

Memes as a Marketing Tool: Examining Brand Recall, Trust, and Purchase Intent Among Gen Z Social Media Users

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Abstract – This study examines the influence of meme marketing on brand engagement among Gen Z social media users. As brands increasingly adopt memes to connect with younger, digitally native audiences, this research investigates how such content shapes brand recall, emotional connection, and purchase intent. A structured questionnaire was administered to 215 Gen Z respondents through Google Forms, covering meme exposure, platform usage, trust in branded content, and behavioral responses. The study employed non-probability convenience sampling and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative responses. Findings indicate that branded memes strengthen brand relatability and recall, particularly when humour and cultural relevance are present. A majority of respondents reported that meme content positively influenced their perception of brands, with a considerable proportion stating that memes influenced a purchase decision. The results suggest that meme marketing, when executed authentically, can meaningfully enhance engagement and loyalty among Gen Z consumers, offering practical insights for marketers seeking to build stronger relationships with this audience through culturally embedded content strategies.

Keywords: meme marketing, brand engagement, Gen Z, social media, consumer behaviour, purchase intent.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has fundamentally reshaped how brands communicate with consumers, and among the newer forms of digital communication, memes have emerged as a powerful and culturally resonant tool. Memes are humorous, easily shareable pieces of content that spread rapidly across platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. For Generation Z, a cohort that has grown up entirely within a digital and social-media-saturated environment, memes are not merely entertainment but a language of cultural participation and identity expression. Brands have started leveraging this trend through meme marketing, an approach in which humorous, relatable, or trend-based content is used to promote products, services, or brand values. Unlike traditional advertising, meme marketing thrives on authenticity, humour, and cultural timing, making it particularly effective for reaching Gen Z, who tend to be sceptical of overtly promotional content. This study investigates the extent to which meme marketing influences brand engagement, trust, and purchase intent among Gen Z consumers, using primary data collected through a structured online questionnaire (n = 215).

1.1 Literature Review

Digital marketing scholarship has increasingly recognised user-generated and participatory content as a driver of brand engagement. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) characterised social media as a shift from one-way broadcast advertising to collaborative, user-driven communication, laying the conceptual foundation for humour-based formats such as memes to function as brand touchpoints. Building on this, Shifman (2013) described memes as units of popular culture that are remixed and redistributed by users, arguing that their persuasive power lies precisely in their informal, non-corporate appearance, which lowers audience resistance to embedded brand messages.

Research on viral and word-of-mouth content offers further support for meme-based strategies. Dobelet et al. (2007) found that emotionally charged content, particularly humour and surprise, significantly increases the likelihood of sharing, a mechanism directly applicable to meme diffusion. Similarly, Berger and Milkman (2012) demonstrated that positive and high-arousal emotional content is disproportionately shared online, suggesting that the comedic and relatable nature of memes is well suited to organic amplification. In the context of younger consumers specifically, Duffett (2017) established that social media marketing communications positively influence Gen Z attitudes, brand awareness, and purchase intention, though the effect is contingent on the content being perceived as authentic rather than overtly promotional.

More recent studies have examined meme marketing directly. Akram and Sharma (2021) reported that brand-related memes enhanced perceived relatability and humanised brand personality among college-age respondents, while cautioning that poorly executed or forced memes could trigger negative brand associations. Vraga and Bode (2017), studying meme-based correction of misinformation, similarly found that message framing and perceived source credibility strongly moderate audience response to meme content, a finding echoed in marketing contexts where 'try-hard' branded memes are often mocked rather than embraced. Trust emerges as a recurring theme across this literature: studies consistently find that user-generated or influencer-shared memes are trusted more than brand-created content, reinforcing the value of authenticity over polish in meme marketing execution.

Taken together, the existing literature suggests three consistent findings relevant to this study: (i) humour and emotional resonance drive content sharing and recall, (ii) authenticity and cultural relevance are prerequisites for positive brand response

among Gen Z, and (iii) the effectiveness of meme marketing on purchase intent, while promising, remains under-researched empirically, particularly through primary survey-based studies with larger Gen Z samples. This study addresses that gap by collecting primary data from 215 Gen Z respondents to empirically examine exposure, engagement, and purchase-related outcomes of meme marketing.

2. BODY OF PAPER

2.1 Research Objectives

- To analyze the extent of exposure to meme marketing among Gen Z users on social media platforms.
- To examine the influence of meme-based content on Gen Z's emotional connection and interaction with brands.
- To assess the impact of meme marketing on Gen Z's brand perception and purchase intentions.

2.2 Variables

Type	Variable
Independent	Exposure to meme marketing (frequency, platform used)
Dependent	Brand engagement (trust, recall, connection, purchase intent)
Control	Demographic factors (age, gender, social media usage)

2.3 Sampling Technique and Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was designed on Google Forms covering demographics, meme exposure and platform usage, user-generated content behaviour, type and preference of branded memes, Likert-scale brand engagement statements, and purchase influence. The study adopted a non-probability convenience sampling method; respondents were selected on the basis of ease of access, comprising college students and young working professionals aged 18-27, reached through social media groups, campus networks, and snowball referrals. Although the findings are not statistically generalizable to the entire population, this approach is well suited to exploratory research aimed at understanding niche behavioural trends such as meme-based brand engagement. The survey link was circulated over a four-week period, and after removing incomplete responses and duplicate submissions, a total of 215 valid responses were retained for analysis, giving the study reasonable statistical power for descriptive and comparative analysis.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) to profile respondents and summarise engagement levels. Likert-scale items were treated as interval data for the purpose of computing means, consistent with common practice in exploratory consumer-behaviour research. Cross-tabulations were used to examine variation in engagement across age groups and platform usage.

2.4 Results and Analysis

Table 1 presents the demographic and social-media-usage profile of respondents. A large majority (about 73%) of respondents fell within the 18-22 age group, and over 61% reported spending between two and six hours per day on social media, indicating a highly engaged and digitally active sample.

Table 1: Demographic and Social Media Usage Profile (n = 215)

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age 18-22	157	73.0%
Age 23-27	58	27.0%
Gender: Female	118	54.9%
Gender: Male	90	41.9%
Gender: Other / Prefer not to say	7	3.3%
Social media use: 2-6 hrs/day	131	60.9%
Social media use: <2 or >6 hrs/day	84	39.1%
Primary platform: Instagram	101	47.0%
Primary platform: Twitter/X	52	24.2%
Primary platform: YouTube	37	17.2%
Primary platform: Reddit	25	11.6%

Regarding meme exposure and behaviour, approximately 84% of respondents (181 of 215) encounter brand-related memes daily or multiple times a day, and 68% (146 of 215) have personally created or shared brand-related meme content, most commonly because they found the brand's content funny, trending, or relatable. In terms of content preference, funny/sarcastic memes (61%), relatable daily-life memes (54%), and topical/news-based memes (39%) emerged as the most favoured formats, followed by pop-culture and meme-format parodies.

Table 2 summarises the descriptive statistics for the key brand-engagement constructs measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The overall mean engagement score across items was approximately 4.14, indicating strong agreement that meme content positively affects attention, brand connection, and perceived brand humanisation. Standard deviations remained below 0.9 across items, suggesting relatively consistent agreement across the sample rather than sharply polarised opinions.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Brand Engagement Items (5-point Likert Scale, n = 215)

Statement	Mean	SD
Branded memes grab my attention	4.31	0.64
Memes improve my connection with the brand	4.15	0.73
Brands using memes seem more human/relatable	4.26	0.68
I trust brands more when they use memes authentically	3.98	0.81
My perception of a brand improved after seeing its meme	4.01	0.79
Meme content influenced me to explore/purchase a product	3.89	0.86
Overall Mean	4.10	0.75

With respect to purchase influence and loyalty, 63% of respondents (135 of 215) admitted that meme exposure

influenced them to explore or purchase a product, and approximately 69% (148 of 215) believe that meme marketing contributes to long-term brand loyalty. In terms of trust, user-generated and influencer-shared memes were rated most trustworthy (mean 4.05), while brand-created memes performed best when perceived as genuine, creative, and humorous rather than forced (mean 3.72 when perceived as forced vs. 4.18 when perceived as authentic). A recurring qualitative theme was that meme marketing is viewed positively when it feels authentic, but is perceived as "cringy" or "try-hard" when brands force trending formats without cultural fit.

A cross-tabulation by age revealed that respondents aged 18-22 reported marginally higher engagement scores (mean 4.19) than those aged 23-27 (mean 3.97), suggesting that meme responsiveness may be strongest among the youngest segment of Gen Z. Similarly, heavy social media users (6+ hours/day) reported the highest purchase-influence rates (74%), compared with 52% among lighter users (under 2 hours/day), indicating a positive association between platform immersion and susceptibility to meme-driven brand messaging.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study confirm that meme marketing holds significant potential to shape Gen Z's engagement, trust, and purchase behavior. Branded memes enhance recall and relatability, particularly when they incorporate humor and cultural relevance, and a majority of respondents reported a positive shift in brand perception as a result of meme exposure. However, authenticity emerged as a critical success factor: memes perceived as forced or overly commercial risk damaging brand credibility rather than enhancing it. Brands that understand internet culture and engage with it authentically are more likely to build stronger, longer-lasting connections with Gen Z consumers. Future research could extend this study using probability sampling and a larger, more diverse sample to improve generalizability.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank Dr. K G Hemalatha, Prof. & Head DOMS, DSCE for guidance and support throughout this research, and all respondents who participated in the questionnaire for their time and valuable input.

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