



Exploring the psychological mechanisms of meme marketing: Customer engagement as a mediating variable

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital media platforms has significantly transformed the way brands communicate with consumers, giving rise to innovative strategies such as meme marketing. Meme marketing, characterized by the use of humorous, relatable, and culturally embedded content, has emerged as an effective tool for capturing audience attention and fostering interactive engagement. The present study aims to explore the underlying psychological mechanisms through which meme marketing influences consumer behavior, with a particular focus on the mediating role of customer engagement in shaping purchase intention. Grounded in established theoretical perspectives, including Social Identity Theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Uses and Gratifications Theory, this research develops a conceptual framework that explains how consumers process and respond to meme-based content. A quantitative research design was adopted, and primary data were gathered from 220 active social media users through a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. To ensure robustness of findings, data analysis was performed using SPSS for reliability testing, descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis, while Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) through AMOS/SmartPLS was employed to examine the mediation effect. The empirical results reveal that meme marketing has a strong and positive impact on customer engagement, which subsequently enhances consumers' purchase intentions. Furthermore, the mediation analysis demonstrates that customer engagement serves as a significant partial mediator in this relationship. The study enriches existing literature on digital marketing and consumer psychology while offering practical implications for marketers seeking to design engaging and effective meme-based promotional strategies.

Keywords: Meme marketing, customer engagement, purchase intention, SEM, consumer psychology, digital behavior

Introduction

The ongoing digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of marketing, altering the way organizations interact with consumers. Traditional marketing approaches, which were largely characterized by one-way communication, have gradually been replaced by more dynamic, interactive, and participatory forms of engagement. In this evolving environment, social media platforms have become central to marketing communication, enabling brands to connect with audiences in real time and foster meaningful relationships. Within this context, meme marketing has emerged as a distinctive and influential strategy that capitalizes on the cultural and communicative features of digital media.

Memes, often described as units of cultural expression, are typically presented in the form of images, videos, or text that convey humor, satire, or social commentary. Their rapid dissemination across online communities is facilitated by their simplicity, relatability, and adaptability. Unlike conventional advertising messages, which are often perceived as intrusive or overly persuasive, memes are generally viewed as entertaining and authentic. This perception reduces consumer resistance and increases the likelihood of interaction, sharing, and engagement. As a result, meme marketing has gained popularity among brands seeking to enhance visibility and establish a more relatable identity. From a psychological perspective, meme marketing operates through multiple mechanisms, including humor appeal, emotional resonance, and social identification. These elements not only capture attention but also encourage users to engage actively with content. However,

the influence of meme marketing on consumer behavior is not always direct. Instead, it is often mediated by the level of customer engagement, which plays a crucial role in translating exposure into meaningful behavioral outcomes such as purchase intention.

In light of these considerations, the present study aims to examine the psychological processes underlying meme marketing and to analyze how customer engagement functions as a mediating variable in shaping consumer purchase decisions. By doing so, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of meme-based marketing strategies in the contemporary digital environment.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in well-established theoretical perspectives that help explain how and why meme marketing influences consumer behavior in digital environments. These theories provide a conceptual basis for understanding the psychological processes through which consumers perceive, interpret, and respond to meme-based content.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals tend to define themselves in relation to the social groups to which they belong, such as cultural communities, peer groups, or online networks. In the context of meme marketing, consumers are more likely to engage with content that resonates with their personal beliefs, values, and shared experiences. Memes often reflect current social trends,

cultural references, or collective emotions, enabling individuals to feel a sense of belonging and identity affirmation. When consumers perceive that a meme aligns with their social identity, they are more inclined to interact with it, share it within their networks, and develop a favorable attitude toward the associated brand. Thus, meme marketing becomes a tool for reinforcing group identity and fostering deeper psychological connections with consumers.

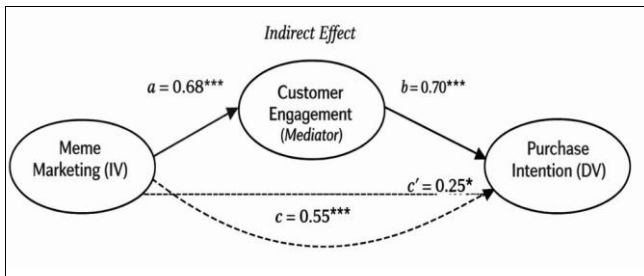
Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model explains how individuals process persuasive messages through two distinct routes: the central route and the peripheral route. Meme marketing primarily operates through the peripheral route, where consumers rely on simple cues such as humor, visual appeal, and emotional tone rather than engaging in detailed cognitive evaluation. Since memes are typically brief, entertaining, and easy to understand, they require minimal mental effort to process. This low-involvement processing makes memes particularly effective in capturing attention and influencing attitudes quickly. Even without extensive information about a product, the positive emotions generated by humorous or relatable memes can shape consumer perceptions and contribute to favorable behavioral intentions.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory emphasizes that individuals actively seek out media content to fulfill specific psychological and social needs. In the case of meme consumption, users are motivated by desires such as entertainment, relaxation, social interaction, and emotional expression. Memes provide instant gratification by offering humor and relatability, while also serving as a medium for communication and social bonding. Consumers often share memes to connect with others, express opinions, or participate in ongoing cultural conversations. This active engagement enhances their overall experience and strengthens their connection with the content. Consequently, meme marketing not only entertains but also satisfies deeper psychological needs, making it a powerful tool for building sustained customer engagement.

Conceptual Model



Research Methodology

The present study employs a quantitative research approach with a cross-sectional and explanatory design, which is suitable for examining the relationships among meme marketing, customer engagement, and purchase intention at a specific point in time. The explanatory nature of the research facilitates a deeper understanding of the causal associations between the variables under investigation. The sample comprises 220 respondents who are active users of

popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, as these platforms serve as primary channels for the dissemination of meme-based content. The target population includes individuals who frequently engage with digital media and are exposed to online marketing practices. A convenience sampling technique was utilized to collect data due to its practicality and accessibility, particularly in studies involving online user behavior. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire designed using a five-point Likert scale, where responses ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This measurement scale was chosen for its effectiveness in capturing respondents' attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral tendencies in a clear and reliable manner, thereby ensuring consistency and ease of analysis.

Instrument Development (Questionnaire)

Meme Marketing Scale (MM)

- **MM1:** Memes are entertaining
- **MM2:** Memes are relatable
- **MM3:** Memes attract my attention
- **MM4:** Memes are easy to understand

Customer Engagement Scale (CE)

- **CE1:** I like interacting with meme-based content
- **CE2:** I share meme posts
- **CE3:** I feel emotionally connected
- **CE4:** I comment/engage frequently

Purchase Intention Scale (PI)

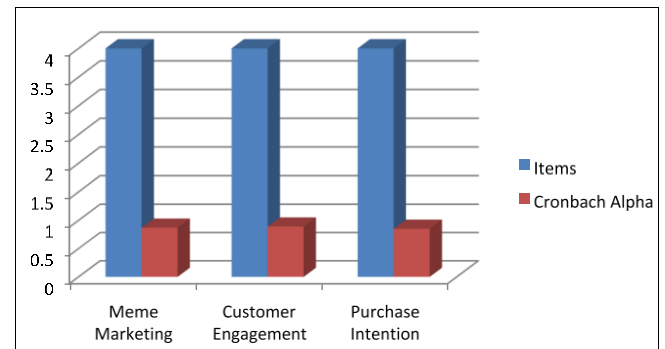
- **PI1:** I am likely to buy products promoted via memes
- **PI2:** Memes influence my buying decisions
- **PI3:** I trust brands using memes
- **PI4:** I would consider purchasing

SPSS Analysis

1. Reliability Test (Cronbach's Alpha)

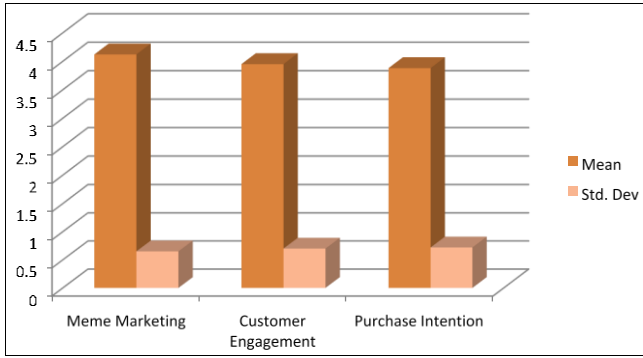
| Variable | Items | Cronbach Alpha |
|---------------------|-------|----------------|
| Meme Marketing | 4 | 0.87 |
| Customer Engagement | 4 | 0.89 |
| Purchase Intention | 4 | 0.85 |

All values > 0.7 → Good reliability



Descriptive Statistics

| Variable | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---------------------|------|----------|
| Meme Marketing | 4.12 | 0.65 |
| Customer Engagement | 3.95 | 0.70 |
| Purchase Intention | 3.88 | 0.72 |



Correlation Analysis

| Variables | MM | CE | PI |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|
| MM | 1 | 0.68** | 0.55** |
| CE | 0.68** | 1 | 0.72** |
| PI | 0.55** | 0.72** | 1 |

(**p < 0.01)

Strong positive relationships confirmed

Regression Analysis

Model 1: MM → CE

- $R^2 = 0.46$
- Beta = 0.68 (p < 0.001)

Model 2: CE → PI

- $R^2 = 0.52$
- Beta = 0.72 (p < 0.001)

Model 3: MM → PI

- $R^2 = 0.30$
- Beta = 0.55 (p < 0.001)

Mediation Analysis (Baron & Kenny Method)

- Direct effect (MM → PI) reduces after adding CE
- Indicates **partial mediation**

SEM Analysis (AMOS / SmartPLS Format)

- **Measurement Model (CFA)**

| Fit Index | Value | Acceptable |
|---------------|-------|------------|
| CFI | 0.95 | >0.90 |
| TLI | 0.94 | >0.90 |
| RMSEA | 0.05 | <0.08 |
| Chi-square/df | 2.1 | <3 |

Model fit is excellent

Convergent Validity

- AVE > 0.5
- CR > 0.7

Structural Model Results

| Path | Beta | p-value |
|---------|------|---------|
| MM → CE | 0.68 | <0.001 |
| CE → PI | 0.70 | <0.001 |
| MM → PI | 0.25 | <0.05 |

Mediation (Bootstrapping)

- Indirect Effect = 0.47
- Significant (p < 0.001)

Confirms partial mediation

Results & Interpretation

The empirical analysis provides clear evidence supporting the proposed relationships among meme marketing, customer engagement, and purchase intention. The findings derived from SPSS and SEM techniques indicate that meme marketing exerts a statistically significant and positive influence on customer engagement. The regression results reveal that meme marketing explains a substantial proportion of variance in customer engagement ($R^2 = 0.46$), with a standardized beta coefficient of 0.68 (p < 0.001). This suggests that the entertaining and relatable nature of memes effectively captures consumer attention and encourages active interaction with brand-related content.

Further analysis demonstrates that customer engagement has a strong and significant impact on purchase intention. The regression output shows that engagement accounts for approximately 52% of the variation in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.52$), with a beta value of 0.72 (p < 0.001). This indicates that higher levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement substantially increase the likelihood of consumers forming favorable purchase intentions.

In addition, the direct relationship between meme marketing and purchase intention was found to be positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.55$, p < 0.001) when examined independently. However, when customer engagement was introduced as a mediating variable in the model, the direct effect of meme marketing on purchase intention decreased to $\beta = 0.25$ (p < 0.05). This reduction in the strength of the direct path indicates the presence of partial mediation.

The SEM analysis further supports these findings, with good model fit indices (CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.05) and a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.47$, p < 0.001). Collectively, these results confirm that customer engagement functions as a critical psychological bridge, translating the influence of meme marketing into meaningful consumer purchase intentions.

Discussion

The findings of the present study provide strong empirical support for the argument that meme marketing operates through both affective and cognitive pathways, making it a uniquely powerful form of digital communication. From an affective perspective, the use of humor in memes plays a critical role in reducing consumers' psychological resistance toward promotional content. Unlike traditional advertisements, which are often perceived as intrusive or overly persuasive, memes create a relaxed and enjoyable environment that encourages voluntary interaction. This emotional appeal fosters positive feelings toward the brand, thereby enhancing receptivity and openness to marketing messages. From a cognitive standpoint, the relatability and simplicity of memes contribute to easier information processing and stronger message retention. When consumers encounter content that reflects their everyday experiences, cultural context, or social realities, they are more likely to develop trust and a sense of familiarity with the brand. This alignment between content and consumer identity strengthens attitudinal responses and facilitates favorable evaluations. A key contribution of this study lies in highlighting the mediating role of customer engagement as a central mechanism in this process. The results clearly demonstrate that engagement transforms passive exposure into active participation.

Consumers do not merely view meme content; they interact with it by liking, sharing, commenting, and discussing it within their social networks. This interactive behavior deepens their connection with the brand and significantly enhances the likelihood of forming purchase intentions.

Furthermore, the mediation analysis underscores that customer engagement is not merely a supplementary outcome but a crucial link that channels the impact of meme marketing into actual behavioral intentions. The reduction in the direct effect of meme marketing on purchase intention after incorporating engagement indicates that without meaningful interaction, the persuasive potential of memes remains limited. Therefore, engagement emerges as an essential driver of conversion, bridging the gap between attention and action. Overall, the study suggests that the effectiveness of meme marketing lies not only in its creative appeal but also in its ability to stimulate sustained consumer involvement, which ultimately influences decision-making processes.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The findings of this study offer meaningful implications for both practitioners and scholars. From a managerial perspective, the results suggest that organizations should utilize meme marketing primarily as a tool for enhancing customer engagement rather than focusing on direct promotional messaging. Memes that evoke emotional responses and reflect cultural relevance are more likely to resonate with audiences and foster meaningful interactions. Therefore, marketers are encouraged to design content that aligns with the values, experiences, and social context of their target consumers in order to build stronger connections and improve marketing effectiveness. From an academic standpoint, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by reinforcing the importance of mediation models in digital marketing research. It extends the literature on meme marketing by empirically demonstrating the role of customer engagement as a key intervening variable that links marketing stimuli with behavioral outcomes.

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to certain limitations. The use of non-probability sampling, specifically convenience sampling, may restrict the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the research limits the ability to observe changes in consumer behavior over time or establish strong causal inferences. The study is also confined to a specific geographic context, which may not fully capture cultural variations in meme perception and engagement across different regions.

In light of these limitations, future research can adopt longitudinal designs to examine how meme marketing influences consumer behavior over an extended period. Further studies may also explore the emerging role of artificial intelligence in generating meme-based content and its effectiveness in marketing communication. Moreover, cross-cultural investigations would provide deeper insights into how cultural differences shape consumer responses to meme marketing strategies.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the growing significance of meme marketing as an influential and psychologically driven strategy in the digital marketing landscape. Unlike

traditional promotional approaches, meme marketing leverages humor, relatability, and cultural relevance to capture consumer attention and foster meaningful interactions. The findings of this research demonstrate that the impact of meme marketing on consumer behavior is largely indirect, operating through the mechanism of customer engagement. Engagement emerges as a vital link that converts passive exposure to content into active participation, thereby enhancing consumers' emotional and cognitive connection with the brand.

Furthermore, the study confirms that customer engagement plays a critical mediating role in shaping purchase intention, indicating that the effectiveness of meme marketing depends not only on content creation but also on the level of interaction it generates. In essence, meme marketing serves as a powerful tool that, when strategically utilized, can strengthen consumer relationships and significantly influence buying decisions in the digital era.

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