

Meme and Trend-Based Marketing: Strategies for Gen Z Brand Recall and Purchase Intent

The Digital Currency of Culture and Commerce

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Abstract—This report investigates the role of meme and trend-based marketing, focusing on its influence on measurable outcomes, specifically Brand Recall and Purchase Intent, among Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers. This cohort (born 1995–2010) is deeply skeptical of traditional, polished advertising, prioritizing transparency and cultural alignment. Memes, which Gen Z overwhelmingly uses as their primary communication (with seventy seven percentage communicating via them daily), serve as emotional language that translates raw humor into instant trust and cultural capital. The concept of meme virality is proven to be a powerful precursor that positively affects brand recall. Furthermore, studies indicate that successful campaigns, by strengthening brand identification and increasing engagement, subsequently correlate with higher customer purchase and repurchase intentions. The analysis details a Meme Marketing Strategy Framework (Section VI) built on principles of cultural fluency, simplicity, and agility, required for navigating platforms like TikTok and X. Conversely, failure to align content tone or act quickly can lead to negative brand associations and commercial failure, as illustrated by the *Morbius* re-release. The strategy carries significant legal and ethical risks, particularly concerning copyright infringement and personality rights (e.g., "Disaster Girl," "Success Kid"). Meme marketing is a highly cost-effective, sustainable strategy that, when executed with genuine cultural sensitivity, is indispensable for building long-term, trustworthy relationships with the influential Gen Z consumer.

Keywords—component; formatting; style; styling; insert (key words)

I. INTRODUCTION AND FOUNDATIONAL MEMETICS

The emergence of Generation Z (Gen Z), typically defined as those born between 1995 and 2010, marks a significant transformation in global consumer behavior. This cohort is deeply digitally immersed, representing a powerful force in the marketplace, particularly for technological and digital products. Gen Z consumers possess a sophisticated skepticism toward traditional, highly polished advertising, favoring transparency, authenticity, and social responsibility from the brands they support. They are accustomed to fast, personalized, and interactive content, often relying on social media platforms for news (42.9% daily reliance) over older mediums. Consequently, for brands to achieve resonance and engagement, they must adopt the native communication styles of the internet.

II. DEFINING THE MEME: FROM CULTURAL UNIT TO DIGITAL CURRENCY

The concept of the meme has deep academic roots that predate the digital age. The term "meme" was originally coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 work, *The Selfish Gene*, where he defined it as a fundamental unit of cultural transmission or replication, drawing a direct parallel to the biological gene. Dawkins stipulated that memes require a physical medium—such as sound waves or photons—and replicate through the process of imitation.

In contrast, the modern internet meme represents a distinct evolution of this concept. While internet memes still spread rapidly through person-to-person imitation via digital platforms (email, social media, websites), they often take the form of pictures, videos, or media containing cultural information that

has been **deliberately altered** by individuals. This deliberate mutation is the critical divergence from Dawkins' original theory, which envisioned a unit of culture replicating and mutating spontaneously. This deliberate modification, often employed by brands seeking commercial gain, generates an inherent tension with Gen Z's demand for unpolished authenticity. When brands intervene too overtly in the natural mutation and evolution of a trend, the content risks being perceived as forced or disingenuous, undermining the very relatability that makes memes effective.

III. SCOPE, OBJECTIVES, AND STRUCTURAL OVERVIEW

This report investigates the complex role of meme marketing in shaping Generation Z's brand perception and enhancing online engagement. It establishes the foundations of memetics, traces the digital evolution of the medium, examines the theoretical frameworks governing Gen Z engagement, details strategic best practices and case studies, analyzes demographic differences in meme perception, and evaluates the significant legal and ethical risks associated with commercial deployment. The analysis integrates an understanding of Gen Z's values—specifically their preference for raw humor over polished messaging—to explain why cultural fluency in meme usage is now a prerequisite for building trust and relevance.

IV. THE EVOLUTION AND MECHANICS OF DIGITAL VIRALITY

The history of the internet meme spans several digital eras. Early examples of what would later be termed internet memes emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s as humorous colloquial visual communications, such as the "Dancing Baby" and the "Hampster Dance".

The foundation of modern meme culture was solidified in the early 2000s with the creation of anonymous imageboards like 4chan, launched in 2003. These platforms, designed for anonymous and temporary posting, fostered an intense online subculture. This environment became the crucible for the formation and rapid popularization of prominent internet memes, including "lolcats," "Rickrolling," "rage comics," and "Pepe the Frog". The migration of meme culture from these often extreme or niche subcultural origins into mainstream digital discourse, highlighted by the rise of genres like "Dank memes" around 2014, demonstrates its maturation into a crucial and universally recognized communication medium.

A. Algorithmic Curation and the Acceleration of Virality

The rapid spread of memes is inextricably linked to the mechanics of modern social media algorithms. Platform designs increasingly prioritize engaging content based on signals like user interactions (likes, shares, comments, watch time). This structure inherently supports the virality of short, highly engaging meme content.

TikTok, in particular, has become a hot spot for meme marketing, with its algorithm strongly weighting User Interactions (likes, shares, and the crucial metric of how long a user spends watching a video) and Video Information (captions, trending sounds, and hashtags). The platform's short-form video format is ideal for rapidly turning comedic skits and challenges into viral memes.

This algorithmic prioritization creates a subtle paradox for brands seeking authenticity. Algorithms incentivize content creators and marketers to actively "optimize" their output for maximum visibility, such as pandering to perceived platform priorities (e.g., how the Instagram Explore Page shapes visual aesthetic trends). This pressure to conform to successful but potentially stale formats can inadvertently erode the genuine, unpolished "vibe" culture that Gen Z values. The strategic implication is that relying on mass optimization risks creating sterilized content that misses the mark. Therefore, brands must seek "micro-virality," which is defined as achieving profound resonance within a small, defined niche, ensuring the content remains authentic and culturally relevant even as it scales.

V. GEN Z'S DIGITAL DNA AND THE MEME IMPERATIVE

A. Consumer Behavior and the Authenticity Mandate

Gen Z's approach to consumption is fundamentally shaped by their digital fluency and high expectations. They exhibit skepticism toward traditional advertising, preferring brands that demonstrate authenticity and transparency, often leveraging user-generated content (UGC) to showcase products genuinely. For this generation, building trust and a positive brand image is paramount; strong online brand experience, image, brand trust, and loyalty are identified as the most crucial factors influencing their purchase intent. They are drawn to brands that align with their core beliefs regarding self-identity, sustainability, and social change.

It is worth noting the significant economic weight of this cohort, especially in emerging markets. For example, Gen Z in

India contributes an estimated ₹860 billion to the economy, accounting for about 43% of consumption. This spending power underscores why engaging this demographic through culturally relevant, authentic channels like meme marketing is essential.

Meme marketing provides a direct solution to this skepticism. Since Gen Z values "raw humor over polished messaging," memes offer a sense of "realness" that translates into instant trust, contrasting sharply with conventional ad formats.

B. Memes as Emotional Language and Cultural Capital

For Gen Z, memes transcend simple jokes; they serve as a sophisticated form of "emotional language, cultural commentary, and digital identity". Research indicates that a substantial majority (77%) of Gen Z consumers communicate via memes daily, highlighting their function as a primary language.

The power of a meme lies in its ability to facilitate a sense of belonging. Sharing or remixing a meme signals that the communicator—whether an individual or a brand—"gets it," which strengthens community bonds and allows brands to participate in cultural conversations non-intrusively. By tapping into universal, relatable experiences, memes effectively humanize a brand, making it feel less corporate and more accessible.

A brand's ability to utilize this emotional language fluently acts as a powerful shortcut to meeting Gen Z's demand for authenticity. This cultural fluency essentially positions the brand as an "in-group" member, bypassing the immediate filters of ad skepticism and quickly fostering trust and relatability, which is far more efficient than conventional, long-term transparency efforts.

VI. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF MEME ENGAGEMENT

To understand the profound influence of meme marketing, academic analysis often applies established psychological and sociological theories of media consumption and identity.

A. Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that consumers actively choose media content based on their intrinsic psychological and social needs. When applied to meme marketing, consumption and sharing primarily fulfill the needs for **Entertainment Seeking** (via humor and absurdity) and **Socialization** or **Interpersonal Connectivity**. Memes strengthen bonds by creating shared cultural moments. By satisfying these core emotional and social needs, brands successfully incentivize consumers to engage, share the content, and amplify Electronic Word-of-Mouth (EWOM).

B. Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory suggests that an individual's self-image is partly derived from their affiliation with social groups and communities. Brands effectively utilize SIT by aligning their meme content with the specific identity, humor, and values of digitally native communities. By deploying a

culturally appropriate meme, the brand is perceived as sharing the community's cultural capital, thereby enhancing brand-consumer identification and strengthening loyalty.

C. Cue Utilization and Elaboration Likelihood Models

The Cue Utilization Theory is highly relevant in digital environments where consumers lack real-world, direct product interaction and rely heavily on external cues for insight. Memes function as powerful, highly visual, and humorous cues that positively impact consumer attitude, awareness, and **brand recall**, similar to the verified positive effects of emojis and emoticons.

Furthermore, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) suggests that because memes are simple, short, and quickly humorous, they typically drive engagement via the **peripheral route**—meaning they require low cognitive effort for widespread visibility. Although the format is simple and low-elaboration, the brand's success is dependent on high cultural elaboration: the ability to use the meme *correctly*. The ability to execute a meme fluently signals deep cultural intelligence. This process translates low cognitive effort in consumption into high emotional resonance, maximizing peripheral persuasion and long-term **recall**. If the context is misappropriated, however, the simplicity of the format does not prevent negative associations.

VII. MEME MARKETING STRATEGY FRAMEWORK AND OPERATIONALIZING CAMPAIGNS

A. Core Strategy: The Foundational Principles for Success

Effective meme marketing strategies must adhere to several core principles to avoid appearing forced or exploitative and to ensure maximum effectiveness with Gen Z audiences.

B. Strategic Development: Audience, Content, and Timing

1. **Know Your Audience and Align Humor:** Conduct research to understand the preferences, humor style, and values of the target demographic. Meme humor must align with the brand's established tone to avoid appearing forced or exploitative. For Gen Z, humor should be culturally fluent, "raw," and relatable.
2. **Prioritize Simplicity and Relatability:** Use clear, well-known meme templates and short captions to convey a single, simple message. The content must tap into universal or relatable experiences for maximum sharing and engagement.
3. **Ensure Agility and Perfect Timing:** Meme culture shifts rapidly, demanding real-time trend monitoring and rapid content production. Posting memes at strategic times and responding to trends quickly is critical before the trend dies.

C. Execution Principles

4. **Authenticity and Fluency:** Gen Z detects inauthenticity rapidly. Brands must develop a relatable voice and avoid chasing every fleeting trend, which increases the risk of appearing culturally tone-deaf. Engage with memes, do not exploit them for commercial gain.
5. **Maintain Brand Consistency:** Ensure all meme content aligns with the brand's overall image and values. Memes can also be used to humanize the brand (e.g., sharing behind-the-scenes content) and build personal connection.
6. Brands can leverage humor to capture attention and can tap into nostalgia or pop culture references to connect with Gen Z and Millennials on a deeper emotional level.

D. Core Strategy: The Foundational Principles for Success

Successful campaigns are optimized for the culture and technical specifications of each platform, utilizing the strengths of each channel:

- **TikTok Like Apps:** Requires a focus on short-form video content, integrating with trending challenges, sounds, duets, and comedic skits to leverage the platform's high-engagement algorithm.
- **X (formerly Twitter):** Memes thrive in fast-paced conversations and real-time responsiveness, enabling strategies like "Twitter roasts" and timely, concise humor. This channel excels at timely, sharp humor.
- **Instagram:** As a visual platform, memes here often require a higher production value (Reels, Stories, Feed posts) while maintaining their humorous or relatable core.
- **LinkedIn:** An emerging channel where B2B brands utilize humor to distinguish themselves and break through professional content saturation.

E. Operationalizing Meme Marketing and Resource Allocation

Scaling meme marketing within a large organization presents unique operational challenges. Successful campaigns necessitate dedicated teams combining creative talent, marketing strategy, and specialized expertise in real-time internet culture.

The organizational structure must reconcile the need for speed with brand safety. The requirement for rapid, real-time execution frequently conflicts with traditional marketing's layered approval and quality control processes. To overcome this, organizations must decentralize creative authority to agile, culturally fluent teams who can respond to trends within hours, rather than weeks. Operational success, therefore, requires accepting a higher tolerance for creative risk, provided the team possesses deep cultural context verification. Despite these challenges, meme marketing is highly cost-effective, requiring

minimal resources compared to traditional ad campaigns while delivering high potential for organic reach and return on investment.

VIII. MEME MARKETING STRATEGY FRAMEWORK AND OPERATIONALIZING CAMPAIGNS

A. Measuring Success: Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Meme marketing significantly outperforms traditional advertising in driving immediate engagement metrics. Consumers perceive posts with memes to be more humorous than non-meme posts, resulting in increased likes and shares. Furthermore, viral memes can deliver up to 10 times more reach than standard advertisements.

From a strategic perspective, meme advertising robustly enhances **brand recall**, which is considered a precursor to **purchase intent**. Research confirms that meme virality powerfully and profoundly helps enhance **brand recall** and that the positive effect of meme virality on recall enhances the probability of customer **repurchase and recommendations**. Increased customer engagement with memes correlates positively with higher future **repurchase intentions** and the likelihood of recommending the brand to others (EWOM).

To accurately gauge success, marketers must track a range of metrics. While vanity metrics like impressions and reach measure **Awareness/Recall** (e.g., brand discovery via meme and virality), the focus should shift to metrics indicating deeper **Engagement** (likes, shares, comments, and User-Generated Content volume) and ultimately, **Conversion/Loyalty** (Purchase Intent, EWOM, and Repurchase Intentions). Critically, marketers are advised to shift focus toward qualitative metrics like reflective comments and **saved content**, as saving content signals its long-term relevance to the user.

B. Analysis of Strategic Successes

Successful brands demonstrate the viability of integrating meme marketing across various industries and platforms. In the Indian digital landscape, food delivery platforms **Zomato** and **Swiggy** are frequently cited for their exemplary use of culturally relevant meme marketing. Zomato, for instance, maintains a social media presence filled with memes that reference pop culture and viral internet trends, effectively catering to young audiences in a humorous way to build a relatable brand identity.

Global examples of strategic successes include:

- **Wendy's:** The brand's adoption of sharp, real-time "Twitter roasts" exemplifies unfiltered, authentic engagement. Their posts often averaged 10,000 retweets during peak viral moments, demonstrating success through timely, responsive humor.
- **Chipotle:** The **#GuacDance campaign** successfully utilized user-generated content (UGC), generating over 250,000 user videos on TikTok in 2019. This strategy demonstrated the power of creating an easy,

repeatable trend template tailored to the TikTok challenge culture.

- **Netflix:** Netflix employs show-specific memes (e.g., references to *Stranger Things*) to drive highly targeted fan interaction, strengthening brand loyalty within specific content communities.
- **Gucci:** This luxury fashion house successfully integrated memes by collaborating with high-reach meme accounts like @pubity. This showcased that aspirational brands can adopt meme culture authentically when the tone is subtle and clever.

C. Analysis of Strategic Failures and Missteps

The effectiveness of meme marketing is not guaranteed, and several high-profile failures illustrate the inherent risks:

- **The Morbius Re-release:** Following a viral meme phenomenon and widespread ironic online defense of the film, Sony decided to re-release *Morbius* in over 1,000 theaters. The campaign failed, generating only \$85,000 in revenue. This outcome demonstrated the danger of the "virality trap," where high online engagement (likes, trend spikes) is misinterpreted as genuine commercial consumer demand. Since the online discussion was rooted in sarcasm and irony, the massive recall generated was worthless for conversion.
- **Inappropriate Tone:** Academic research confirms that deploying humor through memes in serious, cause-related campaigns results in a *decrease* in consumer engagement. This highlights the need for careful tone alignment.
- **Context Misappropriation:** Brands that fail to grasp the specific context of a meme format risk appearing "completely out of the loop," leading to a negative brand image instead of positive results.

The analysis confirms that the relationship between meme virality and sales is non-linear. While virality reliably boosts brand recall, the conversion to purchase intent is mediated by established brand trust, loyalty, and the perception of authenticity. A strategy must therefore prioritize genuine emotional connection (as explained by SIT and U&G) over merely achieving peripheral reach (ELM).

IX. COMPARATIVE DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF MEME PERCEPTION

Generational cohort plays a defining role in how marketing memes are received, requiring nuanced tailoring of content.

The primary audience for meme marketing consists of Gen Z and Millennials, both showing significantly increased engagement with meme-based content. However, perceptions differ across age groups:

- **Generation Z (1995-2010):** This cohort exhibits high favorability towards branded humor, viewing memes

as a core communication language, and primarily engaging out of motivations related to authenticity, entertainment, and social identity. Their key risk for brands is inauthenticity or appearing "out of touch" if the meme usage is not culturally fluent. They also exhibit a specific preference for dark humor.

- **Millennials (1981-1994):** Millennials generally respond well to value-aligned messaging and are more patient with advertising. Their motivation for engagement centers on relevance, nostalgia, and social sharing. Brands risk alienating them if content is perceived as overly polished or forced promotion.
- **Older Generational Cohorts (Gen X and Baby Boomers):** Meme efficacy diminishes rapidly across older cohorts, such as Generation X (Gen X) and Baby Boomers. For Gen X, motivation for engagement is primarily focused on information seeking and utility, rendering the intrinsic value of the meme medium often lost or viewed neutrally to skeptically. For sectors prioritizing established trust, the inflationary or inappropriate use of humor-driven memes risks brand dilution and a public perception of a lack of seriousness.

Successful strategies for Gen Z must leverage current, hyper-specific cultural codes ("vibe" culture), rather than relying solely on broader, nostalgic cultural references often used for Millennials.

X. RISKS, ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS, AND LEGAL LANDSCAPE

The low cost and high viral potential of meme marketing must be weighed against significant legal and ethical risks that can severely damage brand reputation and goodwill.

Memes are inherently subjective. Humor is a balancing act, and campaigns can easily backfire if the tone is misaligned with brand values or if the content is misinterpreted. If a brand uses a meme format incorrectly or employs an outdated meme, it risks looking "out of the loop," resulting in a loss of cultural credibility and negative brand associations. The audience must perceive the content as authentic, not as an exploitative attempt at capitalizing on a cultural moment.

A crucial ethical consideration is cultural appropriation. Brands that fail to understand or respect the cultural origins of a meme or trend risk reputational harm. These controversies are no longer fleeting; when customers feel disrespected, they are likely to take their commerce elsewhere, leading to long-term sales dips, as seen in the Dolce & Gabbana "Chopsticks" disaster. Furthermore, content must be carefully reviewed for global deployment, as a meme that works in one market might carry unintended offensive meanings in another.

The most substantial risk in commercial meme deployment is legal liability related to Intellectual Property (IP). Most internet memes originate from copyrighted material, such as photographs, video clips, or artwork, whose rights remain with the original creator or rights holder.

The key IP risk is **Copyright Infringement**. The commercial use of copyrighted material, even with

modifications, constitutes infringement without explicit licensing because commercial intent fundamentally changes the legal status of the content. Advertisers must dispel the misconception that a viral meme is "public property." The mitigation strategy is to use original brand assets, partner directly with creators, or use content verified as public domain.

An additional, often overlooked legal risk involves **Personality Rights or Misappropriation of Likeness**. Memes frequently feature recognizable individuals, such as "**Disaster Girl**" or "**Success Kid**," whose likeness is used without consent. If a brand uses a person's image for commercial gain, the individual can argue that their likeness is being used for profit without approval.

The mitigation strategy is to secure explicit, written consent from the featured individual prior to commercial deployment.

Finally, there is the risk of **Brand Dilution and Tone Misalignment**. Overuse or inappropriate context (e.g., deploying humor in serious, cause-related campaigns) can lead to a brand no longer being considered serious by the public. To mitigate this, brands should limit usage and align the meme's tone strictly with the brand's seriousness or mission.

XI. FUTURE TRAJECTORY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. *The Shift to Qualitative Metrics and Niche Communities*

The future of meme marketing requires moving beyond simple quantitative metrics (likes and followers). Marketers must focus on qualitative indicators, such as reflective comments and, critically, **saved content**, which signals that the content possesses long-term relevance and utility to the user.

Furthermore, as digital conversations increasingly move into private spaces (DMs, closed groups, newsletters), brands must create content that feels "insider-like" or exclusive to effectively penetrate and engage these niche communities. This shift supports the rising "vibe" culture, which favors curating mood-driven emotional experiences that strengthen brand identity rather than mindlessly chasing short-lived, viral trends.

B. *The Integration of AI and Algorithmic Curation*

Artificial intelligence (AI) is set to reshape meme creation, offering new possibilities for generating personalized and hyper-relevant content at speed. AI tools are already assisting in content creation and networking. As AI integration increases, marketers are developing protocols for transparency, openly sharing their AI prompts and methodologies rather than trying to pretend the polished output was created organically. AI and social listening are also enabling predictive analysis, helping marketers decode the emotional energy or "mood" behind trends, allowing for the curation of experiences with greater longevity.

C. *Long-Term Viability and Influencer Integration*

Meme marketing is confirmed to be a sustainable strategy that delivers high returns on investment in reach and engagement. To maximize this viability, meme campaigns are increasingly integrated with influencer marketing. It is imperative that brands adhere strictly to ethical guidelines:

transparency and clear disclosure of sponsored content are necessary to maintain audience trust. This is especially relevant given the rise of the "de-influencing" movement, which scrutinizes authenticity and honesty in product recommendations.

D. Strategic Recommendations for Future-Proofing Campaigns

- **Prioritize Cultural Fluency over Scale:** Brands should invest in internal teams or specialized niche creators who possess genuine cultural competence. Accepting that targeted, meaningful engagement often results in sustained brand value, even if it does not achieve massive, shallow viral reach, is key.
- **Formalize Legal Contingency Frameworks:** Given the high risk associated with intellectual property and personality rights, organizations must establish clear protocols for legal clearance, verifying the copyright status of source material, and securing explicit consent for the commercial use of any featured individual's likeness.
- **Ensure Cross-Channel Authenticity:** Meme content should be designed to be flexible, allowing for adaptation across major platforms (TikTok, X, Instagram) while strictly maintaining the platform-specific cultural nuances necessary for authentic communication.

XII. CONCLUSION: MEME MARKETING AS A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

Meme marketing represents more than a tactical trend; it is a foundational cultural shift that redefines how brands interact with the digitally native consumer. The success of this approach is deeply rooted in its capacity to fulfill Gen Z's psychological and social needs for entertainment and community identification (U&G and SIT) by delivering content that is authentic, humorous, and instantly relatable.

For Generation Z, brand perception is significantly enhanced by a brand's demonstrated cultural fluency in meme usage, which effectively humanizes the brand, strengthens communal identity, and reliably boosts **brand recall**. When executed with speed, sensitivity, and authenticity, meme marketing drives consumer engagement and mediates higher **purchase and repurchase intentions**, solidifying its status as an indispensable strategy for fostering long-term, trustworthy relationships with the most influential digital generation.

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