the subjects, as memes contain an element of humor that can divert negative thoughts that may lead to stress. Experimental research using memes can explore stress coping strategies among adolescents in future studies.

INTRODUCTION

Stress during adolescence can be understood as an adaptive framework in which individuals develop coping strategies to deal with environmental pressures. Coping can be viewed as a combination of process responses (strategies chosen to address problems) and a step-by-step approach to sources of stress, influenced by personal factors such as gender, perceived control, and social identity. Various studies have shown that coping during adolescence is influenced by individual-environmental dynamics as well as gender differences in coping strategy preferences, such as social support and self-control (Sordes-Ader et al. 1997; Gangloff & Malleh, 2017; Mariage & Schmitt-Fourrier, 2006).

Memes have been identified as a digital cultural phenomenon that is not only entertaining but also serves as a coping tool in times of crisis. The literature indicates that memes can function as a collective coping strategy, helping to alleviate anxiety, enhance a sense of humor, and foster group identity that serves as a form of virtual social support. Cross-national research indicates that pandemic/COVID-19-related memes can facilitate emotional coping, reduce stress-related tension, and mediate psychological well-being through humor, emotional recalibration, and the formation of online communities (Laor, 2023; Skórka et al., 2022; Myrick et al., 2022; , Flecha-Ortiz et al., 2020; Anter, 2022; Guillod et al., 2018; Vaingankar et al., 2021; Liby et al., 2023). Understanding how memes contribute to coping among adolescents requires exploring two main pathways: (a) humorous or satirical meme content that reduces emotional burden, and (b) social learning processes through online communities that enable social support and shared identity (Laor, 2023; Myrick et al., 2022; Vaingankar et al., 2021).

Previous research conducted by Flecha Ortiz et al. (2021) explains that memes serve as a tool for collective coping during the COVID-19 pandemic in Puerto Rico by following the four stages of collective coping theory – awareness, divergence, convergence, and normalization – which help identify the role of memes in reducing the social stress arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the study in that research journal indicate that memes have a significant psychological impact on individuals. The presence of social media also influences many people to use memes as a collective coping mechanism to channel the anxiety and stress experienced by individuals.

Based on the data above, researchers are interested in investigating how stress coping among meme-using adolescents can influence the younger generation in managing the psychological pressures they face. This is because adolescents are a group that is very active on social media and engaged in consuming or creating memes. Therefore, in this context, memes are not only used for entertainment or sarcasm, but are also utilized by the younger generation to express emotions, engage in non-verbal communication, and sometimes serve as a means of stress relief.

Based on the results of an interview conducted on Monday, November 17, 2025. The subject is a teenager who enjoys watching memes while using social media and uses memes as a coping mechanism. The subject explained that memes serve as a coping mechanism because they contain videos or photos in

the form of stickers that provoke laughter, even to the point of roaring with laughter. When experiencing stress, the subject tends to divert that stress through entertainment, one of which is memes, which the subject views as a source of amusement. When watching or enjoying memes, the subject tends to prefer video memes, as they feel that video memes resonate more with daily life, making them more effective in managing or reducing the stress they experience. Observing this phenomenon, we, the researchers, are interested in conducting an in-depth study on how memes can serve as a stress coping strategy for adolescents in this digital age.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress coping is a process by which individuals attempt to manage the gap between demands (whether originating from the individual or the environment) and the resources they utilize in dealing with stressful situations (Smet, 1994). According to Radley (2005), the term stress coping can be defined as cognitive and behavioral adjustments toward a better state, reducing and tolerating existing demands that cause stress. Sarafino (2006) states that stress coping is a process in which individuals make efforts to manage situations perceived to have a gap between effort and ability, which is assessed as the cause of the stressful situation. Stress coping is an individual's cognitive and behavioral effort to manage stressful conditions from their environment.

Various studies indicate that memes can serve as a medium for stress coping strategies due to their emotional mechanisms (emotion-focused coping); memes often function as a medium for alleviating negative emotions through humor, emotional expression, and social validation (e.g., sharing experiences of stress, embarrassment, or discomfort). The literature indicates that emotion-focused coping tends to be higher among adolescents who express emotions through creative/comedic media, which can reduce stress when accompanied by healthy social support (Vo & Park, 2008; Fauziyyah et al., 2023; Daulay, 2024).

Other research indicates that memes also serve as a form of social support and identity validation; specifically, memes shared among peers can enhance a sense of belonging, reduce isolation, and strengthen coping strategies through informal social interventions. This aligns with findings that family/peer support and social structures play a crucial role in resilience and well-being when facing stress (Yoviana et al., 2023; Ermita & Rosenthal, 2024; King, 2022; Kusnadi & Kaloeti, 2022).

This is reinforced by the fact that memes are viewed as a balancing act between adaptive and maladaptive coping; that is, memes can serve as adaptive coping by stabilizing mood and enhancing self-efficacy, yet there is a risk that memes that mock or reinforce stigma may exacerbate stress or perpetuate maladaptive coping if not accompanied by reflective context or professional support. This is consistent with findings showing variations in coping among Indonesian adolescents and the importance of social support contexts as well as individual factors such as self-compassion (Yoviana et al., 2023; Aziz & Rahmatullah, 2023; Sumargi & Giovanni, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this study is a qualitative case study aimed at identifying and understanding the meaning of the experiences of adolescents who use memes as a stress coping mechanism. The qualitative data analysis technique employed utilizes a deductive thematic analysis approach, which involves deriving theories deductively from research on data derived from the analyzed phenomena and explaining them in the form of data patterns from the examined phenomena.

The research subjects are adolescents currently enrolled in college who view and use memes to reduce stress. The subjects were selected to determine how memes can alleviate and eliminate stress or problems they are currently experiencing. There are 4 findings: the subjects greatly enjoy memes; they tend to prefer memes in video format because they find them more relatable; they frequently watch memes when in situations filled with negative emotions (such as anger); and they state that memes can alleviate the stress they are currently experiencing. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview method incorporating the coping mechanisms outlined by Wagner et al. (2002) in the journal by Flecha Ortiz, José A., et al. (2021), namely: a.) Divergence, which refers to the initial stage of experiencing a stressful situation (escaping stress through memes). b.) Convergence, which refers to the stage where a person.

Table 1. Interview Guidelines

Aspect	Indicators	Question
<i>Divergence</i>	1. Using memes as a distraction from problems.	1. Does searching for and looking at memes help you distract yourself when you're stressed? 2. How often do you search for and view memes when you feel stressed?
	2. Using humor in memes as a way to distance oneself from negative emotions.	1. Does looking at humorous memes help calm you down when you're feeling emotional? 2. Do you feel better after seeing a funny meme?
<i>Convergence</i>	1. Using memes to connect with others who are going through similar experiences.	1. How often do you come across memes that "resonate" with your current situation and feelings?

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> How did you feel when you realized that many people were going through the same thing, as shown in the meme?
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Using memes and sharing them as a form of emotional communication. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel supported by other people's comments or reactions to the memes you share? After laughing together at a meme, do you feel like your bond with others has grown stronger?
<i>Normalization</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Using memes to normalize stressful experiences. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> With the help of memes, how can you learn to take negative or unpleasant experiences in stride? Does watching memes make you realize that stress is something everyone experiences?
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Raising awareness that difficulties are normal. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Does this meme make you realize that failure and stress are part of life's journey? Have you become more realistic and able to accept yourself after seeing memes about everyday life?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on interviews with adolescents who use memes as a stress reliever, researchers were able to describe coping mechanisms based on the aspects of coping mechanisms identified by Wagner et al. (2002), as follows:

Table 2. Aspects of Coping Mechanisms Identified by Wagner Et Al

Aspects of Stress Coping	Interview Results	Conclusion
<i>Divergence</i>	The subject skillfully tries to cope with the difficulties they are currently facing, such as headaches, a backlog of tasks, and a bad mood. The subject tends to choose to address these difficulties immediately by creating positive distractions – that is, temporarily avoiding the source of stress – which they do by opening social media apps like TikTok or Instagram to watch memes, which the subject uses as a coping mechanism.	Initial Condition: When facing a difficult situation, the subject views memes via a sharing app
<i>Convergence</i>	The subject feels that their stressful experience is shared by many others, such as the meme about piling up college assignments.	The subject felt that viewing memes helped alleviate their mental stress after seeing memes that they felt were relevant to their current situation.
<i>Normalization</i>	The subject feels that satirical memes – such as the overwhelming workload of college assignments or failed diets – are normal situations experienced by everyone, so the subject can laugh at them	Negative experiences can happen to anyone.

a. Divergence

The concept of divergence refers to the initial stage when a person faces a difficult or stressful situation (using memes as an escape from stress). This can be defined as a form of creativity that goes beyond a person's existing knowledge to a certain extent. In other words, individuals begin analyzing a collection of images or videos to transform them into something different and unique, with the aim of

creating a positive distraction—that is, temporarily distancing themselves from or avoiding the source of stress to calm down. Based on the interview results, the subjects can be said to possess or exhibit the aspect of divergence, which can be described through the interview findings as follows:

“When I’m feeling stressed or overwhelmed, I usually just open up TikTok or Instagram. When I’m swamped with work, I do it in a hurry... Basically, just to take a break...”

Based on the interview results, it was found that the subject often watches or enjoys memes when facing stressful or difficult situations, such as when feeling frustrated or overwhelmed, or when facing a heavy workload; the subject often temporarily distracts themselves from the source of stress by watching memes, specifically by opening TikTok or Instagram to view them. Additionally, the subject also feels that memes can change their mood, from a bad mood to a good mood or an improved mood, as illustrated by the following interview results:

“For example, when I’m not in the mood—when I’m just feeling down—seeing a funny, totally absurd meme can make me burst out laughing all on my own.”

Based on the interview results, it can be said that the subject always tries to dispel negative “vibes”—such as a bad mood—by watching memes, thereby improving their mood from bad to better through memes that make them laugh.

The subject’s efforts to always stay on a positive path are clearly evident, as the subject is able to accurately assess their internal state. The subject deftly strives to overcome the difficult situations they are experiencing, such as headaches, piling tasks, and a bad mood. When facing difficulties, the subject tends to choose to immediately address the issue by creating a positive distraction—that is, temporarily avoiding the source of stress—which the subject does by opening social media apps like TikTok or Instagram to watch memes, which serve as their coping mechanism. Memes are quite effective in addressing the problems or difficulties experienced by the subject, as memes play a crucial role in helping the subject improve their mood, alleviate existing stress, and conceptualize stress as a relationship between the individual and the environment that extends beyond coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), where divergence functions as an initial strategy to avoid allostatic overload, such as emotional symptoms (irritability, anxiety) or mental symptoms (difficulty concentrating). The use of social media for positive humor supports process-oriented stress management, including transforming “bad stress” into a challenge through emotional relaxation rather than direct confrontation. This also involves internal factors such as an individual’s perception of stressors (tasks, mood), which influence adaptive or dysfunctional responses.

b. Convergence

Convergence implies that individuals begin to find common ground with one another when there are numerous reactions (emotional connection and validation). This refers to the fact that certain messages are adopted by the majority, meaning that minority viewpoints are set aside. As a result, individuals or groups of people may share similar beliefs regarding images or videos (memes) that align with the majority’s social interpretation. Essentially, this refers to the use of memes to address existing negative emotions in a more lighthearted manner. There are interviews based on the aspect of convergence, namely:

“Usually, when I’m feeling overwhelmed – since I’m a student, too – if I have a pile of assignments, I’ll look at memes to take my mind off things. The memes are funny, so they help lighten the load, you know?”

From the subject’s statement, it can be concluded that the subject reported feeling a reduction in mental stress after viewing memes that were perceived as relevant to their current situation. In their journal article, Hidayati & Harsono (2021) explain that stress is an individual’s response to a situation perceived as threatening or a threat; however, stress can be reduced if there is social support or positive emotional connections. Convergence facilitates this through shared humor and common experiences. Additionally, the subject often finds memes that resonate with their situation, as illustrated in the following interview:

“Okay, the answer is pretty often. For example, there’s that meme about piling up homework. Well, I always feel that way myself, so I think this meme really speaks to me.”

This statement indicates that the subject feels their stressful experience is shared by many others. The subject recognizes that stress caused by a mounting workload is not experienced solely by them, but is a collective experience. This aligns with a journal article stating that social connections and a sense of belonging to a group are key factors in reducing stress. This is because when someone discovers that others respond to academic stress in the same way – for example, through humor in memes – a sense of convergence emerges, leading to emotional validation. The journal emphasizes that when individuals feel understood or share similar experiences with others, their emotional reactions to stress become more manageable.

Thus, based on the interviews and stress theories found in the literature, convergence among participants can be understood as a form of stress reduction through shared emotional understanding – that is, a process that makes individuals feel they are not alone in facing pressure, thereby making the stress they experience feel lighter and easier to cope with.

c. Normalization

Normalization means that stress becomes normalized when people share a common understanding – specifically, a shared emotional response to a meme – which helps them stop feeling afraid or overwhelmed and instead accept and laugh about the situation together (acceptance of negative experiences). The subject indicated that memes can help them view negative experiences in a more lighthearted way. The subject explains that situations that typically cause stress, such as a pile of tasks, feel lighter when viewing a meme depicting that situation. Through the humor in the meme, the subject is able to keep laughing even while under stress, so that an experience that was initially overwhelming can be accepted more casually. Based on the interview results, the subject can be said to possess or exhibit aspects of normalization, which can be described through the interview results as follows:

“Sometimes, things that stress me out or give me a headache often get turned into memes. So, for example, when assignments pile up and the deadline keeps getting closer, there’s a meme that goes, ‘I know it’s tight, but I’m still just lying around.’ When I see that, I just burst out laughing and think, ‘Oh well, I might as well just relax for a bit, right? Take it easier, keep it light...’”

The subject’s statement demonstrates the process of stress reinterpretation described by Lazarus & Folkman (1984) in their journal article: stress is perceived as less intense when individuals cognitively assess a situation as non-threatening.

By laughing at stressful situations, the subject directly reduces the emotional impact of academic burdens, consistent with the concept that perception can alter the intensity of stress (Hidayati & Harsono, 2021).

The subjects also described the normalization of negative experiences through the awareness that stress, failure, and various challenges are part of life's journey that many people also experience. By viewing memes that discuss failure or self-consistency, the subjects felt that these experiences were not unique to them. This can be illustrated from the interview results as follows:

"I was just talking about a meme about failing to stick to a diet, failing to stay consistent – maybe realizing that everyone can go through that too..."

In addition, the subject also said that looking at memes made them feel more realistic and accepting of their condition:

"Seeing those relatable memes about life makes me feel like it's okay to just be myself, so I don't put so much pressure on myself."

This statement is closely related to acceptance-oriented coping, which is the ability to accept situations that cannot be changed and to lower one's overly high expectations of oneself. Normalization through memes helps subjects adjust their internal demands so that they do not become a greater source of stress.

Thus, all of the subjects' statements indicate that humor in memes functions as a medium that alters the perception of stress, making it seem normal, lighthearted, and acceptable, in line with the theories of coping and stress perception in the journal by Hidayati & Harsono (2021).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the subjects have a way to reduce and cope with the stress they experience, namely by watching relevant and funny memes. This can be seen from the aspects of stress coping, specifically the divergence aspect, which is evident in the subjects watching memes to distract themselves from the stress they are currently experiencing. Then there is the convergence aspect, which is evident in the subjects' perception that the memes they watch often relate to and align with the conditions or situations they are currently experiencing, thereby reducing their stress. Similarly, regarding the normalization aspect, the subject often feels that others might be experiencing the same thing, making them realize they are not alone and that the situation they are facing is something others might also experience.

This prevents them from dwelling on the stress and helps them move on quickly. The results of this study certainly indicate that stress must be addressed promptly to prevent it from lingering and causing more serious consequences. There are many ways to cope with or reduce stress, one of which is watching funny memes, which can improve the viewer's mood thanks to the humor present in the memes.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research could employ experimental methods to test the effectiveness of using memes as a stress-coping strategy among adolescents, involving a more diverse sample of participants.

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