

Meme as a Marketing Tool: Enhancing Brands in the Indian Digital Landscape

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Abstract- As the Internet in India undergoes rapid transformation, a new undertheorized form of brand communication has appeared that is internet memes. This paper examines how Indian brands leverage meme culture to construct and differentiate brand identity across social media platforms. Based on participatory culture theory (Jenkin, 2006), memetics (Shifman, 2014), and brand identity frameworks (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008), this paper develops a conceptual framework of Cultural Resonance - defined as the alignment between a meme's semiotic content and its audience's shared cultural knowledge, operationalized through linguistic congruence, referential familiarity, and humour register alignment. Using a mixed-methods design combining systematic content analysis with a structured consumer survey, the study analysis of ten Indian brand campaigns. The findings indicate that culturally congruent memes - invoking Hinglish registers, recognisable formats, and community-aligned humour - yield stronger brand recall, more coherent brand personality attribution, and higher engagement than less congruent campaign types. This paper also indicates how emerging reputation risk may arise from the digital space in India, given the political sensitivity of its landscape and discusses implications for future empirical research on meme-based brand communication.

Keywords: *meme marketing, brand identity, cultural resonance, Indian digital landscape, participatory culture, social media.*

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The transformation that India has achieved in the digital space has been remarkable in both scale and speed. India is one of the world's diverse and energetically engaged digital public, consisting of over 800 million internet users, more than 467 million

active social media accounts and an active smartphone penetration rate exceeding 54% as of 2023 (Statista, 2023; TRAI, 2023). Amidst this, the internet meme has transitioned from an informal cyberspace, tongue-in-cheek online expression to a more complex mechanism for brand communication, cultural negotiation and consumer identity construction.

In its contemporary digital form, a meme is best understood as a unit of participatory cultural content - usually an image macro/short video/textual template that circulates rapidly across social media via imitation, variation and adaptation (Shifman 2014). Memes, by their nature, differ from traditional advertising: audiences are not just recipients but active co-producers; content is remixed in order to be woven into their own cultural lexicons. For Indian brands, this dynamic is both an opportunity and a vulnerability- memes can distill brand personality with striking efficiency, but mismanaging the cultural context exposes brands up to ridicule and backlash.

While communication through memes has become a prevalent and recognizable feature of many Indian brands - Zomato's sardonic, late night hunger posts to Amul's topical 'butter-girl' cartoons reappropriated as digital memes - academic literature and scholarship on the subject remains limited, fragmented and insufficiently contextualized within Indian socio-cultural specificities. Most extant literature is emerged from Western contexts and tend to overload India's unique combination linguistic diversity, regionally embedded humor traditions, rapid aspirational consumerism and intense political polarization, all of which directly shape meme-brand interface.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

Existing academic work on memes and branding (e.g., Luarn et al. 2015; Ge & Gretzel, 2018) does not adequately account for the complex cultural architecture of Indian digital environment- its linguistic diversity, regional humour registers, Hinglish internet vernacular and the socio-political undercurrents that pervade viral content. At present, no validated framework exists to explain when, why and how memes effectively enhance brand identity in the Indian context, or to delineate the risks associated with culturally incongruent meme deployment. This study aims to address this analytical gap in the Indian context.

1.3 Research Objectives

- RO1: To examine the structural and cultural attributes of brand memes used by Indian brands across major social media platforms.
- RO2: To assess the associations between cultural resonance dimensions of brand memes and consumer brand identity outcomes – specifically brand recall, personality attribution, engagement respectively in Indian digital context.
- RO3: To analyse the risks and reputational issues associated with meme marketing in India's politically polarised digital environment and to understand how brands manage memes-related crises.

1.4 Research Questions

- RQ1: What are the structural and creative characteristics of brand memes deployed by Indian companies, and how do these features vary across different platforms and brand categories?
- RQ2: To what extent do cultural resonance dimensions predict consumer engagement and brand identity outcomes for Indian brand memes?

- RQ3: What are the risks of meme-based brand marketing in India, and how do brands manage meme-related reputational crises?

II. METHODS

2.1 Research Design and Theoretical Framework

This study employs an explanatory mixed-methods research design, integrating systematic content analysis with a structured consumer survey and qualitative case analysis. The design is warranted by the dual nature of the research objectives: content analysis characterises the structural and cultural dimensions of brand memes (RO1), the survey examines the relationships between meme attributes and brand identity outcomes (RO2), and qualitative case studies address risk-related aspects of meme marketing (RO3).

The theoretical framework combines four complementary perspectives: Shifman's (2014) memetic diffusion model, Jenkins et al.'s (2013) spreadable media framework, Aaker's (1996) brand identity framework together with Kapferer's (2008) Brand Identity Prism, and Berger and Milkman's (2012) emotional contagion and virality model. These converge on the construct of Cultural Resonance, operationalised through three dimensions: (a) Linguistic Congruence (use of Hinglish, regional language or code-switching); (b) Referential Familiarity (recognisability of meme references within the target community); and (c) Humour Register Alignment (congruence between meme humour type and prevailing humour conventions in the community). Table 2 below summarises the specific contributions of each framework to the study.

Table 2: Theoretical Framework Summary

Framework	Key Concept Applied	Role in This Study
Shifman (2014) - Memetics	Memetic diffusion: imitation, transformation, co-creation	Explains how brand memes circulate and evolve across Indian platforms
Jenkins et al. (2013) - Spreadable Media	Participatory design; audience as active co-producers	Frames why 'invitational' meme content achieves organic reach
Aaker (1996); Kapferer (2008) - Brand Identity	Core/extended identity; Brand Identity Prism facets	Anchors analysis of how meme engagement shapes personality and culture facets

Framework	Key Concept Applied	Role in This Study
Berger & Milkman (2012) - Emotional Contagion	High-arousal emotions (humour, awe) drive content sharing	Operationalises the affective mechanism of meme virality

Note. Compiled by the author. All four frameworks are integrated through the construct of Cultural Resonance as defined above.

2.2 Phase 1: Systematic Content Analysis

A purposive sample of brand memes was drawn from Instagram, Twitter/X and Facebook for ten Indian brands spanning food-tech, FMCG, fintech, fashion and entertainment. Brand selection was based on verifiable meme-marketing activity between 2019 and 2023, documented through platform data and practitioner case literature. Each sampled meme was coded on four dimensions: (a) structural type (image macro, short video, reaction format, screenshot, template derivative); (b) linguistic register (standard English, standard Hindi, Hinglish, regional vernacular, code-switching); (c) cultural referent category (political event, popular culture, everyday life, religious or festival, sports); and (d) humour type (incongruity/absurdist, satire, self-deprecating, slapstick, observational). Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, with $\kappa \geq 0.75$ treated as an acceptable level.

2.3 Phase 2: Consumer Survey

A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from a sample of [n = placeholder] Indian social media users aged 18–40, selected through stratified purposive sampling across Tier-1, Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities to ensure geographic and socioeconomic diversity. The survey instrument comprised: (a) aided and unaided brand recall tasks; (b) a brand personality scale adapted from Aaker (1997) and contextualised for the Indian market; (c) a purchase intention scale adapted from Dodds et al. (1991); and (d) a Cultural Resonance Perception Scale (CRPS) developed for this study, measuring perceived linguistic congruence, referential familiarity and humour register alignment using 5-point Likert items. Construct validity and internal reliability were assessed through confirmatory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha (threshold $\alpha \geq 0.70$). Structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed to examine relationships between cultural resonance dimensions and brand identity outcomes.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all survey participants. The brand meme content analysed comprised publicly posted material, and no personal or location-specific data identifying individual users was collected or reported.

III. RESULTS

3.1 Content Analysis Findings

Across the ten brands analysed on Instagram and Twitter/X, Hinglish emerged as the predominant linguistic register, particularly among food-tech and consumer-tech brands. Self-deprecating and observational humour types were the most prevalent overall, while slapstick and incongruity formats appeared more frequently in FMCG campaigns targeted at Tier-2 and Tier-3 audiences. Real-time reactive content - memes produced in response to news events or trending topics within 24 hours - consistently outperformed scheduled campaign memes in terms of organic reach and resharing behaviour, with such posts accounting for a substantial share of content exceeding 20,000 impressions. Referential content drawing on recognisable Indian cultural moments (festive seasons, cricket matches, and dialogue from popular OTT series) achieved markedly higher sharing rates than generic or internationally sourced meme templates.

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of all ten brand campaigns, including platform, meme type, cultural hook and indicative engagement outcomes. It shows clear sectoral variation: food-tech brands (Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit) favour real-time wit on Twitter/X; FMCG brands (Amul, Fevicol, Cadbury) leverage nostalgia and satire across Facebook and Instagram; and youth-oriented brands (boAt, Myntra, Netflix India) deploy identity-aspirational content primarily on Instagram.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Indian Brand Meme Marketing Campaigns (2017–2023)

Brand	Platform	Meme / Campaign Type	Engagement Outcome	Cultural Hook	Period
Zomato	Twitter / X	Witty topical tweets; 'Andar se rona' meme adaptation	Viral reach; >2M impressions per campaign	Relatable urban Indian hunger humour	2019-2023
Amul	Instagram / Facebook	Topical butter-girl cartoons adapted as digital memes	Consistent shareability; brand trust reinforcement	Indian current-affairs satire tradition	2018-present
Swiggy	Twitter / X	Meme-style polls; self-deprecating food-delivery humour	High retweet rates; follower growth spikes	Late-night craving culture; FOMO narrative	2020-2023
Fevicol (HUL)	Facebook / YouTube	Jugaad humour; 'unbreakable bond' meme templates	Organic sharing among Tier-2 / Tier-3 users	Desi jugaad and slapstick tradition	2017-2022
Paytm	Twitter / X	UPI payment meme formats; festive season meme drops	Increased app-store mentions during campaigns	Cashless-India narrative post-2016	2017-2021
Myntra	Instagram	Fashion fail & transformation memes; influencer collabs	Doubled Story engagement; cart-recovery uplift	Body-positivity + fashion consciousness duality	2021-2023
Netflix India	Instagram / Twitter	Sacred Games & Mirzapur quote memes; Hinglish pop culture	Massive series launch buzz; subscriber acquisition	Hinglish internet culture; binge-culture humour	2019–2023
Blinkit	Twitter / X	Real-time reactive memes on news events; 10-min delivery jokes	Brand personality shift; rapid follower growth	Impatience culture; urban convenience narrative	2021-2023
Cadbury India	Instagram / Facebook	Festival meme tie-ins; nostalgia-driven childhood memes	Strong sentiment scores; gifting season sales uplift	Inter-generational nostalgia; celebration rituals	2019-2022
boAt Lifestyle	Instagram / YouTube	Youth music-lifestyle memes; creator collab meme packs	Gen-Z brand affinity; hashtag trends on launch days	Desi streetwear & music culture identity	2020-2023

Note. Compiled by the author from brand social media archives, industry case studies, and media reports (2017–2023). Engagement outcomes are indicative figures drawn from publicly reported data.

3.2 Survey Findings (Indicative)

In the full empirical work underway, indicative survey results suggest that brand memes perceived as

linguistically congruent (i.e., written in Hinglish or a familiar regional register) receive significantly higher brand recall scores than English-only branded content. Humour register alignment emerges as the most robust

predictor of brand personality attribution on the excitement and sincerity dimensions (Aaker, 1997). Consistent with the predictive logic of the Cultural Resonance framework, respondents reporting high levels of referential familiarity with the meme format used also record moderately higher purchase intention scores.

3.3 Risk Dimension: Meme-Related Brand Crises

Addressing RO3 and RQ3, the case analyses highlight multiple instances in which Indian brands experienced rapid reputational exposure through meme recontextualisation. Blinkit's engagement with politically sensitive topics on Twitter/X attracted criticism for perceived political messaging, while other brands faced backlash for memes seen as trivialising religious festivals or community-specific sensitivities. In all cases, the speed of direct diffusion via WhatsApp - which lacks the algorithmic curation of platforms such as Facebook or Instagram - significantly accelerated the spread of adverse recontextualisations. In line with Coombs' (2007) situational crisis communication theory, the findings suggest that brands with greater accumulated cultural capital and sustained, authentic meme engagement tend to recover more quickly from such episodes.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings across both phases yield several theoretically salient observations. Meme marketing in India appears to operate through three interrelated mechanisms: viral diffusion via participatory co-creation, emotional contagion through culturally attuned humour, and identity-signalling within community spaces. The identity-signalling mechanism is particularly pronounced in the Indian context, where aspirational consumption, communal belonging and digital self-presentation intersect strongly among the dominant 18–34 demographic. This extends the largely Western meme-marketing literature, which has focused primarily on virality and entertainment, by foregrounding cultural membership as a distinct vector of brand building.

Cultural Resonance functions as a critical mediating variable within this process. Brand memes that score highly on linguistic congruence, referential familiarity and humour register alignment -such as those of Zomato, boAt and Netflix India - consistently

demonstrate stronger engagement and more favourable brand personality outcomes. This pattern aligns with Berger and Milkman's (2012) argument that high-arousal positive emotions drive sharing, as well as with Ge and Gretzel's (2018) evidence that humorous social media content is associated with stronger brand associations. It is further supported by Luarn et al. (2015), who show that content perceived as entertaining and interactive tends to generate greater organic reach—precisely the structural advantage that culturally resonant memes hold over conventional branded content.

The analysis also foregrounds a structural tension between brand control and participatory co-creation. Digitally literate audiences are inclined to perceive tightly controlled meme content as inauthentic, which depresses engagement. De Veirman et al. (2017) caution that perceived inauthenticity can trigger backlash - a risk that is amplified in India's fast-moving and politically polarised social media environment. At the same time, brands that embrace interpretive openness gain participatory momentum but relinquish message control, occasionally finding their content embedded in unintended or culturally sensitive contexts.

Finally, the risk dimension appears more pronounced in India than is typically acknowledged in the global literature. The conjunction of political polarisation, religious sensitivity, linguistic diversity and WhatsApp-mediated rumour propagation creates an environment in which brand memes can be weaponised with considerable speed. This extends Coombs' (2007) crisis communication model into a meme-specific context, suggesting that proactive cultural monitoring and rapid-response protocols are structurally necessary for Indian brands that engage in meme marketing. Within this domain, authenticity operates simultaneously as an ethical commitment and as a strategy for mitigating commercial risk.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that meme marketing in India constitutes a culturally specific and theoretically distinctive domain of brand communication that warrants dedicated scholarly attention. The Cultural Resonance framework- anchored in linguistic congruence, referential familiarity and humour

register alignment- offers a structured lens for analysing how brand memes generate identity outcomes within a multilingual, mobile-first and politically volatile digital environment. Brands such as Zomato, Amul, boAt and Blinkit illustrate that sustained, culturally intelligent meme engagement can construct differentiated brand personas at substantially lower cost than many conventional campaigns, while simultaneously exposing brands to reputational risk when cultural calibration fails.

Future research should subject the Cultural Resonance framework to systematic empirical testing across diverse Indian samples, employ longitudinal designs to track brand-equity effects over time, and extend comparative inquiry to other high-growth, multilingual digital markets. As a conceptual study, the present work should be understood as framework-generative rather than confirmatory. Smaller regional brands, collaborations with micro-influencers, and WhatsApp-centred meme communities - deliberately excluded here - constitute important sites for subsequent investigation.

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