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Meme Marketing: How Do Memes Influence Customer Perception and Awareness of The Brand

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi respons Generasi Z yang bekerja di industri kreatif terhadap pemasaran berbasis meme, mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi keterlibatan mereka, dan menganalisis strategi yang dapat mengoptimalkan konten meme untuk meningkatkan kesadaran terhadap merek. Desain penelitian ini adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologis. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap 8 profesional Gen Z di bidang kreatif seperti pembuatan konten, media sosial, dan pemasaran digital. Hasil penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Generasi Z menunjukkan sikap positif terhadap pemasaran meme, terutama ketika kontennya terasa humoris, relevan, dan autentik secara emosional. Meme yang menyerupai komunikasi kasual antar teman sebaya lebih efektif dalam menarik perhatian dan menghindari penolakan terhadap pesan promosi. Penelitian ini menemukan 5 (lima) faktor utama yang memengaruhi keterlibatan Gen Z dengan konten meme, yaitu humor, keterkaitan emosional, kesadaran tren, kesederhanaan, dan autentisitas.

Kata kunci: pemasaran meme, generasi Z, persepsi konsumen, kesadaran merek, keterlibatan emosional.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the responses of Generation Z working in the creative industry to meme-based marketing, identify factors influencing their engagement, and analyze strategies that can optimize meme content to increase brand awareness. This study used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight Gen Z professionals in creative fields such as content creation, social media, and digital marketing. The study concluded that Generation Z exhibits a positive attitude toward meme marketing, especially when the content is humorous, relevant, and emotionally authentic. Memes that resemble casual peer communication are more effective in attracting attention and avoiding rejection of promotional messages. This study identified five main factors influencing Gen Z engagement with meme content: humor, emotional connection, trend awareness, simplicity, and authenticity.

Keywords: meme marketing, generation Z, consumer perception, brand awareness, emotional engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly changed the way brands communicate with consumers. The widespread use of smartphones and constant internet connectivity has immersed individuals in a continuous stream of digital content. People now interact with media in more active and selective ways. Social media platforms have become central to users' navigating personal expression and brand interaction. Ashley & Tuten (2015) explained that social media is a communication tool among individuals and a powerful platform for distributing branded content.

Brands are forced to adapt to new behavioral patterns as consumer attention becomes more fragmented. Malodia et al. (2022) stated that brands increasingly turn to culturally embedded and interactive formats that feel natural to users' online behavior. These include short-form videos, relatable visuals, and emerging genres like memes. At the same time, users are growing more resistant to traditional digital advertising. Wielki (2020) found that many consumers actively avoid or block ads

they perceive as irrelevant or disruptive. This reality has led marketers to seek more native, organic engagement methods.

Originally a form of user-generated content, memes have evolved into a strategic marketing tool. Benaim (2018) argued that memes function as cultural symbols, condensing shared experience and humor into highly portable formats. Their simplicity and entertainment value contribute to their viral nature. Alhabash et al. (2013) highlighted that emotionally resonant content leads to higher engagement and stronger recall on social platforms. Bowo et al. (2024) and Meer et al. (2022) confirmed that memes are particularly effective when they reflect the audience's sense of humor and emotional preferences.

Younger audiences like Generation Z are exceptionally responsive to this content. Bowo et al. (2024) found that Gen Z engages more actively with meme-based marketing when it reflects their lifestyle, values, and language. However, informal and humorous memes can also carry reputational risk for brands. Chan & Lowe (2021) warned that humor in advertising, while helpful, can undermine brand image if it fails to connect. Aleem et al. (2024) emphasized that perceptions of authenticity and symbolic "coolness" shape how consumers respond to meme content.

Despite the growing popularity of meme marketing, much of the academic literature remains focused on surface metrics such as virality, reach, and engagement counts. Rathi & Jain (2023) argued that the core value of meme marketing lies not only in visibility but in emotional and cultural relevance. Chuah & Kabilan (2022) supported this by showing that meme effectiveness depends on contextual familiarity and the coherence between visual and textual elements. Siddique (2024), in her case study of Indian food delivery platforms, found that Gen Z responded more positively to memes that aligned with their humor preferences and social language.

Given this context, this study explores how Generation Z professionals in the creative industry perceive meme-based content shared by brands on social media. Understanding their perspective is crucial because this generation not only consumes but also shapes digital communication practices. The findings of this research are expected to provide valuable insights for marketers in developing more effective and relatable strategies when using meme content to engage digitally native audiences.

METHOD

This research uses qualitative methods to understand social phenomena in depth, especially in the context of meme-based marketing. Qualitative methods were chosen because of their ability to explore experiences, behaviors, and meanings constructed by individuals in certain situations. Qualitative research allows for a deep understanding of human experiences, particularly when exploring meanings that are socially constructed and context-dependent (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

The approach used in this study is phenomenology. The phenomenological approach aims to understand individuals' subjective experiences of a particular phenomenon by exploring the meanings they give to these experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach was chosen for its ability to explore individual experiences deeply and reflectively, which is in line with the purpose of this study, which is to understand how Generation Z, particularly those working in the creative industry, respond to meme-based marketing.

This study aims to explore how meme marketing can shape consumers' perceptions and awareness of a brand. By examining consumers' experiences and responses to meme-based marketing, this research is expected to uncover factors contributing to the effectiveness of meme-based marketing strategies and their impact on brand engagement. In addition, this research also aims to provide insights for marketers in designing more effective digital marketing strategies. By understanding how and why consumers interact with meme-based content, the results of this study can serve as a reference in developing marketing campaigns that are more relevant and appealing to the target audience.

Research Resource Persons

The number of interviewees in this study was set at 8, using data saturation in qualitative research. This decision was based on the interview results, which showed that no significant new information was found after the eighth interview, so it was considered sufficient to describe a stable thematic pattern. This is in line with previous research, which states that data saturation in qualitative research is generally achieved in the range of 6-12 interviews, especially in thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, the number of 8 interviewees in this study is adequate to gain an in-depth

understanding of Generation Z's perception of meme marketing. Data saturation is a significant factor in determining the appropriate sample size in qualitative research. Although there is no standardized minimum and maximum number of interviewees, previous research has shown that 6-12 interviews are sufficient to identify key patterns, especially in in-depth interviews with groups of informants with specific characteristics (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Therefore, the number of 8 interviewees in this study was chosen not only based on the principle of data saturation, but also to ensure that the insights gained were in line with the objectives of this study.

The characteristics and suitable research sources are: (1) aged 21-27, belongs to the Generation Z group; (2) work in the creative industry, such as a content creator, social media specialist, digital marketer, graphic designer, or other professions related to digital marketing; (3) actively use social media and have experience interacting with meme marketing; and (4) knowledge of digital marketing strategies through work experience or educational background.

Data Collection Method

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, chosen for their flexibility and depth in exploring participants' subjective experiences and perceptions. This approach enables researchers to gather rich, detailed narratives while maintaining a guided structure aligned with the research objectives. Semi-structured interviews are considered especially powerful in qualitative research because they enable researchers to gather in-depth, flexible, and context-rich information while maintaining alignment with the study's focus (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Through this method, the study aimed to investigate the factors influencing consumer engagement with meme content and understand how memes shape brand identity and awareness perceptions. Interview questions were designed to elicit responses about participants' interpretations of humor, relatability, and relevance in meme advertising. Open-ended prompts encouraged spontaneous discussion and helped uncover the underlying attitudes that inform digital content preferences (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Table 1
Interview Questions

Variable	Literature	Interview Questions
Meme Marketing	Shifman (2013); Ngo (2021)	How would you define a meme in a marketing context?
	Chuah & Kabilan (2022); Kumar et al. (2024)	Have you ever encountered a brand that uses memes in their marketing campaigns? If so, what was your first impression of them?
	Kumar et al. (2024); Ashley & Tuten (2015)	In your opinion, what is the main difference between conventional advertising and meme marketing?
	Malodia et al. (2022); Eisend (2022)	What elements do you think make a meme interesting or relevant?
	Shifman (2013); Zulli & Zulli (2022)	How important is cultural context or current trends in creating a compelling meme?
Meme Marketing (Ethics and Limitations)	Ngo (2021); Siddique (2024)	Examples of brands that you think are not suitable for using meme marketing
	Eisend (2022); Siddique (2024)	When do you think a brand's use of memes can be considered ineffective or inappropriate?
	Chan & Lowe (2021); Chuah & Kabilan (2022)	How do you usually feel when you see a meme from a brand on social media?
Customer Perception	Eisend (2022); Otterbring (2021)	Does humor in memes play a big role in grabbing your attention?
	Wu & Ardley (2007); Kumar et al. (2024)	Can using memes change the way you view a brand's values or personality?
Brand Awareness	Lubis et al. (2021)	How effective do you think memes are in increasing consumer awareness of a product or brand?
	Siddique (2024); Rathi & Jain (2023)	Did a viral meme from a brand make you want to know more about the brand?
Engagement	Rathi & Jain (2023); Ashley & Tuten (2015)	Have you ever shared or interacted with a meme uploaded by a brand?
	Rathi & Jain (2023); Alhabash et al. (2013)	What usually motivates you to like, share, or comment on a brand's meme?
Engagement / Brand Loyalty	Benaim (2018)	Do you feel memes can be an effective tool for building community or customer loyalty?

Source: data processed

RESULT

Perception of Meme Marketing by Gen Z

The study reveals that Generation Z perceives memes as a more natural and engaging form of communication when used by brands. Rather than seeing them as advertising tools, participants viewed memes as content they would typically encounter in everyday social media use. This supports the idea that memes blur the boundary between entertainment and marketing, allowing brands to enter audience spaces without resistance. According to Eisend (2022), humor lowers persuasion resistance, especially when it does not feel manipulative or overly promotional. Gen Z is more likely to respond positively when the tone aligns with peer communication.

Several participants mentioned that when memes are relatable or mirror their experiences, they tend to stop scrolling and pay attention. This ties into Otterbring's (2021) explanation that humor and emotional familiarity create shortcuts for cognitive attention, especially in a digital environment saturated with content. Participants preferred content that felt like it came from someone like them, not a faceless corporate account. This finding affirms that authenticity is desirable and essential for meme marketing to succeed. Gen Z quickly detects insincerity and responds by ignoring or rejecting the message. This supports the view that consumers do not absorb marketing messages passively but instead engage with content selectively, interpreting it through personal values and lived experience (Alza & Linando, 2025).

Another common theme was the negative response to memes that appeared forced or out of touch. IF4 and IF6, for instance, described feeling “cringed out” when brands used outdated memes or formats that no longer reflected current digital trends. This points to the importance of cultural awareness in meme communication. As Wu & Ardley (2007) noted, humor that misses the mark can result in a worse perception than no humor. Gen Z has little patience for brands that try too hard to be relevant without understanding the platform or the audience.

In contrast, when brands can produce or adopt timely and stylistically appropriate memes, they gain attention without relying on traditional calls to action. This matches the view presented by Bowo et al. (2024), who stated that memes allow brands to exist within the content stream rather than interrupt it. Participants noted they are likelier to engage with or remember a brand if the meme fits their typical content consumption habits. This approach encourages organic interactions rather than engineered campaigns. As a result, the brand becomes part of their digital routine.

Lastly, the findings suggest that Gen Z prefers content that feels spontaneous and reflects current conversations online. IF7 explained that a meme that captures a trending joke or shared social moment immediately earns respect and attention. This implies that meme marketing must be authentic, agile, and culturally fluent. Delayed responses or poor timing reduce the effectiveness of the content, regardless of quality. Brands must therefore commit to cultural listening and quick content creation to maintain resonance.

Factors Influencing Engagement and Interaction

This creates a form of micro-bonding between the audience and the brand. This study finds that meme content is more likely to generate engagement when it aligns with five main factors: humor, emotional relatability, platform fit, simplicity, and originality. Participants emphasized that humor is the first hook that will stop them from scrolling if something is funny. However, it is not just about laughter; it is about laughter that comes from recognition. Otterbring (2021) explained that humor grounded in shared social truths creates a stronger emotional response. Therefore, humor in meme marketing must reflect the lived experiences of Gen Z. Emotional relatability stood out as one of the most cited reasons for interacting with branded meme content. Participants shared that when memes reflect common frustrations, such as professional burnout or social awkwardness, they feel more connected to the message. This observation aligns with Wu & Ardley (2007), who found that emotional alignment in humor-based advertising increases viewer empathy and recall. Gen Z enjoys memes and relates to them as expressions of personal or collective experience.

Platform adaptation also played a central role. Participants were clear that memes must feel natural on the platform where they appear. A meme that works on TikTok may not have the same effect on LinkedIn, due to differences in audience tone and content culture. Bowo et al. (2024) emphasized that meme strategies should be designed based on where the brand's target users are most active and

how they communicate there, ignoring these distinctions risks making the content feel awkward or irrelevant.

Simplicity and visual clarity were also repeatedly mentioned. Gen Z does not respond well to content that is too cluttered or requires too much time to understand. According to Lubis et al. (2021), meme-based campaigns are most effective when the message is visually light, quick to digest, and emotionally intuitive. Participants expressed that even low-resolution or “lo-fi” memes could be effective if the humor landed. This further supports the idea that engagement is driven by emotional sharpness, not graphic perfection.

Finally, originality was seen as a differentiator. While participants appreciated familiar meme templates, they preferred it when a brand added a creative twist. Overused memes were often seen as lazy or unimaginative. When a brand creates something unique that still plays into a popular trend, it generates surprise and delight. In other words, originality does not mean creating from scratch; it means adding something fresh to what is already culturally recognizable.

Meme Marketing and Brand Awareness

The third part of the discussion focuses on how brands can better structure meme-based strategies to build long-term engagement and awareness. One recurring theme is that meme marketing must be part of a broader identity, not a one-time gimmick. Participants valued consistency in tone and humor, noting that they follow accounts that repeatedly make them laugh or feel understood. Lubis et al. (2021) emphasized that content rhythm drives sustainable digital engagement, not just one-off success. Brands that post memes regularly and maintain a consistent voice are likelier to become part of their audience’s daily media cycle.

Another emerging strategy was participatory design, inviting audiences to contribute, remix, or respond to meme content. Several informants described enjoying brands that let users participate in the joke through duets, comments, or meme challenges. Bowo et al. (2024) supported this by stating that memes with interactive potential generate higher satisfaction and emotional investment. Instead of broadcasting messages, the brand becomes a facilitator of online expression. This sense of involvement builds loyalty and makes the audience feel seen.

Timeliness and trend sensitivity were also highlighted as key success factors. Participants noted that memes lose their impact if they arrive too late or miss the core of the trend. The content needs to reflect what is happening now, not last week. According to Eisend (2022), humor must be contextually relevant to trigger the desired emotional response. This means brands must be culturally agile and monitor meme cycles closely to remain relevant.

Participants also considered monitoring and evaluation essential. Several informants mentioned that they appreciate brand adaptation based on user feedback or engagement patterns. Lubis et al. (2021) also argued the importance of performance tracking in meme strategy, especially in fast-moving digital environments. A strategy that fails to evolve may quickly become stale or repetitive. Therefore, meme marketing should be treated as an iterative process combining creativity and responsiveness.

Lastly, the long-term goal of meme marketing is not just virality but brand recall and emotional connection. Participants indicated they remembered brands more clearly when the meme style stayed consistent. This is supported by Kumar et al. (2024), whose findings show that consistent, emotionally resonant meme campaigns significantly improve brand awareness and foster authentic audience relationships. When meme tone aligns with audience expectations, it creates a lasting impression, making the brand memorable even without traditional promotional cues.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study concluded that Generation Z exhibits a positive attitude towards meme marketing, especially when the content feels humorous, relevant, and emotionally authentic. Memes that resemble casual communication between peers are more effective in attracting attention and avoiding rejection of promotional messages. This study found 5 (five) main factors that influence Gen Z's engagement with meme content, namely humor, emotional connection, trend awareness, simplicity, and authenticity. Emotional and cultural relevance significantly transform passive viewers into active participants, leading to organic content spread and brand visibility.

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