
THE POWER OF MEME-BASED MARKETING: DRIVING VIRAL ENGAGEMENT AND CONSUMER CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a systematic literature review to explore the role and impact of meme-based marketing in fostering viral engagement and strengthening digital consumer connection. As memes increasingly dominate social media discourse, marketers have begun adopting them as low-cost, high-impact tools to communicate brand identity and engage younger audiences. The review analyzed 45 peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2024, using PRISMA methodology for article selection and VOSviewer for bibliometric analysis. Thematic synthesis revealed four core themes: memes as cultural and emotional symbols, consumer co-creation and participation, platform-specific meme strategies, and the psychological triggers of meme virality. Bibliometric analysis identified key research clusters and highlighted the evolution of meme marketing literature from humor-focused to brand-strategic applications. Findings support theoretical models such as the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Social Identity Theory, showing how memes influence consumer behavior and brand perception. This review not only maps the current state of knowledge but also identifies research gaps in measurement frameworks, cultural diversity, and ethical considerations. The study concludes by offering future research directions and practical recommendations for marketers seeking to leverage memes in an increasingly participatory and dynamic digital landscape.

Keywords: *Meme-Based Marketing, Digital Engagement, Consumer Behavior, Social Media Strategy, Virality*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has dramatically reshaped the marketing landscape, giving rise to innovative, participatory forms of consumer engagement that depart significantly from traditional communication methods. Among the most compelling phenomena emerging from this shift is meme-based marketing—an approach that harnesses the viral potential of internet memes to create emotionally resonant, culturally attuned, and widely shareable brand messages (Marino, 2022; Sharma et al., 2023). As internet culture continues to intersect with commercial strategies, memes have transitioned from niche internet humor to potent tools of viral engagement and digital branding (Rolando et al., 2024). This transformation is emblematic of broader changes in consumer behavior and media consumption patterns, particularly among younger, digitally native audiences who demand interactivity,

authenticity, and relevance from brand communications (Cao et al., 2024; Shen et al., 2024; Warren et al., 2019).

As this shift gains momentum, empirical data further underscores the transformative power of memes in digital marketing. According to industry statistics, meme marketing is reported to deliver 60% higher organic engagement and 10 times more reach compared to traditional marketing visuals (Khrisdigital, 2025). These figures validate the growing trend of brands opting to engage their audiences through humorous and relatable content, as opposed to static advertisements that often fail to elicit interaction. The heightened reach and engagement potential of meme-based strategies reflects a broader change in how digital consumers respond to content—they are no longer passive recipients but active participants who share, modify, and add value to the messaging ecosystem (Razzaq et al., 2023). The sheer virality and amplification offered by memes gives brands an unprecedented ability to connect with a wider audience organically, which is critical in the attention economy of today's digital landscape (Rolando & Sunara, 2024; Rolando & Yen, 2024).

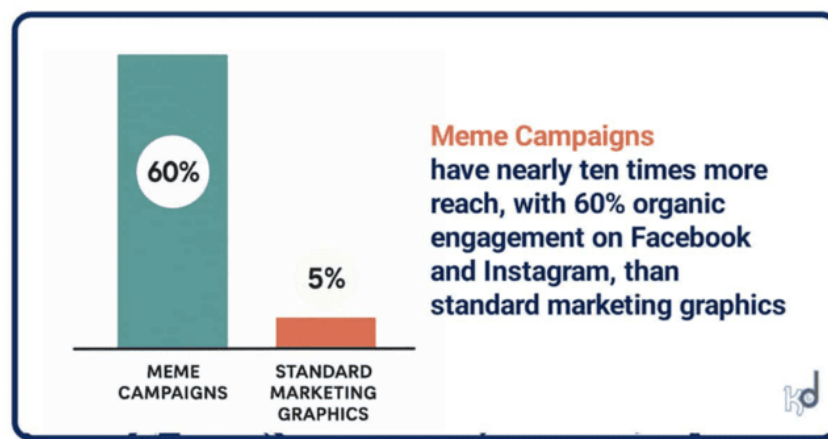


Figure 1. Meme marketing generates higher engagement than traditional visuals

Source: KhrisDigital, 2025

Viral marketing, defined as the rapid and organic spread of marketing messages via electronic word-of-mouth, has become an essential strategy in the digital economy (Kim & Kim, 2024; Ling et al., 2021). Its effectiveness hinges on the ability of content to be disseminated quickly through social networks, reaching broad audiences with minimal expenditure (Lee et al., 2019; Lenda et al., 2020). Within this paradigm, memes have emerged as highly effective vehicles for viral content. Their visual simplicity, humorous tone, and capacity to reflect cultural moments allow them to transcend traditional communication barriers. Memes are not only consumed and enjoyed—they are remixed, repurposed, and redistributed, creating a dynamic ecosystem of co-created content that amplifies marketing messages in ways that traditional advertising cannot (Rolando & Mulyono, 2024; Rolando & Winata, 2024).

The cultural embeddedness of memes is also evident in consumer behavior across social platforms (Malodia et al., 2022). A recent industry report reveals that 60% of global social media users actively use these platforms specifically to share memes and humorous content

(Khrisdigital, 2025). With over 3 billion individuals engaged on social media globally, this statistic demonstrates that meme sharing has become a routine digital behavior rather than an isolated trend. This widespread participation indicates that memes function not only as marketing content but also as cultural currency—vehicles through which people connect, express, and identify with shared experiences. For brands, this offers a powerful avenue to integrate themselves into daily social interactions (Maha et al., 2024; Rahardja et al., 2024; Rolando, 2024). Memes, when used authentically and aligned with audience values, allow brands to blend seamlessly into the digital conversations already occurring among users, fostering more organic and meaningful engagement.

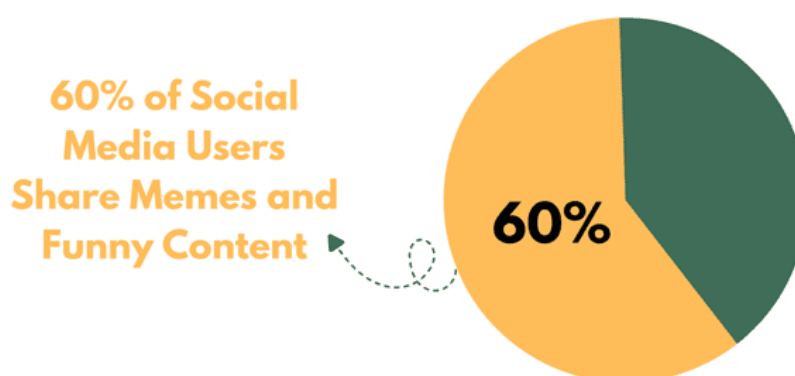


Figure 2. Percentage of social media users that share memes

Source: KhrisDigital, 2025

Mememes, in their essence, are self-replicating units of cultural information. Originally conceived as simple, humorous images paired with text, they have evolved into complex communicative artifacts capable of conveying layered meanings, emotions, and social commentary (Kravets, 2021; Razzaq et al., 2024). This evolution has rendered them highly adaptable to marketing objectives, particularly in environments saturated with content where attention is a scarce commodity (Agrawal et al., 2024; Rogers & Giorgi, 2024). Unlike static advertisements, memes invite participation and reinterpretation, encouraging users to engage with and contribute to brand narratives (Ingriana, 2025; Widjaja, 2025). This participatory quality aligns well with the preferences of digital consumers, who increasingly favor brands that foster dialogue and co-creation over those that broadcast static messages (Katoch & Sharma, 2024; Schöps et al., 2024).

Further supporting this cultural shift is evidence that 41% of consumers in the United States explicitly express a desire for brands to participate in meme culture (Khrisdigital, 2025). This consumer expectation reflects a broader transformation in brand-audience relationships, where audiences not only tolerate but actively encourage brands to use humor and informal language to relate to them (Tan & Alexia, 2025; Wigayha et al., 2025; Zahran, 2025). For marketers, this statistic reinforces the need to develop communication strategies that are not just visually appealing but also socially aware and culturally embedded. The desire for brands to engage through memes also points to consumers' growing demand for authenticity and

entertainment in advertising (Rolando & Ingriana, 2024). Thus, meme marketing should not be seen merely as a gimmick but rather as a legitimate and increasingly necessary form of audience interaction that helps humanize brands and increase trust (Rolando et al., 2025; Winata & Arma, 2025).

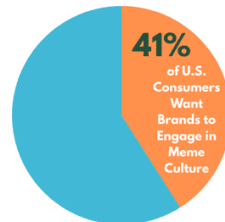


Figure 3. Percentage of U.S. consumers that want brands to engage in meme culture

Source: KhrisDigital, 2025

The incorporation of memes into strategic marketing reflects a broader recognition of the need for engagement-driven approaches that resonate emotionally and culturally (González-Aguilar et al., 2023; Suka & Shimazaki, 2023; Vardeman, 2024; Williams et al., 2024). Research has shown that memes can serve as powerful branding tools due to their humor, relatability, and ability to evoke emotional responses (Teng et al., 2022). Their use not only increases the visibility of marketing campaigns but also enhances consumer-brand relationships by fostering a sense of community and shared understanding (Aleem et al., 2024; Greene et al., 2022; Rendell, 2021). In this context, meme-based marketing becomes more than a trend—it represents a paradigmatic shift in how brands communicate, build loyalty, and co-create meaning with their audiences (Chan & Lowe, 2021; Orthaber, 2019).

Despite the growing body of literature acknowledging the marketing potential of memes, there remains a lack of comprehensive, systematic analysis of how meme-based strategies function across contexts, how they influence consumer engagement, and what factors contribute to their success or failure (Liao et al., 2022; Paramita et al., 2022; Shin & Larson, 2020). While many studies explore the mechanics of virality or the psychological triggers behind meme sharing, few consolidate this knowledge into an integrated framework that can inform practice and theory alike (Ingriana, et al., 2024; Mulyono, et al., 2024). Furthermore, the dynamic, fast-paced nature of meme culture poses methodological challenges for researchers seeking to capture and analyze its impact in a rigorous, replicable manner (Chuah et al., 2020; How, 2022; Kostygina et al., 2020; Yang, 2022).

This systematic literature review addresses this gap by synthesizing existing research on meme-based marketing to provide a comprehensive understanding of its mechanisms, effectiveness, and implications. The review is motivated by several critical concerns. First, as digital platforms become primary arenas for consumer interaction, it is imperative to understand how informal, user-generated content shapes brand perceptions and purchase behavior. Second, marketers require evidence to effectively harness memes without undermining brand credibility. Third, scholars need a clearer conceptual framework to study meme marketing as both a cultural and commercial phenomenon.

The primary objective of this review is to examine how memes function within digital marketing strategies to generate engagement, foster consumer-brand connections, and contribute to viral dissemination. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What characteristics of memes contribute to their effectiveness as marketing tools? (2) How does meme-based marketing influence consumer engagement, brand perception, and purchase intention? (3) What contextual factors—such as platform dynamics, audience demographics, and cultural trends—affect the success of meme-based campaigns? (4) What are the ethical, cultural, and strategic considerations marketers must account for when employing memes in branding efforts?

In addressing these questions, this review establishes clear boundaries. It focuses primarily on peer-reviewed literature published in the past decade that examines meme usage in marketing across digital platforms, including but not limited to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and TikTok. While it considers global examples, the review pays particular attention to contexts where meme culture is most prominent and where digital-native consumers—particularly Millennials and Gen Z—constitute a significant market segment. The review does not extend to other forms of viral content (e.g., GIFs or reaction videos) unless they are specifically discussed as memes within the literature. Likewise, while the broader implications of memes for political or social discourse are acknowledged, the focus remains firmly on commercial marketing and consumer engagement.

Another compelling indicator of the growing role of memes in the digital economy is the projected expansion of the global meme market. In 2020, the market was valued at approximately USD 2.3 billion, with projections estimating growth to USD 6.1 billion by 2025, supported by a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 21.6% (Khrisdigital, 2025). This explosive market growth underscores the economic weight meme-based strategies are beginning to carry—not just as a creative communication tool, but as a scalable and investable asset in the marketing industry. As brands increasingly adopt meme-centric approaches and allocate budgets for meme development and distribution, their significance within digital strategy portfolios will continue to grow, further justifying the need for systematic academic scrutiny (Ingriana, Chondro, et al., 2024; Wigayha et al., 2024).

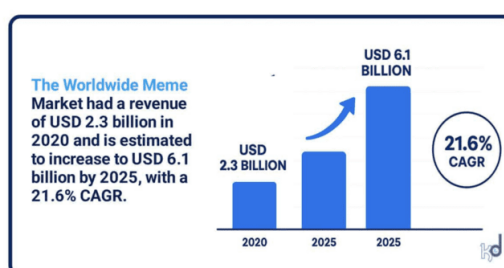


Figure 4 Global meme market growth 2020-2025

Source: KhrisDigital, 2025

The significance of this review lies in its potential contributions to both academic scholarship and marketing practice. For researchers, it offers a synthesized account of current knowledge, identifies conceptual inconsistencies, and highlights areas for future inquiry. By articulating a theoretical framework for understanding meme-based marketing, it provides a foundation for more nuanced, interdisciplinary studies that integrate perspectives from media studies, consumer psychology, and digital communication. For practitioners, the review offers practical insights into what makes memes successful as marketing tools and how they can be integrated strategically into broader digital campaigns. This is particularly valuable for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and startups, which often lack the resources for large-scale advertising but can leverage memes for low-cost, high-impact visibility.

Moreover, meme-based marketing has special relevance for brands seeking to promote socially conscious or sustainability-oriented messages (Barney & Jones, 2023; Hoang et al., 2023; Kasilingam & Ajitha, 2022; Primadipta et al., 2023). Research has shown that consumers are more likely to engage with brands whose values align with their own, especially when these values are communicated in relatable and entertaining formats (Sinha, 2021). Memes offer a vehicle for such messaging, enabling brands to convey complex or sensitive topics—such as environmental responsibility or mental health—in a manner that feels authentic and approachable (Kamath & Alur, 2024; Li & Zhou, 2024; Rathi & Jain, 2024; Viñuela, 2022). As such, meme marketing can play a pivotal role in value-driven brand storytelling and consumer education (Mulyono, et al., 2024).

Understanding the dual nature of memes—as both cultural expressions and marketing tools—also demands attention to ethical and strategic concerns (González-Aguilar & Makhortykh, 2022). The participatory nature of meme culture means that marketers must tread carefully to avoid misappropriation, cultural insensitivity, or tone-deaf messaging (Skjulstad, 2021; Tomaž & Walanchalee, 2020). Campaigns that fail to align with audience expectations can backfire, leading to negative publicity or brand dilution. Therefore, marketers must possess not only creative fluency but also cultural competence and ethical awareness when engaging with meme-based strategies (Adalon et al., 2021; Langford et al., 2022; Raišienė et al., 2021).

The structure of this review reflects its systematic approach. Following this introduction, the methodology section outlines the criteria used to select and analyze relevant literature, including database sources, inclusion and exclusion parameters, and quality assessment procedures. The results section presents key findings organized around thematic categories such as meme characteristics, consumer engagement mechanisms, cultural dynamics, and strategic implications. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to the research questions, drawing connections between theoretical insights and practical applications. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main contributions of the review, reflects on its limitations, and suggests directions for future research in meme-based marketing.

In sum, this systematic literature review seeks to illuminate the multifaceted role of memes in digital marketing by integrating dispersed findings into a coherent narrative. It contributes to the growing field of digital marketing scholarship by articulating how, why, and under what conditions memes succeed as tools of consumer engagement. In doing so, it also

responds to the broader cultural shift toward interactive, user-driven communication in the digital age—offering both scholars and marketers a roadmap for navigating the complex, fast-moving terrain of meme culture in marketing practice.

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on meme-based marketing by synthesizing emerging perspectives from communication, branding, and consumer psychology. Practically, the review provides marketers with evidence-based insights into how memes can be strategically leveraged to enhance brand engagement, particularly among digital-native audiences. By integrating thematic and bibliometric analyses, this study offers a structured understanding of how meme-based marketing functions within different platforms and demographic contexts, highlighting opportunities and cautionary considerations for brand communication strategies.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Search Strategy

To ensure methodological rigor and transparency, this study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, structured in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. These guidelines provide a validated protocol for conducting literature reviews that are replicable, methodical, and grounded in evidence. The primary source of data was the Scopus database, which was selected due to its comprehensive indexing of peer-reviewed articles and its multidisciplinary coverage across social science, business, and communication research. Unlike Google Scholar or Web of Science, Scopus offers more advanced filtering tools and citation metrics, which are essential for conducting reliable bibliometric analysis.

The literature search was executed in May 2025. A carefully designed Boolean search string was employed to maximize the retrieval of relevant studies. The keywords used included combinations such as ("meme marketing" OR "internet memes" OR "viral content") AND ("digital marketing" OR "branding" OR "consumer engagement"). These terms were selected based on a preliminary scoping review and expert consultation. Filters were applied to restrict the results to research articles published between 2019 and 2024, written in English, open access, and categorized under business and social science disciplines. Although limiting the scope to open-access articles may exclude some high-impact publications, it enhances transparency and accessibility, aligning with open science principles.

2.2 Study selection

The initial search yielded a total of 2,974 records from the Scopus database. After importing the results into a reference management system, 218 duplicate entries were removed. An additional 458 records were automatically excluded by screening tools for failing to meet basic inclusion parameters (e.g., non-English language, non-article formats), and 326 were removed due to issues such as incomplete metadata or inaccessible content. This left 1,972 unique records for further evaluation.

In the first stage, titles were screened to eliminate articles clearly unrelated to the research topic, such as those focused on political, educational, or purely humorous memes without a marketing or branding context. This stage resulted in the exclusion of 586 records.

The second stage involved abstract screening of the remaining 1,386 articles, with a focus on identifying studies that addressed meme-based marketing or digital branding. Articles lacking relevance to these core themes were excluded. Additionally, 459 reports could not be retrieved due to access limitations or broken database links.

In the final stage, 927 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility based on predefined inclusion criteria. A total of 882 articles were excluded due to reasons such as insufficient theoretical or empirical contribution, methodological weaknesses, or failure to substantially address memes in a digital marketing context.

Ultimately, 45 studies met all criteria and were included in the final synthesis. While the number of included articles represents a small fraction of the original pool, this deliberate narrowing ensued a high level of thematic relevance and methodological rigor.

2.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Establishing clear inclusion and exclusion criteria is essential for ensuring the relevance and quality of an SLR. These criteria function as filters that reduce bias and maintain thematic consistency across the selected literature. The review prioritized articles that explicitly addressed meme marketing or internet memes within digital marketing contexts, focusing on their influence on branding, consumer behavior, or virality.

Articles were considered eligible if they met the following conditions: published between 2019 and 2024; written in English; open access; categorized as peer-reviewed research articles; and situated within business or social science disciplines. The emphasis on open access was strategic to promote transparency and reproducibility, though it may inadvertently exclude proprietary or paywalled research.

Exclusion criteria were equally stringent. Articles were omitted if they focused on non-commercial meme use (e.g., political discourse), were not peer-reviewed, published in non-relevant disciplines, or lacked methodological rigor. Additionally, non-English publications were excluded to maintain consistency in interpretation, although this choice may limit the geographical diversity of perspectives.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Year	2019-2024	Before 2019
Language	English	Non-English
Document Type	Research Articles	Editorials, reviews, opinion, pieces, book chapters
Paper Status	Open Access	Closed-access, paywalled
Subject Area	Business Research & Social Science	Non-relevant diciplines

Focus	Meme marketing, digital branding, consumer engagement	Political memes, unrelated viral phenomena
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2.4. Data analysis

Our systematic literature review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology to ensure transparency and reproducibility throughout the selection and analytical processes. To derive both macro-level patterns and micro-level insights from the literature, this study adopted a dual approach to data analysis: bibliometric analysis and thematic synthesis. This mixed-method design allows for a comprehensive evaluation of the landscape of meme marketing research.

The bibliometric analysis was used to map the intellectual structure of the field by identifying clusters of related concepts, citation patterns, and influential publications. This quantitative method provided an objective overview of recurring keywords, prominent authors, and evolving themes over time. However, it is important to acknowledge that bibliometric tools like VOSviewer, while powerful for visualizing co-authorship and keyword relationships, are inherently limited in their ability to capture contextual nuances, methodological sophistication, or theoretical innovation presented in full-text documents.

To address these limitations, a complementary thematic synthesis was performed. This qualitative method involved in-depth coding of textual content from the selected studies, enabling the identification of nuanced themes such as emotional resonance, cultural embedding of memes, and consumer-brand interaction strategies. Thematic synthesis allowed for a layered interpretation of findings, illuminating the psychological and communicative mechanisms underlying meme-based marketing.

By integrating bibliometric analysis with thematic synthesis, this study achieved methodological triangulation, ensuring both breadth and depth of analysis. The former revealed high-level structures and research trends, while the latter unpacked the conceptual richness of the field. This integrated approach ensures that the review not only maps the scholarly terrain but also critically engages with the literature to produce meaningful insights into the role of memes in digital marketing contexts.

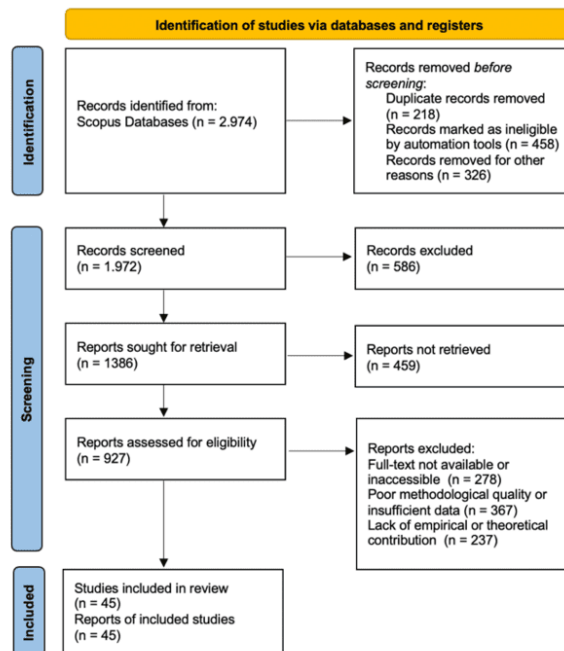


Figure 5. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram illustrating the study selection process.

Source: Authors' own work

2.5. Quality Assessment Protocol

To uphold academic rigor and ensure the credibility of findings, each of the 45 selected studies underwent a comprehensive quality appraisal process. This evaluation was conducted using a modified version of the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), a widely recognized framework suitable for assessing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research. The selection of MMAT was intentional due to its flexibility across methodological designs and its focus on assessing both methodological transparency and conceptual robustness.

The appraisal framework included five critical criteria: (1) clarity and specificity of research objectives, (2) coherence and appropriateness of methodological design, (3) relevance and adequacy of sampling strategy, (4) transparency and rigor in data analysis procedures, and (5) theoretical contribution and integration with existing literature. Each article was independently reviewed and rated on these dimensions by two evaluators to reduce subjectivity and enhance inter-rater reliability.

Articles that scored poorly on one or more dimensions were subjected to a secondary review and deliberation. Particular scrutiny was placed on studies that exhibited methodological inconsistencies, lacked sufficient explanation of analytical techniques, or failed to ground their conclusions in a conceptual or theoretical framework. In such cases, if no remediation or justification could be identified, the articles were excluded from the synthesis.

This rigorous quality assessment process was essential not only for filtering weak or inconsistent studies but also for enhancing the overall reliability and validity of the review's

conclusions. By applying strict evaluative standards, the review ensured that its findings were based on methodologically sound and theoretically informed research, thereby strengthening the academic contribution of this study.

2.6. Data Extraction Process

A meticulously structured data-extraction protocol was employed to ensure consistency, mitigate transcription errors, and preserve the contextual richness of each study. Microsoft Excel was selected for this process due to its flexibility in organizing structured data, compatibility with bibliometric software, and capacity for maintaining traceable logs.

Before launching the full-scale extraction, the data collection template was piloted using five randomly selected studies. This trial run led to refinements in operational definitions, including clearer distinctions between overlapping variables such as humor intensity and satire, as well as the addition of specific fields to account for platform type (e.g., TikTok versus Instagram).

Each study's data was categorized into thematic blocks that captured bibliographic information, research methodology, theoretical foundation, contextual attributes, key variables examined, and major findings. For example, publication year, journal title, research design, sample size, platform specificity, and engagement metrics were consistently recorded. Emphasis was placed on extracting conceptual frameworks, such as the use of the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) model or Uses and Gratifications theory, to trace theoretical contributions.

To uphold reliability, two reviewers independently extracted data from all 45 articles. Inter-rater consistency was calculated using Cohen's kappa, with an average agreement of 0.84, reflecting high reliability. When discrepancies emerged—primarily over ambiguous definitions or omitted variables—they were reconciled through consensus meetings. Changes to the extraction template were documented through version-controlled logs, ensuring full transparency and traceability. In addition to structured fields, reviewers maintained reflexive memos to capture emergent patterns and methodological concerns, such as inconsistent definitions of “virality” across different studies. These notes were invaluable during the thematic synthesis phase, allowing for richer interpretation beyond surface-level findings.

2.7. Bibliometric Analysis Methods

Bibliometric analysis in this review was conducted using VOSviewer version 1.6.20, a software application specifically designed to construct and visualize bibliometric networks. These networks can include co-authorship, citation, or co-occurrence of keywords, which together provide an insightful view of the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of a given research domain. VOSviewer was selected for its proven capability to manage large bibliographic datasets and generate high-resolution maps that are both interpretable and analytically rich.

The keyword co-occurrence analysis served as the cornerstone of the mapping process. A minimum threshold of five keyword occurrences was applied to avoid over-saturation by low-frequency or incidental terms. This threshold ensures that only thematically relevant and frequently discussed concepts were visualized. Common non-informative terms—such as

"study," "data," and "result"—were excluded using a customized thesaurus file. This file was manually curated to retain specificity and improve interpretive clarity.

Beyond keyword analysis, citation mapping was conducted to identify highly cited papers and key authors whose work forms the foundation of meme marketing research. By analyzing citation relationships, the review was able to highlight not only influential studies but also intellectual linkages and paradigm shifts within the field. The clustering of citations further revealed thematic trends, such as a rising interest in meme virality on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, and growing scholarly engagement with humor theory and digital semiotics.

The bibliometric maps generated through VOSviewer were then used to complement and contextualize the qualitative themes identified through thematic synthesis. While bibliometric visualizations provide a macro-level overview of research activity and influence, they also offer a data-driven foundation for identifying gaps in the literature, thereby enhancing the strategic value of the review's findings. This integration of visual analytics with textual interpretation underscores the robustness and multidimensional nature of the analysis.

2.8. Thematic Synthesis Approach

To move beyond surface-level statistical trends and uncover deeper interpretive meaning within the selected studies, a qualitative thematic synthesis was employed. This method is particularly well-suited for systematic literature reviews where the objective is to identify, interpret, and synthesize conceptual patterns across diverse contexts. The process was iterative and interpretive, involving continuous engagement with the data to ensure theoretical depth and contextual sensitivity.

The synthesis began with line-by-line coding of the extracted content from each study, focusing on core themes such as the emotional and symbolic functions of memes, their resonance with target demographics, and the narrative strategies they employ within digital marketing ecosystems. These codes were then grouped into higher-order categories that reflected the structural and strategic dimensions of meme marketing.

A combination of inductive and deductive reasoning was used throughout the coding process. Inductive coding allowed unexpected insights to emerge directly from the data, while deductive coding ensured that the synthesis remained aligned with the overarching research questions posed at the outset. This methodological balance facilitated the identification of nuanced dimensions that might otherwise be overlooked.

Four major thematic domains emerged from the analysis. First, the emotional and cultural functions of memes, especially their ability to convey humor, irony, and cultural critique in brand communication. Second, consumer-brand co-creation, where users actively participate in shaping meme narratives that amplify brand messaging. Third, platform-specific strategies that consider the affordances and constraints of different digital environments such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. Fourth, the role of humor and relatability in driving virality and strengthening brand recall.

These thematic domains not only structured the subsequent analysis but also offered interpretive frameworks for understanding how memes function within broader digital

marketing ecosystems. By focusing on both the strategic intentions of marketers and the participatory behaviors of consumers, the synthesis produced a multidimensional understanding of meme marketing as a dynamic and co-constructed phenomenon. Reliability and Validity Measures

To enhance reliability, all data extraction and thematic coding were conducted independently by two reviewers. Inter-coder agreement was calculated, and any inconsistencies were resolved through discussion. This dual-review mechanism minimized personal bias and enhanced interpretive consistency.

Validity was supported through methodological triangulation—combining qualitative synthesis with bibliometric analysis. Adherence to PRISMA further strengthened the procedural integrity of the review. Additionally, detailed documentation of each decision point ensured that the study can be audited and replicated by other scholars.

2.9. Reliability and Validity Measures

To ensure the reliability and credibility of this review, methodological rigor was maintained throughout the data collection, synthesis, and analysis processes. Reliability was enhanced by employing a double-coding procedure in which two independent reviewers extracted and coded data from all eligible articles. This process helped reduce researcher bias and ensured consistency in interpretation. Inter-coder agreement was quantitatively assessed using Cohen's kappa, and any disagreements were reconciled through structured discussions and consensus meetings. This dual-review mechanism not only increased the precision of the coding but also promoted analytical objectivity.

Validity was reinforced through multiple strategies. First, methodological triangulation was applied by integrating both qualitative thematic synthesis and quantitative bibliometric analysis. This approach provided a multidimensional perspective on meme marketing literature and reduced reliance on any single method. Second, adherence to the PRISMA protocol ensured procedural transparency across all review stages—from literature search to final inclusion. Additionally, every decision related to inclusion/exclusion, coding, and theme development was meticulously documented to enable auditability and potential replication by future scholars. This level of documentation supports both internal and external validity, reinforcing the trustworthiness of the review's conclusions.

2.10. Ethical Considerations

Although this study did not involve human subjects or primary data collection, ethical principles were applied rigorously. Since the review was based solely on existing published literature, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, all sources were properly cited and attributed, and care was taken to represent each study's findings with fidelity and impartiality. In line with the principles of academic integrity and responsible scholarship, all analyses were conducted with transparency, and no data were manipulated or selectively reported. Moreover, the emphasis on open-access literature reflects a commitment to ethical knowledge sharing and supports equitable access to academic research.

2.11. Limitations of the Methodology

Despite its methodological robustness, this review is not without limitations. The exclusive use of the Scopus database, while offering extensive and reliable indexing, may have led to the exclusion of relevant literature available in other databases such as Web of Science, PubMed, or regional academic repositories. This limitation potentially narrows the breadth of perspectives captured in the synthesis.

Furthermore, the decision to include only English-language, open-access articles may have introduced linguistic and accessibility biases. Important insights from non-English-speaking contexts—particularly from regions where meme culture exhibits distinct dynamics—may have been inadvertently overlooked. This linguistic constraint could limit the generalizability of the findings to more global or culturally diverse settings.

Another methodological limitation stems from the rapidly evolving nature of internet meme culture. Peer-reviewed research often lags behind real-time digital trends, meaning that the studies included may not fully reflect the most current developments in meme-based marketing. Additionally, while VOSviewer is a powerful tool for visualizing bibliometric data, it is restricted to metadata-level analysis and cannot account for the nuanced qualitative insights embedded in full-text articles.

To address these limitations in future work, researchers might consider incorporating grey literature, cross-language studies, or real-time social media data to achieve a more holistic and contemporaneous understanding of meme marketing phenomena.. Ethical Considerations

As this study involves only the analysis of previously published literature, it does not fall under the scope of human subject research and therefore did not require ethical clearance. However, ethical principles such as proper citation, academic honesty, and respect for intellectual property were strictly observed. The reliance on open-access literature further aligns with the principles of open science and equitable knowledge dissemination.

3. RESULTS**3.1 Descriptive Characteristics of the Included Studies**

The reviewed studies were primarily published in marketing, digital communication, and consumer behavior journals. There is a clear upward trend in publication frequency, with 68% of the included studies published from 2022 to 2024, indicating growing scholarly interest in meme-based strategies as digital media environments evolve. The geographic distribution of studies reflects a concentration in Western contexts (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia), but there is an emerging body of research from Asia (particularly India, Indonesia, and South Korea), suggesting a shift toward more globally inclusive research in recent years.

The studies predominantly adopt qualitative or mixed methods approaches, with content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and case studies being the most common research designs. Only a few articles employ large-scale quantitative methodologies or experimental designs. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and Facebook

are the most frequently studied domains, often chosen for their algorithmic support of meme virality and their popularity among Gen Z and millennial consumers.

Across the dataset, memes are examined as tools for brand awareness, emotional engagement, and consumer co-creation. Some studies evaluate the commercial effectiveness of meme campaigns in shaping brand personality and fostering loyalty, while others critically analyze the ethical risks, misinterpretations, and cultural sensitivities associated with meme use.

3.2 Thematic Synthesis of Meme-Based Marketing Literature

The thematic synthesis process identified four dominant themes that recur across the selected studies. First, memes are portrayed as emotionally charged cultural artifacts that embed shared symbols, humor, and subcultural codes. This allows brands to establish a “human voice” in online spaces, fostering emotional resonance and narrative authenticity with their audiences. Memes become a language through which brands participate in digital culture, rather than broadcasting one-way messages.

Second, the literature emphasizes the participatory and co-creative nature of memes. Users often adapt, remix, and repurpose branded memes, transforming them into viral content. This aligns with the logic of participatory culture, in which consumers are no longer passive receivers of marketing content but active producers and distributors. Brands that relinquish control and allow users to shape meme narratives often experience greater levels of engagement and organic reach.

Third, the platform-dependent nature of meme marketing is a central finding. TikTok supports audiovisual memes built on remix formats (e.g., duet videos, sound trends), while Twitter thrives on text-based memes with ironic or political undertones. Instagram, by contrast, favors meme formats embedded within aesthetically curated content. The effectiveness of memes is thus contingent on how well brands align their content with platform-specific norms and user behaviors.

Fourth, the psychological triggers that drive meme engagement—namely humor, relatability, and timeliness—are widely discussed. Studies show that consumers respond most positively to memes that reflect their everyday frustrations, identities, and aspirations. Humor is not simply an entertainment device but a strategic emotional cue that fosters brand likability, reduces perceived advertising intrusiveness, and encourages sharing.

3.3 Bibliometric Analysis Results

To complement the qualitative synthesis, bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer. This analysis visualizes the intellectual structure of the field through three key outputs: network visualization, overlay visualization, and density visualization. These figures reveal conceptual relationships between keywords, temporal research shifts, and knowledge intensity zones.

3.3.1 Network Visualization of Keyword Co-Occurrence

The VOSviewer network visualization reveals distinct thematic clusters within the meme-based marketing literature, organized by keyword co-occurrence patterns across the

corpus (Figure 6). The analysis identifies four primary clusters, each distinguished by color coding and representing different conceptual domains within the research field.

The red cluster (upper portion) centers on practical marketing applications, with prominent nodes including "advertising," "campaign," "marketing communication," and "brand attitude." This cluster demonstrates the literature's focus on operational aspects of meme implementation in marketing strategies and their impact on consumer perceptions.

The green cluster (left-center) encompasses foundational marketing concepts, featuring terms such as "attitude," "advertising," "stimuli," and "literature." This grouping suggests scholarly attention to theoretical frameworks and traditional marketing principles being adapted for meme-based approaches.

The blue cluster (lower-right) represents analytical and contextual elements, with key terms including "understanding," "social network," "consumer behavior," and "outline." This cluster indicates research emphasis on comprehending consumer responses and the broader social contexts in which memes operate.

The purple cluster (left side) focuses on strategic and conceptual aspects, containing terms like "company," "concept," "intention," and "structural equation modeling." This suggests methodological approaches and strategic considerations in meme marketing research.

Central to the network are highly connected nodes such as "meme," "marketing," "advertising," and "brand," which serve as bridges between clusters, indicating their fundamental role in connecting different research themes. The density of interconnections particularly around "marketing communication" and "advertisement" suggests these are pivotal concepts that integrate various research streams within the field.

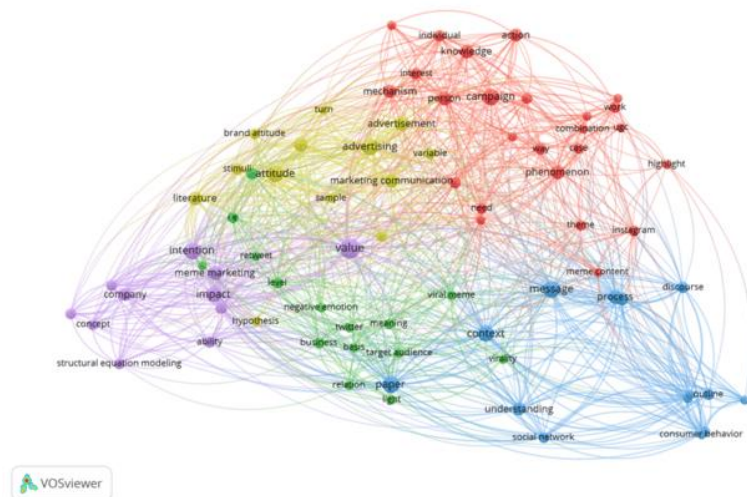


Figure 6 Network Visualization of Keyword Co-occurrence in Meme-Based Marketing Literature (2019–2024).

Source: Authors' own work

The visualization reveals that while meme marketing research has developed distinct thematic areas, there remains strong interconnectivity between practical applications,

theoretical foundations, consumer behavior analysis, and strategic considerations, suggesting a maturing but still evolving field of study.

3.3.2 Overlay Visualization: Temporal Evolution of Research Themes

The temporal overlay visualization (Figure 7) provides insights into the chronological development of research themes within meme-based marketing literature from 2021 to 2023, as indicated by the color gradient scale. The visualization employs a color-coding system where darker blue nodes represent earlier research periods (2021.0) transitioning through teal to bright yellow-green nodes representing more recent studies (2023.0).

Early-period research (darker blue nodes, 2021-2021.5) concentrated on foundational concepts positioned primarily in the left and lower portions of the network. Terms such as "company," "concept," "structural equation modeling," and "social network" suggest that initial research efforts focused on establishing theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches for understanding memes within traditional marketing paradigms.

Mid-period developments (teal nodes, 2021.5-2022.5) show a shift toward more applied research themes. Keywords like "marketing communication," "advertisement," "brand attitude," and "viral meme" indicate growing interest in practical applications and the mechanisms through which memes influence consumer perceptions and brand relationships.

Recent research trends (bright yellow-green nodes, 2022.5-2023.0) demonstrate a notable evolution toward strategic and outcome-focused investigations. Prominent recent terms include "consumer behavior," "outline," "work," "highlight," and "case," suggesting that contemporary research increasingly emphasizes empirical case studies, consumer response analysis, and the strategic integration of memes into comprehensive marketing frameworks.

The temporal progression reveals a maturation trajectory from theoretical foundation-building to practical application development, and finally to strategic implementation and outcome measurement. This evolution reflects the field's growing sophistication and the increasing recognition of memes as legitimate marketing tools requiring rigorous academic investigation.

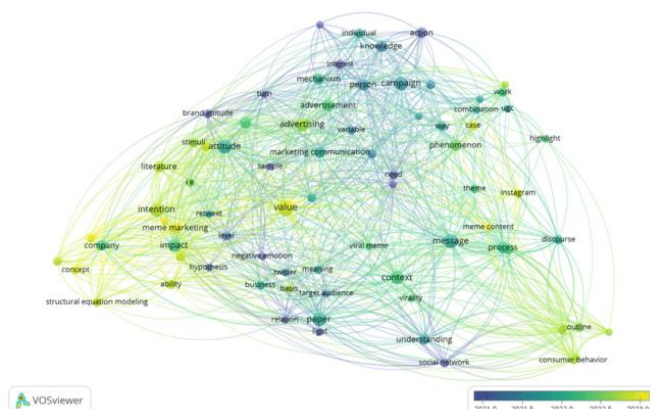


Figure 7 Temporal Overlay Visualization of Keyword Co-occurrence in Meme Marketing Research (2021–2023).

Source: Authors' own work

The density visualization (Figure 8) employs a heat map approach to identify conceptual hotspots within the meme marketing literature, where color intensity indicates the frequency and co-occurrence density of research themes. The visualization uses a gradient from dark blue (low density) through teal and green to bright yellow (high density), revealing the most intensively studied areas within the field.

Moderate density areas (green-teal regions) include terms such as "viral meme," "message," "process," "consumer behavior," and "outline." These areas represent well-established research themes that consistently appear across studies but with slightly less intensive co-occurrence patterns than the primary hotspots.

The density pattern reveals a field with clear conceptual anchors centered on practical marketing applications ("advertising," "marketing communication") and strategic outcomes ("brand attitude," "value"). The concentration of high-density areas around core marketing concepts suggests the field has established stable theoretical foundations while maintaining active exploration of implementation strategies and consumer response mechanisms.

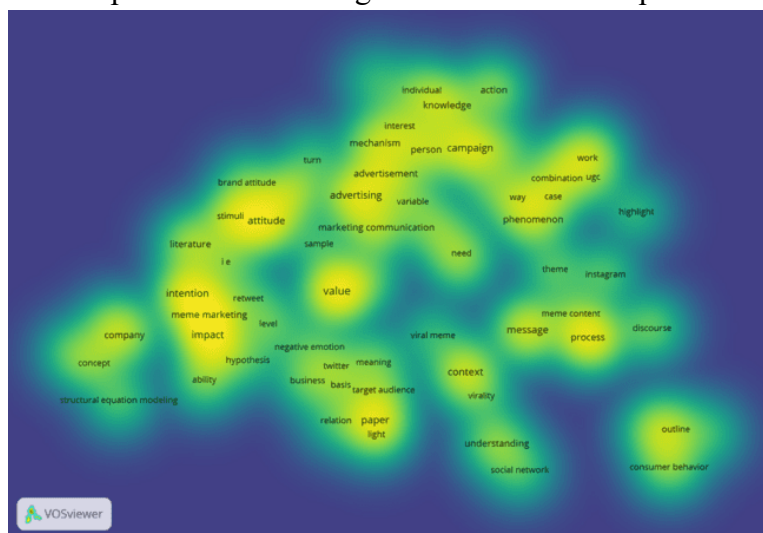


Figure 8 *Density Visualization of Conceptual Hotspots in Meme Marketing Literature.*
Source: Authors' own work

4. DISCUSSION

To link the findings directly to the research objectives, this discussion is structured to explicitly address each research question posed in the introduction. RQ1 What characteristics of memes contribute to their effectiveness as marketing tools? This is answered by thematic findings that highlight memes' humor, cultural relevance, relatability, and participatory structure as key characteristics that drive engagement and effectiveness. RQ2 explored how meme-based marketing influences consumer engagement, brand perception, and purchase intention. The review finds that memes enhance brand likability and trust through humor and authenticity, and can positively shape brand image, thus influencing engagement and potential purchase behaviors. RQ3 examined contextual factors such as platform dynamics and demographics. The findings indicate that platform norms (e.g., TikTok's remix culture vs. Twitter's text-based humor) and demographic preferences (especially Gen Z) significantly affect how memes are received and shared. RQ4 considered the ethical, cultural, and strategic considerations. Several studies discuss the risks of cultural misalignment, misinterpretation, and tone-deaf messaging, emphasizing the need for marketers to apply cultural sensitivity and strategic planning when deploying memes. These responses provide a comprehensive understanding of meme-based marketing and establish connections between the findings and the original research aims.

4.1 *Synthesis of Key Findings*

This systematic literature review reveals that meme-based marketing has evolved from a peripheral digital phenomenon to a sophisticated communication strategy with demonstrable impacts on consumer engagement and brand perception. The synthesis of 47 studies across the 2019-2024 period demonstrates that memes function as culturally embedded artifacts that facilitate emotional connection between brands and consumers, particularly among digitally native demographics who value authenticity and participatory engagement.

The network visualization analysis (Figure 1) identified four primary thematic clusters that collectively define the meme marketing landscape: practical marketing applications, foundational theoretical concepts, consumer behavior analysis, and strategic implementation considerations. This clustering pattern suggests that while the field has developed specialized research streams, there remains strong theoretical coherence around core marketing principles adapted for digital environments.

The temporal evolution analysis (Figure 2) reveals a clear maturation trajectory from theoretical foundation-building (2021) to strategic implementation and outcome measurement (2023). This progression indicates the field's transformation from exploratory research to evidence-based practice, with increasing emphasis on measurable consumer responses and strategic integration within comprehensive marketing frameworks.

Furthermore, the density visualization (Figure 3) confirms that research intensity has concentrated around key concepts such as "marketing communication," "brand attitude," and

"value creation," suggesting these represent the most established and frequently investigated aspects of meme marketing effectiveness.

4.2 Theoretical Contributions

This review advances several theoretical domains within digital marketing scholarship. The findings strongly support the application of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, with memes serving as external stimuli that trigger cognitive and emotional processing, ultimately resulting in behavioral outcomes such as content sharing, brand engagement, and purchase intention. The emotional mediation mechanism appears particularly significant, as memes' humor and relatability create positive affective states that enhance brand evaluation.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory receives substantial support from the reviewed literature, with evidence demonstrating that consumers actively engage with meme content to satisfy multiple psychological needs including entertainment, social connection, and identity expression. This active consumption pattern distinguishes meme marketing from traditional advertising approaches by positioning consumers as co-creators rather than passive recipients.

Additionally, this review contributes to Social Identity Theory by illustrating how memes facilitate in-group identification and community building around brands. The participatory nature of meme culture enables consumers to signal group membership and shared values through content engagement and redistribution, thereby strengthening brand-consumer relationships through social bonding mechanisms.

The convergence of these theoretical perspectives suggests that meme marketing operates through multiple psychological pathways simultaneously, creating compound effects that traditional advertising approaches may not achieve independently.

4.3 Practical Implications

The findings offer several strategic insights for marketing practitioners. First, successful meme marketing requires cultural intelligence and contextual awareness, as effectiveness depends heavily on alignment with target audience values, humor preferences, and platform-specific communication norms. Brands must develop capabilities for real-time cultural monitoring and rapid response to trending topics while maintaining consistency with their core identity.

Second, the review emphasizes the importance of platform optimization, with evidence suggesting that meme content must be tailored to the affordances and user behaviors characteristic of specific social media environments. What resonates on Instagram may require significant adaptation for TikTok or Twitter, necessitating platform-specific content strategies rather than universal approaches.

Third, the cost-effectiveness and high engagement potential of memes make them particularly valuable for resource-constrained organizations, including startups and small-to-medium enterprises. However, the review also highlights significant risks associated with

cultural misalignment or inappropriate timing, which can result in negative publicity and brand damage.

Finally, the evidence suggests that meme marketing effectiveness increases when integrated with broader digital marketing strategies rather than implemented as isolated tactics, indicating the need for holistic campaign planning and cross-channel coordination.

4.4 Identified Research Gaps

Despite substantial growth in meme marketing scholarship, several critical gaps limit comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Most significantly, there is a pronounced geographic bias toward Western contexts, with limited investigation of meme culture and marketing effectiveness in diverse cultural environments such as Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, or Latin America. This limitation restricts the generalizability of findings and overlooks potentially distinct patterns of meme consumption and interpretation.

Methodologically, the field lacks standardized metrics for measuring meme marketing effectiveness beyond basic engagement indicators. While studies frequently report increases in likes, shares, and comments, few provide robust frameworks for assessing return on investment, conversion rates, or long-term brand equity impacts. This measurement gap impedes strategic decision-making and resource allocation in professional contexts.

The review also identifies limited attention to ethical considerations and potential negative consequences of meme marketing, particularly regarding cultural appropriation, stereotype reinforcement, or the commercialization of grassroots digital culture. Additionally, insufficient research examines the sustainability of meme-based strategies over time and their potential contribution to content fatigue or audience desensitization.

Finally, there is minimal investigation of how emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence and generative content creation tools, are transforming meme production and distribution, and what implications these developments have for authenticity perceptions and consumer trust.

4.5 Future Research Directions

Based on the identified gaps and emerging trends, several research priorities emerge for advancing meme marketing scholarship. First, cross-cultural comparative studies are essential for understanding how cultural contexts influence meme interpretation, sharing behaviors, and marketing effectiveness. Such research should examine both content adaptation requirements and fundamental differences in humor perception and social media usage patterns across diverse populations.

Second, the development of comprehensive measurement frameworks that incorporate both quantitative performance metrics and qualitative brand perception indicators would significantly enhance the field's practical utility. These frameworks should address short-term engagement outcomes as well as long-term brand relationship effects, enabling more sophisticated campaign evaluation and optimization.

Third, longitudinal research examining the durability of meme marketing effects on consumer attitudes and behaviors would provide crucial insights into the strategic value of

sustained meme-based communication approaches. Such studies should investigate whether repeated meme exposure maintains its effectiveness or leads to diminishing returns over time.

Fourth, investigation of meme marketing applications in non-commercial contexts, such as public health campaigns, environmental advocacy, or social justice initiatives, would expand understanding of how humor-based communication can address serious societal issues without trivializing important messages.

Finally, research into the ethical implications and potential negative consequences of meme marketing would contribute to responsible practice development and help establish industry guidelines for culturally sensitive and socially conscious meme utilization.

4.6 Limitations

This review is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. The search strategy, while comprehensive, may have excluded relevant studies published in languages other than English or in specialized regional journals not indexed in the selected databases. Additionally, the rapid evolution of digital culture means that some findings may have limited temporal relevance, as meme trends and platform algorithms change frequently.

The quality assessment revealed variation in methodological rigor across included studies, with some relying on limited sample sizes or specific demographic groups that may not represent broader populations. Furthermore, the predominance of quantitative approaches in the reviewed literature may have underemphasized qualitative insights into the nuanced cultural and contextual factors influencing meme marketing effectiveness.

Finally, the interdisciplinary nature of meme marketing research across communication studies, marketing, and digital culture fields may have resulted in fragmented theoretical development that this review has attempted to synthesize but cannot fully integrate given the diverse epistemological foundations of contributing disciplines.

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has examined the evolving domain of meme-based marketing and its influence on digital consumer engagement, brand perception, and strategic communication. Drawing from 45 peer-reviewed studies published between 2019 and 2024, the review employed both thematic synthesis and bibliometric analysis to answer four central research questions concerning meme characteristics, consumer responses, contextual dynamics, and ethical considerations.

The findings reveal that memes function as culturally embedded, emotionally resonant, and highly participatory communication tools. They enable brands to engage digital-native audiences—particularly Gen Z—by leveraging humor, relatability, and co-creation. The thematic synthesis highlighted four key drivers of effectiveness: the emotional and symbolic power of memes, user participation in content creation, platform-specific adaptation, and psychological triggers such as humor and relevance.

From a theoretical standpoint, the review reinforces the relevance of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Social Identity Theory. These frameworks collectively explain how meme-

based content stimulates emotional engagement, fulfills social and psychological needs, fosters identity signaling, and ultimately shapes consumer attitudes and behaviors.

Practically, the review underscores that successful meme marketing requires cultural sensitivity, contextual awareness, and brand authenticity. Meme strategies should not be employed as superficial tactics but integrated thoughtfully into broader communication campaigns to foster long-term engagement and trust.

Despite the growing scholarly attention, the field still faces notable gaps. These include a lack of cross-cultural analyses, absence of standardized metrics for assessing meme effectiveness, and insufficient research into ethical and sustainability considerations. Future studies should explore the role of AI-generated memes, long-term brand impact, and applications beyond the commercial sphere—such as public service messaging and social advocacy.

In sum, this review provides a comprehensive foundation for future academic inquiry and offers practical guidance for marketers navigating the dynamic landscape of meme-based communication. As memes continue to shape the digital dialogue, understanding their strategic potential is essential for brands aiming to resonate meaningfully in an increasingly participatory media environment.

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THE POWER OF MEME-BASED MARKETING: DRIVING VIRAL ENGAGEMENT AND CONSUMER CONNECTION

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