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The Power and Pitfalls of Internet Memes in promoting brand awareness and engagement on social media

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ABSTRACT

Today, memes have grown as a digital mode of communication across different media streams. They have become all pervasive, rendering them as a pertinent topic for studying and understanding the relationship between the integration of memes and the efficiency of social media marketing. The aim of the current paper is to examine the effectiveness of memes in promoting brand awareness and engagement on social media platforms. The study undertakes qualitative methods such as content analysis and descriptive analysis and examines the viewpoints of various authors. Findings are based on reliable observations in relation to the effectiveness of memes in promoting brand awareness and engagement on social media platforms. The study concludes that multiple brands across the globe are using memes to magnify their social media presence. The paper further outlines how the successful brands interact with their customers through innovative memes to improve the engagement and satisfaction spectrum.

Keywords: Digital Content, Humour, Social media marketing, Brand Awareness, Memes, Consumer engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

Memes have evolved into a prevalent manifestation of digitally mediated cultural exchange, permeating virtually all major social networking platforms (Sharbaugh & Nguyen, 2014). These concise and visually driven artifacts effectively encapsulate humour within a confined spatial framework, typically comprising an image and a succinct textual component (Taecharunroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Recognizing the substantial business potential associated with these communication channels, brands exert considerable efforts to cultivate and sustain relationships with their customers across diverse social media platforms (Williams, 2000). Consequently, the focal point of investigation resides within the domain of real-time digital content consumption, as a conglomerate of multinational entities harness memes as a vehicle to amplify their levels of engagement. Notably, every day, approximately 95 million photos are shared on Instagram, with over 40% of tweets also including visual content. Furthermore, posts on social media that incorporate images are significantly more likely to capture user interest, leading to 150% more retweets compared to posts without images. (Shang et al., 2021).

The proliferation of online accounts singularly dedicated to meme propagation serves as compelling evidence attesting to the diverse purposes to which memes are now put. Initially rooted in the realm of entertainment, memes have increasingly been seen as a resolution of ideological disagreements and the reinstatement of a conventional story line (Hristova, 2014) or as a promotional tool (Williams, 2000). For instance, the official Twitter account of Netflix, a prominent provider of streaming media services, frequently deploys memes that pertain to their original content. Against this backdrop, the present study endeavours to delineate the challenges and complexities entailed in employing memes as an extension of brand engagement initiatives (Malodia et al., 2022).

This investigation assumes heightened significance for enterprises operating on a global scale. By elucidating optimal practices and regulatory measures governing the creation of meme-centric content and its strategic customization to enhance engagement levels, this study furnishes indispensable insights for brand management. Moreover, this research encompasses a comprehensive analysis of negative instances, thereby enabling brands to apprehend the attendant pitfalls inherent in utilizing memes as an adjunct to social media marketing. Consequently, the findings presented herein hold the potential to guide enterprises in the formulation of effective countermeasures against these challenges

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As per Razzaq et al. (2023), meme marketing is widely recognized as a powerful strategy in the realm of modern social media advertising. Meme marketing has emerged as a key social media marketing strategy due to the growing popularity of social media platforms. The countless memes uploaded daily are impossible to avoid, regardless of the social media platform used. Memes, with their potential to go viral and increase brand visibility, are being used by more and more brands as their primary social media strategy for brands across the globe (Soha & McDowell, 2016). The study further outlines that with this increased visibility and approachability of customers with memes, it has become essential for companies to engage with a few of the meme accounts from the enormous pool in a strategized manner.

The section below is a dive into various concepts that revolve around this meme marketing and how this is a viable marketing feature for today and upcoming time.

2. 1. Memes and social media marketing in real-time scenarios

Following a critical examination of a study conducted by Carrington (2023), it is observed that memes are quickly spreading ideas, jokes, or catchphrases typically utilised for humorous effect online. The real-time introductory notion of memes typically takes the shape of visuals, but they can also exist in other media like videos or even just text. Memes can be in the form of still photos, written text, or even animated graphics. Since memes have magnified acceptance, brands can use creativity to reach and appeal target audience. Memes are a recent phenomenon that arose in the early to mid-1990s, coinciding with the rapid expansion of the internet. It is observed that modern marketing includes the use of using memes to appeal a particular customer segmentation.

As per Yang (2022), depending on the style of humour being expressed, a specific formula may be used to generate memes, which users subsequently replicate and spread. Memes can reach their intended audiences more effectively and, in more ways, than other forms of marketing. The study further states that, considering the lower monetary investments, memes in real-time are considered as an extension of a marketing instrument for a brand (Razzaq et al., 2023).

Meme marketing stands apart from the rest of the pack since so many free meme generators are available on the internet. Incorporating knowledge of memes into corporate marketing is essential for comprehending the mindset of today's digital consumers. Modernly defined as replicators, memes are akin to contagious and self-serving mind viruses that impact human behavior and greatly influence the minds of consumers (Vasile et al., 2021). These memes seemingly appear out of nowhere and can spread like wildfire. The study outlines that brands and enterprises strive for the phenomenon of *going viral* or achieving massive popularity and notoriety. The justified reason behind the same is that it helps brand to reach a wider and better segmented audience (Razzaq et al., 2023).

Netflix is one of the most liked brands on Facebook. However, that hasn't prevented them from using memes to gain more viewers (Malodia et al., 2022). Recent successful online marketing includes their meme-based campaign for the film Bird Box.

2. 2. Relationship between the Integration of Memes and the efficiency of social media marketing

When compared to other forms of viral advertising, meme marketing stands out. There is a rising and successful trend of using digital media to attract and convert clients across several channels (Vasile et al., 2021). There are many benefits to using memes as part of a social media marketing plan. Internet usage has contributed to the development of a more participatory and collaborative culture. This has proven very helpful in the dissemination of memes (Mukhongo, 2020). Users can easily alter current memes and generate new ones due to the Internet's adaptability, accessibility, and affordability (Xie, 2020).

According to Malodia et. al. (2022), it is highlighted that a company's marketing and bottom line could benefit from using memes in its social media strategy. The target audience highly regards the subject matter's appropriate application. The study also states that the use of clever memes and ethically acceptable memes may help a brand connect with a younger market,

particularly one that has never known a world without the Internet. One of the most effective ways to influence the tastes of the young consumer market is with humour and comic portrayal. Memetic marketing can help brands save money because it does not require producing new content. The brands must quickly develop an engaging message to promote on the company's social media channels now that the required graphics are present (Kostygina et al., 2020).

Since today's consumers are thought to be different from those of the past, viral marketing through memes could be an interesting new avenue to pursue. In addition, more people will get familiar with the brand, which is excellent for sales. A company's image can be boosted with the help of memes by making it appear modern, creative, and relevant, thus creating a favourable relationship between the two. Consumers' favourable mental associations with the brand increase its appeal (Teng et al., 2022).

2. 3. Potential issues encountered while using memes to magnify brand awareness and engagement on social media platforms.

Meme marketing may have lower entrance hurdles than other forms of advertising, however it can further be stated that there is presence of multiple obstacles as well. The study as well as the following illustrative example states that meme marketing often backfires, making the company look inept in the eyes of the public and turning off the people it was trying to reach. Placing the examination epicentre behind the meme-oriented marketing campaign deployed by McDonald's which is a worldwide phenomenon and a significant player in the fast-food industry (Murray et al., 2014).

Meme marketing can be challenging to implement, as seen by the many huge companies that have failed to produce either effective or easily understood memes. To know if the proposed meme will have the desired effect, social media marketing experts who are entrusted with employing this tool need to have a deep understanding of the tastes of their target. This helps brands in real-time to avoid making mistakes (Mukhopadhyay, 2023).

However, there are a few drawbacks to using memes in advertising that might lessen its impact. If an organisation uses unpopular or old and out of trend memes, not only would the campaign fail, but the brand's goodwill also be at risk. If customers opt to avoid the issue, it will have a negligible impact on the organisation's image. Incorrect or contentious meme content supporting any propoganda has the potential to offend users, which can have adverse effects (Dimitrov et al., 2021). The upcoming discusses the possible countermeasures which one can adhere while using memes.

2. 4. The possible countermeasures against the issues of using memes as an extension of social media marketing.

Memes can help a brand become more relatable to its target demographic. There is a favourable correlation between the extent to which consumers interact with a brand on social media and their sense of a personal relationship equivalent to friendship. It is observed that exhibiting desirable and attractive behaviours and traits boosts the brand's chances of being sought out as a social partner. Suppose the brand wants to get the most out of the macros and avoid the tension associated with the effective implementation of the campaign implementation. In that case, they need to ensure the use of suitable environments (Malodia et al., 2022).

According to Yankoski et al. (2021), With the growing internet access among the human population, a higher number of individuals will be vulnerable to campaigns aiming to

manipulate and enhance their existing beliefs and emotions. To address this issue, it is crucial to have systems that not only detect deepfake content but also identify coordinated shallow fake campaigns across various platforms.

Due to the fleeting nature of memes (Nørgaard Kristensen & Mortensen, 2021) swift action is required to take advantage of their popularity. There may be a brief window of opportunity when an entertaining meme image coincides with the brand. Therefore, it's best to take advantage of it by adding the relevant content as soon as possible.

Wendy's shows the incapability of a brand to deploy a good campaign. A Twitter user responded to Wendy's post claiming they only use "fresh, never frozen" beef by challenging the claim, resulting to a series of humorous tweets and retweets between the company and the individual. Wendy's published a retweet on the platform featuring a slightly altered Pepe the Frog version meme that resembled their signature mascot. However, since Pepe was recently linked to racist undertones, the firm swiftly removed the post. It is critically evaluated that the incompetence of a brand in designing a tailored campaign can have severe consequences (Dynel, p. 3, 2020).

Following an in-depth comparison of the constructive outlooks of multiple authors the above analysis navigates through multiple gaps. The examination marked an absence of a synchronized piece of cohesive arguments introducing the notions, focusing on its integration, outlining challenges, and establishing solutions. The current examination fills the literature gap by enclosing a complete introductory and modern marketing ready use of a successful and widely acceptable marketing tool.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In line with the epistemological underpinnings of qualitative inquiry, the researchers adopt a secondary data analysis methodology to meticulously scrutinize existing literature and discourse on the subject. By leveraging established research findings, this approach enables a thorough and multidimensional exploration of the phenomenon.

The selection of content and descriptive analysis as the research methodology presents several compelling advantages in the context of examining the influence of memes on brand promotion. Primarily, this method allows access to an extensive body of existing knowledge and scholarly dialogue, providing a robust foundation for the research investigation. By integrating a broad spectrum of scholarly perspectives, the study achieves a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics surrounding memes in the realm of brand awareness and engagement (Javadi & Zarea, 2016).

Moreover, the adoption of qualitative analysis within the ambit of secondary data analysis harmoniously aligns with the inherent complexities and subtleties entailed in the study of memes in brand promotion. Content analysis emphasizes an in-depth exploration of the underlying meanings, contextual nuances, and dynamics associated with the phenomenon under investigation (Harwood & Garry, 2003). In this study, it facilitates a comprehensive examination of the diverse ways in which memes are employed to augment brand awareness and engagement on social media platforms. To conduct the research process, an exhaustive search across academic databases, notably Emerald, Springer, and DOAJ, was initially carried out to identify pertinent scholarly articles. Only those articles were selected which were also

accessible through Google Scholar, search engine, as it is widely recognized for academic rigor and credibility, reliability and validity of the amassed data.

The data collection process involved a systematic and meticulous selection process to identify the most pertinent and insightful contributions by keyword search with a time period filtration. This systematic process facilitated a holistic understanding of the effectiveness of memes in fostering brand awareness and engagement on social media platforms. Table 1 presents the filter used for each database.

Table 1. Filters used for each databases

Database	Mode of filtration	Time period
Emerald	Using correct keywords, fully accessible papers were extracted.	2016-2023
Springer	Studies based on memes and related terms were extracted.	2014-2021
DOAJ	Using keywords such as memes and meme marketing, the search was filtered and relevant papers were extracted.	2018-2023

Source: Authors' own work

4. RESULT

The current study is aimed at investigating the effectiveness of memes in promoting brand awareness and engagement on social media platforms through a qualitative secondary data analysis. The data collection process involved an extensive search across various academic databases. A total of 16 research works were included in the analysis, ensuring a comprehensive retrieval of relevant information. These sources encompassed diverse perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and empirical evidence, providing a robust foundation for the investigation.

Employing descriptive analysis and content analysis, the researchers focused on identifying underlying meanings, contextual nuances, and dynamics associated with the use of memes in brand promotion. This approach provided a deep understanding of the multifaceted ways in which memes are employed to enhance brand awareness and engagement on social media platforms.

The examination of the gathered data led to several noteworthy findings. Firstly, the study revealed that memes have emerged as a potent tool for fostering brand visibility within the dynamic and fast-paced digital landscape. Brands that effectively employed memes witnessed a significant increase in their online presence, as these humorous and relatable visuals garnered widespread attention and engagement from users.

Moreover, memes were found to resonate with younger audiences, especially those belonging to the millennial and Gen Z demographics, due to their colloquial and trendy nature. This resonance played a pivotal role in enhancing brand relevance and establishing a strong brand-consumer relationship, ultimately contributing to brand loyalty and advocacy.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that the strategic use of memes in brand promotion necessitates careful consideration of cultural context and audience preferences. Memes that successfully incorporated elements of pop culture or current events were found to be more effective in capturing the attention of the target audience and fostering higher levels of engagement.

However, the study also identified potential risks associated with meme-based brand promotion. In some cases, poorly executed or insensitive memes result in negative backlash and damage to brand reputation. Therefore, brand managers and marketers must exercise caution and adopt responsible content creation practices when utilizing memes as a marketing tool.

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact of memes in promoting brand awareness and engagement on social media platforms. Memes offer a unique and engaging approach to brand communication, leveraging humour and relatability to connect with audiences effectively. Nonetheless, a cautious and culturally sensitive approach is crucial to harnessing the full potential of memes as a strategic brand promotion tool. The insights gained from this research contribute to the burgeoning field of digital marketing and provide valuable guidance for brand strategists aiming to navigate the ever-evolving digital landscape successfully.

5. DISCUSSION

As presented by Yang (2022), Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, is credited with coining the terminology several decades ago. It is further observed that the process of their spread involves replication and adaptation, just like genetic material. The author uses a wide variety of examples, including catchphrases, musical motifs, fashion trends, and arch-building methods.

The current understanding of the notion has been influenced by the development of the internet. An in-depth examination establishes that memes are conceptual creations that spread via word of mouth but also include a bit of human cleverness. The study further highlights that the attractiveness and efficiency have led to their meteoric rise in popularity as a common form of online expression.

For starters, they have close ties to virtually every social media network, which allows for lightning-fast distribution. Secondly, they create condensed memes making them perfect for rapid consumption as internet users are believed to have short attention spans.

As per Olena et. al. (2020), most people prefer watching videos to reading text on a website. This discovery highlights the value of visual storytelling in the social media space. The utilisation of creative visual material helps to develop a personal connection between viewers and the humanistic parts of the business in today's advertising era when people are flooded with ads featuring explicit calls to action (Olena, et. al., 2020). Marketers should be keeping up a consistent marketing effort that increases the allure of the social media presence and creates an active online community around the content. It is further discussed that when readers start feeling sure about the posts, they can use that to their advantage when trying to sell them something. Memes can quickly become viral because they only require a single attention-grabbing image, GIF, or short video clip to convey the intended message (Malodia et al., 2022).

Over the past few years, a new Internet trend known as doge has emerged. Often featuring a Shiba Inu, this meme incorporates concise and vibrant phrases surrounding the image. The unique and recognizable language used in dogespeak has prompted marketers to utilize the Shiba Inu's image for advertising purposes. Delta Airlines is among those companies that have employed the doge meme to promote their services (Bury, 2016).

The viral meme known as Grumpy Cat features a photo of a displeased-looking cat with humorous captions. This meme has gained widespread popularity on the Internet and has amassed a large following. Marketers have successfully utilized the Grumpy Cat meme to generate interest and engage consumers. For example, cat food company Friskies has incorporated the meme into their advertising campaigns to promote their brand. By employing humor, the meme creates an emotional connection with consumers (Bury, 2016). Taking advantage of the public's interest in and enthusiasm for a trend that's already popular can yield positive results. However, it is essential to pick the right meme (Malodia, et. al., 2022). Thus, the critical examination established that marketers must not just think about using meme marketing, but also determine if it is a good fit for their company.

While there may be fewer barriers to entry into meme marketing, it doesn't mean it's any easier to achieve similar levels of success. Meme efforts often backfire, hurting the company's reputation and making the brand seem out of touch with its audience. Thus, it is observed that rather than focusing on their core goal of reaching their target audience, many marketers make the common mistake of trying to stand out by being creative or unique. Although meme marketing may seem easy to adopt at first glance, the logical argumentation concludes that this is not the reality. There are plenty of examples of big companies trying to create memorable or at least comprehensible memes, but ultimately failing. Knowledge of audience needs and confidence that the proposed meme will have the desired effect are prerequisites for the social media marketing specialists tasked with deploying this tool. On the other hand, there are a few things that could go wrong with meme advertising and make it less effective:

- **Inability to grasp the meme's meaning.** If the meme's context is misappropriated, the organisation risks looking completely out of the loop. The company's image will suffer rather than improve as a direct result of this (Burton, 2019).
- **It was a missed opportunity to acquire favour.** Using memes that have since fallen out of favour won't do as much damage to the brand's image as the original problem did, but it also won't achieve the desired result. Few memes can remain widely popular for extended periods of time, and as they age, they lose much of their value. The company can't afford to waste time if it wants to capitalise on trending memes.
- **Disconnect between a meme and the intended audience.** The ideal case scenario would be if people ignored it, as this would have no effect on the company's reputation or bottom line. The worst-case scenario is when people are offended by inappropriate or provocative information, which can devastate the brand's reputation.

It is observed that offensive material may be included in certain memes. Thus, it's vital to remember that not all memes are positive. Before diving headfirst into a new fad or phenomenon, it's smart for a company to do some preliminary research. Simply put, a meme is a joke that everyone can appreciate. A meme that doesn't make people laugh is just like a bad joke.

As per Yankoski et. al. (2021), the integration of humour into a brand's identity may be a challenging endeavour that calls for careful deliberation to avoid alienating or insulting the consumers who are the brand's primary focus. In view of the plethora of benefits that memes have to offer, the existence of the challenges exists in the form of efforts required to enforce their community norms; businesses must grapple with the difficulty of controlling memes. The critical examination gravitates that, companies have started tailoring memes to include messages that are consistent with them. The concept of content gratification pertains to the degree to which individuals depend on memes to disseminate and obtain informative content, which can be considered one of the most viable techniques to be utilised for engaging a wider audience with memes (Leiser, 2022). Previous scholarly works have acknowledged that content gratification plays a crucial role in driving the usage of social platforms that are mediated by the internet. Memes have a crucial function in conveying concepts and beliefs by presenting data through memetic material within a particular framework, as observed in the realm of memes.

It is further observed from review of secondary literature that the primary incentive driving individuals' involvement with memes is the prospect of contributing content by modifying meme templates or authoring commentary on pre-existing memes. The prevailing opinion holds that memes work best for new, digitally native firms. However, several research show that memes work just as well for well-known businesses, making it important to reach a wider audience type. Many well-known firms have yet to tap the advertising potential of memes online fully. Therefore, it is critically evaluated that the brand managers in a variety of sectors would benefit from keeping tabs on viral memes and capitalizing on this trend by creating their own meme-based marketing materials (Zhang & Bi, 2022). Research suggests that higher levels of brand memory and customer engagement are linked to viral memes that score higher on the proposed characteristics. It is further outlined that memes are essential to digital marketing strategies and should be used by all parties involved. This calls for a preventative method of discovering useful meme templates and evaluating them by building a matrix that includes the proposed dimensions.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Following an examination of facts and logical series of arguments in the above paper it is concluded that meme marketing isn't new, but its recent rise to prominence has made it seem like a more recent phenomenon. Evaluating the success of meme marketing on a global scale can be difficult. The opinions of individuals towards meme marketing appear to be very unexpected and not necessarily associated with their social media or meme consumption habits. It is further concluded that age and self-reported acquaintance with memes are the only constant indications, but they are too broad and lack sufficient detail for use in practise. In addition, the absence of a governing body has greatly broadened the application of the meme notion, allowing any generally recognised and popular phenomenon to qualify as a meme with enough exposure. It can be difficult for businesses to predict whether an idea will become popular enough to be exploited via memetic means. Since meme marketing is a form of viral marketing, it is also subject to the medium's benefits and drawbacks. While inexpensive initially, the spread of its message can quickly become uncontrollable. Nonetheless, meme marketing has the potential to develop into a powerful tool with the help of spoken communication. One needs a

deep familiarity with Internet culture and memes, as well as the ability to spot and cash in on the buzz surrounding trending topics, to make good use of meme marketing. Companies can reap the benefits of social media marketing by staffing up with personnel fluent in using social media platforms and familiar with online and pop culture phenomena such as memes.

The discussion further concludes that small and large businesses alike can benefit from the modern social media landscape because to the proliferation of various platforms and the prevalence of powerful data-analytics technologies. Businesses could benefit from investigating meme marketing, a strategy that has proven to be highly effective in the past. A critical examination also concludes that the concept of a meme is well-known to a sizeable percentage of the public. These amusing visuals and animated graphics, which can be easily adapted to fit a wide range of contexts and quickly gain widespread appeal, are useful for more than just making people laugh. Research and keeping up with current trends are constant priorities for successful marketers because both can lead to new opportunities and the creation of new resources. Meme marketing within the field of social media marketing can show to be a highly effective instrument if used properly. On the other hand, danger may result from overlooking important details. The average millennial sees twenty to thirty memes every day. Given that millennials are now in the majority, it's clear that meme culture plays a major role today. The concept in question can be imitated endlessly. Since their beginnings, internet memes have circulated easily shareable content like humorous photos and viral videos. Therefore, memes have a sought-after presence and can be propagated, reproduced, and overused before becoming tiresome.

It is concluded that in real-time, professionals in the field of digital marketing have taken notice of the meme phenomena. They are currently developing social media efforts centred on meme-based engagements that claim to deliver economic benefits to cater to the tastes of their audience. Thus, the paper states that meme marketing is a low-cost and widely available promotional strategy.

Biography

Navrang Rathi is a PhD candidate at the CHRIST (DEEMED TO BE) University, Commerce department, Bangalore. Her research is inclined towards the application of memetics and adding value to phenomenon of meme . She is currently researching the theories aiding the development of memes and allied topics as a stream.
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