

Meme Marketing and Consumer Behavior in the Digital Age: A Systematic Literature Review Using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Framework

Kuljeet Punia ^{1,✉}, Balgopal Singh ¹

¹. Department of Commerce and Management, Banasthali Vidyapith, Banasthali, IND

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Abstract

Digital communication environments have fundamentally changed the way consumers today communicate with brands, facilitating participatory, emotional, and culturally responsive online communication. In this changing scenario, meme marketing has emerged as a powerful digital communication tool by which brands use humor, symbolic elements, social responsiveness, and social relatability to connect with social media users. Although the subject of meme marketing has been increasingly studied in both academic and management contexts, the literature is conceptually disjointed and lacks theoretical consistency, especially when it comes to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that underlie meme marketing's impact on consumer behavior. For this purpose, a systematic literature review is used to synthesize existing research on meme marketing and consumer behavior in terms of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. Searching in accordance with the principles of PRISMA, the relevant studies were retrieved from Scopus, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect from the available years 2016-2026. Thematic synthesis and conceptual analysis were conducted on 30 studies following a structured screening and eligibility assessment process. The insights reveal that the effectiveness of meme marketing is dominated by stimulus factors such as humor, relatability, familiarity with culture, relevance to trends, and platform adaptability. They engender organismic reactions like emotional involvement, cognitive attention, entertainment satisfaction, authenticity assessment, and interpretive interaction, which in turn impact conduct such as sharing behavior, electronic word-of-mouth, purchase intention, and electronic consumer involvement. The review also points to the context- and culture-specific dynamics of the effectiveness of memes, which include the impact of platform culture, symbolic meaning, audience demographics, and algorithmic visibility in participatory digital spaces. In relation to the S-O-R framework, the review conceptually proposes an extension to contemporary digital communication contexts and interprets meme marketing as a culturally embedded and emotionally mediated form of symbolic brand interaction. This proposed extension is theoretical in nature and requires future empirical validation. In addition, practical implications for marketers, digital strategists, and social media practitioners are explored, especially in relation to authenticity, ethical sensitivity, and adapting communication for different platforms in meme-based branding.

Categories: Consumer Behavior, Digital Marketing, Marketing Communication

Keywords: meme marketing, consumer behaviour, stimulus–organism–response framework, digital engagement, social media marketing, brand communication, participatory culture, ewom

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Introduction And Background

The creation and development of participatory digital ecosystems have revolutionized the nature of today's marketing communication and consumer-brand interaction. In algorithmically mediated social media environments, consumers are not only recipients of brand messages but also creators, distributors, interpreters, and amplifiers of branded content through sharing practices, remix culture, and networked digital participation (Jenkins, 2006) (Kietzmann et al., 2011). With the rise of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, X, and Reddit, emotionally charged, short-form, and culturally adept forms of communication, which can now create quick interaction, symbolic participation, and algorithmic visibility in highly saturated digital spaces, are increasingly dominating the market (Teng et al., 2022), (Nasution and Silalahi, 2025), and (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). Emotional, social, and participatory aspects of communication are coming to the fore in digital marketing, more so than traditional persuasive advertising mechanisms.

In this dynamic communication environment, meme marketing is one of the most prominent and culturally resonant forms of digital brand communication. In general, an Internet meme is considered to be a replicable unit of digital culture that is imitated, adapted, reinterpreted, and circulated participatively and collectively within online communities (Shifman, 2013) (Miltner, 2018). In today's marketing world, however, memes serve as more than just a form of humorous entertainment or Internet phenomena. Meme-based communication has become a symbolic, emotionally driven communication mechanism that is used by brands to engage in the continuous digital conversation; to react to new cultural trends and to build online identities that can be understood in the social sphere (Miltner, 2018) (Teng et al., 2022). A typical characteristic of meme marketing is that it tends to use more informal communication styles; that is, an advertising message that is communicated in a manner that is similar to the peer-to-peer communication style, and that adapts to cultural elements, reducing the perception of intrusiveness and making it more likely that consumers will engage in it, through sharing, commenting, remixing, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) behavior (Gretry et al., 2017), (Muntinga et al., 2011), and (Erkan and Evans, 2016).

The rise in the strategic use of meme marketing is a result of the larger structural shifts in the digital consumer culture. Recent investigations also suggest that meme-based communication can strengthen brand visibility and appears to be associated with favorable consumer purchase outcomes in digitally connected environments (Tsai, 2025). In an environment of brief attention spans and uninterrupted content consumption, a brand's success in earning audience attention is increasingly dependent on humor, the ability to respond to trends, emotional appeals, and symbolic appeal. This is why companies like Netflix, Duolingo, Swiggy, or Zomato are increasingly adopting meme marketing methods for their digital communication strategies as these methods help reinforce their online presence, foster emotional connections, build platform-specific brand personas, and enhance brand engagement through viral communication (Kim and Kim, 2024). Familiar research consistently links meme-based communication to greater levels of audience interaction, emotional reactions, brand recall, online involvement, and purchase-related behavioral results, notably among younger audiences who are adept at engaging in informal and culturally relevant communication forms (Yadav and Rai, 2017), (Bowo et al., 2024), (Hollebeek et al., 2014), and (Calder et al., 2009).

This increased attention by academics and managers does not imply that the body of knowledge around meme marketing is well-integrated and cohesive. However, there is a large body of previous research that focuses on either cognitive (e.g., humor), affective (e.g., virality) or behavioral (e.g., online engagement, purchase intention) components of meme-based communication and their effects on consumer responses, without systematically integrating those mechanisms (Malodia et al., 2022). The results from existing studies are also dependent on the context and are sometimes contradictory. Some research, however, suggests that too much fun, too much trend following, too much symbolizing, or too much culturally inappropriate usage of a meme can lead to "holes in the credibility" of the brand and negative consumer reactions (Miltner, 2018), (Gretry et al., 2017), and (Walsh et al., 2024). These inconsistencies indicate that the value of the meme is not as easily measured by engagement or virality alone; instead, an integrated explanation is required to understand how consumers cognitively process, emotionally react to, and behave with respect to meme-based communication in participatory digital environments.

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The existing literature also shows a few significant methodological and theoretical shortcomings. Much of the current meme marketing research is focused on cross-sectional quantitative methods with a primary emphasis on short-term metrics like likes, shares, and the visibility of the meme online. In comparison, less focus has been paid to the deeper psychological mechanisms of emotional attachment, interpretive engagement, authenticity perception, trust formation, and long-term consumer-brand relationships related to meme-based communication (Hollebeek et al., 2014), (Dessart et al., 2015), and (Vivek et al., 2012). Moreover, although meme marketing now takes place in an algorithmically dominated and platform-specific digital landscape, few studies have investigated the impact of platform culture, symbolic meaning, participatory communication, and audience expectations on consumer response patterns in a systematic manner. Although highly relevant to digitally networked communication contexts, ethical issues surrounding meme communication, such as stereotyping, cultural appropriation, manipulative virality, misinformation, and offensive humor, are relatively under-researched.

Such constraints stress the need for a more theoretically grounded approach to consumer behavior and meme marketing in participatory digital ecosystems. In terms of this, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model offers a relevant conceptual perspective for exploring how consumer responses are influenced at various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels in meme-based communication. The S-O-R framework, originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell, explains how environmental stimuli affect individuals' cognitive and affective states, which subsequently influence behavioral responses. Meme features like humor, cultural references, feelings of being associated with or understood, topicality, and platform fit can serve as ambient cues that affect consumers' emotional involvement, their interpretation of the input, their amusement, and their brand-related perceptions in meme marketing settings. The organismic responses can then influence various behavioral consequences, such as online interaction, sharing behavior, eWOM, intensity of interaction, and purchase intention (Eroglu et al., 2001), (Islam and Rahman, 2017), (Chu, 2011), and (Kumar et al., 2016). Most important, the S-O-R model also allows for the understanding of meme marketing as a process of communication rather than just content to be promoted, as it is an interpretive, participatory, and symbolic process influenced by audience interpretations, digital culture participation, and relations with the context.

Therefore, this research work conducts a systematic literature review to compile the existing literature related to meme marketing and consumer behavior within the S-O-R perspective. The study uses the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach to conduct a systematic literature review that examines literature on meme communication, emotional response, cognitive response, symbolic interaction, and behavioral response in digital marketing settings. The aim of the review is to discover the key trends, theories, methodologies, and gaps in the field of meme marketing. The study is significant to the literature on digital marketing and consumer behavior in several ways as it integrates the different findings into a conceptual framework based on theory. First, it offers a thorough synthesis of meme marketing research, both in stimulus and organismic and behavioral responses. Second, it conceptually proposes an extension of the S-O-R framework to participatory and algorithmically mediated digital communication settings. This proposition is derived from the thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature and should be interpreted as a theoretical direction for future empirical research rather than as an empirically validated extension. Third, it helps further the theoretical discussion of meme marketing as a culturally rooted and emotionally charged symbolic brand communication strategy as opposed to simply the use of humor as an engagement tool. Lastly, the study provides practical guidance for marketers to craft culturally responsive, emotionally appealing, and ethically sound strategies for meme marketing in the rapidly evolving landscape of social media.

Research objectives

To address the identified theoretical and methodological gaps in the literature, this review is guided by the following research objectives:

RO1: To systematically examine the existing literature on meme marketing and consumer behavior in digital communication environments.

RO2: To identify the key stimulus factors of meme marketing that influence consumer cognitive and emotional responses.

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RO3: To analyze the organism-level mechanisms through which consumers interpret, evaluate, and engage with meme-based marketing content.

RO4: To synthesize the behavioral outcomes associated with meme marketing, including sharing behavior, eWOM, engagement, and purchase intention.

RO5: To develop an integrated S-O-R framework that explains consumer behavior in the context of meme marketing and participatory digital ecosystems.

Review

Review approach

The present study employs a systematic literature review method in synthesizing existing studies on meme marketing and consumer behavior using the S-O-R model. A systematic review method was deemed to be suitable because the research dealing with meme marketing is scattered across various interdisciplinary fields such as digital marketing, social media communication, consumer psychology, online engagement, and participatory digital culture. Systematic literature reviews are a transparent and structured approach that can be replicated to identify, evaluate, and synthesize scholarly evidence in a specific research area (Tranfield et al., 2003) (Snyder, 2019). The review also takes place according to the PRISMA guidelines for methodological transparency in identifying, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion (Page et al., 2021). The review focuses on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of consumers' responses in digital environment, and how their responses may be shaped through meme-based communication. Because there is conceptual diversity in terms of terminology, the focus of the study, and the theoretical perspective in the current literature on meme marketing, a thematic synthesis approach was used to capture conceptual themes, methodological patterns, and emerging gaps in the literature from the selected works. The S-O-R framework also was used as an interpretative lens to organize the synthesized findings into stimulus, organism, and behavioral response dimensions. The review aimed to include research published between 2016 and 2026; however, some seminal theoretical studies published prior to this time period were selectively included to provide conceptual context for participatory digital culture, Internet meme theory, and the S-O-R framework. These foundational studies were used only to provide theoretical context and were not part of the empirical synthesis.

Database selection and search strategy

Studies were retrieved from Scopus, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect to ensure a thorough coverage of relevant research in the field of academic literature. The selection of these databases was based on the fact that they cover interdisciplinary research areas such as marketing, communication studies, consumer behavior, social media research, and digital culture. Multiple databases also minimized the risk of missing relevant studies related to emerging meme marketing scholarship. The database search and screening were conducted between December 2025 and March 2026. The review centered on literature published from 2016 to 2026, as scholarly and industry interest in the use of memes for brand communication increased significantly with the growth of participatory social media culture, the rise of influencers, and short-form content driven by platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Previous research has concentrated on internet culture and non-commercial meme use while since 2016, research has been more focused on meme communication in branding, consumer engagement, eWOM, and online behavioral settings. To find relevant studies, a combination of keywords and Boolean operators was used. As meme marketing literature is still conceptually scattered among related communication and engagement categories, several keyword combinations were adopted to increase the comprehensiveness of the search results and to align the concepts. The literature was retrieved using the search keywords and Boolean combinations as shown in Table 7.

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Database	Search String
Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect	((("meme marketing" OR "internet meme" OR "branded meme" OR meme*) AND ("consumer behavior" OR "consumer engagement" OR "purchase intention")) OR (("social media marketing" OR "brand engagement" OR "customer engagement" OR "online brand community" OR eWOM OR "electronic word-of-mouth") AND ("consumer behavior" OR "consumer response" OR "digital engagement")))

TABLE 1: Search Keywords and Search Strings
Source: Developed by the authors based on the review objectives and PRISMA 2020 guidelines

The searches were conducted between December 2025 and March 2026. As database indexing is continuously updated, exact retrieval counts may vary over time. The screened dataset used in this review has therefore been archived in Zenodo to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The literature search was conducted across Scopus, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect to identify studies examining meme marketing and consumer behavior in digital environments. Given the interdisciplinary nature of meme marketing research, the search strategy incorporated related concepts including consumer engagement, digital engagement, online brand communities, eWOM, and social media marketing. To improve comprehensiveness, backward reference screening of seminal studies was also performed. The final search strategy was designed to capture both direct meme marketing studies and foundational research explaining consumer responses in digital communication environments.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To maintain methodological consistency and conceptual relevance, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to the screening process. The criteria were designed to ensure that only studies directly associated with meme marketing and consumer behavior within digital communication environments were included in the review. The inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during the screening process are summarized in Table 2.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies focusing on meme marketing, branded memes, or internet memes in advertising and branding contexts	Studies unrelated to marketing or consumer behavior
Research examining engagement, emotional response, eWOM, online participation, or purchase intention	Studies focusing exclusively on political memes or non-commercial meme culture
Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and foundational theoretical works	Editorials, blogs, dissertations, magazines, and non-peer-reviewed sources
English-language publications	Non-English publications
Studies published between 2016 and 2026; however, seminal studies published prior to 2016 were retained when they provided essential theoretical and conceptual foundations relevant to consumer engagement, social media interaction, internet meme research, and the S-O-R framework	Studies published before 2016 that did not provide foundational theoretical or conceptual relevance to the review objectives

TABLE 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Source: Developed by the authors based on the review objectives and PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). eWOM, electronic word-of-mouth

Studies focusing exclusively on political communication, internet subcultures, or general online humor without marketing relevance were excluded to maintain alignment with the objectives of the review. Similarly, non-peer-reviewed content and opinion-based publications were excluded to preserve methodological rigor and academic reliability.

Screening and study selection process

The study selection process was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA methodology, which includes identification, screening, eligibility evaluation, and final inclusion (Page et al., 2021). The first database search returned 235 records. A total of 186 records were included for abstract and title screening after the removal of duplicate records and filtering of inaccessible records. At this stage, studies that were not directly related to the field of consumer engagement through digital media and/or consumer behavior were excluded.

The remaining articles subsequently underwent full-text eligibility assessment based on conceptual relevance, methodological clarity, and alignment with the objectives of the review. Studies focusing primarily on political memes, non-commercial Internet culture, or unrelated social media phenomena were excluded during the eligibility stage. Following the final screening process, 30 studies were included for thematic synthesis and conceptual analysis. Although the primary review period covered publications from 2016 to 2026, selected foundational studies published between 2009 and 2015 were retained because of their significant theoretical contributions to consumer engagement, social media interaction, Internet meme research, and the S-O-R framework. These studies provided the conceptual foundation for interpreting contemporary meme marketing research. The PRISMA-based study selection process is illustrated in Figure 7.

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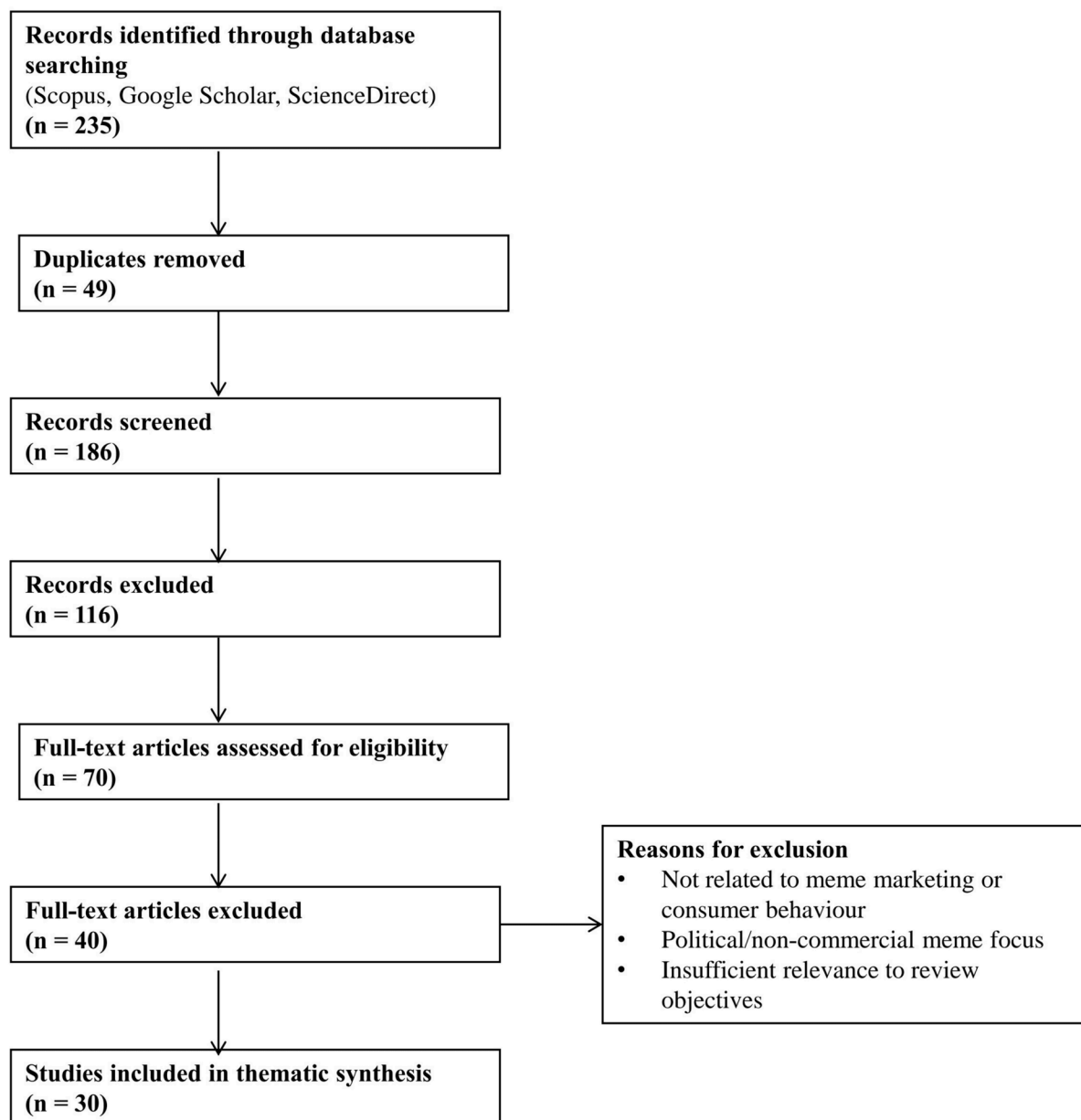


FIGURE 1: PRISMA-based Study Selection Process Adopted for the Systematic Literature Review

Source: Developed by the authors following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021)

The final set of studies was considered suitable because it demonstrated conceptual relevance, theoretical consistency, and direct applicability to meme marketing and consumer behavior. The study pool as a whole covered important aspects of meme-based communication, such as humor, emotional involvement, culture-specific appeal, online communication, eWOM, and behavioral response outcomes in social media. Recent studies published in 2025-2026 were also included in the final selection to ensure the studies were relevant to the contemporary digital communication landscape.

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Category	Number of Studies	Purpose
Direct Meme Marketing Studies	3	Primary empirical evidence directly examining meme marketing
Supporting Empirical Studies	17	Consumer behavior, digital engagement, eWOM, online communities
Foundational Theoretical Studies	10	S-O-R, consumer engagement and digital communication theories

TABLE 3: Classification of Included Studies
eWOM, electronic word-of-mouth; S-O-R, Stimulus-Organism-Response

To improve transparency regarding the composition of the evidence base, the included studies were classified according to their primary contribution to the review. The classification distinguishes between studies directly examining meme marketing, supporting empirical studies investigating broader digital marketing and consumer behavior constructs, and foundational theoretical studies that informed the conceptual development of the S-O-R framework (Table 3).

Data extraction and thematic analysis

After the selection of the studies, the articles included in this research were analyzed systematically to identify common themes, theories, methodology, and consumers' reactions to meme marketing. The data extracted focused on the goals of the study, research methods, major findings, consumer behavior variables, and theories used in the selected literature. A thematic analysis approach was used to carry out a synthesis of the recurring themes within the reviewed studies. The classification of concepts was mainly inductive, with the themes emerging from recurrent conceptual patterns in the literature. The S-O-R framework, however, also guided the organization of the themes identified into stimulus, organism, and response dimensions. This integrated approach allowed the review to be conceptually flexible while also being theoretically coherent in the synthesized findings. Studies examining humor, emotional resonance, cultural relatability, virality, online engagement, eWOM, and purchase intention were then compared to with one another to determine broader thematic connections between meme marketing studies. Accordingly, humor, trend relevance, visual symbolism, and cultural familiarity were seen as environmental stimuli that impacted consumer reactions; these were considered to be meme characteristics. These were interpreted as meme characteristics that impacted consumer reactions: humor, trend relevance, visual symbolism, and cultural familiarity. Internal responses were assessed using organismic dimensions (emotional involvement, cognitive attention, amusement, and brand perception) and the behavioral outcomes were interpreted as response variables (online interaction, content sharing, eWOM, and purchase intention) in digital consumer behavior contexts. The characteristics of the studies included in the final synthesis are summarized in Table 4.

No.	Author(s)	Year	Research Context	Methodology	Key Findings	S-O-R Dimension
1	Ashley & Tuten	2015	Social media marketing	Content analysis	Creative content enhances engagement	S, R
2	Godey et al.	2016	Luxury brand marketing	Survey	Social media affects brand equity and behavior	O, R
3	Kumar et al.	2016	Firm-generated content	Quantitative	Social media content influences customer actions	R
4	Hudson et al.	2016	Consumer-brand relationships	Survey	Social interactions strengthen relationships	O, R
5	Labrecque	2014	Social media branding	Conceptual	Social media fosters brand relationships	O
6	Tsai & Men	2013	Brand pages	Survey	Engagement driven by motivations and interactions	O
7	Jahn & Kunz	2012	Brand fandom	Quantitative	Engagement converts consumers into brand fans	O, R
8	Hollebeek et al.	2014	Consumer brand engagement	Scale development	Engagement has cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions	O, R
9	Muntinga et al.	2011	COBRAs(Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities) framework	Qualitative	Consumers consume, contribute and create content	R

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10	Schivinski & Dabrowski	2016	Social media communication	Survey	Social media communication improves brand perceptions	O, R
11	Buzeta et al.	2020	Social media motivations	Survey	Motivations drive online brand activities	S, O
12	Brodie et al.	2013	Virtual brand communities	Exploratory study	Community participation drives engagement	O, R
13	Dessart et al.	2015	Online brand communities	Mixed methods	Engagement includes affective, cognitive and behavioral elements	O, R
14	Vivek et al.	2012	Customer engagement	Conceptual/Empirical	Engagement extends beyond purchasing behavior	O, R
15	De Vries et al.	2012	Brand fan pages	Quantitative	Post characteristics affect popularity	S, R
16	Cvijikj & Michahelles	2013	Facebook brand pages	Quantitative	Content characteristics influence engagement	S, R
17	Erkan & Evans	2016	eWOM	Survey	eWOM significantly influences purchase intentions	R
18	Bowo et al.	2024	Meme marketing	Survey	Memes increase engagement among Gen Z	S, R
19	Gretry et al.	2017	Informal brand communication	Experimental	Informality may improve or damage perceptions	S, O

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20	Islam & Rahman	2017	Online brand communities	SEM	Community characteristics influence engagement	O, R
21	Kietzmann et al.	2011	Social media ecosystems	Conceptual	Social media enables interaction and participation	S
22	Malodia et al.	2022	Meme marketing	Conceptual/Em pirical	Humor and virality drive engagement	S, O
23	Miltner	2018	Internet memes	Conceptual	Meme interpretation is context-dependent	O
24	Nasution et al.	2025	Brand communities	Survey	Participation improves engagement outcomes	O, R
25	Teng et al.	2022	Internet memes & branding	Quantitative	Memes positively affect brand image	O, R
26	Walsh et al.	2024	TikTok authenticity	Survey	Authenticity increases engagement	O
27	Xiao et al.	2026	Short-form video advertising	Quantitative	Entertainment drives participation	O, R
28	Yadav & Rai	2017	Generation Z social media use	Review	Gen Z prefers informal digital communication	S
29	Chu	2011	Viral advertising	Survey	Social participation increases advertising response	R
30	Calder et al.	2009	Online engagement	Experimental	Engagement enhances advertising effectiveness	O, R

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TABLE 4: Characteristics of Included Studies (n = 30)

Source: Developed by the authors based on the systematic review of included studies

Table 4 presents the characteristics of the 30 studies included in the final synthesis. The studies span the period from 2009 to 2026 and encompass diverse research contexts, including meme marketing, social media engagement, online brand communities, eWOM, digital advertising, and consumer-brand relationships. Collectively, these studies contribute to an understanding the stimulus, organism, and response mechanisms underlying consumer behavior in digital environments.

Methodological limitations

Despite the structured and transparent review process, several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, only English-language publications were included in the review. Consequently, relevant studies published in other languages may have been excluded, potentially limiting the representation of culturally specific meme practices, consumer behavior, and digital communication patterns across different linguistic and regional contexts. As meme interpretation is often shaped by cultural norms, language, and local social media ecosystems, the findings may not fully reflect meme marketing practices in non-English-speaking environments. Future systematic reviews incorporating multilingual databases and cross-cultural evidence could provide a more comprehensive understanding of meme marketing across diverse cultural settings. Second, not all papers were directly related to meme marketing, and some were found in what could be called “indirect” literature databases, so it is possible that some indirectly related studies were missed due to the interdisciplinary and dynamic character of the field of meme marketing research. Third, the review was predominantly based on peer-reviewed academic articles and may not fully reflect the changes in industry practices related to using memes for communication on new social media platforms. Lastly, the conceptual judgment needed during categorization and synthesis of thematic interpretation can create a degree of interpretive subjectivity, even if it was maintained that there was analytical consistency throughout the review process.

The review primarily relied on peer-reviewed academic publications retrieved from the selected electronic databases. Consequently, relevant grey literature, including industry reports, conference papers, doctoral theses, working papers, and unpublished studies, was not systematically included. This may introduce publication bias, as studies reporting statistically significant or positive findings are generally more likely to be published than studies reporting null or contradictory results. Although the selected databases provide broad coverage of high-quality scholarly literature, the exclusion of grey literature may have limited the comprehensiveness of the evidence base. Future systematic reviews could incorporate grey-literature sources to further strengthen the robustness and completeness of the synthesized evidence.

Having reviewed the literature, the conceptual framework of S-O-R has been presented in Figure 2 to give a conceptual understanding of how meme marketing affects consumers in digital environments.

Conceptual framework development

Based on the synthesis of the reviewed literature and the theoretical foundations of the S-O-R model, a conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the mechanisms through which meme marketing influences consumer behavior in digital environments. The framework integrates the key stimulus factors identified in the literature, the cognitive and affective responses they evoke within consumers, and the resulting behavioral outcomes. In addition, it acknowledges the role of contextual factors that may influence the relationships among these constructs. The proposed framework is presented in Figure 2.

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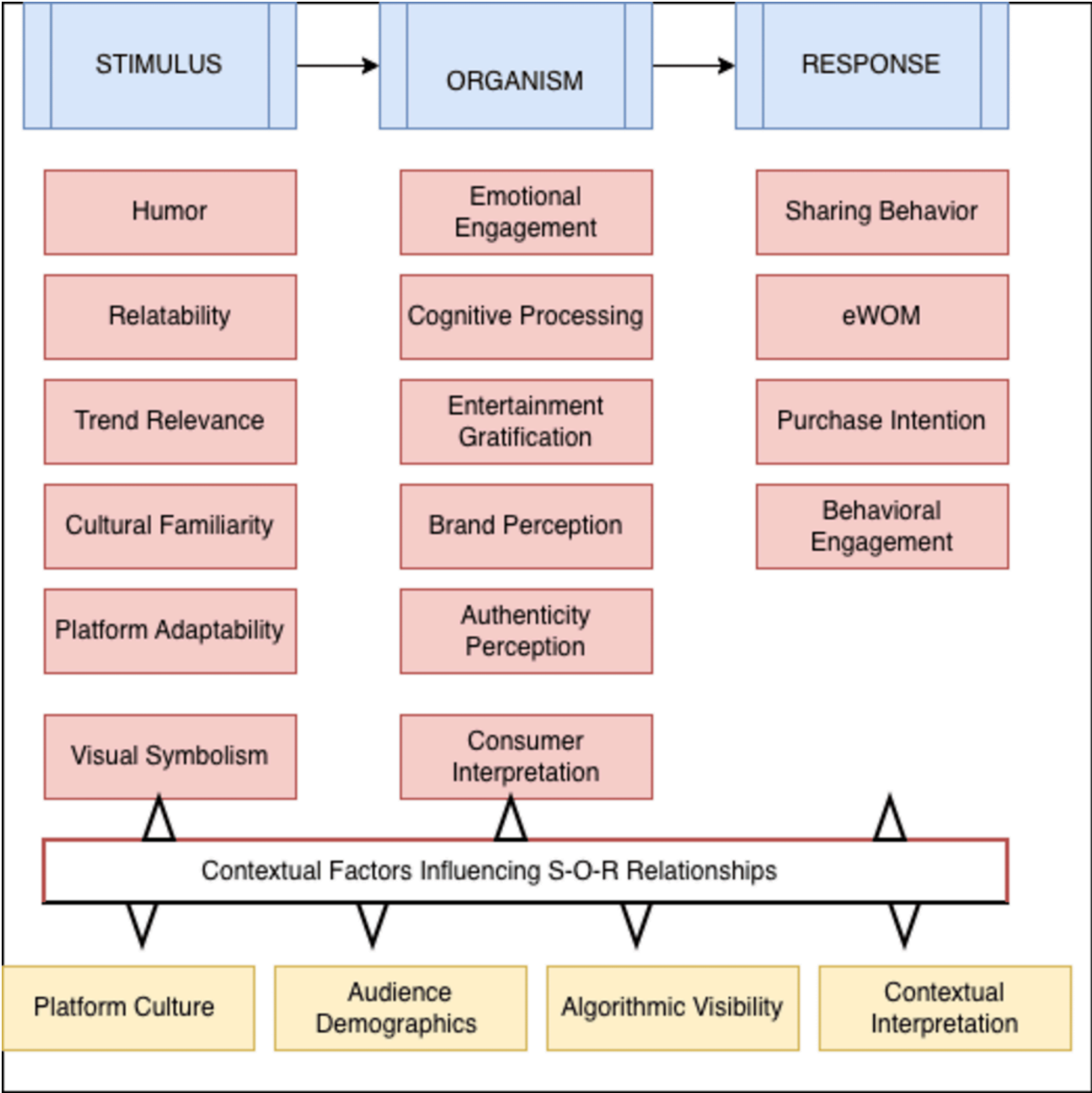


FIGURE 2: Conceptual S-O-R Framework of Meme Marketing and Consumer Behavior in Digital Environments

Source: Developed by the authors based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (Mehrabian and Russell, 1980), its application to online environments by Eroglu et al. (Eroglu et al., 2001), and the synthesis of the reviewed literature

The framework proposed in this review is conceptual in nature and was developed through thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature rather than empirical testing. Consequently, it should be interpreted as a theoretical proposition intended to guide future empirical research. Further validation using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches across different industries and digital platforms is required before the framework can be considered empirically established.

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Findings and discussion

Stimulus Factors Influencing Meme Marketing Effectiveness

The literature identifies several stimulus factors that influence the effectiveness of meme marketing in digital environments. The reviewed literature consistently identifies humor, relatability, cultural relevance, trend responsiveness, and platform adaptability as the primary stimulus factors influencing the effectiveness of meme marketing in digital environments. These attributes may function as environmental stimuli that are associated with consumers' cognitive attention, emotional involvement, and behavioral responses. In addition to the advantages of the meme as a communication tool, meme marketing often integrates informal, participatory, and culturally embedded communication styles, which are more similar to the communication patterns found in users of today's social media (Miltner, 2018) (Gretry et al., 2017). This makes consumers more likely to interact with brand content, share it online, and feel a social connection with it, making brand communication more palatable and relatable due to being meme focused. Of the stimulus dimensions identified, humor was the most widely discussed stimulus dimension found in the reviewed studies. Recent empirical evidence also suggests that meme marketing activities are positively associated with consumer engagement and purchase-related outcomes, particularly through enhanced online interaction and emotional resonance (Kim and Baek, 2025) (Rathi and Jain, 2024). Humor has been consistently associated with higher levels of attention, emotional accessibility, and online engagement among audiences toward branded content, as it lowers the persuasive barriers to the message and encourages audiences to engage with it voluntarily (Malodia et al., 2022), (Ashley and Tuten, 2015), and (De Vries et al., 2012). In addition, there are several recent studies indicating that humor-based meme communication appears particularly relevant within short-form social media contexts, where entertainment-related content features predominantly shape patterns of consumer communication (Xiao et al., 2026). A recent study on meme engagement with India's youth also stated that funny meme formats have been found to boost digital engagement and sharing of content among the Indian young audiences, who are generally more inclined towards informal digital communication styles (Bowo et al., 2024). Similar findings have been reported in social media engagement research, where creative and interactive content characteristics significantly influence user participation and content popularity (Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013) (De Vries et al., 2012). A recent study on consumer interaction with brands through memes has also indicated that humor in brand communication can lead to higher memorability and emotional engagement with the content, as it combines entertainment with familiar social interactions (Walsh et al., 2024). However, humor is not always seen as a universally good thing in the literature. Some studies have warned that the effectiveness of memes is highly dependent on context - when a meme goes too far in terms of humor, lack of cultural sensitivity, political content, or brand identity (Miltner, 2018) (Gretry et al., 2017). In some instances, too performative a meme communication can lead to the loss of a professional image and the loss of brand credibility, particularly when the audience is used to information-based seriousness or institutional trust. Overall, these conflicting results indicate that the value of humor is not solely defined by entertainment value, but by the appropriateness of the content, cultural sensitivity, and audience expectations in specific digital settings.

Another key stimulus factor that affects the success of a meme marketing campaign is relatability. The currently available research indicates that consumers respond positively to meme-based communication when the message resonates with them as a shared online experience, generational humor, social frustrations or culturally recognizable situations (Teng et al., 2022) (Nasution and Silalahi, 2025). This relatable factor appears to strengthen the psychological connection with content and may increase the likelihood of online engagement and peer-to-peer sharing. In addition, various studies on younger digital audiences have found that communicating through memes that resonate with online youth can help give the impression that brands are attuned to the current online culture and shifts in audience behavior, leading to greater perceptions of authenticity (Teng et al., 2022) (Bowo et al., 2024). As such, meme marketing has become a kind of marketing tactic and a symbolic means by which brands become a part of continuous digital dialogue and a shared cultural experience. The relevance of the trend and platform adaptability were also found to be important factors influencing the effectiveness of the meme. Memes exist in rapidly changing digital contexts, where the relevance of the content is often short-lived and algorithm-driven, unlike static advertising formats. Recent research has highlighted that timing, context, and rapid brand reactions to new trends and conversations online are vital to the success of meme

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marketing (Malodia et al., 2022), (Walsh et al., 2024), (Ashley and Tuten, 2015), and (Buzeta et al., 2020). Brands that can seamlessly incorporate platform-specific slang, current trends, and culturally relevant references stand a better chance of standing out and resonating with users on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. However, there is also a risk of short attention spans, content fatigue and diminished brand differentiation in the long term with too much use of trendy communication. Emerging research further suggests that meme-centric communication strategies may contribute to community building, consumer loyalty, and enhanced brand engagement within digital ecosystems, particularly when brands successfully align meme content with audience expectations and platform culture (Kim, 2025). The other recurring theme in the literature reviewed is the importance of simplicity and symbolism in furthering the effectiveness of a meme. Memes are often very ambiguous, and they do not always use the explicit persuasive messages that are found in traditional digital ads. This efficient form of communication is well suited to the current consumption model of digital content, which features shorter attention spans and a constant stream of high-volume online media (Xiao et al., 2026). Meanwhile, symbolic communication of memes can lead to interpretative ambiguity due to the fact that, meme meaning is determined by the context of the audience, platform culture, and previous knowledge of internet trends. This makes the effectiveness of meme marketing often dependent on consumers' cultural literacy and the ability to correctly understand the intended symbolic meaning. Recent studies further indicate that meme characteristics, brand prominence, and narrative transportation mechanisms contribute to consumer immersion and engagement in digital environments (Razzaq et al., 2024). From the literature reviewed, it can be concluded that the most important stimulus dimensions that influence the effectiveness of meme marketing in digital communication contexts are humor, relatability, trend responsiveness, and cultural familiarity. However, this study also shows that the effectiveness of the memes is not always positive - it depends on the context. These stimulus factors often lead to improved engagement, visibility, and emotional accessibility, but can be undermined if the meme communication is perceived as too commercial, too culturally inappropriate, too repetitive, or too unengaging and not what the viewer is expecting. The successful marketing of memes is not just about the creative aspect of the content but also about ongoing cultural awareness and platform sensitivity, as well as strategic adaptation in the fast-changing digital landscape.

Organism Responses: Cognitive and Emotional Consumer Reactions

In the S-O-R approach, organism responses are the internal psychological and emotional responses that occur as a result of external marketing stimuli. A number of the studies reviewed indicated that meme marketing has a substantial impact on the emotional involvement, attention to the content, entertainment value, and perception of the brand among consumers in digital settings. Meme communication often evokes affective responses, including aspects of humor, irony, emotional relevance, and cultural familiarity, enabling consumers to psychologically process and emotionally engage with branded content, which is not the case with traditional promotional advertising. Across the literature, emotional engagement was one of the most widespread organism-level reactions. This finding is consistent with consumer engagement literature, which conceptualizes engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Hollebeek et al., 2014), (Brodie et al., 2013), and (Dessart et al., 2015). There are some studies which indicate that using memes in communication can improve emotional connection because it makes the communication between brands and customers entertaining and friendly (Teng et al., 2022) (Nasution and Silalahi, 2025). Consumers find meme-based communication more engaging, verbal, and "natural" than advertising, which enhances the emotional impact and decreases the feeling of "pushy" advertising (Vivek et al., 2012) (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Studies in recent years on how younger digital audiences engage with memes also suggest that when the meme is emotionally relatable, it can enhance the sense of social connectedness and digital intimacy between the brand and consumer (Xiao et al., 2026) (Bowo et al., 2024). The results indicate that increasingly, meme marketing is making use of emotional familiarity and participatory interaction instead of simply promotional persuasion. Cognitive attention and interpretative engagement have also been attributed as important organismic responses to meme marketing, as found in the literature. Within an increasingly saturated social media ecosystem characterized by fragmented consumer attention, memes frequently attract users through visual simplicity, symbolic compression, humor, and culturally resonant references (Jenkins, 2006), (Shifman, 2013), and (Teng et al., 2022). Some researchers suggest that memes evoke higher order thinking because viewers are required to interpret more complex ideas, expressions of irony, and socially relevant references included in the content. This observation aligns with studies demonstrating that meaningful engagement

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with digital content often requires active interpretation and cognitive processing (Calder et al., 2009). This type of engagement can lead to increased memorability and brand recall over traditional digital ad formats. But the impact of these cognitive interactions seems to rely on consumers' familiarity with the platform culture and internet-specific symbolic language. Niche-humor or culturally specific references might not elicit the desired reaction from people who do not have the same background. Another theme that was prevalent in the literature reviewed was brand perception and authenticity at the organism level. Current studies show that memes can be used to make brands seem relatable, as socially engaged, culturally responsive, and digitally engaged members of online communities (Teng et al., 2022) (Malodia et al., 2022). Similarly, Godey et al. (Godey et al., 2016) demonstrated that social media marketing activities can positively influence consumer perceptions of brands and contribute to stronger brand equity outcomes. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that social media communication positively influences consumer perceptions of brands and strengthens brand-related attitudes (Schivinski and Dąbrowski, 2016). This authenticity perception also plays a crucial role in the buying habits of Gen Z consumers, who often times engage more with informal messaging and culturally relevant messaging than very slick corporate advertising. Additionally, several recent studies show that effective meme communication fosters perceptions of brand relatability and brand familiarity by minimizing symbolic distance between brands and consumers (Walsh et al., 2024) (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). The literature, however, also shows that if the meme is poorly designed, it can negatively impact the brand image when customers think the communication is opportunistic, outdated, forced, and/or culturally insensitive (Gretry et al., 2017). The conflicting results suggest that organism-level responses depend on the content of the memes, as well as perceptions of communicative authenticity and contextual appropriateness.

Another important emotional mechanism that became salient in explaining the engagement behavior from the meme is called entertainment gratification. Based on the aforementioned research, it can be inferred that consumers tend to interact with meme content voluntarily as it offers amusement, emotional escape, and social entertainment in a saturated digital landscape (Xiao et al., 2026), (Bowo et al., 2024), (Calder et al., 2009), and (Brodie et al., 2013). Such an event usually leads to more online interaction, retention of the event's content, and more digital participation behavior in a fun way. However, others have warned that relying too heavily on communication that is geared toward fun could diminish the informational quality and impact on brands in more serious institutional or professional environments. The literature therefore indicates that entertainment value has a positive impact on emotional engagement as long as it is appropriately balanced with the brand identity and communication goals. The studies examined in this report collectively show that meme marketing can impact consumer behavior in multifaceted ways, beyond just the metrics of engagement. Emotional resonance, interpretive engagement, authenticity, amusement, and cognitive attention are the factors that influence consumer's internal processing of meme-based communication in digital space. The literature, however, also suggests that these organismic reactions are still context sensitive and culture-specific, shaped by platform appropriateness, cultural authenticity of communication, cultural interpretation patterns, and the evolving social media environments.

Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the digital marketing and consumer behavior literature by providing a conceptual integration of meme marketing through the S-O-R framework. Previous meme marketing research has tended to be siloed into separate dimensions such as humor, engagement, virality, emotional reaction and eWOM with little theoretical linkages between these dimensions (Hollebeek et al., 2014) (Dessart et al., 2015). The present review provides a synthesis of results obtained in cognitive, affective, and behavioral areas, thereby adding to the existing literature and establishing that meme marketing is a multidimensional communication medium and not just a humorous promotional tool. The results suggest that meme effectiveness is created through the mediation of symbolic communication, emotional processing, cultural familiarity, and participatory digital engagement in rapidly changing digital environments. The main theoretical contribution of the study is the extension of the S-O-R model in the context of participatory digital communication. The S-O-R theory has been used extensively in consumer studies, online retailing, and digital service environments, but its application in the case of meme-driven communication is still relatively undeveloped. This present review illustrates that

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the features of memes (humor, relevance of the trend to the culture, emotive symbolism, and cultural relatability) are environmental stimuli that have the potential to shape consumer's emotional engagement, cognitive interpretation, and behavioral responses. Unlike traditional advertising stimuli, meme communication operates at a different level of communication mechanisms, namely socially embedded and culturally adaptive mechanisms which require a high level of participation from the audience, symbolic interpretation, and interaction patterns in each platform. This implies that the contemporary digital stimuli increasingly work in communicative processes that are participatory and community oriented, and not only in one-way persuasive communication. The results also help to develop theoretical debates on digital consumer involvement and symbolic brand communication. Previous research has shown that consumers perceive meme-based communication as promotional and as a social participation aspect of the online cultural ecosystem (Brodie et al., 2013) (Vivek et al., 2012). In this respect, meme marketing is not just an advertisement but a social negotiation of the communication practice which is influenced by internet culture, collective jokes, and experiences shared online. The review thus validates the theoretical ideas that have developed recently which indicate that consumer interaction with digital spaces is increasingly being driven by symbolic interaction, emotional connection, and a sense of cultural participation, in addition to informational persuasion and transactional communication. The other theoretical implication is the importance of authenticity in the current digital branding contexts. The analyzed studies reveal that consumers often connect successful communication of a meme with the perception of humanizing the brand, making it conversational and culturally aware (Labrecque, 2014) (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). This discovery adds to the existing body of branding literature and indicates that authenticity in digital communication might be more and more reliant on the brand's credibility in the platform-specific cultural conversations. Literature also shows that at the same time the idea of authenticity is very precarious in meme based communication ecosystems. When memes are not executed well, when they are forced or when they are not culturally relevant, they often evoke negative emotional responses and reputational risk, implying that authenticity in meme marketing is ever negotiated through the interpretation of the audience and contextual appropriateness. A review also adds to the accumulating body of literature related to algorithmically driven digital communications spaces. A number of the recent papers discussed in the review indicate that the visibility and engagement of memes is significantly shaped by algorithms that target forms of content that are more likely to have emotional appeal, to be funny and to be highly shareable. As a result, the meme marketing phenomenon is a part of a wider structural shift in the digital communication landscape, where virality, intensity of interaction, and audience participation are defining conditions for visibility. This suggests that consumer response processes in digital environments are far from being reducible to the traditional exposure-based advertising model. Rather, the contemporary landscape of engagement calls for theoretical frameworks that can explain algorithmic amplification, participatory dissemination, and the quick symbolic circulation through social media networks. It is noteworthy that the review also identifies a number of theoretical paradoxes in the current body of meme marketing expertise. The literature often relates meme-based communication to positive engagement results, but these outcomes are reported on a context specific basis and sometimes contradict each other. In some instances, humor, relatability, and keeping up with the trends can help build emotional connection and online engagement, while at the same time compromising credibility or creating an ambiguity of interpretation in other instances. The differences suggest that some context-related factors are affecting the success of memes: platform culture, demographics, symbolic familiarity, and communicative appropriateness. The review consequently indicates that future theoretical models that investigate meme marketing should be more context-sensitive and culturally adaptive so as to better reflect the fluid and interpretive dynamics of digital communication environments. Lastly, the study adds methodologically to the growing body of literature on meme marketing by summarizing the fragmented empirical data and organizing it into a thematic synthesis. The current literature on meme marketing is largely cross-sectional in nature, quantitative, and largely centered on measures of engagement and short-term behavioral reactions. The present review integrates literature in a theoretically coherent way, facilitating a conceptual base for further studies that investigate how emotional processing, symbolic interpretation, digital interaction, and long-term consumer-brand relationships can be studied in meme-driven communication environments.

Practical Implications

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There are several practical lessons for marketers, digital strategists, social media managers, and any brand that relies on meme communication in competitive digital spaces. When done in a culturally relevant and contextually appropriate manner, the reviewed studies have all shown that meme marketing has a significant impact on improving online visibility, audience engagement, emotional resonance, and eWOM (Godey et al., 2016) (Hudson et al., 2016). The results, however, suggest that the success of a meme is highly dependent on the ability to adapt, awareness of platforms, and how the audience interprets the content, which means that using internet humor in brand messages is not as simple as it sounds. Perhaps the most meaningful implication for practice is that of cultural relevance and knowledge of the audience in the use of meme-based communication strategies. The interpretation of the meme is very context-specific - depending on the social experiences of the viewer, their level of familiarity with the symbol, and their engagement with digital culture, it is important that marketers understand how their audience will react to a meme campaign on each individual platform before implementing it. Brands that try to catch the "meme wave" without the knowledge of the changing online conversations might come across as performative, dated, or unengaging to the audience. Therefore, it is essential to continuously listen to social media, monitor trends, and analyze audiences to ensure that meme marketing strategies are relevant and authentic. The findings further suggest that humor should be viewed not merely as an engagement strategy but as a strategic communication tool capable of shaping brand perceptions and consumer relationships. While memes can help boost engagement and reach, overuse of humor, inappropriate cultural references, or an attempt to jump on a trend can hinder brand credibility and consumer trust. This is especially vital for brands that are found in industries that demand institutional gravity, moral awareness, or informational accuracy. However, brands must strike a balance between the entertainment value and maintaining consistency with the brand, so that meme communication can be in line with the broader strategic positioning of the brand. A second implication is related to the platform-specific communication adaptation. The literature reviewed shows that the effectiveness of memes varies significantly across digital platforms, with consumer interactions, algorithms, and expectations varying between different platforms like Instagram, TikTok, X, and Reddit (Ashley and Tuten, 2015) (Tsai and Men, 2013). Brands should therefore not use a one-size-fits-all approach to memes and instead adapt their communications so that they fit the culture of each platform and the method of engagement of that digital ecosystem. Depending on the conditions of the platform and the demographics of the audience, the performance of each short-form video meme, conversational meme thread, reaction-based format, and image caption meme might vary. The results also show that memes are more effective with younger audiences, particularly Gen Z consumers, who tend to prefer informal, participatory, and culturally attuned communication (Yadav and Rai, 2017) (Chu, 2011). Brands targeting the younger crowd might thus be better served with a more meme-like approach focused on authenticity, humor, emotional relatedness and social engagement, rather than an all-too-corporate message. But the review also shows that younger people can be very aware of inauthenticity, opportunistic involvement with a trend, and overcommercialization. That means brands need to be a part of memes in a way that is not fake, but relevant and sincere. The review also emphasizes the emerging role of ethic sensitivity in environments of communication based on memes. However, some of the studies analyzed in the review warn that meme marketing can also lead to backlash when messages are based on stereotypes, offensive jokes, cultural appropriation, and/or insensitive to social issues. In networked digital environments, the transmission of problematic memes is fast, and the repercussions of the negative reputation of problematic meme communication can rapidly build up through online amplification and public criticism. Organizations should, therefore, enhance their ethical review processes and culturally appropriate content evaluation processes before launching campaigns that are based on memes, especially in a diverse or international audience settings. Lastly, the study reveals that marketers need to more seriously consider meme marketing as a component of a wider participatory digital communication ecosystem, not just as a viral content approach. Creativity is not the only determinant of a successful meme communication, but its responsiveness, cultural timing, symbolic relevance, and co-participation by the audience alike. Brands that can seamlessly incorporate these elements into their strategy have a better chance of enhancing emotional connections, community engagement, and sustained online presence in the crowded social media landscape.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

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Despite providing a comprehensive synthesis of the literature on meme marketing and consumer behavior, this review has several limitations. First, the review was restricted to English-language publications and selected academic databases, which may have resulted in the exclusion of relevant studies published in other languages or indexed in alternative sources. Second, meme marketing is a rapidly evolving field influenced by changing platform algorithms, digital cultures, and communication trends; therefore, the findings reflect the state of knowledge available during the review period. Third, the existing body of literature is dominated by cross-sectional quantitative studies, limiting current understanding of long-term consumer responses, relationship development, and behavioral changes associated with meme-based communication.

The review also identified several avenues for future research. Greater attention should be devoted to examining the long-term effects of meme marketing on brand trust, customer loyalty, and consumer-brand relationship quality. Future studies may employ longitudinal and mixed-method research designs to better capture how consumer interpretations and engagement with meme-based content evolve over time. In addition, comparative studies across different social media platforms may provide deeper insights into how platform characteristics, algorithmic visibility, and community norms influence the effectiveness of meme marketing strategies.

Further research is also needed to explore cross-cultural variations in meme interpretation and consumer responses. As memes derive meaning from cultural references, language, and social context, their effectiveness may vary significantly across regions and demographic groups. Moreover, the increasing use of artificial intelligence, automated content generation, and personalized recommendation systems presents new opportunities and challenges for meme-based communication. Future research should therefore investigate the implications of AI-assisted meme creation, authenticity perceptions, and ethical concerns related to misinformation, cultural appropriation, stereotyping, and responsible digital communication practices.

Conclusions

This systematic literature review examined the relationship between meme marketing and consumer behavior through the S-O-R framework. The findings suggest that meme marketing has evolved beyond a humorous communication tactic and appears to function as a culturally situated and emotionally resonant form of digital brand communication. The review identifies humor, relatability, trend relevance, cultural familiarity, and visual symbolism as recurring stimulus factors that are consistently associated with consumers' cognitive and emotional responses, which may subsequently contribute to behavioral outcomes such as engagement, eWOM, sharing behavior, and purchase intention.

The review further indicates that the effectiveness of meme marketing is contingent upon contextual factors including platform culture, audience expectations, authenticity, and cultural sensitivity. While meme-based communication appears to support consumer engagement and brand interaction, its effectiveness may depend on the ability of brands to balance creativity, relevance, and responsible communication practices.

The primary contribution of this review lies in integrating fragmented findings into a comprehensive S-O-R framework that provides a structured perspective for understanding meme-based communication within participatory digital environments. By synthesizing existing evidence and identifying recurring mechanisms underlying consumer responses, the study contributes to the growing literature on digital marketing and offers practical insights for marketers seeking to develop authentic, audience-oriented, and ethically responsible meme marketing strategies. Recent evidence also indicates that branded memes may facilitate stronger affective consumer-brand relationships and contribute to the development of brand attachment within social media environments, particularly among digitally engaged audiences. Overall, the review suggests that meme marketing represents an increasingly important communication approach within contemporary digital ecosystems and warrants further empirical investigation across diverse cultural and platform contexts.

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Additional Information

Author Contributions

All authors have reviewed the final version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Concept and design: Kuljeet Punia, Balgopal Singh

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: Kuljeet Punia

Drafting of the manuscript: Kuljeet Punia

Critical review of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Balgopal Singh

Supervision: Balgopal Singh

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Data Availability Statements

The data (and/or code) supporting this study are openly available in zenodo at <https://zenodo.org/records/21738360>, reference 20759004.

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