

Much More Than a Brand Memes: How the Collective Memory of Gen Z Gets a Memetic Makeover

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Abstract

Meme marketing is a digital narrative communication strategy used to enhance brand communication and consumer engagement. This strategy is primarily aimed at engaging Generation Z, a generation immersed in a hybrid media landscape. Memes, digital artifacts with strong viral potential, allow brands to seamlessly integrate their messages into sharable content that resonates with younger audiences. Despite the literature being rich in contributions on the impact of meme marketing on consumer-brand relationships, brand engagement, brand associations, and purchase intentions, little attention has been paid to the content and role of memes in shaping collective memory. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating meme marketing campaigns that leverage historical and cultural references to understand how Generation Z engages with and reshapes these narratives.

Employing a mixed-method approach, the research combines case study analyses of meme-centric marketing strategies targeted at Generation Z with insights extracted from focus groups and in-depth interviews.

Findings demonstrate how meme-based content leads to engagement and shapes collective memory while also contributing to the theoretical understanding of how digital media reframe cultural memory in marketing contexts. By introducing the framework of collective memory into studies of meme marketing, this research highlights the relationship between digital content, brand engagement, and historical reinterpretation, delivering valuable insights for brand managers seeking to create durable and culturally resonant brand narratives.

Keywords

Meme marketing, Generation Z, digital communication, brand engagement, collective imaginary.

Introduction

In recent years, meme marketing has emerged as an effective communication and consumer engagement strategy. This strategy exploits the ability of memes to go viral and be shared quickly on social media, thereby increasing brand exposure and engagement. Meme marketing has become increasingly significant also as a means to effectively reach and engage Generation Z, a generation living in a hybrid media context characterized by the convergence of old and new media, transmedia, and platformization (Chadwick, 2017; Jenkins, 2006; Leonzi, 2022; van Dijck et al., 2018).

This generation presents unique characteristics that are reflected in their consumption behavior, which tends to be online, influenced by factors such as early internet usage habits, easy access, and different content choices (Tyson et al., 2021), making them highly responsive to online engagement tactics such as memes. By leveraging the popularity of internet memes, brands seamlessly integrate their brand elements (i.e., brand name, logo, product picture, etc.) into entertaining content to communicate and engage with customers in a naturalistic way (Razzaq et al., 2024). The literature has investigated several aspects related to meme marketing, including how brand memes influence the consumer-brand relationship (Shen et al., 2024), how they shape brand associations and how they drive and impact purchase intentions (Surya et al, 2024; Rathi & Jain, 2024), and user attitudes (Somasundaram et al., 2024; Malodia et al., 2022). Brands do not only use images or viral jokes in their memes but refer to a wide repertoire of iconic references from the past, including films, music, historical events, TV programs and cultural figures.

However, a phenomenon is emerging in which there is a significant difference in the way new generations retain and interpret information. This reframing process sometimes entails a resetting or transformation of certain deeply rooted cultural aspects. This is particularly relevant as brands increasingly draw on historical and cultural references in meme campaigns, encouraging associations that go beyond traditional brand recall. The integration of these elements into meme content poses important questions about how these references shape individual and collective perceptions of brands and simultaneously contribute to the development of collective memory. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing meme marketing campaigns that incorporate historical and cultural symbols. To the best of our knowledge, there is a lack of studies investigating the relationship between meme marketing and collective memory, i.e., a memory that can be exercised and shared even by those actors who did not directly experience the event that is the object of the memory passed on for social and cultural purposes (Halbwachs, 1925). Overall, this article aims to contribute to the current literature by analyzing how brands use memes to create engagement and their role in influencing the creation of collective memory, with a focus on Generation Z.

Background

Memes—defined by Dawkins (1976) as "units of cultural transmission"—have evolved from simple internet humor to influential tools that convey complex narratives and brand messages. This transformation aligns with the principles of memetics, which studies how memes replicate, evolve, and impact cultural knowledge over time (Ermakov & Ermakov, 2021). A meme is defined as *<<a basic unit of cultural evolution, representing pieces of information that spread through imitation from mind to mind. These can include tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, and various cultural elements that propagate themselves through imitation>>* (Powell, 2006). In today's digital landscape, memes serve as an innovative communication tool composed of a fusion of text, images, audio, video, and gifs, often humorous, which can be realized individually or as a mixture of these elements (Brubaker et al., 2018). The growing popularity of

memes on social media has led brands to incorporate memes into marketing and advertising, resulting in a new social media marketing communication strategy known as meme marketing. Based on previous cross-disciplinary literature, Razzaq et al. (2023) defined meme marketing as *“a brand-initiated multimodal online communication strategy, executed through imitated and original memes, conveying speech acts through which consumers extract epistemic, emotional, and social values dependent on the contextual knowledge to persuade and engage customers”*. Meme marketing enhances brand memory by embedding brand elements within culturally resonant, shareable memes. This strategy, which effectively leverages narrative-driven engagement, allows audiences to form emotional connections with the brand, fostering deep and lasting associations. It is a strategy that makes use of both original memes created by brands and memes imitated and adapted from pre-existing content, used to attract and engage audiences in a non-intrusive way. Memes containing historical or culturally significant references serve as catalysts for building a collective memory that not only boosts individual brand recall but also contributes to shared cultural narratives. “Collective memory”, in fact, refers to memories shared within a group or society that help build a collective identity by recalling historical or cultural events, even for those who did not experience them directly (Halbwachs, 1967; Misztal, 2003). Generation Z, a demographic highly attuned to digital media, frequently engages with meme content, making it an effective way for brands to achieve visibility and engagement (Kala & Pawkar, 2022). The humor and shared cultural references in memes resonate deeply with this audience, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared understanding that traditional marketing approaches often struggle to achieve. Swiatek (2016) introduces the concept of “memetic engineering,” where memes are crafted intentionally to influence societal values and collective memory. Through repeated exposure and association with cultural or historical references, memes can embed brand identities into public consciousness, contributing to a shared cultural memory. This aligns with Assmann's (1995) framework of cultural memory, which is constructed and reinforced through symbols, rituals, and repeated practices. For instance, memeplexes—cohesive sets of memes that support and reinforce each other—allow brands to integrate into cultural narratives by creating a stable, recognizable identity across multiple media. Studies suggest that meme marketing can be understood as a form of collective memory construction, where brands leverage shared symbols and narratives to establish long-lasting connections with consumers. This approach enables brands to not only increase short-term engagement but also embed themselves within the cultural landscape in ways that may shape perceptions for years to come. By using memes that resonate with collective values or historical moments, brands can participate in the creation of collective memory, reinforcing their relevance and emotional impact on audiences.

Within this context, understanding how memes influence cultural discourse and engagement is crucial to comprehend how the formation of collective memory is evolving. Therefore, this study addresses the role of memes in shaping the collective memory of Generation Z, focusing on the following research questions:

1. How do memes affect the way consumers perceive and remember brands?
2. What elements of meme marketing are most effective in reinforcing or reshaping brand identity?
3. How does meme marketing facilitate the integration of brands into the cultural narratives and collective memories of specific communities?

Methodology

The study employed a sequential qualitative mixed-method approach (Creswell, 2007; Brewer & Hunter, 2006; Morse, 2010) to explore the relationship between brand meme marketing strategies and the shaping of the collective memory of Generation Z. The research is structured in four phases. In phase 1, 54 effective meme marketing campaigns were collected from Generation Z students. Nine campaigns were selected through a criterion-based approach, utilizing descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013), based on their use of historical, pop culture, and social references that have achieved viral popularity in TikTok and Instagram platforms. These campaigns have been categorized by theme and reference (cultural, historical, etc.).

In phase 2, a semiotic analysis of the selected campaigns was conducted. Following Berger's indications (2013), signs, symbols (denotative – literal – meanings and connotative – cultural – associations), tone of voice (such as humor or irony), and multimodal strategies (text, image, and cultural codes) have been investigated to understand how brands utilized binary oppositions (e.g., past/present) and how they leveraged cultural codes to resonate with Generation Z.

In Phase 3, nine focus groups were conducted to explore participants' responses to meme marketing, focusing on how these campaigns shape collective interpretations. Lastly, Phase 4, currently underway, involves in-depth interviews with individual Generation Z participants to achieve a deeper knowledge of subjective interpretations of meme marketing and its impact on collective memory. A convenience sample of 148 students belonging to Generation Z for Phase 1 and 163 students belonging to Generation Z for Phase 3 was used.

Preliminary analysis

The results reveal distinct patterns in how meme marketing engages Generation Z and contributes to collective memory formation. In Phase 1, the selected meme campaigns featured consistent themes—historical references, pop culture elements, and recent social events—that resonated with Gen Z's preferences and achieved significant viral engagement. Phase 2's semiotic analysis highlighted that brands use humor, sarcasm, and multimodal strategies, such as blending past and present references, to create a sense of cultural familiarity. This approach effectively builds emotional connections, helping brands embed their messages within shared cultural narratives. Phase 3's focus groups demonstrated that Gen Z participants interpret memes as authentic and relatable, especially when they align with current social issues or shared historical references. Memes with cultural depth generated stronger brand associations, fostering a sense of collective identity among participants. Overall, the results suggest that meme marketing

not only enhances individual brand recall but also weaves brands into the cultural fabric of Gen Z's collective memory.

Expected results

The meme marketing strategy applied to brands and aimed at this generation exploits an immediate language that reworks shared symbols and references, generating content capable of becoming part of a collective narrative. When brands appropriate such symbols and include them in their campaigns, they not only attract the attention of young consumers but also actively contribute to the construction of a shared memory made up of cultural references that transcend individual experience.

The research is still in progress. The study seeks to provide a significant contribution to the current literature on the use of memes in marketing, exploring their role in generating engagement and shaping shared collective memory, with a particular focus on Generation Z. The main theoretical innovation lies in the introduction of the concept of collective memory within meme marketing, a so far unexplored area. By analyzing how memes are re-interpreted and re-adapted by young consumers, such as Generation Z, this approach allows us to understand how they reframe and redefine the collective memory of historical events, subverting or reinforcing existing narratives.

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