

# An Investigation of Consumer Responses to Visual and Textual Elements of Meme Marketing Advertisements

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## ABSTRACT

Brands have started using internet memes as a marketing tool on social media to combat declining engagement rates among consumers. Despite increased adoption in professional practice, limited scholarly attention has been paid to meme marketing, or to the elements that may contribute to the success of memes intended as brand advertisements. Employing heuristic cues to facilitate peripheral cognitive processing and controlling for humor perception and advertising skepticism, two interrelated experiments investigate how ad type, brand identity, humor, and perceived popularity of a social media marketing post containing a meme influence consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions. Results indicate that consumers prefer ads in the form of humorous memes to text-only ads without memes. Brands with less serious identities and posts that are perceived as more popular also evince more favorable responses. These findings offer theoretical and practical insights into optimizing meme marketing engagement in content-saturated digital environments.

## 1. Introduction

Engagement with digital advertising has declined in recent years (Chaffey, 2023), leading advertisers to question consumer involvement and begin seeking fresh strategies to increase their digital reach (Malodia et al., 2022). A promising, cost-effective approach is to use internet *memes* by leveraging their shareable nature to attract consumers who prefer user-generated content over traditional ads (Csordás et al., 2017). Half of United States-based Web users under age 40 share memes regularly, as do 25% of Web users between 40 and 60 (Enberg et al., 2021). Similarly, advertisements incorporating internet memes enjoy 30% engagement rates on Facebook versus the 1%-15% associated with influencer posts or branded content posts (Paquette, 2019). However, despite a shift toward the adoption of internet memes in digital advertising, this nascent practice has received limited scholarly attention, with only a handful of articles published to date (e.g., Chuah et al., 2020; Kamath & Alur, 2024; Malodia et al., 2022; Rathi & Jain, 2024). These studies provide a crucial foundation, but generally focus on identifying which consumers to target rather than on investigating specific attributes of memes that digital consumers may be receptive to. This exploratory study aims to help fill this knowledge gap by experimentally examining

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attitudinal and intentional responses to ad type, humor, brand identity, and perceived popularity of meme-based social media advertisements.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Memes and Meme Marketing**

The word "meme" was coined by Dawkins (1976) as a cultural analog to genes. Today, memes are distinct from Dawkins' initial concept and refer to compact, typically humorous Web-based artifacts transmitted primarily via social media (Shifman, 2014) to reach an array of online audiences (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021). Memes require a visual scheme, commonly in the form of static image templates upon which superimposed text is intentionally altered (Molina, 2020). This text often comments on everyday experience by referencing multimedia and current affairs (D'Angelo, 2009). Because of this, internet memes have been labeled "mediators of cultural evolution" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 1889) and are believed to possess the potential to exert persuasive influence on receptive digital audiences (Aronson & Jaffal, 2021). Over the past decade, brands have recognized this potential and begun using memes to connect with consumers (Chuah et al., 2020). Razzaq et al. (2023) define the emerging meme marketing phenomenon as:

A brand-initiated multimodal online communication strategy, executed through imitated and original memes, conveying speech acts through which consumers extract epistemic, emotional, and social values dependent on contextual knowledge to persuade and engage customers (p. 9).

Here, contextual knowledge refers to a Web user's capacity to understand sociocultural and meme-specific references that influence persuasion and engagement. Given that different memes demand different contextual knowledge (Shifman, 2014), a consumer's comprehension of an advertisement that includes an internet meme requires both familiarity with the meme itself and broad understanding of current issues (Yus, 2019).

Arguably the best-known meme marketing campaign was launched by Wendy's (Kao et al., 2020). Beginning in 2017 and continuing through the end of the 2010s, the fast-food franchise posted humorous memes on social media "to spread their playful brand personality through interactions with customers and other companies" (p. 103). The campaign sparked a substantial uptick in mentions and retweets on Twitter (now X) and led other brands to take note of memes' power to increase visibility, bolster consumer experience, and build long-term consumer relationships (Tiffany, 2021). While meme marketing is typically not a brand's only advertising strategy or means of promotion, it often complements more traditional approaches (Malodia et al., 2022).

### **2.2 Heuristics and Peripheral Processing of Memes**

A compelling reason why memes appeal to Web users is that memes activate various *heuristics* and often do not demand extensive mental processing (Molina, 2023; Niebuurt, 2021). Heuristics are "efficient cognitive processes, conscious or unconscious, that ... make decisions faster, more frugally, and/or more accurately than more complex methods" (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011, p. 451). *Peripheral processing* is, in part, the mental application of heuristics to form quick attitudinal assessments of a given message (Lins & Sunyaev, 2023; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Web users who process items peripherally attend to superficial qualities and forgo deeper evaluation, allowing them to remain current in a

message-saturated digital space (Metzger et al., 2010). In turn, they maintain their sociocultural and meme-specific knowledge.

Peripheral processing is activated by cues, which produce an ensuing evaluation related to relevant mental representations (Wood & Neal, 2007). If a Web user views an image identifiable as a meme, a meme-related peripheral cue will activate processing of the meme's contents in a low-resource manner. Fogg et al. (2003) assert that "using peripheral cues is the rule of Web use, not the exception" (p. 12). By extension, Web users behave in ways that "optimize the utility of information gained as a function of interaction cost" (Pirolli, 2005, p. 351). Although the Web contains unprecedented quantities of information, scrolling through large volumes of content takes a long time. Simon's (1955) theory of *bounded rationality* holds that, given such an abundance of content, the average individual will *satisfice* ("satisfy" and "suffice") to reach an adequate judgment. In other words, they will process the information they encounter only until they generate a satisfactory and sufficient evaluation of it. The most cognitively resourceful approach to Web-based satisficing is to employ heuristics, which people often do unthinkingly (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

Research on the heuristic properties of internet memes is still in its early stages, but the connection between heuristics and memetics is apparent. People process memes quickly, spending only a few seconds viewing and thinking about a meme before moving on (Vardeman, 2022). Given the above definition of meme marketing (Razzaq et al., 2023), it follows that peripheral processing is a likely mechanism to help Web users to efficiently and confidently extract multiple values and integrate them into diverse forms of knowledge. Pech (2003) argues that humans may be ontogenetically hardwired to be receptive to memes, and that certain memes are more successful than others "because some aspect of their content or message readily conforms to the mind's structure" (p. 177). Along these lines, it has been found that visual simplicity and familiar tropes in memes enhance their accessibility, making them particularly effective for conveying ideas in an over-saturated media environment (Rezeki et al., 2024). Therefore, peripheral cues are likely embedded in internet memes intended as marketing tools. With this supposition in mind, two interrelated, social media-based meme marketing experiments were conducted to examine the effects of certain salient factors believed to heuristically influence consumer responses. These factors are discussed in the following sections.

### 2.3 Brand Identity

A brand's name is a peripheral cue that activates expectations related to its function and identity (Maheswaran et al., 1992). Brand identity, defined as "the essential idea of a brand" (da Silveira et al., 2013, p. 29), originates from within the organization and significantly impacts how it is perceived by outside consumers (Nandan, 2005). A brand's advertising strategies must accord with its identity in order to maintain its reputation and credibility among stakeholders (Hemsley-Brown, 2016). When brands use internet memes as self-promotion, they are not merely participating in a trend but embedding themselves in a shared cultural dialogue (Nowak, 2016). Thus, consumers expect the identities of brands that use memes as a marketing tool to align with the humorous tone associated with internet memes in general (Vardeman, 2024). A humorous meme posted on social media by a brand with a serious public-facing image may be intrinsically less appealing than one posted by a brand with a more lightweight image. Brands such as Wendy's and Old Spice, with their playful and irreverent personas, have effectively used memes to reinforce their identities, fostering better consumer engagement and stronger loyalty (Kao et al., 2020; Sharma, 2018). However, mismatched or misunderstood cultural signals can lead to missteps and spark public backlash.

In 2019, Chase Bank tweeted a supposed motivational post that implied people could save money by avoiding small luxuries, such as coffee or eating out. The meme-like format of the tweet, intended to be humorous, backfired. Consumers regarded it as tone-deaf and dismissive of broader economic issues like income inequality and stagnant wages. The backlash led Chase Bank to delete the tweet and apologize (Cappetta, 2019). *Ceteris paribus*, the opposing consumer responses to Wendy's and Chase Bank suggest that typical consumers may be more receptive to meme marketing from brands with a less serious core identity than from brands with a more serious core identity.

**H1:** Participants will self-report (a) more favorable attitudes; (b) greater purchase intentions; (c) greater resharing intentions toward internet memes advertising a nonserious brand than a serious brand.

## 2.4 Perceived Popularity

The perceived popularity of a social media post is a robust peripheral cue that influences evaluations of source credibility (Wang, Chu, & Huang, 2023), attitudes toward a given social media post (Li et al., 2020), and intentions to reshare that post (Yang, 2022). Within advertising, this extends to consumer attitudes toward brands (Phua & Ahn, 2016) and purchase intentions (Cho, Kim-Vick, & Yu, 2021). Logically, these variables all relate positively to the number of likes and comments appearing on a given post. The popularity cue is thought to activate the *bandwagon heuristic*, whereby approval and popularity are positively associated with quality and appeal (Li et al., 2020). A similar pattern of effects is expected within the context of meme marketing, where they have been paid less scholarly attention.

**H2:** Participants will self-report more (a) more favorable attitudes; (b) greater purchase intentions; (c) greater resharing intentions toward marketing memes that have more likes and reshares than those with fewer likes and reshares.

## 2.5 Ad Type

The synergy of images and text in advertising is well-documented as an effective means of engagement, with research suggesting that image-plus-text combinations outperform text-only stimuli in terms of processing speed and consumer response due to activation of the *distinctiveness heuristic* (Lord & Putrevu, 1998; Budson et al., 2005). This is especially true in digital contexts where consumers are inundated with content and seek shortcuts to make fast decisions (Metzger et al., 2010). The concept of processing fluency further supports the idea that images paired with text lead to greater engagement (Reber et al., 2004). People find ad content easier to process when it combines visual and textual elements, which leads to higher recall and positive evaluation (Rayner et al., 2001). The mere presence of images in online ads augments consumer engagement such that an image-plus-text ad on Twitter (X) yields more likes and reshares than a text-only ad (Li & Xie, 2020). Internet memes, as hybrid image-plus-text artifacts (Shifman, 2014), epitomize this interaction. Their basic structure aligns with the cognitive preference for quick, compelling content, enabling rapid comprehension and increased consumer engagement (Vardeman, 2022). When applied specifically to meme marketing on social media, this is expected to translate to increased likes, reshares, and positive consumer responses.

**H3:** Participants will self-report more (a) more favorable attitudes; (b) greater purchase intentions; (c) greater resharing intentions toward advertisements containing a pictorial meme than those containing only text.

## 2.6 Humor

Internet memes thrive on jokes (Aronson & Jaffal, 2021). This makes them a logical vehicle for digital advertising, since the use of humor has long been considered an effective and memorable advertising strategy (e.g., Eisend, 2022). This is also true on social media (Brennan et al., 2020), particularly when the message is compact and easily digestible (Munsch, 2021), as internet memes often are. While most studies to date have treated participants' levels of amusement toward ads (e.g., Goodrich, Schiller & Galletta, 2015; Li et al., 2018) or memes (e.g., Yang, 2022) as variables of central interest by conceptualizing audiences' perceptions of humor as predictors of success, the inherent subjectivity of humor (Veatch, 1998) and the likelihood of a broad consumer base perceiving varying degrees of humor within the same message (Cline & Kellaris, 1999) suggests that researchers should simultaneously manipulate the presence of humor and also control for how said humor is perceived. Thus, presenting a marketing meme that is intended to be humorous in tandem with a marketing meme that is not intended to be humorous allows for direct examination of which meme performs better. At the same time, treating humor perception as a covariate allows for clearer interpretation of attitudinal and intentional outcomes.

**H4:** Controlling for humor perception, participants will self-report (a) more favorable attitudes; (b) greater purchase intentions; (c) greater resharing intentions toward marketing memes that incorporate humor than those that do not.

## 2.7 Advertising Skepticism

A similar logic applies to resistance to advertising in general. *Advertising skepticism*, defined as an individual's antecedent and independent tendency to disregard or disbelieve an advertising message (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998), is also a relevant control variable when assessing the impact of meme marketing. Since high levels of advertising skepticism are associated with increased avoidance of advertising messages (Baek & Morimoto, 2012), decreased purchase intentions (Joireman, Liu, & Kareklas, 2018), decreased persuasion (Park et al., 2014), and less favorable attitudes toward advertising overall (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998), it is appropriate to account for advertising skepticism among online consumers who view and engage with meme marketing content.

## 3. General Method

Two discrete, complementary 2x2x2 between-subjects factorial experiments adapted from Yang (2022) were conducted to test the above hypotheses. Brand identity (serious / nonserious), perceived popularity (low / high), ad type (text-only / meme-plus-text), and humor (absent / present) were manipulated in different combinations, with humor perception and advertising skepticism treated as covariates. Both experiments received approval from the pertinent Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection.

### 3.1 Stimuli

Stimuli were developed with TweetGen, a platform that enables users to create realistic-looking mock tweets via customization of handle, avatar, time and date, retweets, quote tweets, and reshares. A popular meme template called Kombucha Girl, which originated from

a viral 2019 TikTok video and depicts sequential facial expressions ranging from disgust to approval, was repurposed as an advertisement (KnowYourMeme, 2023). The template's static, two-panel format provides a clear visual representation of a yes/no dichotomy, enabling it to unambiguously and universally illustrate inverse reactions. The meme's widespread recognition among social media users allows it to serve as a standardized and culturally relevant visual.

Mirroring the nonserious (fast-food) versus serious (bank) brand identity distinction discussed in the Literature Review and reinforced by participants in meme marketing focus groups (Vardeman, 2024), Burrito Bros. and First Presidential Bank were devised as the present study's nonserious and serious-identity brands, respectively. Perceived popularity was manipulated by modifying the mock tweet's number of retweets, quote tweets, and likes. For low perceived popularity, values were set to single or low double-digit numbers. For high perceived popularity, values were set to triple and quadruple-digit numbers. Ad type was manipulated by presenting a text-only headline with no meme or the same headline with an accompanying Kombucha Girl meme. Sample stimuli are presented in Figure 1.

### **3.2 Measures**

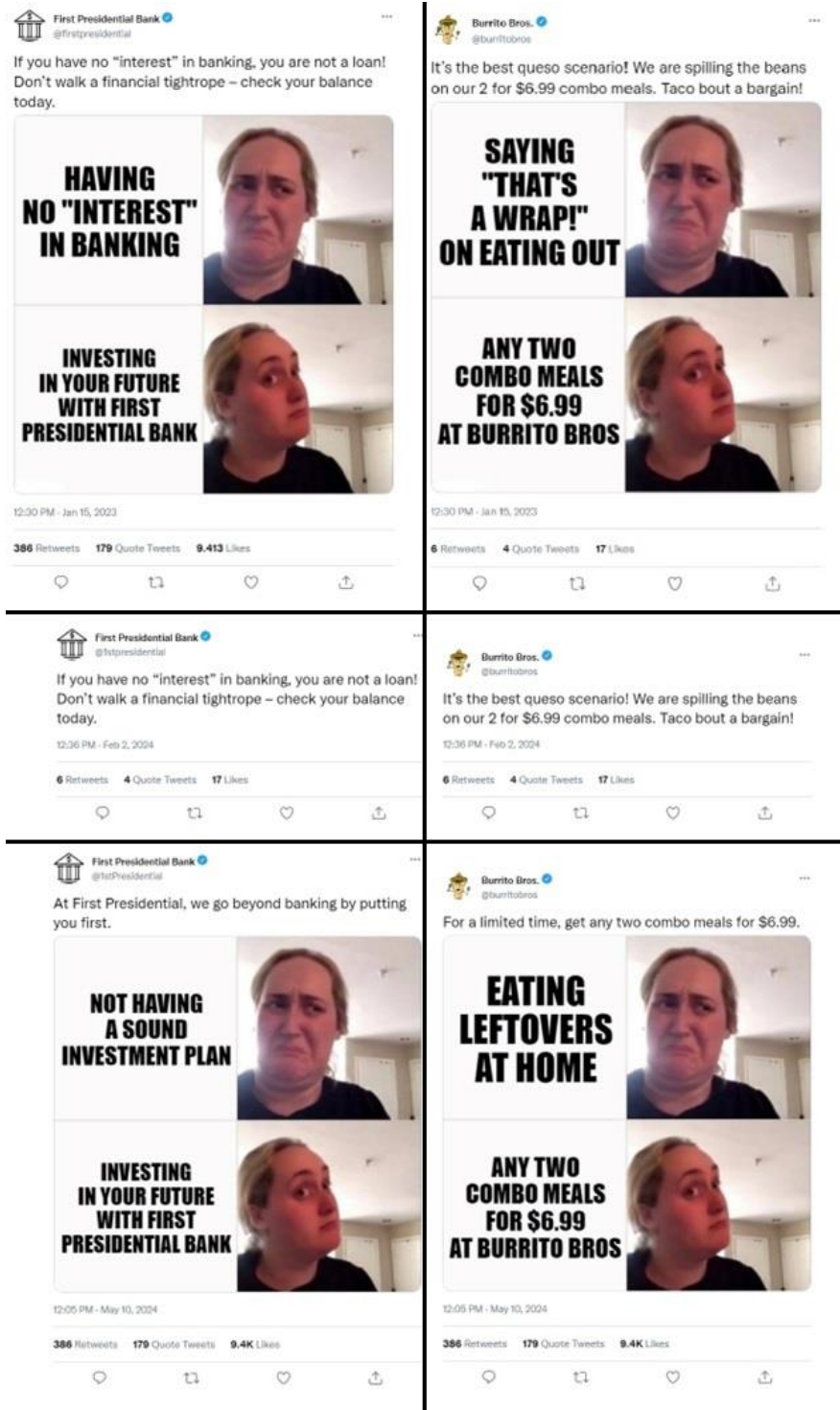
Participants' attitudes toward the advertisement ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) were measured via four seven-point semantic differential items (e.g., "very bad/very good," "very negative/very positive") adapted from Bruner (1998). The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency across both experiments,  $\alpha = .96$ .

Self-reported intention to purchase from the brand ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ) was measured via three seven-point semantic differential items ("unlikely/likely," "definitely not/definitely," "improbable/probable") adapted from Gangadharbatla et al. (2022). The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency across both experiments,  $\alpha = .91$ .

Self-reported intention to reshare the tweet that they viewed ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) was measured via three seven-point semantic differential items ("unlikely/likely," "definitely not/definitely," "improbable/probable") adapted from Gangadharbatla et al. (2022). The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency across both experiments,  $\alpha = .90$ .

The degree to which participants perceived the meme they viewed to be humorous ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) was measured via three seven-point semantic differential items ("not funny/very funny," "not humorous/very humorous," "not amusing/very amusing") adapted from Yang (2022). The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency across experiments,  $\alpha = .96$ .

*Figure 1.* Sample Stimuli Displaying Manipulations for Brand ID, Perceived Popularity, Ad Type, and Humor



Participants' antecedent level of advertising skepticism ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) was measured via Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1998) nine-item scale, all of which employ 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type response options. Sample items include, "Advertising is generally truthful" and "Advertising's aim is to inform the consumer." The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency across experiments,  $\alpha = .96$ .

## 4. Experiment 1

Using the characteristics and study procedures described above, a 2 (brand identity: serious / nonserious) x 2 (perceived popularity: low / high) x 2 (ad type: text-only / meme-plus-text) between-subjects factorial experiment was designed and administered via Qualtrics, an online survey and experiment-building platform. After participants read the informed consent document and agreed to participate, they were randomly and evenly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions. Participants in each condition viewed a mock tweet advertising a fictitious brand (i.e., Burrito Bros. or First Presidential Bank), then completed the same posttest.

### 4.1 Participants

A nationally representative, probability sample of 400 adult United States residents ( $n = 50$  per condition) was recruited through Prolific, a Web-based service identified as yielding higher-quality data than Amazon Mechanical Turk, Dynata, or similar online research services (Peer et al., 2021). The sample was 47.8% male ( $n = 191$ ), predominantly Caucasian ( $n = 239$ ), with age range of 18 to 86 ( $M = 45.27$ ,  $SD = 15.91$ ). Following recruitment, participants were automatically directed from Prolific to the Qualtrics-powered experiment.

### 4.2 Results

#### 4.2.1. Manipulation Check

A manipulation check demonstrated that participants perceived the characteristics of the two fictitious brands differently. Six Likert-type items were presented on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale: “A bank (fast-food restaurant) is businesslike / professional / competent.” A paired-samples t-test confirmed that participants perceive a bank ( $M = 6.34$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) as significantly more serious than a fast-food restaurant ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ),  $t(399) = 25.99$ ,  $p < .001$ , supporting the appropriateness of the fictitious brands depicted in the stimuli. The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency,  $\alpha = .73$ .

#### 4.2.2. Experimental Results

Hypotheses were tested via two-way between-subjects ANCOVAs, with humor perception and advertising skepticism entered as covariates. Attitude toward the ad, purchase intention, and resharing intention were entered as dependent variables, yielding three models.

For participants' attitude toward the ad, the overall ANCOVA was significant,  $F(9, 390) = 50.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .54$ . There were significant main effects of brand identity,  $F(1, 390) = 8.26$ ,  $p < .01$ , perceived popularity,  $F(1, 390) = 12.97$ ,  $p < .001$ , and ad type,  $F(1, 390) = 125.72$ ,  $p < .001$ . Specifically, the nonserious brand, high-popularity post, and meme-plus-text ads all evinced more favorable attitudes. Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a were supported. The covariates of humor perception,  $F(1, 390) = 222.97$ ,  $p < .001$ , and advertising skepticism,  $F(1, 390) = 21.55$ ,  $p < .001$ , were also significantly related to participants' attitude toward the ad.

For participants' purchase intention, the overall ANCOVA was significant,  $F(9, 390) = 59.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .58$ . There were significant main effects of brand identity,  $F(1, 390) = 29.20$ ,  $p < .001$ , perceived popularity,  $F(1, 390) = 21.10$ ,  $p < .001$ , and ad type,  $F(1, 390) = 78.38$ ,  $p < .001$ . Specifically, the nonserious brand, high-popularity post, and meme-plus-text ads all evinced greater purchase intentions. Hypotheses 1b, 2b, and 3b were supported. The covariates of humor perception,  $F(1, 390) = 253.98$ ,  $p < .001$ , and advertising skepticism,  $F(1, 390) = 38.18$ ,  $p < .001$ , were also significantly related to participants' purchase intention.



For participants' resharing intention, the overall ANCOVA was significant,  $F(9, 390) = 23.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .35$ . There were significant main effects of brand identity,  $F(1, 390) = 5.40$ ,  $p < .05$ , perceived popularity,  $F(1, 390) = 9.42$ ,  $p < .01$ , and ad type,  $F(1, 390) = 57.83$ ,  $p < .001$ . Specifically, the nonserious brand, high-popularity post, and meme-plus-text ads all evinced greater resharing intentions. Hypotheses 1c, 2c, and 3c were supported. The covariates of humor perception,  $F(1, 390) = 71.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , and advertising skepticism,  $F(1, 390) = 26.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , were also significantly related to participants' resharing intention.

A summary of experimental group characteristics, estimated marginal means, and standard errors for all dependent variables is presented in Table 1. Estimated marginal means for each dependent variable by experimental condition are presented in Figure 2 (text-only ads) and Figure 3 (meme-plus-text ads).

Table 1. Experiment 1: Group Characteristics, Estimated Marginal Means, and Standard Errors for All Dependent Variables

Group	Brand ID	Pop.	Ad Type	Ad Attitude		Purchase Int.		Resharing Int.	
				<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
1	Nonserious	Low	Text	3.61	.211	3.06	.211	1.53	.237
2	Nonserious	Low	Meme	5.53	.206	4.79	.205	3.36	.230
3	Nonserious	High	Text	4.03	.210	4.08	.209	2.32	.235
4	Nonserious	High	Meme	5.90	.206	5.69	.206	3.61	.231
5	Serious	Low	Text	3.39	.206	2.93	.205	1.58	.230
6	Serious	Low	Meme	4.62	.210	3.89	.209	2.56	.235
7	Serious	High	Text	3.88	.208	3.35	.207	2.11	.233
8	Serious	High	Meme	5.46	.209	4.25	.209	3.03	.234

Figure 2. Estimated Marginal Means by Dependent Variable for Text-Only Ads in Experiment 1

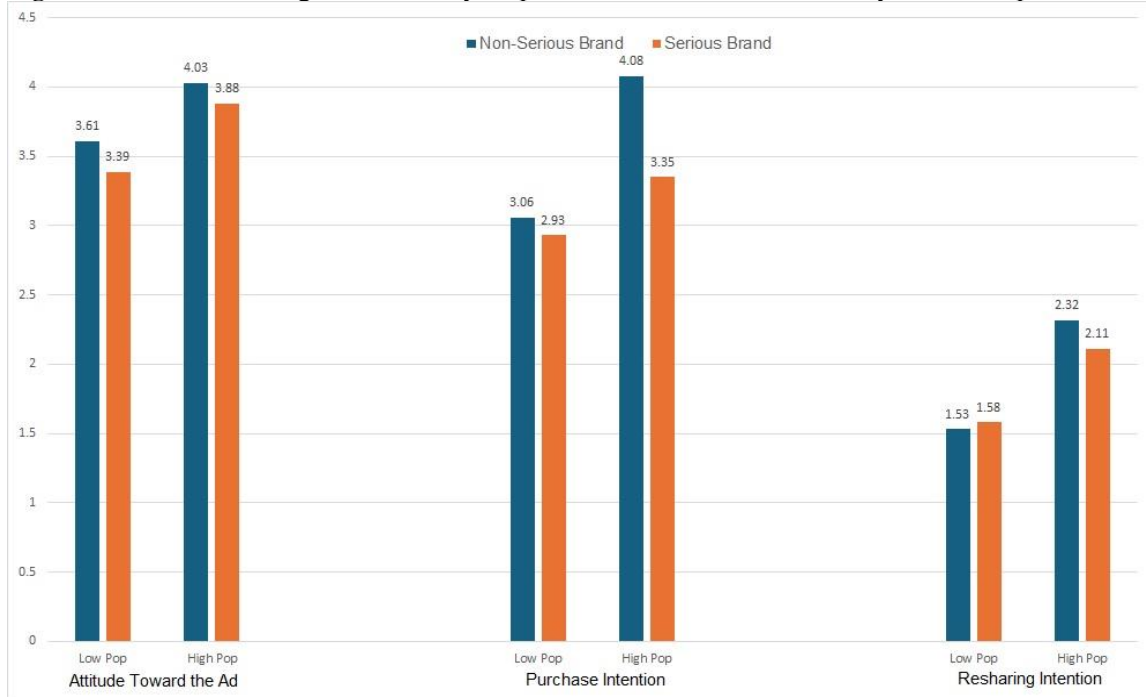
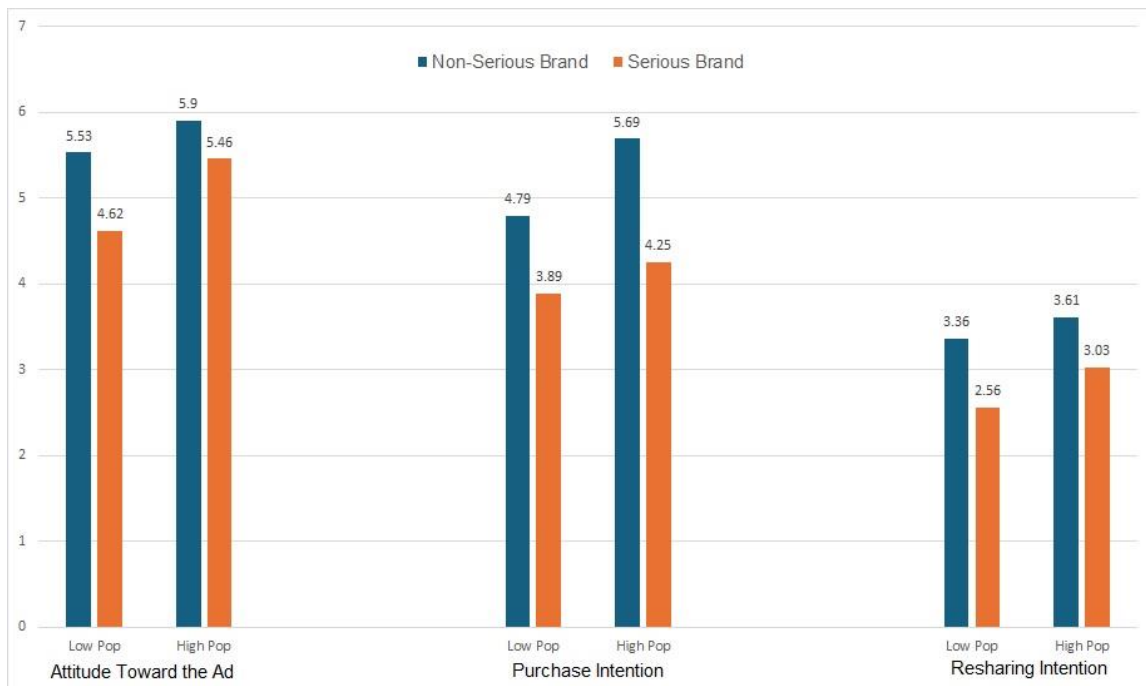


Figure 3. Estimated Marginal Means by Dependent Variable for Meme-Plus-Text Ads in Experiment 1



### 4.3 Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 support the argument that brand identity, perceived popularity, and ad type significantly influence consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and resharing intentions in the context of digital meme marketing. The overwhelming preference for meme-based ads over text-only ads corroborates prior research on the cognitive efficiency of visuals in advertising (e.g., Li & Xie, 2020) and suggests the application of the distinctiveness

heuristic (Budson et al., 2005) to contextualize the visual stimulus within existing contextual knowledge (Razzaq et al., 2023). The results also reinforce the contention that humor-centric meme marketing aligns better with nonserious brands, as serious brand identities may face a credibility gap when presenting humorous content (Vardeman, 2024). A brand's personality must accord with its advertising tone to maintain authenticity and trust (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Additionally, the more favorable attitudes and greater purchase intentions evoked by posts with higher perceived popularity indicate that participants applied the bandwagon heuristic (Li et al., 2020), through which interaction metrics signal credibility and drive consumer engagement. This is consistent with recent research on social proof in digital advertising (Wang et al., 2023).

While these results are clear, they overlook a crucial component of communication via internet memes: the intentional use of humor. All stimuli used in Experiment 1 employed light, inoffensive humor to convey selling messages and perception of humor was treated as a covariate, but the design did not allow for comparison between responses to humorous messages versus non-humorous messages. Experiment 2 addresses this limitation.

## **5. Experiment 2**

Building off Experiment 1, a 2 (brand identity: serious / nonserious) x 2 (ad type: text-only / meme-plus-text) x 2 (humor: present / absent) between-subjects factorial experiment was designed and administered via Qualtrics. Manipulation of perceived popularity from Experiment 1 was removed and replaced with manipulation of humor. Headlines and memes either contained no attempt at humor (e.g., "For a limited time, get any two combo meals for \$6.99" for the fictitious Burrito Bros. brand) or employed innocuous puns and brand-relevant wordplay (e.g., "We are spilling the beans on our two for \$6.99 combo meals"). All other procedures, materials, and measures from Experiment 1 remained the same.

### **5.1 Participants**

A nationally representative, probability sample of 400 adult United States residents ( $n = 50$  per condition) was recruited through Prolific. The sample was 50.5% male ( $n = 202$ ), predominantly Caucasian ( $n = 248$ ), with age range of 18 to 84 ( $M = 44.13$ ,  $SD = 12.47$ ).

### **5.2 Results**

#### **5.2.1. Manipulation Check**

A paired-samples t-test again confirmed that participants perceive a bank ( $M = 6.41$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) as significantly more serious than a fast-food restaurant ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ),  $t(399) = 27.66$ ,  $p < .001$ , further supporting the appropriateness of the fictitious brands. The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency,  $\alpha = .75$ .

#### **5.2.2. Experimental Results**

Hypotheses were again tested via three separate, two-way between-subjects ANCOVAs, with humor perception and advertising skepticism entered as covariates. For participants' attitude toward the ad, the overall ANCOVA was significant,  $F(9, 390) = 72.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .63$ . There were significant main effects of brand identity,  $F(1, 390) = 7.02$ ,  $p < .01$ , ad type,  $F(1, 390) = 173.80$ ,  $p < .001$ , and humor,  $F(1, 390) = 63.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . Specifically, the nonserious brand, meme-plus-text ads, and humorous posts all evinced more favorable attitudes. Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 4a were supported. The covariates of humor perception,  $F(1, 390) =$

391.44,  $p < .001$ , and advertising skepticism,  $F(1, 390) = 45.18$ ,  $p < .001$ , were also significantly related to participants' attitude toward the ad.

For participants' purchase intention, the overall ANCOVA was significant,  $F(9, 390) = 32.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .43$ . There were significant main effects of brand identity,  $F(1, 390) = 39.74$ ,  $p < .001$ , ad type,  $F(1, 390) = 34.34$ ,  $p < .001$ , and humor,  $F(1, 390) = 12.34$ ,  $p < .001$ . Specifically, the nonserious brand, meme-plus-text ads, and humorous posts all evinced greater purchase intentions. Hypotheses 1b, 2b, and 4b were supported. The covariates of humor perception,  $F(1, 390) = 116.48$ ,  $p < .001$ , and advertising skepticism,  $F(1, 390) = 41.65$ ,  $p < .001$ , were also significantly related to participants' purchase intention.

For participants' resharing intention, the overall ANCOVA was significant,  $F(9, 390) = 27.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .39$ . There were significant main effects of brand identity,  $F(1, 390) = 8.26$ ,  $p < .05$  and ad type,  $F(1, 390) = 20.13$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, there was no main effect of humor,  $F(1, 390) = 3.43$ ,  $p = .126$ . Specifically, the nonserious brand and meme-plus-text ads evinced greater resharing intentions, but the presence or absence of humor did not affect resharing intentions. Hypotheses 1c and 2c were supported, but hypothesis 4c was not. The covariates of humor perception,  $F(1, 390) = 69.20$ ,  $p < .001$ , and advertising skepticism,  $F(1, 390) = 80.67$ ,  $p < .001$ , were also significantly related to participants' resharing intention.

A summary of experimental group characteristics, estimated marginal means, and standard errors for all dependent variables is presented in Table 2. Estimated marginal means for each dependent variable by experimental condition are presented in Figure 4 (text-only ads) and Figure 5 (meme-plus-text ads).

*Table 2.* Experiment 2: Group Characteristics, Estimated Marginal Means, and Standard Errors for All Dependent Variables

Group	Brand ID	Humor	Ad Type	Ad Attitude		Purchase Int.		Resharing Int.	
				<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
1	Nonserious	No	Text	3.93	.123	3.94	.170	2.03	.173
2	Nonserious	No	Meme	4.45	.126	4.27	.175	2.18	.178
3	Nonserious	Yes	Text	4.10	.123	4.27	.169	1.93	.171
4	Nonserious	Yes	Meme	6.08	.133	5.41	.183	3.18	.187
5	Serious	No	Text	3.91	.123	3.45	.169	1.79	.173
6	Serious	No	Meme	4.27	.122	3.78	.169	2.20	.172
7	Serious	Yes	Text	3.78	.122	3.26	.168	1.73	.171
8	Serious	Yes	Meme	5.69	.122	4.38	.184	2.20	.187

Figure 4. Estimated Marginal Means by Dependent Variable for Text-Only Ads in Experiment 2

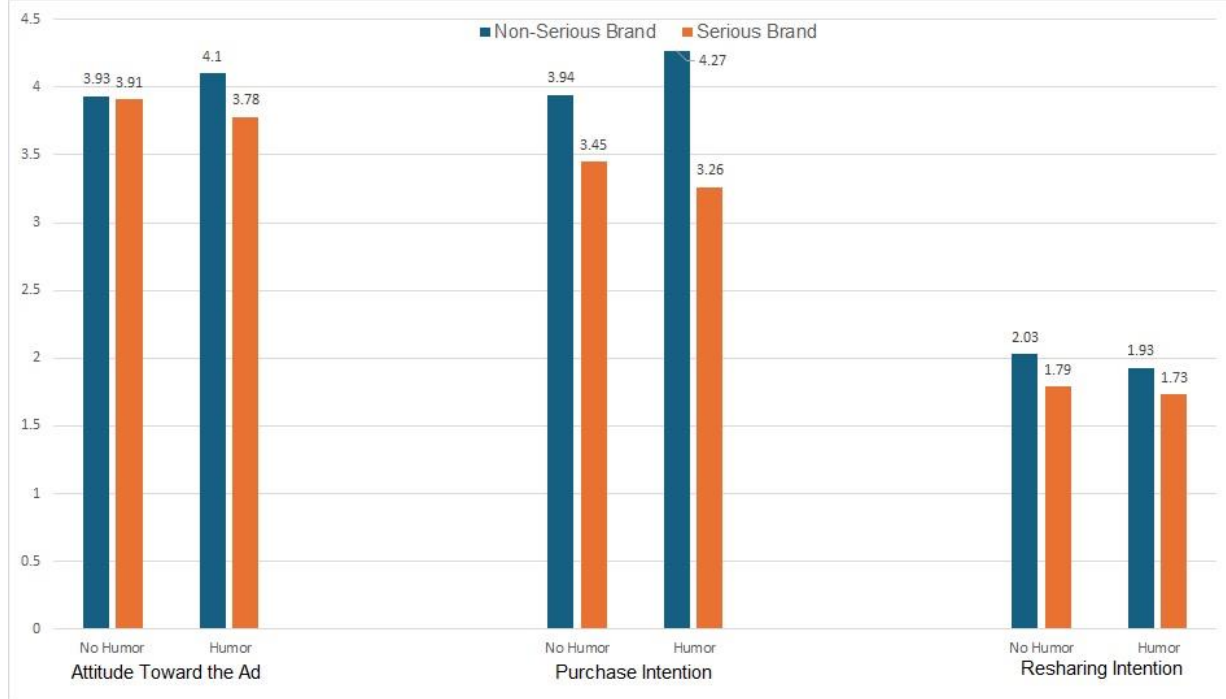
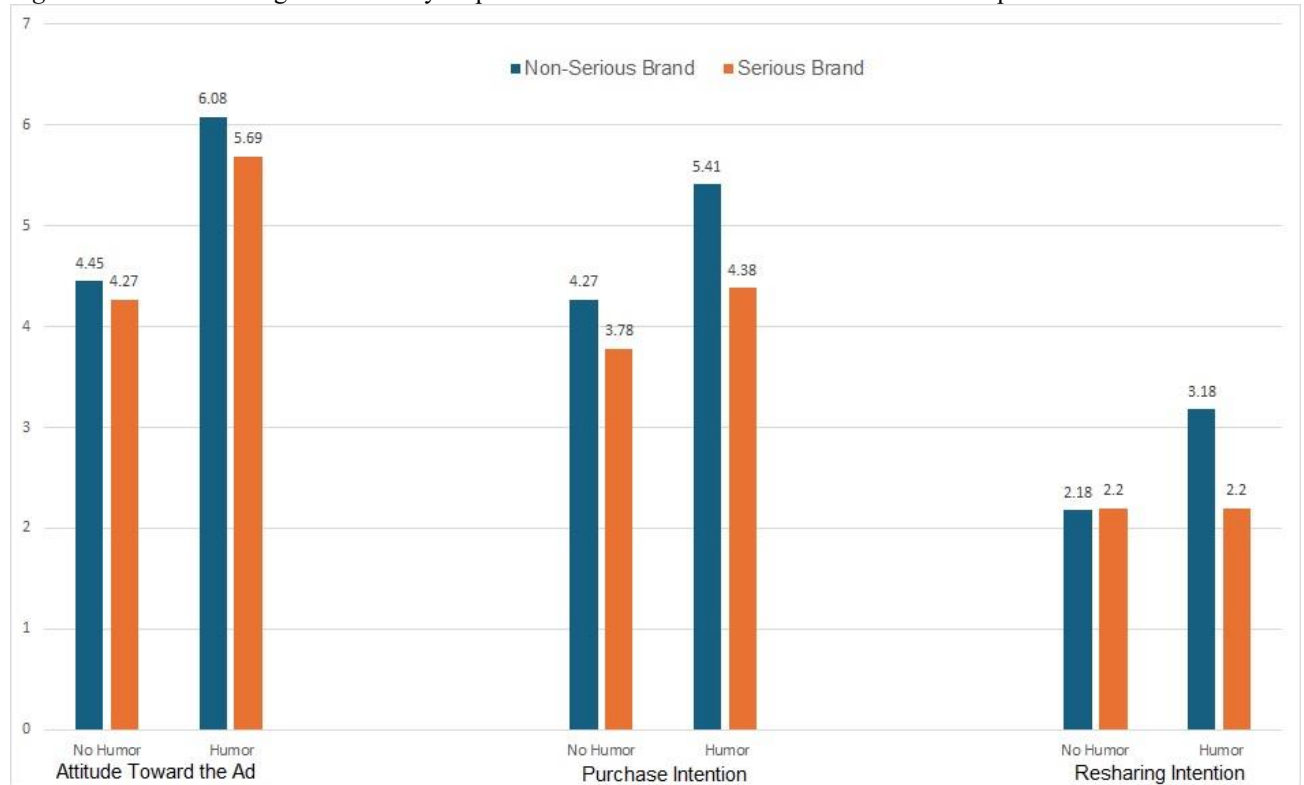


Figure 5. Estimated Marginal Means by Dependent Variable for Meme-Plus-Text Ads in Experiment 2



### 5.3 Discussion

Experiment 2 expands on Experiment 1 by isolating humor as a key meme marketing variable. The more favorable attitudes and greater purchase intentions elicited by the humorous stimuli is consistent with the humor-in-advertising literature (e.g., Eisend, 2022) and suggests that humor amplifies the peripheral appeal of meme marketing artifacts (Spielmann, 2014). The additive effect of humor in this context suggests that visual memes provide an optimal vehicle for humor's persuasive impact. However, humor's influence on resharing intentions was not significant. Molina (2023) argues that the self-identity heuristic, which links an individual's self-concept to their appraisals of credibility and quality, impacts the perception of humor in internet memes. Experiment 2 indicates that self-identity alignment and perceived social relevance are more robust predictors of a consumer's decision to further circulate a meme marketing post than the mere presence or absence of humor. The relationship between humor and brand identity is also noteworthy. Humorous ads for the nonserious brand surpassed those of the serious brand across most measures, reinforcing that humor aligns better with brands that project a playful or casual persona. This mirrors the pattern observed in Experiment 1 and reemphasizes that incongruence with a serious brand identity may dilute a message's perceived credibility (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Mao et al., 2020). Together, these results show that while humor enhances consumer responses in meme marketing contexts, its role in encouraging social sharing is less pronounced.

## 6. General Discussion

This study advances understanding of the interplay between visual and textual elements of meme marketing and their effects on consumer responses. Experiment 1 established that internet memes enhance consumer engagement compared to text-only ads, consistent with prior research on the cognitive efficiency of visuals in advertising (e.g., Rayner et al., 2001).

Online consumers employ "satisficing" strategies (Simon, 1955) to process meme marketing content efficiently. Rapid evaluations of advertising messages within internet memes appear to be driven in part by heuristics, including the self-identity heuristic (Molina, 2023), distinctiveness heuristic (Budson et al., 2005), and bandwagon heuristic (Li et al., 2020). Specific to the last-mentioned, consumers often conflate engagement magnitude with message quality (Wang et al., 2023; Yang, 2022). Experiment 2 reinforced the idea that humor serves as a low-resource peripheral cue (Betsch et al., 2020; Spielmann, 2014), although it showed that identity congruence has a stronger effect on resharing behaviors than humor alone. Future studies should explore these dimensions and their nuanced interplay with the self-identity heuristic (Molina, 2023).

Both experiments extend theories of brand authenticity and resonance (e.g., Nandan, 2005) by highlighting the importance of brand identity. Although the nonserious brand performed better overall, participants preferred when the serious brand employed humor when using memes than when it did not. This is likely a consequence of memes being primarily a humorous form of digital communication (Shifman, 2014). The absence of humor in a meme might be viewed as unappealing when Web users expect a joke in some form. Thus, while it is possible for serious brands to leverage humor successfully in memetic formats, they must curate their approach and be aware that consumers may perceive these messages less favorably than those from less-serious brand counterparts.

### **6.1 Theoretical Implications**

This study advances the application of peripheral processing theories (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and heuristics (e.g., Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011) in meme marketing contexts by demonstrating how visual and textual cues and brand identity congruence drive consumer decision-making. Findings validate prior research suggesting that peripheral processing dominates in content-saturated environments (Fogg et al., 2003; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Memes, as heuristic-enabling content (Niebuurt, 2021), naturally fit this framework, with brand identity (Maheswaran et al., 1994), engagement metrics (Wang et al., 2023), ad type (Lord & Putrevu, 1998; Budson et al., 2005), and humor (Betsch et al., 2020) all serving as peripheral cues that activate distinct cognitive heuristics.

### **6.2 Managerial Implications**

In terms of practical implications, this study clarifies the strategic value of memes as a marketing tool for brands navigating a challenging, crowded digital landscape. If meme marketers possess contextual and meme-specific knowledge (Razzaq et al., 2023; Yus, 2019), they can bypass large advertising budgets (Csordás et al., 2017) to deliver memorable messages to receptive, typically younger, consumers. Informed practitioners should recognize that successful meme marketing hinges, in part, on purposefully embedding cues that facilitate rapid processing. However, the effectiveness of these cues ultimately depends on congruence with brand identity and target audience preferences. Businesses can enhance the perceived quality and appeal of their ads by selecting relevant meme templates, infusing them with humor that aligns appropriately with the tone and identity of their brand, and visibly displaying high engagement metrics when possible. Activating the bandwagon heuristic via these metrics can facilitate desired responses. Visual simplicity further enhances ad effectiveness by leveraging fluency heuristics (Eriksen, 2023), but it must be noted that even though humor augments attitudes and purchase intentions, identity-relevant or culturally resonant themes appear more effective at driving resharing behaviors.

### **6.3 Limitations**

This study has notable limitations. Since the presented brands were fictitious, it is possible that businesses other than fast-food chains and banks (or real-world brands of any kind) might perform differently outside a randomized experiment. Future studies should conceive of strategies to make results generalizable to real-world nonserious versus serious brands beyond the two categories investigated here, as well as to a wider variety of meme formats beyond the single template (i.e., Kombucha Girl) that was utilized. Further, meme marketing is a global phenomenon (Razzaq et al., 2023). Future research should account for consumers outside the United States whose attitudes and perceptions may be different. It is worth noting that these experiments were not designed to be definitive, but as exploratory investigations of how certain variables might heuristically influence consumer responses.

### **6.4 Future Research**

This study opens several avenues for future research. The study's methodological framework provides a template for replication in numerous contexts. Factorial experiments using the same or similar dependent measures could investigate meme marketing's impact on specific niche markets (e.g., health and fitness, travel, hobbies) and explore its effectiveness on social media platforms besides X (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok). Additionally, selecting more culturally specific or trending meme formats for the posts' visual scheme could provide valuable insights into regional and time-sensitive preferences, while experimentally manipulating meme familiarity and topicality could illuminate how cultural relevance shapes consumer responses. Further, longitudinal designs might examine the durability of meme marketing effects over time, exploring whether initial engagement translates into long-term brand loyalty. Future research should also account for the interaction between memes and other digital marketing strategies, such as influencer endorsements or augmented reality ads. Understanding how memes complement broader marketing ecosystems could provide a more holistic view of their strategic potential. By adapting the described procedures, practitioners and scholars can explore how meme marketing influences consumer behavior across many diverse and unique business contexts, in turn providing nuance and depth to the generalized conclusions drawn here. A more well-rounded understanding of the cultural and contextual variability within meme-based advertising would guide local and global considerations for meme marketing campaigns.

## **7. Conclusion**

Internet memes can be powerful marketing tools in cluttered digital environments, where peripheral cues often drive consumer decision-making. This study demonstrates that even when online consumers have no prior knowledge of—or history with—a brand, the brand's purported identity, level of perceived popularity on social media, use of innocuous humor, and advertising format appear sufficient for consumers to make meaningful attitudinal and behavioral assessments regarding the meme marketing content they encounter. By carefully integrating memes into broader marketing strategies, brands can enhance engagement, build consumer relationships, and achieve long-term resonance in competitive online marketplaces.



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## **Ethical Approval**

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