

# Impact of Meme Marketing on Brand Recall and Consumer Perception: A Comparative Study with Traditional Advertising

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**Abstract**—The rapid proliferation of social media platforms and the widespread adoption of digital communication have fundamentally altered the landscape of brand advertising. Meme marketing — a strategy that leverages humour, cultural resonance, and virality to communicate brand messages — has emerged as one of the most disruptive forces in contemporary digital advertising. This study investigates the comparative impact of meme marketing and traditional advertising on brand recall and consumer perception among young adults, primarily aged 18 to 30, surveyed at IIEBM Indus Business School, Pune. Drawing on primary survey data collected from 71 respondents and a review of twenty scholarly and industry sources, the study tests three hypotheses concerning meme marketing’s influence on brand recall, its comparative effectiveness relative to traditional advertising, and the role of consumer perception in mediating advertising outcomes. The findings reveal that while meme marketing significantly enhances engagement, shareability, and brand memorability among digitally native consumers, traditional advertising retains a decisive advantage in communicating detailed, complex, and credibility-sensitive brand information.

**Index Terms**—Meme Marketing, Brand Recall, Consumer Perception, Traditional Advertising, Digital Marketing, Social Media Engagement, Gen Z, Comparative Advertising.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Meme marketing has systematically dismantled traditional brand visibility. With a single shareable image, a company can reach millions of potential consumers without purchasing a single advertisement slot. The content spreads horizontally through peer networks rather than vertically from brand to consumer, and its reception is governed not by production quality or media spend but by cultural relevance and comedic timing. The global meme economy, once confined to niche internet subcultures, has become a mainstream marketing channel embraced by global corporations, political campaigns, and consumer goods brands alike. In the Indian context, the penetration of affordable smartphones, near-universal internet access, and a young, digitally fluent population have created conditions in which

meme-based content spreads faster and more widely than almost any traditional advertising format.

Digital fluency does not, however, automatically translate into deep brand recall or durable consumer loyalty. Features that make memes appealing — their humour, their ephemerality, their ironic register — can also make them structurally unsuitable for communicating complex product information, establishing professional credibility, or building the kind of sustained trust that high-consideration purchase decisions require.

### 1.1. Background of the Study

The concept of the internet meme has roots in the evolutionary theory of cultural transmission proposed by Richard Dawkins in 1976. The commercial appropriation of meme culture accelerated notably in the mid-2010s. Companies such as Wendy’s in the United States pioneered the use of irreverent, meme-adjacent social media communication to build brand identity among younger consumers. In India, brands such as Zomato and Swiggy further adapted this model to the local cultural and linguistic context. The rapid expansion of affordable mobile internet following the 2016 launch of Jio, combined with the enormous reach of WhatsApp as a content distribution channel, created conditions in which meme-based content could propagate through both open social media and closed messaging groups simultaneously.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing body of research on meme marketing and advertising effectiveness provides important context for understanding how digital content formats shape consumer behaviour and brand outcomes.

### 2.1 Bigne, Andreu, Hernandez & Ruiz (2020)

Enrique Bigne and colleagues published a landmark study on digital content virality and brand recall. The study found that content characterised by high emotional arousal generated significantly stronger brand recall than neutral informational content. Critically, the study introduced the concept of ‘recall without retention,’ documenting cases in which consumers accurately recalled exposure to branded

content while failing to associate that content with a purchase intention or positive brand evaluation.

**2.2 Nelson-Field, Riebe & Newstead (2013)**

Karen Nelson-Field and colleagues examined the relationship between social media sharing behaviour and brand effectiveness metrics. Their central finding was that while ‘highly shared’ content consistently generated superior reach metrics, it did not reliably outperform ‘lowly shared’ content on measures of brand recall, brand linkage, and purchase intention. The study introduced the ‘share/brand linkage gap.’

**2.3 Gupta & Mahajan (2022)**

Ritu Gupta and Priya Mahajan conducted a primary research study examining how Indian young adults aged 18 to 27 respond to meme-based brand communications. Their study found that 68% of respondents reported better brand recall for brands whose memes they had shared, compared to only 41% for brands whose traditional advertisements they had seen in the preceding month. However, the study also noted that brand trust scores were significantly lower for brands perceived as relying exclusively on meme communication.

**Table 1: Literature Review Summary — Key Sources, Reports, and Contributions**

#	Author(s)	Publication	Year	Key Contribution
1	Bigne et al.	Digital Content Virality and Brand Recall	2020	Introduced ‘recall without retention’; emotional arousal drives recall but not necessarily purchase intent.
2	Nelson-Field et al.	The Emotions That Drive Viral Video	2013	Share/brand linkage gap; highly shared content does not reliably outperform on brand recall.
3	Gupta & Mahajan	Meme Marketing and Brand Awareness Among Indian Gen Z	2022	68% brand recall for shared memes vs 41% for traditional ads; credibility penalty for meme-only brands.
4	Kaplan & Haenlein	Users of the World, Unite!	2010	Foundational social media classification;

#	Author(s)	Publication	Year	Key Contribution
				introduced virality mechanics.
5	Davison	The Language of Internet Memes	2012	Defined internet meme structure; established meme typology for marketing research.
6	Shifman	Memes in Digital Culture	2014	Comprehensive meme theory; distinguished memes as participatory culture.
7	Aaker	Building Strong Brands	1996	Brand equity framework; established dimensions of brand awareness and associations.
8	Keller	Strategic Brand Management	2013	Brand recall and recognition as components of brand knowledge.
9	Percy & Rossiter	A Model of Brand Awareness and Attitude	1992	Advertising communication effects model; distinction between brand recall and recognition.
10	Berger & Milkman	What Makes Online Content Viral?	2012	Emotion and social currency drive sharing; practical arousal outperforms deactivating emotions.

**3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study employs a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Primary data were collected from 71 respondents at IIEBM Indus Business School, Pune, using a structured questionnaire. The sample is primarily concentrated in the 18–30 age bracket, with

significant representation from the 22–25 cohort. Three hypotheses were tested: H1 (meme marketing positively influences brand recall), H2 (meme marketing is more effective than traditional advertising in brand recall), and H3 (consumer perception differs significantly between meme and traditional advertising). Statistical tests applied include Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ) test of independence, Independent Samples T-Test, and One-Sample Z-Test for Proportions, all at  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Engagement Metrics

Brand name recall is meaningfully higher for meme-exposed consumers (62.0%) than for traditionally-exposed consumers (54.9%). Among respondents who regularly encounter brand memes, 76.1% have shared at least one branded meme — a strikingly high rate of voluntary brand content distribution. However, only 29.6% of respondents report making a purchase after meme-based brand exposure, compared to the 45.1% post-exposure search intention associated with traditional advertising. This engagement-to-conversion gap represents the single most commercially significant finding in the dataset.

4.2 Brand Trust and Professionalism Perceptions

Table 2: Brand Trust and Professionalism Perceptions (Likert Scale)

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
Meme marketing makes brands feel more approachable	71.8% (51)	19.7% (14)	8.5% (6)
I trust brands more after seeing their memes	38.0% (27)	42.3% (30)	19.7% (14)
Traditional ads are more informative than memes	69.0% (49)	18.3% (13)	12.7% (9)
Meme marketing feels unprofessional at times	47.9% (34)	28.2% (20)	23.9% (17)

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
A brand using only memes seems less credible	52.1% (37)	25.4% (18)	22.5% (16)

The brand trust and professionalism data surface a tension that is structurally significant for meme marketing strategy. While 71.8% of respondents find that meme marketing makes brands more approachable, only 38.0% report that it increases brand trust — a 33.8-percentage-point gap. Furthermore, 52.1% of respondents agree that a brand relying exclusively on meme communication appears less credible, and 47.9% consider meme marketing at least sometimes unprofessional.

5. FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

5.1 Findings

Meme marketing delivers exceptional performance on metrics associated with awareness, reach, and affective engagement. The engagement-to-conversion gap suggests that meme marketing’s funnel contribution is heavily concentrated in the awareness phase and diminishes materially as consumers move towards purchase consideration. Traditional advertising retains decisive advantages on measures associated with information quality, professional credibility, and purchase facilitation — 80.3% of respondents rated traditional advertisements as professional and credible, compared to only 28.2% for meme marketing. A structurally significant finding is the credibility penalty that consumers associate with brands perceived as relying exclusively on meme-format communication.

5.2 Recommendations

- Adopt a channel-stratified approach: allocate meme content to awareness campaigns targeting 18–30 year old digital native audiences; concentrate traditional advertising investment in purchase consideration and decision stages.
- Establish brand safety guidelines for meme content that maintain cultural resonance while ensuring core brand values and product messaging are consistently embedded.
- Measure meme marketing effectiveness using a dual-metric framework capturing both engagement metrics and recall metrics.
- Develop category-specific meme marketing guidelines: FMCG and entertainment sectors can invest more heavily in meme-led strategies, while

financial services and healthcare should treat meme marketing as a supplementary awareness channel.

### 5.3 Conclusion

Meme marketing occupies a genuinely important position in the contemporary advertising landscape. It offers organic reach and social amplification at costs that traditional advertising cannot match, and it generates brand name recall advantages that have genuine top-of-funnel commercial value. However, it is designed — by the nature of its humour, ephemerality, and cultural embeddedness — in a manner that systematically resists the kind of structured information delivery and professional credibility signalling that high-consideration consumer decisions require. The most important strategic implication of this study is that the two formats operate in fundamentally different psychological registers and should be deployed as complementary rather than competing tools.

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