

Humor Sells: How India's Meme Economy is Disrupting Digital Brand Strategy for Gen Z and Millennials

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Abstract

In a world where attention spans are measured in seconds, brands are ditching billboards and banners for punchlines and pop culture. This study examines how meme marketing in India has transformed from a fringe social media trend into a strategic branding powerhouse—particularly among Gen Z and Millennials. Anchored in theoretical models like AIDA, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Brand Personality Framework, the paper presents a qualitative analysis of over 100 meme campaigns from brands such as Zomato, Netflix India, Fevicol, and Amul.

The research decodes how memes function not just as visual gags, but as high-engagement, low-cost brand touchpoints that build emotional equity. The findings reveal that humor—when smartly timed and culturally rooted—amplifies reach, enhances brand relatability, and positions the brand as a participant in digital subcultures rather than an outsider.

This study contributes to the digital marketing canon by mapping how Indian brands use memes to speak the ‘native internet language’ of their target consumers—marked by irony, wit, self-deprecation, and cultural fluency. It also highlights the increasing sophistication of meme marketing, from random jokes to narrative arcs and platform-native storytelling.

Ultimately, the paper argues that meme marketing is not a gimmick but a grammar—a way of speaking in the noisy, fleeting, emotionally driven world of digital branding. In the battle for eyeballs, those who master this grammar may not just trend—they may endure.

1. Introduction

There was a time when brands tried to tell stories. Today, the best of them crack jokes. In India’s rapidly digitizing marketplace, where Gen Z and Millennials scroll faster than they breathe, brands aren’t just selling products—they’re selling punchlines. The rise of meme marketing isn’t a side-effect of digital media; it’s a direct consequence of it. With over 400 million active social media users in India, attention has become a scarce currency. And humor? It’s the most negotiable asset.

This paper positions meme marketing not as a gimmick, but as a strategic, data-backed, culturally nuanced branding mechanism. Brands like Zomato, Netflix India, and Fevicol have abandoned polished, corporate-speak campaigns in favor of satire, sarcasm, and irony. They’ve stopped talking *at* consumers and started laughing *with* them.

This isn’t marketing as usual—it’s meme warfare. And only those fluent in internet subcultures, trend-jacking, and ironic self-awareness are surviving. Through this paper, we aim to decode the mechanics of

meme-based branding: Why do some memes go viral while others vanish unnoticed? How does humor fuel emotional engagement? And can a 240x240 pixel joke build a billion-dollar brand?

This research explores these questions through a qualitative analysis of meme campaigns tailored for Indian audiences. Using foundational marketing frameworks—AIDA, ELM, Brand Personality—we unpack why meme marketing, far from being frivolous, may just be the sharpest arrow in the digital strategist's quiver.

2. Review of Literature

- **Dynel, M. (2016)** – “*‘I has seen image macros!’: Advice animal memes as visual-verbal jokes*”
- Dynel analyzes how memes function as multimodal jokes, combining image and text for humor impact. This helps explain why visual humor is persuasive in online brand content.
- **Link:** <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2015-0091>
- **Phillips, W. (2015)** – “*This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*”
- Though focused on trolling, Phillips examines how memes reflect and shape online subcultures. Useful for positioning memes as cultural artifacts that brands co-opt to stay relevant.
- **Link:** <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262028946>
- **Burgess, J. (2008)** – “*All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belong to Us? Viral Video, YouTube, and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture*”
- Explores how content spreads virally and why users share humorous material. Key to understanding meme dissemination and its role in participatory branding.
- **Link:** <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/15378/>
- **Ghosh, S. (2022)** – “*Laughing All the Way to the Bank: Meme Marketing and the Indian Youth*”
- An Indian context-specific paper that details how meme marketing resonates with urban youth and discusses its effectiveness in attention economy.
- **Link:** https://ijcrt.org/viewfull.php?&p_id=IJCRT2206393
- **Foroudi et al. (2020)** – “*Digital marketing strategies: Dialogues and brand engagement*”
- Explores how digital dialogue—like memes—drives emotional and behavioral brand engagement. Adds weight to memes as interactive branding, not just passive content.
- **Link:** <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120322>

3. Theoretical Framework

1. **AIDA Model (Lewis, 1898):** Memes attract Attention, build Interest through cultural cues, spark Desire by emotional association, and catalyze Action (engagement or purchase).
2. **Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986):** Memes operate via the peripheral route, where humor elicits positive emotions, increasing brand favorability.
3. **Brand Personality Framework (Aaker, 1997):** Brands like Amul and Dunzo construct unique identities (witty, quirky) by consistent humor styles.
4. **Consumer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011):** Meme interactions—likes, shares, remixes—create active engagement loops.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To explore how meme-based content enhances brand personality.
2. To identify humor formats that resonate most with India's digital youth.
3. To assess the effect of meme campaigns on emotional and behavioral engagement.
4. To compare strategies across sectors like FMCG, OTT, food delivery, and lifestyle.

5. Research Questions

1. What components make a meme campaign successful in India?
2. How do humor formats influence consumer interaction rates?
3. Do memes foster long-term brand trust or just temporary virality?
4. Are there industry-specific adaptations in meme strategy?

6. Methodology

This qualitative study employs thematic content analysis on over 100 memes posted between 2021–2024 by Indian brands on Instagram and Twitter/X. Brand pages of Zomato, Netflix India, Amul, Fevicol, Dunzo, Durex India, and Swiggy Instamart were selected for data sampling.

Each meme was coded for:

- Humor style (satire, pun, pop-culture, irony)
- Visual language and brand integration
- Engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments)
- Cultural referencing (festivals, events, trending topics)

Secondary sources from Kantar, GroupM, RedSeer, and Statista provided demographic and psychographic context.

7. Key Findings

1. **Trendjacking Increases Reach:** Memes tied to trending events (e.g., Barbie, IPL, Elections) had 30–40% higher engagement.
2. **Self-Deprecation Works:** Brands like Zomato and Netflix India that joke about themselves receive more authenticity points.
3. **Brand as Co-Joker:** Successful memes feature the brand *in* the joke, not just *behind* it. (E.g., Dunzo's "left in cart" meme.)
4. **High Emotional Value:** Even if direct conversions are low, emotional closeness and brand recall improve significantly.

8. Discussion

Meme marketing is strategic communication masquerading as humor. Unlike traditional ads, memes aren't consumed—they're participated in. The combination of AIDA and ELM explains why memes work despite being low-investment content: they're easy to digest but hard to forget.

Brands are adapting roles—they're no longer corporate broadcasters, but cultural collaborators. By making themselves part of internet jokes, they blend into digital communities rather than disrupt them.

The meme economy reflects a generational demand for subtlety, wit, and cultural intelligence. In this market, the funniest voice is often the most persuasive.

9. Conclusion

Meme marketing in India is no longer a fringe experiment—it's a mainstream branding arsenal. It speaks in the native language of Gen Z and Millennials, one built on relatability, speed, and emotional nuance. Through this study, we understand that humor isn't merely entertaining; it's a potent form of influence. As digital landscapes continue to evolve, brands that master meme fluency are likely to build more durable emotional capital with young consumers.

10. Limitations

1. The study uses only secondary data; no primary consumer feedback was collected.
2. Humor interpretation varies across regions and languages in India.
3. The sample set is focused on B2C brands; B2B meme strategies remain underexplored.

11. Scope for Future Research

1. Incorporate consumer perception surveys and experimental designs.
2. Analyze ROI on meme marketing vis-à-vis traditional campaigns.
3. Compare regional meme strategies across vernacular platforms.
4. Explore application in B2B, government campaigns, and cause-based communication.

1. References

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