



The Role of Memes and Humor in shaping Gen Z's perception of Brand Personality

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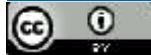
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ABSTRACT

Humor shapes Gen Z's perception of brand personality among 3rd year BSBA Marketing students at Gordon College. Using a transcendental phenomenological qualitative approach, the study gathered data from 48 participants through semi-structured interviews and analyzed them using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that meme-based marketing helps brands appear more relatable, authentic, approachable, and engaging to Gen Z consumers. Participants also noted that memes improve brand recall and social media interaction. However, the effectiveness of meme marketing depends on proper timing, cultural relevance, and alignment with the brand's identity, as poorly executed memes may negatively affect credibility. The study concluded that meme marketing is an effective digital marketing strategy for enhancing emotional connection and consumer engagement among Gen Z audiences.

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital landscape, memes and humor have become powerful tools for brands seeking to connect with Gen Z consumers. The concept of meme was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, where it was defined as a unit of cultural transmission that spreads ideas, behaviors, or styles within a culture. In the digital era, this concept evolved into humorous and relatable content that is widely shared across online platforms. This generation, known for its heavy social media use and preference for relatable and entertaining content, often forms perceptions of brand personality based on how businesses communicate online. The influence of meme marketing on consumer perception, particularly among Gen Z, is a central theme in contemporary research. Generally, literature affirms that the playful and viral nature of memes amplifies brand visibility and positively shapes Gen Z's personality judgments, establishing humor as a pivotal element of modern brand strategy (Agrawal et al., 2024). Broad studies show that using memes enhances brand appeal, likability, and overall social media engagement (Arganoz et al., 2024), contributing to improved brand recall and a positive overall perception of brand personality (Kumar & Patel, 2025).

More specifically, research highlights the mechanisms that drive these positive outcomes. Memes and humor serve as cultural shortcuts that allow Gen Z consumers to quickly differentiate brand personality traits such as authenticity, relatability, and approachability (Dharmawan & Linando, 2025). The success of this strategy depends on its ability to trigger emotional engagement and enhance brand-personality alignment, especially when humor is timely and culturally relevant (Almaghlouth & Saleh, 2024). Furthermore, humor and meme relevance increase positive brand perceptions and emotional attachment among consumers (Narwani et al., 2025).

Research also indicates that embedding humor makes brands appear more relatable and fosters a shared social identity, which strengthens perceived warmth and credibility among Gen Z consumers (Gandhi et al., 2024). This relatability is essential, as humor-driven memes strengthen brand personality traits such as fun, excitement, and relatability (Johnson & Kaushik, 2023), ultimately improving overall brand personality perception (Tsai & Nguyen, 2025). However, studies caution that inappropriate, culturally insensitive, or forced humor can damage a brand's image and reduce credibility (Ganixujaev & Burxonova, 2024; Singh & Dhingra, 2025).

A closely related study by Gandhi et al. (2024) examined how meme-based humor influences Gen Z's perception of brand personality. Their findings revealed that humorous and relatable meme content significantly strengthened perceived brand authenticity, warmth, and approachability. This study supports the present research by confirming that humor-driven digital content plays a critical role in shaping how young consumers interpret and evaluate brand personality.

In the Philippine context, brands such as Jollibee and Angkas have used meme-based and humorous content to communicate with younger audiences, making their online presence more relatable, engaging, and approachable.

Beyond its communicative function, this shift also carries an economic dimension that more directly connects the present study to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, particularly Target 8.3, which calls for development-oriented policies that support entrepreneurship, creativity, and the growth of micro, small, and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs). The Philippine digital economy reached approximately ₱2.25 trillion in 2024, accounting for 8.5 percent of the country's gross domestic product (Truelogic, 2025), and social commerce platforms such as TikTok Shop have reported substantial sales growth among MSMEs that adopted social media-based marketing strategies (MyOptiMind, 2026). Because meme-based content is inexpensive to produce and easy to distribute, it gives micro and small businesses, not only large, established brands, an accessible way to build relatable digital identities and compete for consumer attention without the budgets required for traditional advertising. The present findings, in which participants described meme based communication as lowering perceived promotional intent and increasing their willingness to engage with brand content, speak directly to how this form of creative digital communication can support the economic viability and competitiveness of small businesses operating in an increasingly digital marketplace. This connection is particularly relevant to small and local businesses that may use accessible social media platforms and creative content to communicate with their target audiences. Thus, the study provides a focused and evidence supported contribution to SDG 8 by showing how meme-based humor can serve as a practical, low cost communication tool that helps small and emerging businesses build the visibility and consumer engagement needed to sustain economic growth.

Despite the growing popularity of meme-based marketing, limited qualitative research explores how Gen Z students interpret and construct brand personality through humor and memes. This study aims to address this gap by examining how memes and humor shape Gen Z's perception of brand personality. Through qualitative interviews, the researchers aim to capture participants' lived experiences, interpretations, and insights regarding meme-based marketing strategies.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing field of digital marketing by providing deeper insights into how memes and humor influence brand personality perception among Gen Z. The findings may help businesses, marketers, and content creators develop more effective, culturally relevant, and engaging marketing strategies that resonate with young consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent international research emphasizes the effectiveness of meme marketing in shaping Gen Z's perceptions of brands. Fashions, music styles, and social conventions are examples of sociocultural phenomena that are referred to as memes as cultural expressions (Bowo et al., 2024).

However, memes gained popularity as a means of international communication with the emergence of social media and the digital age (Multipost Digital, 2024). One could argue that the early memes were insufficient

since, for instance, they were only shared in specialized niches. But as time passed and internet usage expanded, meme culture evolved into increasingly intricate visuals and videos that employ pop culture, commentary, and humorous content to reach a wide audience (AdLift, 2024). Borah and Gourish (2025) identify humor, relatability, and cultural relevance as the core elements that make memes persuasive in influencing Gen Z's brand perception. Manalo and Vergara (2024) support this view by explaining that humorous digital content humanizes brands, making them appear more approachable when aligned with Gen Z's communication styles. Together, these studies emphasize the social and psychological power of humor in digital brand communication.

Further studies highlight the emotional and cognitive mechanisms activated by meme-based content. Khalid and Noor (2025) found that meme-based posts generate higher emotional engagement and stronger brand affinity compared to traditional advertisements. Sand (2023) similarly observed that meme culture significantly influences brand recall and purchase intentions by appealing to Gen Z's preference for lighthearted content. These findings position memes not only as entertainment tools but as persuasive mechanisms that shape memory, emotions, and consumer attitudes.

Cultural alignment has also been identified as a critical factor in meme effectiveness. Huang et al. (2024) investigated the ways in which internet memes enable cross-cultural contact in digital domains and break down language barriers, showing how memes' textual and visual components adapt to various contexts while international firms use them for broad marketing reach. Occa et al. (2024) analyzed health-related memes, finding that relatability, humor, and aesthetic appeal boost engagement and retention though risks like misinformation exist highlighting memes' role in making complex ideas accessible. Avelino and Santos (2024) reported that culturally congruent memes strengthen impressions of sincerity, excitement, and relatability in brand personality. Lopez and Salvador (2025) demonstrated that humor cues similar to everyday digital conversations influence perceptions of brand warmth and friendliness, while Park and Joo (2024) found that familiar meme formats enhance perceptions of brand creativity and modernity. These studies highlight how cultural fluency allows brands to embed themselves more naturally within youth identity and online culture.

More specific research explores how memes influence brand personality formation. Williams and Murphy (2025) explain that meme humor activates cognitive processes that lead consumers to assign human-like traits, such as playfulness and authenticity to brands. Similarly, demonstrate that viral and well-toned meme content significantly shapes perceptions of sincerity, competence, excitement, and warmth. These works confirm that humor-based content plays a direct role in constructing brand personality in the minds of young audiences (El-Hakim & Farouq, 2025; Patel & Kaur, 2024; Hassan & Siddiqui, 2025).

Finally, international studies link meme marketing to measurable behavioral outcomes. Dependability, productivity, longevity, and key components like relevancy, simplicity of replication, distinctiveness, and humor

are some of the qualities that make meme marketing so successful (Rodriguez & Chang, 2023). These factors affect the target market's level of involvement and the dissemination of memes. Torres and Aquino (2024) found that relatable meme content increases emotional engagement and perceptions of cultural awareness, while Dharmawan and Linando (2025) identified humor, simplicity, and authenticity as strong predictors of positive brand awareness. Girdhar (2025) and Rana (2025) further concluded that meme-based strategies significantly increase purchase intention, brand recall, and consumer loyalty. These findings reinforce that memes function as strategic marketing tools with both emotional and commercial impact.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Framework, which conceptualizes brand personality as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. Aaker identifies five core dimensions of brand personality. Sincerity, characterized by traits such as being down to earth, honest, wholesome and cheerful. Excitement, characterized by being daring, spirited, imaginative, and up to date. Competence, characterized by being reliable, intelligent and successful. Sophistication, characterized by being upper class and charming. Ruggedness, characterized by being outdoorsy and tough.

In this study, Aaker's five dimensions are used as an interpretive theoretical lens rather than as predetermined variables or categories for statistical measurement. The framework guides the interpretation of how participants perceive the personality characteristics conveyed through meme-based humor and helps identify which dimensions of brand personality are reflected, emphasized, or less evident in their experiences. This approach allows the findings to remain grounded in the participants' lived experiences while providing a theoretical basis for understanding how meme-based humor may shape perceptions of brand personality.

Conceptual Framework

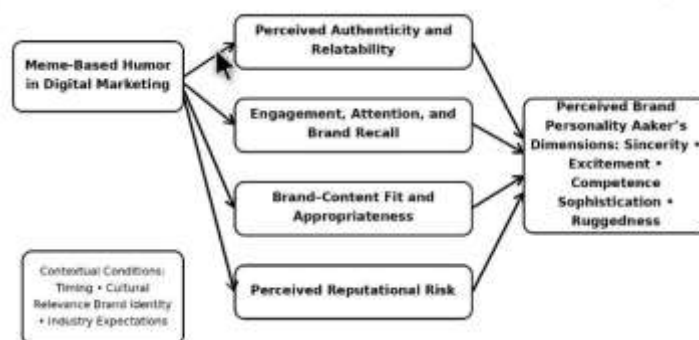


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Diagram

The conceptual framework developed for the present study, illustrating the relationship between meme-based humor and participants' perceptions of authenticity and relatability, engagement and recall, brand-content fit, and reputational risk. These perceptions are interpreted through Aaker's (1997)

Brand Personality Framework, which consists of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The framework also considers timing, cultural relevance, brand identity, and industry expectations as contextual factors in evaluating meme-based brand communication. As a qualitative phenomenological study, the framework serves as an interpretive guide rather than a statistically tested causal model.

Research Flow

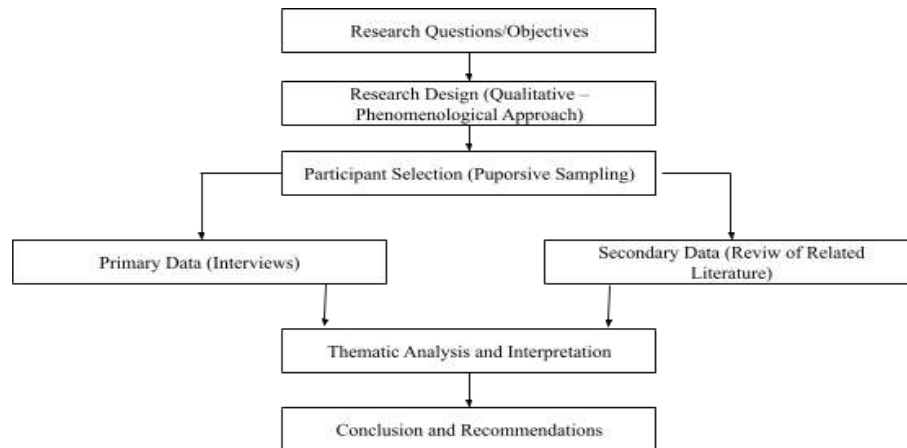


Figure 2. Research Flow Diagram

The figure presents the flow and pattern of the present study, where the rectangular boxes represent the key stages of the research process, including the research questions and objectives, the qualitative research design, and participant selection through purposive sampling, while the arrows indicate the sequence and connection between each stage. The framework shows that data are collected from both primary and secondary sources, with primary data obtained through interviews and secondary data gathered through a review of related literature. According to Ridley (2012), the literature review serves as a bridge in the research flow, connecting the researcher's initial ideas to existing knowledge and justifying the direction of the study. After data collection, the information is analyzed through thematic analysis and interpretation, which then leads to the formulation of conclusions and recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a transcendental phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach that focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals while bracketing the researcher's biases to uncover the essence of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this design is appropriate for exploring how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their subjective experiences. This approach is suitable for the present study as it aims to examine how Gen Z participants experience and interpret memes and humor in shaping their perception of brand personality. Related studies indicate that meme-based marketing influences emotional responses and

brand perception among Gen Z consumers (Khalid & Noor, 2025; Sand, 2023; Dharmawan & Linando, 2025).

Population and Samples

The population of this study consists of 3rd-year BSBA Marketing students from the College of Business and Accountancy (CBA) at Gordon College, Olongapo City. These students belong to Gen Z and are considered active users of social media platforms where meme-based marketing commonly appears. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide relevant and information-rich responses aligned with the objectives of the study. The sample consisted of forty-eight (48) participants, with sixteen (16) participants selected from each block: Block A, Block B, and Block C.

The adequacy of the sample was determined through data saturation rather than solely through a predetermined numerical requirement. During the analysis, the researchers monitored the emergence of codes, categories, and themes across the participants' responses. Saturation was considered in terms of whether subsequent interviews continued to produce substantially new codes or insights relevant to the research questions. When later responses primarily repeated, confirmed, or elaborated on concepts that had already been identified, the developing thematic structure was considered stable. This approach is consistent with Hennink et al. (2017), who distinguish code saturation from meaning saturation and emphasize assessing saturation through the development and stabilization of codes, as well as Guest et al. (2020), who emphasize the assessment and reporting of thematic saturation based on the information emerging from the data.

Research Instrument

This study utilizes a semi-structured interview guide as the primary research instrument. The interview guide consists of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of brand personality influenced by memes and humor in digital marketing. This instrument allows participants to freely express their thoughts and provide in-depth responses while ensuring that the discussion remains aligned with the objectives of the study. The use of a semi-structured interview guide ensures consistency in data collection while still allowing flexibility for follow-up questions and deeper exploration of participants' answers. This approach is appropriate for qualitative descriptive research, as it helps gather rich and meaningful insights from Gen Z participants regarding meme-based marketing.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data collection process for this study followed a structured, qualitative approach designed to elicit nuanced narratives regarding brand personality. To ensure ethical integrity and data richness, the following protocol was implemented: Formal authorization was obtained through the submission of a letter request for data collection to the Research Adviser, followed by approval from the College Dean. This process ensured that the study adhered to

institutional standards and complied with ethical guidelines governing research involving human participants. The study utilized purposive sampling to target 3rd-year BSBA Marketing students. A total of 48 participants, specifically 16 students from each of the three sections (Block A, B, and C), were invited to participate. This ensured a balanced representation of the cohort and facilitated a breadth of marketing-specific perspectives. Before data collection, participants received a comprehensive briefing regarding the study's objectives, the nature of their involvement, and their rights to anonymity and withdrawal without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained, explicitly addressing the use of audio recording and the handling of sensitive information.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in the responses of Gen Z participants regarding meme and humor-based marketing and its influence on brand personality. Braun and Clarke (2006) served as the guide for the analytical process. The researchers read and re-read the interview transcripts, generated initial codes from meaningful words and ideas, grouped related codes into potential themes, and reviewed and refined the themes to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' responses and aligned with the research objectives. The final themes were defined and named based on the central ideas reflected in the data and were supported by direct quotations from the participants.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of the qualitative thematic analysis conducted to explore the role of meme marketing in shaping Gen Z's perception of brand personality. Based on the responses of forty-eight (48) participants, four major themes emerged explaining how meme-based marketing influences consumer perception, engagement, and evaluation of brands. The findings indicate that meme marketing has evolved beyond entertainment and functions as a strategic communication tool that enhances relatability, engagement, and brand recall among Gen Z consumers.

Table 1. Humanization of Brand Identity through Relatable Humor

THEMES	SUB-THEME	CODES
Humanization of Brand Identity through Relatable Humor	Breaking the Corporate Wall	Informal Communication; Reduced Brand Distance; Conversational Tone; Non-Promotional Interaction
	Anti-Robot Persona	Perceived Authenticity; Humanized Brand Voice; Spontaneity; Natural Interaction
	Brand-Consumer Friendship	Emotional Connection; Relatability; Social Closeness; Friendship Perception

Theme 1: Humanization of Brand Identity through Relatable Humor

The findings of this study reveal that meme marketing plays a significant role in transforming brand identity from a formal corporate entity into a more relatable and humanized presence. Participants consistently described brands that use humor as more approachable, friendly, and emotionally accessible. This suggests that meme-based communication reshapes how Gen Z consumers interpret corporate identity by reducing perceived distance and formality in brand interactions. This observation supports Agrawal et al. (2024) that humor in digital brand communication enhances emotional connection and strengthens perceived brand relatability among Gen Z consumers. The theme maps directly onto Sincerity. By "breaking the corporate wall" and adopting an "anti-robot persona," brands signal down-to-earth, honest, and approachable human traits, transforming consumer perceptions from distant corporations into relatable companions.

"It feels surprising but also nice when brands post memes because they seem less formal and easier to connect with."- P3

"When brands use memes, it feels like they understand our humor and are part of our generation."- P14

"It feels more relaxed and enjoyable compared to serious advertisements, so I pay more attention to it."- P27

These responses indicate that meme marketing creates a perceived "friendship-like" interaction between brands and consumers, where communication becomes informal, relatable, and emotionally comfortable. This aligns with Hudson et al. (2016) that social media interactions characterized by informality and emotional expression contribute to friendship-like and parasocial bonds between consumers and brands, ultimately enhancing relational attachment.

Sub-theme 1.1: Breaking the Corporate Wall

Participants emphasized that meme marketing breaks traditional corporate barriers by using informal language and relatable humor. Instead of appearing as distant organizations, brands become active participants in online conversations. This shift allows consumers to perceive brands less as formal institutions and more as relatable social actors within digital spaces. This finding supports Arganoz et al. (2024), who found that informal and conversational communication significantly enhances brand relatability and strengthens consumer engagement in social media environments.

"It makes the brand feel like they are part of our conversation rather than selling something."- P1

"It feels like the wall between the customer and the company disappears because they talk like us."- P3

"Instead of directly selling, it feels like they are just joining conversations naturally."- P18

"I don't feel pressured to buy because the interaction feels casual and relatable."-P32

These responses demonstrate that meme marketing reduces perceived promotional intent, allowing brand communication to feel more natural and conversational. As a result, humor functions as a relational tool that lowers psychological resistance and encourages more organic engagement between consumers and brands. This supports De Vries et al. (2017), who found that humorous and conversational social media content reduces perceived advertising intrusiveness and increases consumer willingness to engage with brand messages.

Sub-theme 1.2: Anti-Robot Persona

Participants also described that meme marketing creates an anti-robot persona, where brands appear more human, spontaneous, and authentic. Instead of being perceived as automated corporate accounts, brands are viewed as having real human presence behind their communication. This reflects Gen Z's preference for conversational and socially responsive brand interactions rather than scripted or automated corporate messaging. This aligns with Balan et al. (2023), who found that conversational marketing significantly enhances perceived authenticity and strengthens consumer trust in digital brand environments.

"The brand feels like real people are behind the account and not just automated messages."
- P2

"It doesn't feel scripted, parang natural yung pakikipag-usap nila sa audience."-P21

"It gives the impression that the brand has personality and emotions, not just a system."-
P36

The following responses indicate that perceived authenticity strengthens how consumers interpret brand personality, making brands appear more genuine and relatable. This supports Peters et al. (2018), who argued that authentic and humanized digital communication increases consumer trust and reinforces positive brand personality perceptions, particularly in social media environments where users expect interaction to feel personal rather than automated.

Sub-theme 1.3: Brand-Consumer Friendship

Participants described meme marketing as a tool that creates friendship-like relationships between brands and consumers. Through humor, brands are able to foster emotional bonding, familiarity, and a sense of community engagement among audiences. This supports Hollebeek (2011), who emphasized that emotional engagement in brand interactions strengthens consumer-brand relationships by increasing affective commitment and relational depth.

"It makes the brand feel like a friend rather than a business because they relate to everyday experiences."- P4

"I feel more connected to brands that use memes because they seem closer and more personal." - P25

"It's like the brand becomes part of our circle when the content is relatable."-P41

This indicates that meme marketing encourages emotional attachment by reframing brands as social companions rather than purely commercial entities. In line with Hollebeek (2011), higher emotional engagement leads to stronger relational bonds, which may enhance consumer loyalty and sustained brand interaction.

Table 2. Brand-Consumer Friendship

THEMES	SUB-THEME	CODES
Perception of Brand Personality and Cognitive Impact	Brand Recall and Initial Reactions	Attention Capture; Memorability; Entertainment Value; Reduced Ad Fatigue
	Platform Efficacy and Sharing Habits	TikTok Dominance; Trend Participation; High Shareability; Algorithm Visibility
	Social Bonding Through Meme Sharing	Peer Interaction; Emotional Expression; Social Sharing Behavior; Digital Social Currency

Theme 2: Perception of Brand Personality and Cognitive Impact

Participants reported that meme marketing significantly improves brand recall, engagement, and consumer attention. Memes function as pattern interrupters that capture attention in crowded social media environments. Instead of traditional advertisements, memes are perceived as entertaining content, making them more memorable and easier to process in fast-scrolling digital platforms. This observation aligns with Shifman (2014), who explained that internet memes are highly effective communicative units because they are easily recognized, culturally relatable, and rapidly spread within digital communities. The theme connects to Excitement. Memes capture attention, interrupt feed scrolling, and leverage platform culture (e.g., TikTok trends), causing consumers to view brands as spirited, imaginative, and culturally up-to-date.

"Memes make the brand easier to remember because they are funny and different from normal ads."- P5

"When I see memes, napapahinto ako sa pag-scroll and I actually remember the brand." - P16

"It immediately catches my attention because it feels like entertainment."- P33

The responses from the participants suggest that integrating humor into marketing communication can strategically enhance brand recall and consumer engagement by reducing advertising resistance and improving message retention. This supports De Pelsmacker et al. (2002), who found that humorous advertising increases attention, improves recall, and enhances overall advertising effectiveness compared to non-humorous formats.

Sub-theme 2.1: Brand Recall and Initial Reactions

Participants explained that meme marketing helps reduce advertising fatigue by transforming promotional content into something that feels more entertaining and less intrusive. Instead of being perceived as direct advertisements, memes are experienced as light, relatable, and enjoyable digital content. This supports Baumgartner and Morris (2010), who found that audiences are more likely to avoid or disengage from traditional advertising when it becomes repetitive or overly promotional, leading to advertising fatigue in digital environments.

"It doesn't feel like an advertisement, it feels like something enjoyable." - P5

"Mas interesting siya kaysa traditional ads kaya hindi ko siya ini-ignore." - P22 "I remember the joke and that helps me remember the brand." - P38

The responses highlight that memes blur the boundary between advertising and entertainment, making brand communication feel more organic and less disruptive in the user's online experience. This aligns with Campbell and Marks (2015), who emphasized that entertainment-based advertising increases consumer receptivity and engagement by lowering perceived persuasion pressure.

Sub-theme 2.2: Platform Efficacy and Sharing Habits

Participants identified TikTok as the most effective platform for meme marketing, noting that its fast-paced and algorithm-driven environment supports the rapid circulation and visibility of viral content. The platform encourages short-form, engaging, and culturally relevant content that easily captures Gen Z attention and facilitates widespread sharing. This finding is supported by Zeng et al. (2021), who found that TikTok's algorithmic structure and participatory culture significantly enhance content visibility and virality among young users.

"TikTok is where most Gen Z humor comes from and where trends start." - P1

This response highlights that TikTok is not only a distribution platform but also a cultural space where humor trends originate and evolve within Gen Z communities. This is supported by Abidin (2020), who explained that TikTok functions as a participatory cultural environment where users actively shape and circulate humor trends, making it a central space for digital youth culture and expressive content creation.

"If the meme is relatable, I immediately send it to my friends." - P12

"Sharing memes is like expressing what we feel without saying it directly." - P29

The answers indicate that memes function as a form of digital social currency that facilitates interpersonal connection and emotional expression among peers. This is supported by Shifman (2014), who explained that internet memes operate as cultural units that promote participatory communication and strengthen social cohesion through shared digital humor. Additionally, Boyd (2014) emphasized that digital networked environments enable individuals to maintain and reinforce social relationships through the sharing of culturally meaningful online content, such as memes.

Table 3. Platform Efficacy and Sharing Habits

THEME	SUB-THEME	CODES
Brand-Content Fit and Perceived Appropriatenes	Brand-Content Fit and Perceived Appropriateness	Brand Consistency; Content Relevance; Identity Alignment; Authentic Execution
	Cringe Response and Timing Sensitivity	Outdated Content; Trend Misalignment; Timing Sensitivity; Perceived Inauthenticity
	Industry-Specific Appropriateness	Professional Expectation; Industry Sensitivity; Credibility Risk; Contextual Suitability

Theme 3: Evaluation of Appropriateness and Brand Fit

Participants emphasized that meme marketing effectiveness depends on relevance, timing, and alignment with brand identity. While humor can significantly improve engagement and relatability, they also noted that poorly executed or irrelevant memes may lead to confusion or create negative impressions of the brand. This highlights that meme marketing is not effective in all contexts and requires careful strategic execution to avoid harming brand perception. This finding aligns with Ganixujaev and Burxonova (2024), who found that inappropriate or misaligned humor can reduce brand credibility and negatively affect consumer perception. The theme directly engages Competence and Sophistication. When brands execute memes with poor timing, out-of-date references ("cringe response"), or within high-involvement/serious

industries, consumers perceive a lapse in professional intelligence and reliability, eroding the brand's perceived competence and status.

"If the meme doesn't match the brand, it feels forced and uncomfortable." - P2 "The humor should align with the brand identity to feel natural." - P19

"Not all brands should use memes because it can affect credibility." - P34

This indicates that the effectiveness of meme marketing is strongly influenced by how well the content aligns with the brand's identity and audience expectations. Keller (2020) emphasized that maintaining brand consistency across all communication channels is essential in preserving consumer trust and ensuring that brand associations remain clear and positive.

Sub-theme 3.1: Cringe Response and Timing

Participants explained that outdated memes can negatively affect brand perception, particularly when the content no longer matches current online trends or cultural references. They noted that Gen Z audiences are highly aware of digital trends, and when brands use old or irrelevant memes, the content may appear forced, unrelatable, or cringe. This suggests that meme marketing is highly time-sensitive, requiring brands to continuously adapt to fast-changing online culture in order to remain effective and relatable. This finding aligns with Lorenz and Scheibe (2022), who emphasized that digital content relevance is strongly influenced by temporal context, where outdated online references tend to reduce audience engagement and perceived authenticity.

"If the meme is outdated, it becomes cringe and people lose interest." - P3 "Brands look out of touch when they use old trends." - P24

"Timing is important because trends change very fast online." - P42

This response highlights that timing plays a critical role in determining whether meme-based content is perceived positively or negatively by audiences, as relevance is closely tied to humor effectiveness and cultural awareness. This supports Vásquez (2019), who found that successful digital humor strategies rely on cultural timing and trend alignment, as misaligned or outdated humor can weaken audience connection and reduce brand credibility.

Sub-theme 3.2: Industry-Specific Appropriateness

Participants noted that the effectiveness of meme marketing also depends on the nature of the industry, emphasizing that not all brands are equally suited for humorous communication. They explained that while memes can enhance engagement in lifestyle or entertainment-related brands, serious industries such as finance, insurance, or healthcare should be more cautious in applying humor. Overuse of humor in these contexts may undermine credibility and reduce perceived professionalism, as consumers expect a more serious and trustworthy tone from such services. This aligns with Eisend (2011), who found that humor

effectiveness is highly context-dependent and may be less appropriate in high-involvement or serious product categories where credibility and trust are critical.

"Insurance companies should remain professional because people expect seriousness." - P5

"Banks should be careful because humor might reduce trust." - P23

"Luxury brands may lose their image if they rely too much on memes." - P37

These responses highlight that consumers associate certain industries with expected communication standards, where deviation toward excessive humor may negatively affect brand perception and trustworthiness. This supports Wang and Sun (2010), who emphasized that the effectiveness of humorous advertising depends on product category fit, as humor can enhance persuasion in low-risk products but may reduce trust in high-involvement or serious services.

Table 4. Industry-Specific Appropriateness

THEME	SUB-THEME	CODES
Perceived Strategic Benefits and Reputational Risks	Viral Awareness and Emotional Engagement	Virality Potential; Increased Engagement; Emotional Appeal; Brand Visibility
	Anti-Robot Persona/ Perceived Authenticity	Human Presence; Authentic Communication; Relatable Tone; Trust Building
	Reputation Risks and Cancel Culture	Public Backlash; Misinterpretation Risk; Cancel Culture Sensitivity; Reputation Damage

Theme 4: Perceived Strategic Benefits and Reputational Risks

Participants identified meme marketing as a double-edged strategy, offering significant benefits such as increased visibility, engagement, and emotional connection, while also presenting potential reputational risks. They explained that while meme marketing helps brands become more relatable and noticeable in digital spaces, its effectiveness depends on execution, as poorly crafted humor can quickly lead to misunderstanding or public backlash. This finding aligns with Borah and Gourish (2024), who found that meme marketing increases brand awareness, consumer engagement, and social media reach, but also introduces reputational vulnerability due to the fast-paced and unpredictable nature of online humor. While viral humor can rapidly boost

brand visibility, tone-deaf execution risks triggering public backlash or "cancel culture," damaging perceived sincerity and competence. Conversely, a brand's ability to withstand online criticism, navigate crisis communications with poise, and maintain a bold, thick-skinned stance without bowing out demonstrates Ruggedness (brand resilience and cultural endurance) in a volatile digital landscape.

"It helps brands become popular, but if the joke is wrong, it can backfire." - P1

"Memes increase engagement because people interact more with entertaining content." - P17

"It is effective but also risky depending on execution." - P30

These remarks highlight the dual nature of meme marketing, where success depends on balancing creativity with sensitivity to audience interpretation. Emotional and humorous branding can strengthen consumer relationships; it must be carefully managed to avoid damaging trust and brand credibility. This supports Fournier (2018), who emphasized that although emotional brand relationships enhance loyalty, negative or inconsistent brand interactions can quickly weaken consumer trust and disrupt established brand relationships.

Sub-theme 4.1: Viral Awareness

Participants also described that meme marketing creates an anti-robot persona, where brands appear more human, spontaneous, and authentic. Instead of being perceived as automated corporate accounts, brands are viewed as having real human presence behind their communication. This reflects Gen Z's preference for conversational and socially responsive brand interactions rather than scripted or automated corporate messaging. This aligns with Balan et al. (2023), who found that conversational marketing significantly enhances perceived authenticity and strengthens consumer trust in digital brand environments.

"The goal is to go viral and reach more people online." - P1

"Memes spread quickly because people share them easily." - P20 *"It creates visibility even without a large advertising budget." - P35*

This indicates that perceived authenticity strengthens how consumers interpret brand personality, making brands appear more genuine, relatable, and socially present. In line with Balan et al. (2023), authenticity in digital communication fosters higher trust and deeper emotional connection, as consumers are more likely to engage with brands they perceive as human rather than automated systems.

Sub-theme 4.2: Reputation Risk

Participants warned about the risks of cancel culture in meme marketing, emphasizing that while humorous content can enhance engagement, it can also lead to negative public reactions if misinterpreted or perceived as inappropriate.

They explained that because memes spread rapidly across social media platforms, even a small mistake in tone, timing, or context can escalate into widespread criticism and reputational damage. This highlights the fragile nature of digital humor in brand communication, where audience interpretation plays a crucial role in determining success or backlash. This finding aligns with Nguyen et al. (2020), who explained that digital content in participatory media environments is highly vulnerable to public scrutiny, where misalignment with audience values can quickly trigger negative viral responses.

"One wrong meme can damage the brand's image." - P3

"Brands can be cancelled if the meme is offensive or insensitive." - P26 *"Negative reactions spread just as fast as positive ones online." - P44*

This response underscores the perceived risk of meme marketing, where humor-based strategies can backfire if they fail to align with cultural sensitivity or audience expectations. The brands must exercise caution and cultural awareness when using humor in digital marketing, as online audiences can rapidly mobilize negative feedback through social media platforms. This supports Kietzmann et al. (2011), who emphasized that social media environments amplify both positive and negative brand exposure, making reputation management critical due to the speed and scale of user-driven information diffusion.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that memes and humor influence how Gen Z participants perceive brand personality. Participants described brands using meme-based content as more relatable, approachable, and engaging, particularly when the content reflected current trends, familiar experiences, and appropriate humor. However, participants also identified limitations associated with outdated trends, forced humor, and content that does not align with the brand's identity or industry. These findings emphasize that the effectiveness of meme-based marketing is dependent on relevance, timing, cultural appropriateness, and brand consistency. Given that the study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, the findings represent the participants' perceptions and experiences rather than measurable changes in consumer behavior. The study therefore provides an understanding of how Gen Z interprets meme-based brand communication but does not establish its direct effect on purchase intention or long-term consumer behavior.

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1) Marketing teams should ditch formal scripts for a conversational tone that mirrors how Gen Z actually talks. This strategy uses the study's finding that breaking down the corporate wall helps brands move away from a transactional feel and toward a persona that acts as a relatable digital friend.
- 2) Brands need to create content that reflects the shared identities and daily experiences of their audience. When content resonates personally, it drives

organic sharing through private DMs and group chats. This transforms simple social engagement into a powerful form of peer-to-peer advocacy rooted in emotional attachment.

- 3) To stay on the right side of the cringe threshold, brands must use rigorous social listening to track trends in real-time. Marketers need to deploy content while trends are peaking to prove the brand is culturally competent and "in on the joke" rather than late to the party.
- 4) Marketers in high-stakes industries, like finance, must perform a strict brand-fit analysis before posting. These brands should use humor to simplify complex information rather than just to entertain. This ensures the brand reaps the benefits of personification without sacrificing the authority and credibility required in their field.
- 5) To avoid canceling culture and reputational damage, brands should bring Gen Z cultural insiders into the review process. Having these insiders vet content for social insensitivity or potential misinterpretation provides a vital safety net before anything goes live.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Researchers should build on these qualitative insights by using quantitative methods to track how meme engagement actually affects long-term purchase intentions. Additionally, future studies should compare different age groups to see how the "cringe threshold" and professional expectations shift across generations.

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