



Meme Marketing and Consumer Behavior: Analyzing the role of humor and relatability in Gen Z and Millennial purchase intentions

Aleena P¹, Dr. Prejilda K²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Govt. Arts and Science College, Kozhikode, Kerala, India

² Associate Professor, Department of Commerce, SARBTM Govt. College, Koyilandy, Kerala, India

Abstract

The rise of digital brand communication has positioned meme marketing as a crucial tactic for connecting with younger audiences through humor and relatability. This study explores how these particular characteristics affect purchase intention (PI) and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) among Generation Z (n = 50) and Millennials (n = 50). Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey approach, the research contrasts the reactions of these two key demographic groups. Independent samples t-tests revealed no statistically significant differences between the generations, indicating a similar level of responsiveness to meme-based content. Correlation analysis showed that humor is the most significant predictor of purchase intention ($r = 0.72$) and a major factor in driving e-WOM. Relatability also plays a significant role in predicting both outcomes, aligning with the theoretical framework used in this research. These results imply that meme marketing is an effective digital strategy that resonates well with both Gen Z and Millennials, offering valuable insights for cohesive social media communication.

Keywords: Meme Marketing Attributes, Purchase Intention (PI), Social Media Engagement, humor, relatability, Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (e-WOM), Generation Z, Millennials, Consumer Behavior

Introduction

The digital marketing landscape has undergone a profound transformation from the unidirectional, interruptive messaging of traditional advertising to a conversational, authentic, and participatory model. In the current era of consumer-driven media consumption, where practices like ad-blocking and skipping content are becoming more widespread, brands are facing the challenge of creating engaging content that not only captures attention but also establishes a genuine connection with their intended audience. This evolution has generated new, culturally native forms of communication, among which meme marketing is the most prominent. In the *Selfish Gene*, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) [6] coined the term "meme" to describe a unit of cultural transmission or imitation. As a pervasive element of internet culture, memes have transcended their niche origins to become a powerful and unpredictable tool for brand communication. This research aims to investigate the psychological consequences of this phenomenon by focusing on how the distinctive features of meme marketing affect consumer behavior in the two main age groups: Millennials and Generation Z.

A meme, in the context of this study, is defined as a piece of digital content (e.g., an image, video, or phrase) that is often humorous, rapidly shared, and culturally relevant. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to convey a complex idea or shared experience with minimal consumer effort. Unlike traditional advertisements, which often present an idealized or aspirational version of a brand, memes thrive on relatability, often leveraging shared frustrations, mundane observations, or nostalgic references (Bury, 2016) [5]. This inherent authenticity is particularly appealing to younger generations who have grown up with a high degree of corporate messaging skepticism. A brand that successfully uses memes demonstrates a level of cultural fluency and

self-awareness that can be perceived as more genuine than a polished, high-production commercial.

The shift in marketing is inextricably linked to the emergence of "digital natives," primarily Gen Z and Millennials, who have distinct psychological and behavioral characteristics that set them apart from previous generations. Both groups are highly tech-savvy and fluent in the language of the Internet, but they possess subtle yet crucial differences. Millennials, who witnessed the birth of social media, tend to value user-generated content and are responsive to content that speaks to their identity and values. Gen Z, on the other hand, is the first true "mobile-first" generation. A brand that understands these nuances can leverage the power of memes to connect on a deeper level, transforming a passive audience into an active participant in the brand's narrative.

The power of meme marketing lies in its ability to evoke emotional responses through humor and a sense of shared relatability. Humor, a well-documented tool in traditional advertising, lowers a consumer's psychological defenses and creates a positive affective state (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). This positive emotional association can then be transferred to the brand, enhancing its image and fostering a positive attitude. However, the humor in memes is often self-aware, ironic, or even self-deprecating, which can humanize a brand in a way that is difficult to achieve through other marketing channels. Similarly, relatability acts as a bridge between brands and consumers, creating a sense of shared understanding and community. When a consumer sees a meme that perfectly encapsulates a shared experience or feeling, they are more likely to feel a connection with the brand that posted it, fostering a sense of brand loyalty and trust (EMB Global, 2024).

The emotional and cultural resonance of meme marketing has a direct impact on two critical consumer behaviors:

purchase intention and e-WOM. Engaging and relatable content positively influences consumers' likelihood of purchasing a product or service (Rathi & Jain, 2024) ^[11]. When a consumer develops a positive emotional connection with a brand through its meme-based content, this positive sentiment can be translated into a tangible desire to support the brand through a purchase. Furthermore, the memes designed for sharing and virality, make them a powerful driver of e-WOM. Consumers who find a brand's meme content humorous or relatable are highly likely to share it with their social circles, effectively becoming unpaid brand advocates. This amplifies the brand's reach and credibility in a way that traditional advertising cannot, as e-WOM is often perceived as more trustworthy and authentic than brand-sponsored content.

Despite its growing prevalence, a significant gap in the academic literature regarding the nuanced effects of meme marketing on different consumer segments remains. Although anecdotal evidence and industry reports suggest its efficacy, a comprehensive, comparative analysis of how meme qualities influence the consumer behavior of distinct generational cohorts is underexplored. This study addresses this gap by investigating the specific psychological pathways through which humor and relatability in meme marketing influence consumer PI and e-WOM. By segmenting the audience into Gen Z and Millennials, the research aims to provide valuable insights for marketers seeking to develop authentic and effective digital communication strategies tailored to these influential consumer groups' unique values and behaviors. The central research question guiding this inquiry is, "To what extent do the perceived humor and relatability of a brand's meme marketing differentially influence the purchase intention and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) of Gen Z and Millennial consumers?" This research will offer a detailed, data-driven understanding of the role of meme marketing as a potent force in modern consumer-brand relationships.

Literature Review

The digital marketing landscape has undergone a significant transformation, moving from traditional advertising to organic, relatable content. Among the most impactful of these new strategies is meme marketing, which leverages viral, culturally resonant content to engage consumers. This review explores the psychological theories underpinning meme marketing, its influence on brand perception and consumer behavior, and its relevance to younger demographics, particularly Generation Z and Millennials.

1. Memes as Cultural and Marketing Units

Originally cultural units, memes have transformed into crucial elements of digital marketing strategies, leveraging their inherent characteristics such as fidelity, fecundity, and longevity to achieve widespread dissemination and engagement (Bowo *et al.*, 2024) ^[4]. By being humorous and relatable, memes may reduce perceived advertising intrusiveness and encourage quick, positive emotional responses. This is particularly effective in the content-saturated social media environment where users exhibit "bounded rationality," making rapid judgments rather than detailed evaluations (Simon, 1955). This aligns with findings that consumers prefer humorous meme-based ads over text-only ads, especially when they are perceived as popular and authentic (Bilecen & Canarlan, 2023) ^[3].

2. Meme marketing and Gen z Behavior

Recent scholarly work has increasingly focused on meme marketing's unique characteristics and impact. A study by Ferdian Arie Bowo, Anisah, and Lia Marthalia (2024) ^[4] on Meme Marketing: Generation Z Consumer Behavior on Social Media highlights that this younger demographic exhibits a positive attitude toward meme content, especially when it is humorous, relevant, and emotionally authentic. The study emphasizes that memes resembling casual peer communication are more effective in attracting attention and avoiding rejection associated with promotional messages. This ubiquitous presence has positioned memes as a predominant form of online engagement, with a significant majority of Gen Z and Millennials favoring them over other entertainment formats like music, video games, and movies (Tsai & Hsiao, 2025). Furthermore, industry studies suggest that a substantial proportion of consumers are more likely to engage with brands that incorporate meme-based content.

3. Role of Humor and Relatability

The dual role of humor and relatability is central to this approach's success. Research consistently shows that funny content is more likely to be shared, amplifying its reach and fostering organic electronic WOM (Rathi & Jain, 2024; Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016) ^[1, 11]. This shareability not only boosts brand visibility but also contributes to the formation of brand communities, making consumers feel more connected to a brand on a human level (Triantafillidou & Siomkos, 2018). The literature collectively suggests that meme marketing is a powerful tool for boosting engagement and enhancing brand recall, but its effectiveness is contingent on a brand's ability to appear authentic and culturally savvy to its target audience (Gómez-Suárez *et al.*, 2017) ^[9].

4. Emotional Connection and Brand Impact

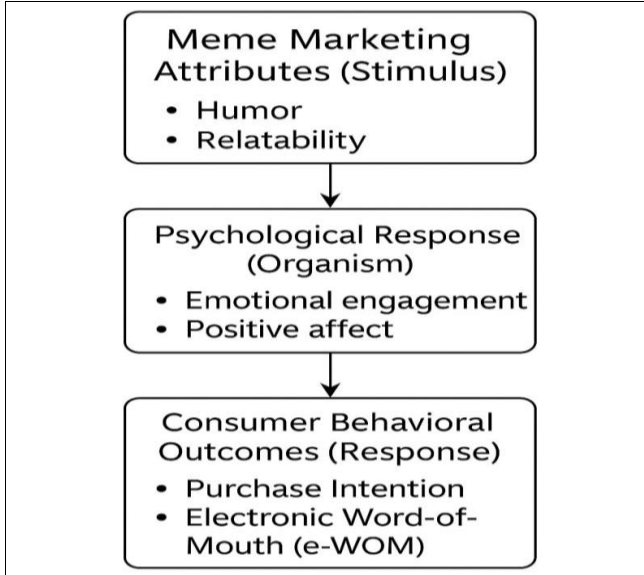
The integration of memes into marketing strategies allows brands to tap into this shared cultural experience, fostering genuine connections by evoking positive emotions and strengthening emotional bonds with their target audience (Dutta *et al.*, 2024) ^[7]. It's especially true given that over 60% of consumers are more likely to buy from companies that incorporate memes into their marketing efforts, highlighting the substantial influence memes wield in the advertising landscape (Agrawal *et al.*, 2024) ^[2]. Studies have also suggested that the effectiveness of memes may be context-dependent, with positive effects on brand-related campaigns but potentially negative outcomes for cause-related marketing (Tafesse and Wien, 2018). The literature shows that brands must strike a delicate balance to leverage the power of memes without undermining their reputation or authenticity.

Based on the above discussion, it is expected that humor and relatability in meme marketing will significantly influence consumer behavioral outcomes, particularly purchase intention and electronic word-of-mouth. This study also explored whether these relationships differ between Generation Z and Millennial consumers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is conceptually grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, which explains how external environmental stimuli influence internal emotional states and subsequently drive behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In the context of

meme marketing, humor and relatability function as marketing stimuli (S), evoking affective reactions such as enjoyment and emotional resonance (O), which in turn influence behavioral outcomes including purchase intention and electronic word-of-mouth (R). Drawing on this framework, the present study examines the psychological pathways linking meme attributes to consumer behavioral intentions across Generation Z and Millennial cohorts.



Source: Developed by the authors based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework

Fig 1: Conceptual Framework of Meme Marketing Influence on Consumer Behavioral Intentions

Based on the reviewed literature and the proposed conceptual framework, this study examines the relationships between perceived humor and relatability in meme marketing and consumer behavioral outcomes, namely purchase intention and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). It further explores whether these relationships differ between Generation Z and Millennial consumers.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between consumer perceptions of meme-based marketing and their subsequent behaviors, focusing specifically on Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born 1997-2012). This design will allow for the measurement of key variables at a single time point to identify correlations and potential differences between the two generational cohorts.

2. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A quota based purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants from both Generation Z and Millennial demographics, ensuring representation proportional to their population sizes within the target market. A target sample

size of approximately N=100 participants will be recruited through online survey platforms. The sample will be stratified to ensure an even distribution between the two generational cohorts, with n≈50 participants from Generation Z and n≈50 from the Millennial generation. Participants must be at least 18 years of age and active social media users.

3. Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The survey instrument presented participants with meme-based content and subsequently employed Likert-scale items to quantify their perceptions of the meme's humor and relatability, as well as their resulting purchase intention and likelihood to engage in electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). The questionnaire also captured relevant demographic information (age, gender, and education) necessary for the comparative analysis between Generation Z and Millennials.

4. Data Collection Procedure

The online survey began with an informed consent form and a brief overview of the purpose of the study. Following consent, participants will be asked to provide their demographic information. To ensure a common understanding of meme-based marketing content particularly for respondents who may not be explicitly familiar with the term “meme marketing” a single, standardized meme image was presented as a reference illustration. This visual was included solely to familiarize participants with the nature of meme-based content and was not intended as an experimental stimulus or emotional manipulation. Participants subsequently responded to Likert-scale items measuring perceived humor, relatability, purchase intention, and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). The entire process is expected to take approximately 10-15 minutes per participant.

5. Reliability Analysis

To assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales used for Humor, Relatability, Purchase Intention (PI), and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), Cronbach’s alpha values were calculated.

Table A: Reliability Statistics

Construct	Cronbach’s alpha (a)	Interpretation
Humor	0.82	High reliability
Relatability	0.79	Acceptable reliability
Purchase Intention	0.84	High reliability
e-WOM	0.76	Acceptable reliability

All constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability.

6. Validity Analysis

Construct validity was tested using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of Sampling adequacy and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity.

Table B: Validity Statistics

Construct	KMO Value	Bartlett’s Test (p-value)	Interpretation
Humor	0.78	<0.001	Valid and adequate
Relatability	0.75	<0.001	Valid and adequate
Purchase Intention	0.81	<0.001	Valid and adequate
e-WOM	0.73	<0.001	Valid and adequate

KMO value exceeded 0.70, indicating that the sample was adequate for factor analysis. Barlett’s Test of Sphericity was ($p < 0.001$) for all constructs, confirming that correlations between items were strong enough for factor extraction.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

1. Demographic Profile

Table 1:

Generation	N	Age Range	Gender (M/F)	Dominant Platform
Gen Z	50	18–27	23/27	Instagram
Millennial	50	28–40	21/29	Facebook, Instagram

Interpretation: The sample consisted of 100 participants (N=100) evenly divided between Generation Z (n=50) and Millennials (n=50), meeting the study's stratification requirement. Gen Z participants were aged 18–27, and Millennials were aged 28–40. Both cohorts had a slightly higher number of female participants (Gen Z: 27/50; Millennial: 29/50). The dominant social media platform for Gen Z was Instagram, while Millennials primarily used both Facebook and Instagram. This distribution reflects the typical media consumption habits of each generation.

2. Descriptive Statistics

Table 2:

Group	Humour (Mean, SD)	Relatability (Mean, SD)	Purchase Intention (Mean, SD)	e-WOM (Mean, SD)
Gen Z	3.28 (0.73)	3.22 (0.69)	3.07 (0.59)	3.15 (0.64)
Millennial	3.19 (0.80)	3.25 (0.65)	3.13 (0.78)	2.88 (0.73)

Interpretation: The mean scores indicate that both generations reported above-average levels (on the scale used) for all variables.

Humor and Relatability: Both generations rated meme marketing as being moderately humorous and relatable. Gen Z rated humor slightly higher (3.28 vs. 3.19), and Millennials rated relatability slightly higher (3.25 vs. 3.22).

Purchase Intention (PI): Millennials showed a slightly higher mean score for PI (3.13) compared to Gen Z (3.07).

e-WOM: Gen Z had a notably higher mean score for electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (3.15) than Millennials (2.88). The low standard deviations (SDs) suggest moderate consistency in responses within each group.

3. Comparative Analysis

Table 3:

Measure	t-value	p-value	Significant?
Humor	0.28	0.78	No
Relatability	-0.10	0.92	No
PI	-0.19	0.85	No
e-WOM	0.96	0.36	No

Interpretation: The independent samples t-tests demonstrate no statistically significant differences between the Gen Z and Millennial cohorts for any of the variables tested: Humor, Relatability, Purchase Intention (PI), or electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). All p-values (0.78, 0.92, 0.85, and 0.36) are substantially greater than the

significance level of 0.05. This strongly suggests that both generations have a parallel responsiveness to the meme-driven content, sharing similar perceptions and behavioral intentions regarding meme marketing.

4. Correlation Analysis

Table 4:

Predictor	Outcome	r	p-value	Interpretation
Humor	PI	0.72	<0.001	Strong, significant
Humor	e-WOM	0.53	<0.001	Moderate, significant
Relatability	PI	0.49	0.002	Moderate, significant
Relatability	e-WOM	0.35	0.035	Weak-Moderate, significant

Interpretation: The Pearson correlation analysis confirms a significant positive relationship ($p < 0.05$) between all predictors (Humor and Relatability) and outcomes (PI and e-WOM) for the combined sample.

Humor is the strongest predictor. It has a strong, significant correlation with Purchase Intention ($r = 0.72$) and a moderate, significant correlation with e-WOM ($r = 0.53$).

Relatability also has a significant influence but with smaller effect sizes. It shows a moderate, significant correlation with Purchase Intention ($r = 0.49$) and a weak-moderate, significant correlation with e-WOM ($r = 0.35$).

Summary of Findings

The analyses reveal that both Gen Z and Millennials perceive humor and relatability in meme marketing similarly, with no significant generational differences. Furthermore, humor and relatability significantly predict purchase intention and electronic word-of-mouth behaviors in this combined sample, supporting the proposed theoretical pathways. While no differences between generations were found, the data confirm the critical role of humor and relatability for successful meme marketing campaigns aimed at these key consumer segments.

Conclusion

This study investigated how humor and relatability in meme marketing influence purchase intention and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) among Generation Z and Millennial consumers. The findings reveal no significant differences between these cohorts in their responsiveness to meme marketing attributes, indicating that humor and relatability resonate equally across these key demographic segments. Furthermore, humor emerged as a strong predictor of purchase intention and a moderate predictor of e-WOM, while relatability also significantly influenced both outcomes. These results underscore the value of meme marketing as an effective strategy for brands seeking authentic engagement and viral dissemination within digitally savvy youth markets. Marketers targeting Gen Z and Millennials should prioritize the creation of culturally relevant, humorous, and relatable meme content to foster brand connection, stimulate word-of-mouth, and drive purchase behavior. This research contributes to the growing understanding of meme marketing’s psychological impact and offers a practical framework to tailor content strategies that bridge generational nuances in the digital landscape.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, the findings are based on a cross-sectional, self-

reported survey design, which restricts causal inference. Second, a non-probability, quota-based sampling approach with a modest sample size limits the generalizability of the results beyond the studied cohorts. Third, a single meme image was used solely as a reference to familiarize respondents with meme marketing content; therefore, variations across different meme formats, platforms, or brand contexts were not examined. Future research may employ longitudinal or experimental designs, multiple meme stimuli, and larger probability-based samples to further validate and extend these findings.

References

1. Abubakar AM, Ilkan M. The role of humor in advertising effectiveness: An examination across cultures. *Journal of Marketing Communications*,2016:22(3):287–304.
2. Agrawal A, Gupta R, Singh V. Consumer preferences for meme-based marketing communication. *Journal of Digital Marketing Insights*,2024:16(2):45–59.
3. Bilecen O, Özer Canarlan N. The role of humor in successful meme marketing campaigns: The case of Ryanair. 8th International Asian Congress on Contemporary Sciences, 2023, 1326–1335.
4. Bowo FA, Anisah, Marthalia L. Meme marketing: Generation Z consumer behavior on social media. *Journal of Social Media Studies*,2024:5(1):55–70.
5. Bury R. Memes and digital culture: Relatability and online humor. *New Media and Society*,2016:18(3):403–420.
6. Dawkins R. *The selfish gene*. Oxford University Press, 1976.
7. Dutta P, Sharma K, Iqbal S. Emotional marketing through memes: A new paradigm for digital engagement. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*,2024:48(1):113–125.
8. Fryklund J, Stenlund S. Impact of meme marketing on consumer purchase behavior and brand recall. *International Journal of Marketing Studies*,2022:14(1):14–29.
9. Gómez-Suárez M, Martínez-Ruiz MP, Martínez-Caraballo N. Consumer–brand relationships under the marketing 3.0 paradigm: A literature review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2017, 8.
10. Jani S, Contractor F, Padiya J. Decoding meme marketing for Generation Z: Engagement and brand perception for FMCG products. *Marketing Renaissance*,2022:20(1):102–115.
11. Rathi N, Jain P. Impact of meme marketing on consumer purchase intention: Mediating role of consumer engagement. *Innovative Marketing*,2024:20(1):20–35.
12. Sharma N, Bilecen B, Canarlan A. Humor-driven meme marketing on social media platforms: Effectiveness and ethics. *Journal of Digital and Social Media Marketing*,2024:12(2):147–161.
13. Simon HA. A behavioral model of rational choice. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*,1955:69(1):99–118.
14. Tafesse W, Wien A. Implementing social media marketing strategically: An empirical assessment. *Journal of Marketing Management*,2018:34(15–16):1269–1293.
15. Triantafyllidou A, Siomkos G. The impact of Facebook experience on consumers’ behavioral brand engagement. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*,2018:12(1):47–67.
16. Weinberger MG, Gulas CS. The impact of humor in advertising: A review. *Journal of Advertising*,1992:21(4):35–59.