



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
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Please Like and Share with Your Friends:

An Investigation of Humour Styles and Consumer Engagement in
Meme Marketing

by

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Abstract

In the contemporary marketing era dominated by social media, internet memes have emerged as a powerful tool for brands to generate consumer engagement. Memes successfully combine two important entertainment aspects: culture and humour. Whether and how different humour styles lead to greater engagement for brand memes has remained relatively unexplored. Therefore, we investigate this using today's most popular media format, short-form videos. Specifically, we analyse memetic Instagram Reels posted by brands to explore potential differences between the effectiveness of varying humour styles, while uncovering the underlying mechanisms that contribute to their ability to elicit likes, comments, and shares. Through the application of Cue Utilization Theory, different humour theories, and Schema Theory, we contend that self-defeating humour is the most effective humour style because it acts as an intrinsic cue that signals authenticity and relatability. In line with previous studies regarding memes on different platforms, we show that self-defeating humour significantly elicits the highest engagement rates. Furthermore, we build upon the existing research by discovering that authenticity and relatability mediate the relationship between self-defeating humour and consumer engagement. Our findings contribute to the growing literature on meme marketing and provide brand managers with a new understanding of how to effectively utilise memes for communicating on social media.

Keywords: Meme marketing, memes, humour, Cue Utilization Theory, self-defeating humour, authenticity, relatability

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- Alek and Aaron

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1 Introduction

Internet memes are a popular way to express one's emotions and provide social commentary on shared experiences. They allow individuals to engage in meaningful cultural discourse that can range from humorous entertainment to cause related campaigns. The only prerequisite for participating in meme culture is creativity, which has made it an accessible and celebrated format on social media. Although memes have played a significant role in internet culture since its inception, academia and marketers seem to only have realised their importance in recent years. Therefore, we aim to explore the realm of meme marketing deeper and uncover why it lends itself to brands that want to foster relationships with their consumers on social media.

1.1 Background

“When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation...” (Dawkins, 1976, p.143)

In his seminal book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), the English ethologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term ‘meme’ to describe how cultural elements spread and evolve. Gradually, the term has been co-opted to describe the rapidly spreading, constantly evolving digital content known as internet memes (Shifman, 2013). Dawkins himself has described the internet as a “particularly fertile ecology for memes” (Dawkins, 2013), a belief that is supported by the modern conceptualization of social media as cultural marketplaces of the digital age (Idrees et al., 2025). Today, memes are understood as content that is intended to be humorous and provide relatable social commentary by using familiar imagery and symbolism (Guadagno et al., 2013; Ward, 2025). Meme formats themselves have evolved over time, in accordance with new social media platform functions and use cases. Traditionally, internet memes were described as an ‘image macro’, featuring an image with text transposed over it (Razzaq et al., 2024). Modern memes have progressed into various media formats, such as the popular short-form videos found on Instagram Reels and TikTok, which feature audiovisual elements along with the traditional text overlay (Zulli and Zulli, 2020). This versatility allows social media users to creatively communicate with their peers, while actively engaging in cultural discourse.

The popularity of memes is rooted in their sociocultural nature of providing light-hearted entertainment while conveying meaningful sentiments and emotions (Agrawal et al., 2024). This also allows brands to engage in the cultural discourse, thereby meaningfully interacting with consumers and fostering brand-consumer relationships by placing commercial motives in the background. Brands such as Duolingo, Wendy's, and RyanAir are among those successfully leveraging memes to establish relationships with consumers, practically basing their entire social media marketing strategy on memes. Their content is based on highly relevant cultural trends and are intended to entertain the audience, rather than to promote their products. Positive

comments and high engagement rates indicate the success of this approach, establishing these brands as leaders in meme marketing.

1.2 Social Media Marketing and Memes

Global social media advertising spend has increased by roughly 155% between 2019 and 2024, reaching over \$237B (Statista, 2026). Social media marketing can take several forms, such as traditional paid ad placements, influencer marketing, and organic content creation. The latter two strategies are utilised by brands to achieve greater reach and create relationships with consumers (Krowinska and Dineva, 2025). On Instagram, eight of the ten most viewed Reels of all time were either posted by brands directly or in collaboration with influencers, amassing more than one billion views (Indian Express Trends Desk, 2025). These Reels generally feature high production value, clear promotional intent, and specific calls to action. While these posts have reached massive audiences, the content fails to generate meaningful consumer engagement rates. For example, a promotional video by Hilton in collaboration with Indian actress Deepika Padukone was the most viewed Instagram Reel in 2025, however only reached an engagement rate of 0.1%. Similarly, a post by Battlegrounds Mobile India, the most viewed Reel without influencer collaboration, shows an engagement rate of 0.3%. In contrast, a meme by grooming products brand Manscaped attained an engagement rate of 16.4%, notably eclipsing the Hilton Reel in likes while having significantly less views and followers. Instead of making boastful product claims or enchanting the viewer with high-production storytelling, the brand utilised the meme format to entertain consumers by creatively participating in cultural discourse. The Manscaped Reel is a prime example of how brands with less resources can successfully engage in low-cost, organic meme marketing to reach new audiences and elicit consumer engagement.

For brands posting on social media, the desired immediate outcome is consumer engagement, as it can help foster strong brand-consumer relationships (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021). Consumer engagement describes the users' interaction with posts (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing) and the account itself (i.e., following). Additionally, user-generated content revolving around brands has also been classified as a form of consumer engagement. Importantly, not all forms of engagement are valued equally. For instance, commenting and sharing are considered more valuable forms of engagement than liking, as they require more cognitive effort and involvement (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021). Specifically, sharing or reposting is believed to be indicative of desired downstream effects, as these interactions spread the message to a wider audience, similar to word-of-mouth promotion (Ge and Gretzel, 2017). Additionally, the recommendation algorithms of social media are more likely to propagate posts with strong initial consumer engagement (Metzler and Garcia, 2023). Consequently, consumer engagement is a universal key performance indicator for content creators and brand managers.

Despite countless online blogs heralding memes as the future of marketing (Bardon, 2026; Levin, 2025; Lummi, 2023), and their apparent capability to increase reach and engagement, the practice has also been met with consumer resistance. Anti-brand memes such as the 'silence

brand' memes (*Figure 1*) have emerged as trends on social media, mocking brands for their attempts to commercialise the cultural discourse on social media. This is in response to brand communication that may be perceived as commercially motivated, intrusive, and inauthentic (Bhargava and Velasquez, 2020; Holt, 2002). Therefore, to successfully engage in meme marketing, brands may benefit from leaning heavily on the cultural and entertaining function of the format rather than actively promoting their products or services.

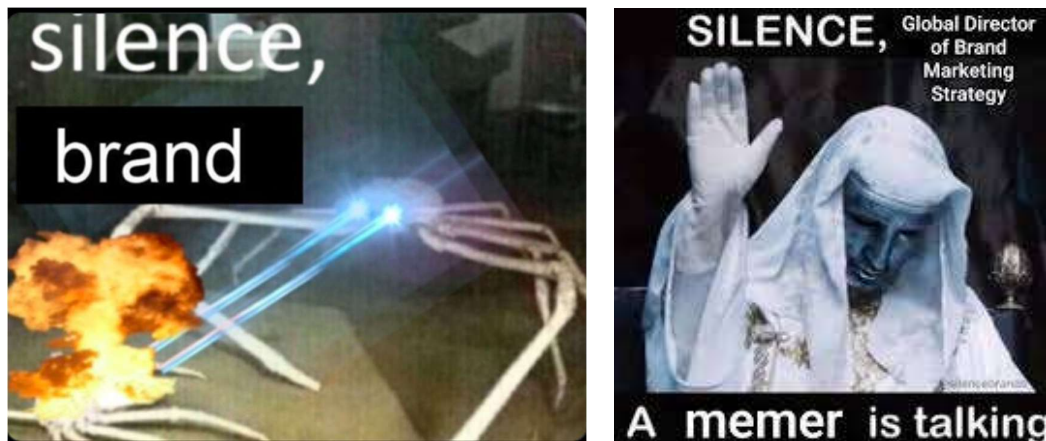


Figure 1 Examples of a 'silence brand' Meme (Guyard, n.d.; silencebrands, 2024)

Richard Dawkins himself stated in an interview, “I haven't researched what it is that makes some memes better at spreading than others. For me it's enough that some do and some don't...” (Dawkins, 2013). Thus, the research purpose of this study is to provide a deeper theoretical and practical understanding of meme marketing by investigating the role of humour and to uncover how it functions in the branded context. The first objective is to establish whether brand memes based on different humour styles elicit different levels of consumer engagement. The second objective is to explore what underlying mechanisms make humour an effective tool for generating consumer engagement. Finally, this study will address the research gap of the effects of different humour styles in brand memes and provide actionable insights for marketing practitioners by: (1) contextualizing meme marketing in the contemporary social media landscape; (2) introducing novel theoretical considerations for the Cue Utilization Theory; (3) illuminating how humorous brand memes can drive social media engagement.

Ultimately, this study aims to answer the following question:

RQ: To what extent does meme humour style impact consumer engagement, and how do social intent signals shape this outcome?

2 Literature Review

This literature review explores the emerging field of meme marketing on social media, discussing the findings of recent and foundational studies. First, the evolving conceptualization of “memes” will be discussed, as it has shifted significantly from its theoretical origin to its current digital form. Next, we will discuss previous relevant theoretical considerations and findings regarding meme marketing. Additionally, we will highlight areas that warrant further investigation and how this study will contribute to a better understanding of how meme marketing functions in theory and practice.

2.1 From Meme to Internet Meme

The term “meme” was originally conceptualised as a unit of cultural transmission, chosen intentionally by Dawkins (1976) to be phonetically similar to the concept of a gene. He proposes that cultural items, such as melodies and fashion trends, replicate by passing from brain to brain in the Darwinian manner of ‘survival of the fittest’. The prosperity of a meme is dependent on its cultural fitness and adoptability, which enables the memes to be imitated. Importantly, Dawkins viewed this propagation of memes as a passive process, akin to catching a virus or parasite. With the introduction of the internet, the definition of memes has evolved, as the digital age has enabled new forms of participation and cultural exchange (Shifman, 2013). This digital ecology has developed from affordances offered by social media platforms, which are the specific participation opportunities that have emerged through the interaction between the platforms’ technological characteristics and social user behaviour (Ronzhyn et al., 2022). In 2013, Limor Shifman labelled memes as a “conceptual troublemaker” and reconciled disparate conceptualisations of memetics and memes to create the foundational definition of memes in the digital space. Specifically, rather than isolated ideas that spread unchanged, she defines memes as an assemblage of digital items that are shaped and interpreted differently by each user. From a communication perspective, Shifman (2013) conceptualises memes as three-dimensional phenomena consisting of content, form, and stance that typically share common characteristics. Content refers to the specific ideas and ideologies that are conveyed by the meme, while form is defined as the (audio) visual shape and design of the message. Thirdly, stance involves the specific tone and standpoint (e.g., sarcasm) the creator takes on.

Essentially, Dawkins’ meme definition is more akin to what is now termed virality, content that spreads to large masses, unchanged, whereas memes are actively altered and repurposed to create new meanings (Shifman, 2011). Building on this foundation, recent literature has conceptualised memes through functional lenses in the consumer behaviour context. For instance, Vardeman (2024) defines memes as a communication device among Gen Z, acting as a storytelling apparatus used for sociocultural narratives. Meanwhile, Razzaq et al. (2023)

classify memes as multi-modal speech acts that transmit emotional and social value to its audience. Ultimately, the conceptualization of the meme has shifted from a passive biological metaphor to an active participatory process in the digital space. In the contemporary social media landscape, they represent structured units of culture that rely on a shared understanding of sociocultural phenomena and transmission between users. In short, an internet meme is commonly referred to as the creation, sharing, and subsequent adaptation of a culturally charged idea or joke in a digital format (e.g., image, video, sound).

2.2 Meme Marketing

The main affordance that enables the viral spreading of memes is visibility, which can be understood as the potential of content creators to reach large audiences that were previously unimaginable (Treem and Leonardi, 2013; Ronzhyn et al., 2022). This ability to capture the attention of large audiences in the contemporary fragmented media landscape makes the platforms very attractive for advertisers (Bhargava and Velasquez, 2020). In recent years, the transmission of memes has accelerated, highlighting their popularity, while simultaneously giving users and brands less time to join the trend cycle (Ward, 2025). Due to this, the most successful memes are those that are highly relevant and evoke a stronger emotional response from the viewer (Guadagno et al., 2013). This response materialises in the users' propensity to like, share, or repost a meme (Malodia et al., 2022). Therefore, creating memes is a valuable strategy for brands to reach a larger audience and evoke consumer engagement in the social media landscape.

Previous research contends that social media engagement can translate into positive results for brands (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021). For instance, Dessart (2017) found that online consumer engagement leads to increased trust and loyalty. Additionally, Casaló et al. (2010) show that online interactions can translate into intentional participatory behaviour with the brand itself. Humour is a powerful driver of consumer engagement, which may explain why memes are able to elicit higher engagement than traditional advertisements (Ge and Gretzel, 2017). This is in line with Shifman's (2011) findings that humour is a crucial element of memes that helps explain the increased popularity of memetic videos on YouTube. For instance, Sewak et al. (2025) show that consumers perceive brand posts featuring memes as significantly more humorous than posts without, which is directly correlated to an increase in likes and shares. Similarly, Yang (2022) confirms that funny memes elicit higher sharing intentions than serious images. Importantly, Yang's results show that the evaluation of a meme's funniness is influenced by bandwagon cues, meaning that posts with more likes and shares have a greater likelihood of being perceived as funny. Humour is a powerful tool for marketers as it has been shown to elicit positive attitudes and lower consumer resistance to advertisements (Hoang et al., 2023; Eisend, 2021) making it one of the main drivers behind memetic success on social media (Sewak et al., 2025). Specifically, Razzaq et al. (2024) explain this by highlighting that brand memes featuring a logo were effective in immersing the consumer into the meme's narrative, hindering critical evaluation of the content and reducing ad-scepticism.

Extant literature shows that it is also critical to examine the different styles of humour (Kamath and Alur, 2024). Based on the typology of humour styles developed by Martin et al. (2003), a study investigating user-generated memes on Facebook found that memes based on aggressive and affiliative humour are the most common, followed by self-enhancing and self-defeating humour styles (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Interestingly, the self-defeating humour style generated a significantly higher number of shares compared to the other humour styles, but no significant differences regarding likes were found. Additionally, their study examined seven different humour types (e.g. comparison, sarcasm, silliness), but found no significant differences in engagement. Similarly, Agrawal et al. (2024) examined food delivery memes and identified the affiliative humour style as the most commonly used. In their study, self-enhancing humour was even less prevalent than the self-defeating humour style.

The theme of self-deprecating humour was also identified in Malodia et al.'s (2022) framework of viral memes, based on interviews and memes collected from X/Twitter, which posits that four content-related factors drive virality: relevance, iconicity, humour, and spreadability. Regarding specific humour types, the authors found that dark humour, self-deprecating humour, and amusement have the greatest impact on meme virality. Beyond consumer engagement, Teng et al. (2021) argue that brand posts featuring humour may enhance brand image, due to their entertainment value. This encourages consumers to propagate the meme among their peers, thereby eliciting positive associations with the brand. Additionally, memes have also been identified as effective tools to address serious topics (i.e., mental health) by reducing stigma and making information more easily processable (Ou et al., 2026). Contrarily, Sewak et al. (2025) found that humorous brand memes can lead to decreased consumer engagement for some serious, cause-related campaigns and reduce brand recall.

2.3 The Nuances of Meme Marketing

It is important to consider the difference between user-generated and brand-generated memes. Agrawal et al. (2024) found that brand-generated memes are more likely to focus on entertainment and creativity, whereas user-generated memes are typically characterised by conveying sentiment and information. Additionally, brand-generated memes require a different approach than user-generated memes, as brand memes are only engaging when they creatively combine familiar and relatable ideas. This is in line with Razzaq et al.'s (2024) findings that a certain level of 'meme literacy' is required to decode symbolic references in the meme. If these references are not understood by the target audience, consumers cannot immerse themselves in the narrative storytelling of the meme and are less likely to engage. Similarly, Shen et al. (2024) posit that consumers cognitively evaluate the fit between a meme and the brand. If a meme does not align with the established image of a brand, consumers reject it. For instance, in a study of Gen-Z college students, Vardeman (2024) found that meme marketing efforts are heavily scrutinised by consumers. Memes were only viewed favourably when they came from light-hearted brands that already had an established media presence. Whereas serious brands attempting to appropriate meme culture for exclusively commercial motives were criticised by respondents.

Meme marketing is still a relatively unexplored academic domain and necessitates continued investigation due to ever changing cultural trends and social media affordances. Therefore, we aim to address several gaps in the existing literature and extend previous findings to the contemporary social media landscape. Firstly, previous research has yet to shed light on the underlying mechanisms of the different humour styles (Malodia et al., 2022; Shifman, 2011; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Furthermore, engagement has been mostly investigated either in the context of already viral posts or experimental settings, failing to capture the variance and real-world data of brand memes on social media (Guadagno et al., 2013; Razzaq et al., 2024; Sewak et al., 2025). Additionally, most studies have focused on static images, thereby not exploring the popular short-form video format (Razzaq et al., 2023). Ultimately, this study will introduce novel findings for the previously unexplored memes on Instagram Reels and the underlying mechanisms of the different humour styles, rooted in real-world data.

3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on Cue Utilization Theory (CUT) to investigate how different humour styles in brand memes may evoke different levels of consumer engagement. Furthermore, relevant humour theories will be addressed to showcase how humour functions in regard to memes in general. Additionally, Schema Theory will be introduced to examine the underlying mechanisms of humour.

Cue Utilization Theory posits that cues are heuristic structures that enable individuals to quickly process and react to stimuli. The level of cognitive effort that a certain task requires determines the amount of cues that will be perceived and evaluated (Easterbrook, 1959). According to CUT, this enables individuals to perceive and evaluate information quickly. An important distinction is made between intrinsic cues and extrinsic cues. Intrinsic cues are inherent to the object that is scrutinised. For instance, the colour of an apple is an intrinsic cue that can immediately inform a consumer about its ripeness. In contrast, extrinsic cues are inferred from environmental attributes. For example, if an apple is sold at a farmer's market, it may be perceived as fresh and organic. This example illustrates that cues play a crucial role in shaping consumer attitude and behaviour.

Konuk (2021) identifies awards, in this case of food brands, as a cue that enhances the effects of perceived taste on perceived quality and brand trust which translates into willingness to buy. Cues also play an important role in the digital context, as the lack of real-world interaction limits how much information a consumer can perceive about a given product (Sewak et al., 2025). Therefore, previous research has applied CUT to the digital marketing context, identifying specific cues consumers use to make decisions. Yu et al. (2020) found that online ads that are perceived as visually attractive led to increased trust which positively mediated click-through intention. Considering the low cognitive involvement of social media, cues have also been shown to play a significant role in social media marketing. Here, consumers can rely on specific informational or entertainment cues to evaluate a brand's intent and quality based on its online communication. For instance, Ryu (2024) demonstrates that higher image resolution and visual complexity in Instagram posts function as visual cues that can signal brand credibility, subsequently leading to increased consumer engagement. Importantly, this effect was mediated by processing fluency, suggesting that certain cues can trigger instant quality inferences in low-cognitive involvement encounters. Interestingly, Yang et al. (2020) did not find visual attractiveness to be an effective intrinsic cue on social media. Rather, the extrinsic cues, popularity and argument quality, signalled trust to consumers and led to an increase in positive attitude and purchase intention.

In this study, we categorise humour as an intrinsic cue of memes, as memes often rely on the principles of easily processable and humorous information. Therefore, humour is established as a common denominator across memes. For example, the study by Sewak et al. (2025) treated humour as an intrinsic cue of memes that explains increased consumer engagement. However,

the study did not investigate how humour functions and what particular humour is the most effective. Therefore, we argue that different humour styles can serve as separate intrinsic cues, which brands can utilise to signal specific social intent. For instance, previous research shows that the use of sarcasm in brand memes can signal malicious intent to consumers, which can have a negative effect on attitude (Shen et al., 2024). In the following, we will illustrate how different humour styles can signal social intent, as well as describe which signals we propose to be impactful in driving consumer engagement for meme marketing.

Martin et al. (2003) initially conceptualised four different humour styles that correspond to different emotions and motivations connected to the sender: affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating. The humour styles can be divided into two categories, jokes made towards others (affiliative and aggressive), and jokes made about oneself (self-enhancing and self-defeating). Affiliative humour is characterised as joking around with others to strengthen relationships and make people feel good. This is linked with positive emotional states, such as warmth and cheerfulness. In contrast, the aggressive humour style is used to demean others, without regard for its consequences. This is associated with high neuroticism and viewed as an outlet for aggression. Next, self-enhancing humour revolves around the portrayal of stress and adversity in a positive, humorous manner. Here, humour is used as a coping mechanism by reframing adversity to hide negative emotions, such as anxiety. Lastly, the self-defeating style is characterised by self-mockery in an attempt to gain social approval. This is associated with negative emotions such as depression and emotional neediness. Based on this typology, affiliative and self-enhancing humour are suggested to be beneficial for signalling positive social emotions, whereas the aggressive and self-defeating styles are the negative counterparts (Martin et al., 2003).

Since internet memes have been shown to facilitate the successful use of the potential harmful humour styles (Malodia et al., 2022), we turn to Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) who adapted the four styles to this context. The authors propose that analysing the different styles within memes can offer insights into how they can positively influence the audience's interpretations and behavioural reactions based on the social intent of the memes. Therefore, we briefly introduce how their typology of humour styles in user-generated memes translates to the brand-generated meme environment. Firstly, memes based on affiliative humour act as a low-risk cue that can signal brand friendliness and accessibility. These often involve the participation in silly online trends. Secondly, self-enhancing humour can be used to highlight a brand's resilience or as a way to showcase its positive attributes, for example joking that their product, while inferior, is cheaper than alternatives. Aggressive humour can be observed by brands mocking or 'roasting' their competitors. These brand memes can signal dominance and edginess. Lastly, self-defeating humour can signal relatability and authenticity by entertaining consumers at the brand's expense. For instance, Ryanair making jokes about their strict carry-on policy which consumers can directly relate to.

The effectiveness of the specific humour styles is rooted in three foundational humour theories: incongruity, superiority, and relief (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2004). Together, they explain the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive consumer responses elicited by memes. The incongruity theory emphasises the cognitive process of recognizing and understanding the violation of an expected pattern. In a meme marketing context, this mechanism is evoked through dissonance that users feel inclined to resolve. For example, the viral video of a 77-year-

old museum curator using Gen Z slang (National Gallery of Art, 2026) showcases a clear incongruity between generational vernacular and the museum as a heritage place of culture. This meme represents the self-enhancing humour style, as it successfully resolves the negative associations of museums as traditionally boring with the humorous cue in order to signal coolness. Notably, humour styles and theories are not mutually exclusive, meaning that a singular humour style may be examined through the lens of multiple humour theories. For example, affiliative humour can also be based on incongruities, such as the Denny's meme posted on Twitter (*Figure 2*) (Denny's Diner, 2019). The incongruity arises from a violation of the traditional use of the meme template, which usually showcases some form of positive transformation. Here, the humour style cue is utilised to evoke the social intent signals trust and goodwill.



Figure 2 Denny's Diner Meme (Denny's Diner, 2019)

Superiority theory interprets humour as an emotional function that enables the performer to portray themselves as confident and enhance their self-esteem (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2004). This materialises in the subject of the joke becoming inferior and is a widely used strategy in meme marketing. Superiority theory underpins the aggressive humour style, which can be observed in the popular 'meme war' between fast food chains on social media. For instance, Wendy's posting a picture of a McDonald's in flames (*Figure 3*) (Wendy's, 2024). Here, the humour style undermines the seriousness of the situation, signalling domination and superiority. Loyal Wendy's consumers appreciate this edginess as it allows them to reinforce their held beliefs that their favourite fast-food brand is powerful. The self-defeating humour style can also benefit from the emotion of superiority, as it allows brands to strategically portray themselves as the flawed humour subject, thereby lifting the consumer into a superior position. In turn, this can signal relatability and authenticity, as the brand acknowledges that it is not perfect, thus enabling eye-to-eye interaction.

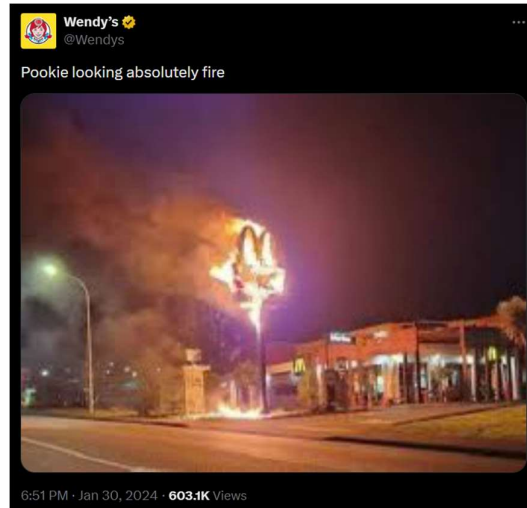


Figure 3 Wendy's Meme (Wendy's, 2024)

Finally, relief theory addresses the physiological function of humour, describing laughter as a means to cope with physiological tension (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2004). Humour helps release nervous energy that arises from obedience to sociocultural inhibitions and suppressing natural desires. Memes are often used as social commentary and are a valuable tool for addressing culturally taboo topics, thus successfully lending themselves to fulfil this release function (Wang et al., 2025). Common themes explained by relief theory include sexuality and aggressiveness (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2004). These are often featured in the aggressive humour style, while also applicable to other styles. For example, Adobe adopting the affiliative humour style by posting a comically large aubergine emoji, commonly used to refer to the male phallus, with the caption “Haters will say it’s photoshopped” (Figure 4) (Vaičiulaitytė, 2019).



Figure 4 Adobe Meme (Vaičiulaitytė, 2019)

Previous research found that the self-defeating humour style significantly increases the chance of a meme to generate higher engagement compared to the other humour styles (Malodia et al., 2022; Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong, 2015). Drawing on CUT, self-defeating humour may act as an intrinsic cue that elicits two relevant social intent signals: authenticity and relatability. According to schema theory, “people organise, interpret, and utilise schemata through cognitive structures known as schemas” (Ou et al., 2026, p.3). Over time, consumers establish advertising schemas that are shaped by traditional characteristics of marketing communications. This leads to the expectation that brands are promotional, self-congratulatory, and focused on positive messaging. However, self-defeating humour violates this boastful brand schema, signalling authenticity, as the brand is breaking the script at its own expense. For instance, Bitterly and Schweitzer (2019) propose that consumers infer the motivations of the brand based on its communication and that humorous statements can convey positive motives. Thereby, the disclosure of negative information can enhance perceptions of trustworthiness. This may result in consumers interpreting the disclosure as authentic, rather than strategically performed. Similarly, messages that resolve incongruity have been shown to elicit increased attention and positive attitude (Bhaduri et al., 2017). Furthermore, Kale and Sayin (2024) suggest that self-deprecating advertisements foster brand trust by reducing consumer scepticism and increasing the brand’s social appeal.

The cultural dimension of memes is captured by relatability signalling, as it solidifies the brand as part of the online community. Malodia et al. (2022) describe relevance, for example cultural symbolism, as a prominent aspect of viral memes. The significance of relatability is further showcased by Shifman’s (2011) findings that consumers are more likely to engage when they feel superior or at the level of the sender. This is underpinned by the superiority mechanism of humour, thereby catering to a shared identification. Furthermore, relief theory may explain why self-defeating humour often signals both authenticity and relatability by resolving the tension around the brand’s exposed flaw through humour. As solving incongruities through humour releases the tension of the schema violation, it ensures that the violation results in positive rather than negative responses (Bhaduri et al., 2017). Although affiliative humour may also signal relatability, it lacks the schema violation that makes the authenticity signal of self-defeating humour persuasive. Based on the aforementioned theories, we propose that self-defeating humour systemically exhibits these signals stronger than the other humour styles, which may lead to higher consumer engagement. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses which are depicted in the research model (*Figure 5*):

H1: Brand memes utilizing a self-defeating humour style will result in significantly higher consumer engagement compared to other humour styles.

H2: The relationship between self-defeating humour and consumer engagement is mediated by authenticity.

H3: The relationship between self-defeating humour and consumer engagement is mediated by relatability.

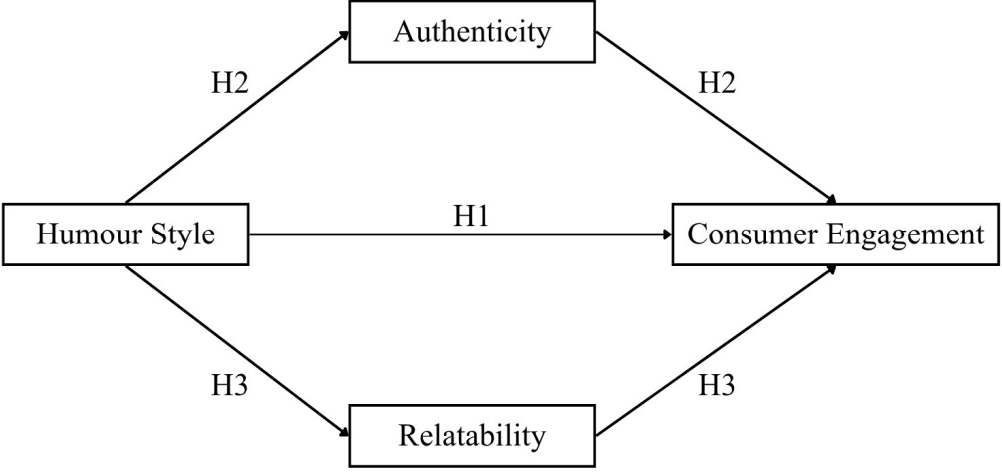


Figure 5 Research Model

4 Methodology

This section will outline how we collected the data to answer our research question and why we deemed a quantitative content analysis to be the appropriate approach.

4.1 Research Design and Approach

To investigate whether brand memes based on different humour styles result in divergent levels of consumer engagement, and whether authenticity and relatability signals mediate this relationship, a quantitative content analysis of memes posted by brand accounts on Instagram Reels was conducted. This research method was chosen because it allows for the systematic comparison of the different humour styles in practice. Due to the lack of prior research, we argue that a quantitative approach was necessary to establish whether there are noticeable differences between the effects of humour styles on engagement. We considered conducting an experimental survey, however the notion was dismissed due to the limitation surrounding the measurement of engagement metrics based on behavioural intentions. Similarly, the experiment setting may detrimentally impact the respondents' cognitive involvement when exposed to the memes. Furthermore, we wanted to test our hypotheses on a variety of real-world brands, as previous research has mostly investigated the effects of humour styles on fictitious brands or singular industries (Agrawal et al., 2024; Sewak et al., 2025). Therefore, the content analysis also avoids potential bias that could be introduced from previous brand attitudes or familiarity. However, the chosen method does not allow for the investigation of the underlying psychological effects of the humour styles, nor whether how the signals are interpreted by consumers. Additionally, it does not allow for the examination of potential demographic differences, nor for the control of potentially confounding variables, such as social media usage. Therefore, the content analysis was chosen to serve as an exploratory method to provide a foundation for further research. Thereby, we adopt a realist ontology by positing that humour styles and social intent signals are observable, and consequently measurable, elements of brand memes that can have an impact on consumer engagement. Furthermore, we follow a positivist epistemological approach by aggregating empirical observations which are deductively analysed in a standardised coding process.

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection Methods

The studied population is brand memes on social media. The sampling frame consisted of memes that were posted on Instagram Reels by official brand accounts between March 2021 and March 2026. Instagram Reels were chosen as it is currently the second most used social

media platform (behind YouTube) by Gen Z consumers (Pew Research Center, 2025) and to extend meme research to this platform. We chose this time period to capture recent social media trends and believe it to be sufficient to capture data that hasn't been impacted by major platform changes or influential events (e.g., Covid). Additionally, since Reels were officially launched by Instagram in August 2020, brands have had the time to establish and refine their meme marketing strategies.

The sampling was conducted by the purposive selection of Reels found on brand pages. First, brands known to employ meme marketing on Instagram were searched. Popular brands with established meme marketing strategies include RyanAir, Duolingo, and Wendy's. From there, other brands engaging in meme marketing were commonly identified in their comment sections. Later, we resorted to directly searching for various brand Instagram accounts and collected any Reel based on meme marketing. In total, we collected 339 Reels. Reels were excluded from the sample if they failed to meet the following criteria: publishing date within the established time window, Instagram Reel (short-form video), brand-generated, included humorous intent, and had at least 100 likes. Of the 339 Reels that were collected, 19 were excluded based on the criteria, and 10 were excluded after being used in a pilot coding sample. Ultimately, the sample consisted of 310 memes posted by 81 different brands. The final sample was comprised of Reels with low and high levels of engagement from brands across various industries, such as fast-food, aviation, and alcohol.

Prior to the data collection, a codebook was conceived to capture the relevant variables: humour styles, authenticity, and relatability (see *Appendix A*). Further details regarding each measure are discussed in the *Measures* section below. The codebook specifies how to code each variable and provides an example for each item. These examples were drawn from a pilot test of the measures, which consisted of 10 memes that were initially collected. Following the individual coding of these memes, an in-depth discussion was had to refine the codebook to enable more consistent coding. These 10 memes were then omitted from the final sample. For the data collection of the final sample, we coded each Reel separately and subsequently compared the scores. Disagreements between coders were settled through systematic discussion in accordance with the codebook instructions, resulting in a final consensus data set.

4.3 Data Analysis

The data was analysed using the Jamovi software. Prior to hypotheses testing, the descriptive statistics of the sample were drawn. Since the hypotheses specify the effects of self-defeating humour in comparison to the other three humour styles combined, the humour style variable was dummy coded. Specifically, self-defeating humour was coded as 1 and the remaining styles were coded as 0. To statistically test whether brand memes based on self-defeating humour elicit higher consumer engagement, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The significance threshold was set to $p < .05$. Although the Shapiro-Wilk test statistic was significant, visual assessment of the histograms revealed an approximately normal distribution. Further, the results of a Mann-Whitney *U* test yielded the same results as the Student's *t*-test. The Levene's test was conducted to assess the homogeneity of variance. To test H2 and H3, a

generalised linear mediation analysis was conducted using the medmod module in Jamovi. Since the sample size exceeded 50, bias-corrected bootstrapping was utilised to account for the non-symmetric sample distribution. Therefore, the bootstrapped confidence intervals (95%, $n = 5000$) were the criterion for determining significance (Demming et al., 2017). Ultimately, the effect was considered significant if the confidence interval excluded zero.

4.4 Measures

4.4.1 Independent Variable: Humour Style

The humour style variable was coded into the four categories based on Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong's (2015) meme humour typology. Each reel was coded as exhibiting one dominant humour style, making them mutually exclusive: "Affiliative", "Aggressive", "Self-enhancing", or "Self-defeating". Affiliative memes were defined as those that conveyed amusing content with the primary intent to bond with the audience. Generally, these affiliative memes feature humour that is simple and is unrelated to the brand. Next, aggressive memes were classified as generating humour at the expense of a third party, such as a competitor or the target audience. Aggressive memes frame a competitor as incompetent in providing the same level of service, or argue that the consumer base is unreasonable, for example. Third, self-enhancing memes were described as using brand-specific humour to resolve an incongruity or adversity. This style places the brand on a metaphorical pedestal, framing it as capable. Finally, we determined self-defeating memes to be those that entertain the viewer at the expense of the posting brand, commonly by acknowledging an existing brand-specific flaw. For example, the brand may joke about its own policies or a past public mistake.

4.4.2 Mediating Variable 1: Authenticity

Authenticity was operationalised as the degree to which a brand meme discloses genuine information about the brand or product/service rather than strategically managing its brand image (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019; Kale and Sayin, 2024). Thus, featuring honest, non-promotional, and transparent brand intent. Current research contends that consumers seek brands that they perceive as authentic (Beverland, 2005; Bruhn et al., 2012; Holt, 2002; Morhart et al., 2015). Therefore, memes that are intended to signal authenticity incorporate several aspects such as originality, transparency, and decoupling from commercial interests. The variable was measured by three binary items, which were combined into a composite score. Here, agreement with the statement was coded as 1, whereas disagreement was coded as 0. The three items are: (1) 'The meme's primary purpose is to entertain rather than product promotion or sales conversion.', (2) 'The brand discloses something about itself that works against its own commercial self-interest.', and (3) 'The humour is based on the brand's own characteristics, behaviour, or identity rather than generic jokes.'

Item 1 was built upon Holt's (2002) assertion that consumers perceive brands as authentic only when the brand's message is perceived as disinterested or disconnected from commercial

motives. This separates brand memes that include clear product promotion, discount offers, and calls to action from those that avoid these traditional advertising strategies. By showing that the brand does not solely care about commercial interests, and that it is willing to shift away from formal structures, the meme signals authenticity (Beverland, 2005). Item 2 isolated memes that clearly acknowledge a known shortcoming of the brand. In the social media context, Lee and Eastin (2021) identify visibility as a core construct of authenticity, which is based on transparency. Item 3 was derived from the originality dimension of authenticity which is built upon how unique a brand is and its ability to stand out (Bruhn et al., 2012). This item measured how memes generate humour from brand-specific references and is rooted in the question of whether this meme could be successful if another brand posted it. This informs the consumer that the content is one of a kind, thereby signalling authenticity.

4.4.3 Mediating Variable 2: Relatability

We operationalised relatability as the degree to which a brand positions itself on the same level as, or below, the target audience, signalling a shared identity. To the best of our knowledge, there is no specific relatability measure for social media content. In this context, relatability is rooted in how the brand meme is intended to create a bond with the consumer in a conversational and human tone (Hayes et al., 2021). Additionally, literature surrounding parasocial interaction explains how a brand can use online communications to build positive and strong relationships with consumers (Labrecque, 2014). Like authenticity, the variable was measured on three items which were combined into a final composite score. Agreement with the statement was coded as 1, whereas disagreement was coded as 0. The three items were: (1) ‘The meme portrays an experience or situation wherein the brand interacts with the consumer.’, (2) ‘The meme employs a shared cultural reference, as in meme format, trending audio or pop-culture reference.’, and (3) ‘The meme features a conversational, peer-level tone through informal language, direct audience address, or self-awareness.’

When an interaction with a brand is perceived as more interactive, the consumer-brand relationship strengthens (Hayes et al., 2021). Thus, item 1 discerned memes that portray a consumer-brand interaction, real or implied. Malodia et al.’s (2022) findings that a meme should be relevant provided the basis for item 2. Thus, a shared cultural reference, or a familiar meme template, increases the likelihood of finding the content relevant, thus enabling the consumer to relate to a greater extent. Finally, the focus of item 3 is the rhetorical language that is used in the text overlaying the video, or in the caption. The use of second-person pronouns to address the audience directly allows the consumer to feel a sense of personal involvement (Razzaq et al., 2024). Additionally, this creates a more human-like representation of the brand which consumers are more likely to interact with (Chen and Fu, 2017).

4.4.4 Dependent Variable: Engagement

Existing formulas for consumer engagement often contend that social media engagement should be calculated by combining the total number of likes and comments divided by the number of followers (Oviedo-Garcia et al., 2014, Putranto et al., 2022; Trunfio and Rossi, 2021). In interviews of brand managers, Malodia et al. (2022) found that they calculate engagement measures for posts by using a ratio of total interactions divided by the number of followers. For this study, we adapted the measures by applying the COBRAs (Consumer's Online Brand-Related Activities) framework to develop a more accurate and relevant metric for this study. The COBRAs framework contends that consumer interactions can be broken down into a three-level hierarchy: consuming, contributing, and creating (Muntinga et al., 2011). Consuming is considered the lowest level of interaction, while contribution is a medium level interaction, and creation is the highest level. For example, a consumer liking a brand's social media post is classified as a consumption interaction, whereas commenting on a post would constitute a contribution level interaction. The importance of transmission in memetic literature legitimises shares as a creation level activity for Instagram Reel memes. While reposts are an equally important creation activity, we exclude them from the measure due to the feature being recently added in August 2025. Posts made before this time will naturally have less reposts. Comments are considered secondary as the activity demands a high level of cognition and behaviour from the consumer; however, the contents of the messages can contradict the brand's message, or be completely unrelated to the post (Ge and Gretzel, 2017). Finally, liking a Reel requires the least amount of effort and it can be unclear whether every like represents a genuine interaction, thus making it the least valuable interaction in engagement metrics.

We propose a novel consumer engagement metric that employs a weighted ratio of the total number of interactions (likes * 1, comments * 2, and shares * 3) divided by the total number of views that the post has received. This is in line with Trunfio and Rossi's (2021) suggestion that social media engagement should be measured with weighted activities. Additionally, algorithmic recommendations to consumers that are not followers of the brand necessitate the use of views in place of followers. This formula provides a new way to understand the percentage of the actual viewers that were inclined to engage with a post. Furthermore, it attaches a specific value to each interaction type to more precisely reflect the levels of the COBRAs framework.

$$\text{Consumer Engagement Rate} = \frac{((Likes \times 1) + (Comments \times 2) + (Shares \times 3))}{\# \text{ of Views}}$$

Due to the limited availability of precise engagement data on Instagram, the views and likes were rounded to the nearest hundred if they fell below 10000, as posts with more views and likes are displayed rounded to the nearest hundred by Instagram.

4.5 Interrater Reliability

Two coders independently coded all 310 Reels. An interrater reliability analysis was conducted using the meddecide module in Jamovi (*Table 1*). For the nominal variables, Cohen’s Kappa was calculated to assess interrater reliability, while the continuous variables were assessed using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient ICC (2,1) (two-way random). The scale developed by Landis and Koch (1977) informed the interpretation of the results for the nominal variables. Koo and Li’s (2016) scale informed the interpretations of the continuous variables. The results indicated substantial agreement for authenticity item 2 ($\kappa = 0.673$) and moderate agreement for humour style ($\kappa = 0.501$), authenticity item 1 ($\kappa = 0.591$), authenticity item 3 ($\kappa = 0.555$), and composite authenticity (ICC = 0.692, 95% CI [0.628, 0.747]). All three items for relatability indicated fair agreement ($\kappa = 0.240 - 0.294$), with the composite relatability variable yielding poor-to-moderate agreement (ICC = 0.444, 95% CI [0.350, 0.530]). Many of the disagreements can be explained by the unfamiliarity with a popular meme format or a brand’s offering, and uncertainty surrounding whether a presented brand flaw was relevant to the brand itself. Further limitations of the scale will be discussed in the limitations section. However, the final analysis was conducted using the consensus scores.

Table 1 Interrater Reliability

Variable	Cohen’s κ	ICC (2,1) [95% CI]	Agreement %	Interpretation
Humour Style	0.501	-	65%	Moderate
Authenticity Item 1	0.591	-	88%	Moderate
Authenticity Item 2	0.673	-	88%	Substantial
Authenticity Item 3	0.555	-	79%	Moderate
Relatability Item 1	0.288	-	65%	Fair
Relatability Item 2	0.240	-	66%	Fair
Relatability Item 3	0.294	-	70%	Fair
Composite Authenticity	-	0.692 [0.628, 0.747]	62%	Moderate
Composite Relatability	-	0.444 [0.350, 0.530]	48%	Poor to Moderate

5 Results

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

The self-defeating humour style showed the highest mean consumer engagement ($M = 6.58$, $SD = 5.02$), authenticity ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.24$), and relatability ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.78$) scores, compared to the other humour styles. *Table 2* showcases the mean scores for the other humour styles. Notably, the assumption of normality was violated across all three variables (Shapiro-Wilk $p < .001$). *Figures 6, 7, and 8* display the bar plots of engagement, authenticity, and relatability.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics

	Humour Style	N	Mean	SD
Engagement	Self-defeating	50	6.58	5.019
	Affiliative	126	4.91	4.324
	Aggressive	47	4.62	4.921
	Self-enhancing	87	4.71	3.972
Authenticity	Self-defeating	50	2.94	0.240
	Affiliative	126	1.14	0.547
	Aggressive	47	1.74	0.736
	Self-enhancing	87	1.59	0.771
Relatability	Self-defeating	50	2.38	0.780
	Affiliative	126	1.87	0.794
	Aggressive	47	1.94	0.818
	Self-enhancing	87	1.97	0.738

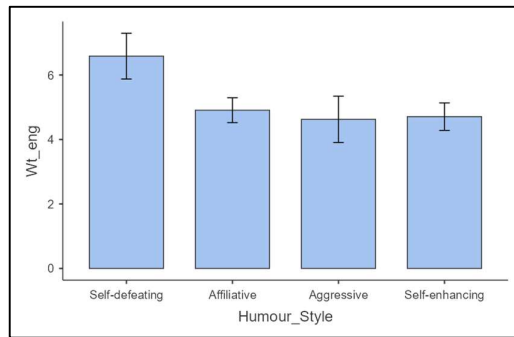


Figure 6 Bar Plot of Engagement

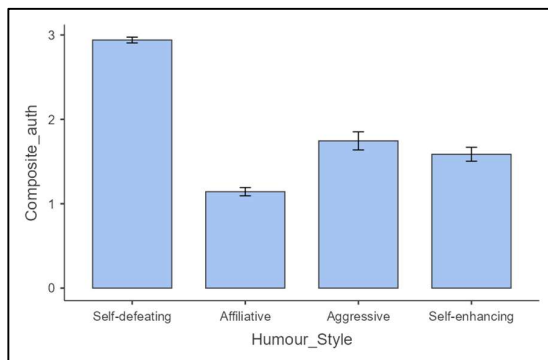


Figure 7 Bar Plot of Authenticity

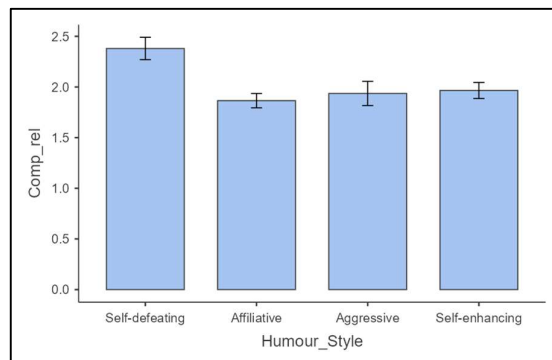


Figure 8 Bar Plot of Relatability

5.1.1 Correlations

To examine the relationships between relatability, authenticity, and consumer engagement, a correlation matrix was consulted (Table 3). The two mediators were positively correlated ($r = .190, p < .001$). Also, authenticity and consumer engagement were positively correlated ($r = .188; p < .001$), as well as relatability and consumer engagement ($r = .264, p < .001$). The correlation matrix is depicted in Figure 9 (Note: engagement is “wt_eng”, authenticity is “composite_auth”, and relatability is “comp_rel”).

Table 3 Correlation Matrix

		Engagement	Authenticity	Relatability
Engagement	Pearson's r	—		
	df	—		
	p -value	—		
Authenticity	Pearson's r	0.188	—	
	df	308	—	
	p -value	<.001	—	
Relatability	Pearson's r	0.264	0.190	—
	df	308	308	—
	p -value	<.001	<.001	—

Note. H_a is positive correlation

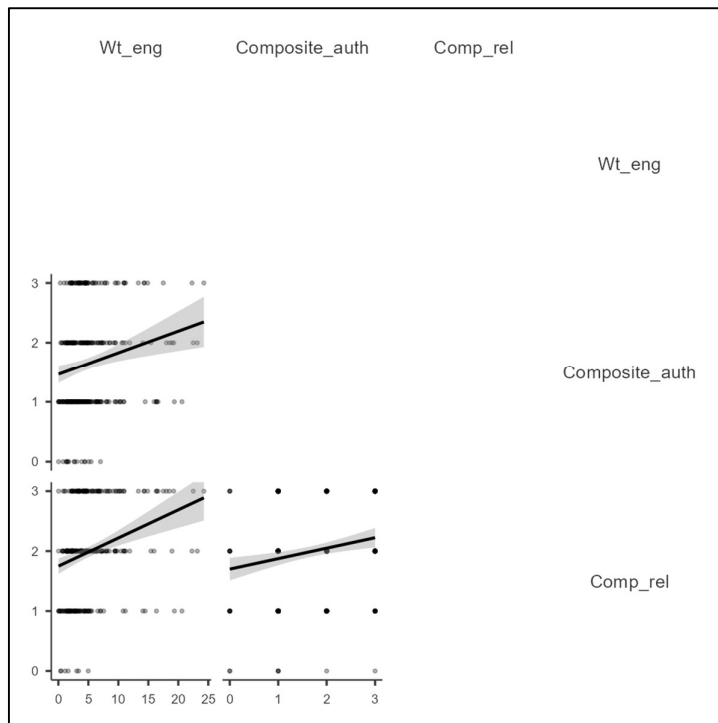


Figure 9 Correlation Matrix Plots

5.2 Hypothesis Testing

5.2.1 Humour Style and Consumer Engagement

Assumption checks indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's test $p = .21$). Although the Shapiro-Wilk indicated a violation of the assumption of normal distribution ($p = <.001$), visual inspection of histograms revealed an approximately normal distribution (Figure 10). Accordingly, we conducted an independent samples Student's t -test ($N = 310$). The results indicate that memes featuring a self-defeating humour style showed significantly higher consumer engagement ($M = 6.58, SD = 5.02$) than the other humour styles ($M = 4.79, SD = 4.31; t(308) = -2.62, p = .005, d = -0.405$) (Tables 4 and 5). As discussed in the *Methodology* section, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted, which confirmed the significant difference between the groups ($p < .001$). Therefore, H1 is supported.

Table 4 Independent Samples t -Test

		Statistic	df	p	Effect Size
Engagement	Student's t	-2.62	308	.005	Cohen's d -0.405

Note. $H_a \mu_0 < \mu_1$

Table 5 Independent Samples t -Test Group Descriptives

	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Engagement	0	260	4.79	3.45	4.31	0.267
	1	50	6.58	4.65	5.02	0.710

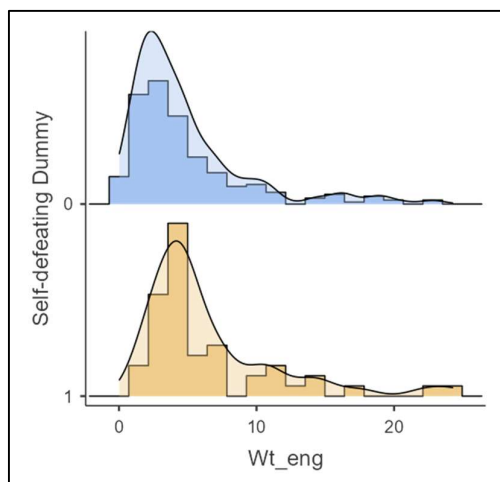


Figure 10 Histograms for Humour Style Dummy Variable and Engagement

5.2.2 Mediation Analysis: Authenticity as a Mediator

The results of the generalised linear model show that self-defeating humour significantly predicts higher authenticity scores compared to the other humour styles ($B = 1.5400$, $SE = 0.101$, 95% CI [1.424, 1.643], $\beta = 0.65379$, $z = 15.2127$, $p < .001$) (Table 6). Additionally, authenticity is a significant positive predictor of consumer engagement ($B = 0.7182$, $SE = 0.370$, 95% CI [0.101, 1.397], $\beta = 0.13935$, $z = 1.9413$, $p = .052$). Furthermore, the indirect effect indicates that authenticity significantly and positively mediates the relationship between self-defeating humour and consumer engagement ($B = 1.1060$, $SE = 0.574$, 95% CI [0.151, 2.178], $\beta = 0.09111$, $z = 1.9257$, $p = .054$). Therefore, H2 is supported.

Table 6 Indirect and Component Effects via Authenticity

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% C.I. (a)		β	z	p
			Lower	Upper			
Self-defeating vs other styles \Rightarrow Authenticity	1.5400	0.101	1.424	1.643	0.65379	15.2127	<.001
Authenticity \Rightarrow Engagement	0.7182	0.370	0.101	1.397	0.13935	1.9413	.052
Self-defeating vs other styles \Rightarrow Authenticity \Rightarrow Engagement	1.1060	0.574	0.151	2.178	0.09111	1.9257	.054

5.2.3 Mediation Analysis: Relatability as a Mediator

Analysis of the component path to relatability shows that self-defeating humour also significantly predicted higher relatability scores compared to the other styles ($B = 0.4685$, $SE = 0.120$, 95% CI [0.225, 0.701], $\beta = 0.21672$, $z = 3.9086$, $p < .001$) (Table 7). Additionally, relatability is a significant positive predictor of consumer engagement ($B = 1.3265$, $SE = 0.312$, 95% CI [0.715, 1.936], $\beta = 0.23619$, $z = 4.2451$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, there is a significant positive mediation of the effects of the self-defeating humour style on consumer engagement via relatability ($B = 0.6214$, $SE = 0.216$, 95% CI [0.272, 1.135], $\beta = 0.05119$, $z = 2.8754$, $p = .004$). Therefore, H3 is supported.

Table 7 Indirect and Component Effects via Relatability

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% C.I. (a)		β	z	p
			Lower	Upper			
Self-defeating vs other styles \Rightarrow Relatability	0.4685	0.120	0.225	0.701	0.21672	3.9086	<.001
Relatability \Rightarrow Engagement	1.3265	0.312	0.715	1.936	0.23619	4.2451	<.001
Self-defeating vs other styles \Rightarrow Relatability \Rightarrow Engagement	0.6214	0.216	0.272	1.135	0.05119	2.8754	.004

5.2.4 Mediation Analysis: Direct and Total Effects

Confirming the results of the independent samples t-test, the mediation analysis (Table 8) shows that a significant total effect exists between self-defeating humour and engagement ($B = 1.7954$, $SE = 0.683$, 95% CI [0.409, 3.434], $\beta = 0.14789$, $z = 2.6286$, $p = .009$). The direct effect is non-significant ($B = 0.0680$, $SE = 0.876$, 95% CI [-1.733, 1.910], $\beta = 0.00560$, $z = 0.0776$, $p = .938$), suggesting that the indirect effects explain the relationship between self-defeating humour and engagement.

Table 8 Direct and Total Effects of Self-Defeating Humour on Engagement Compared to the Other Humour Styles

Type	Estimate	SE	95% C.I. (a)		β	z	p
			Lower	Upper			
Direct	0.0680	0.876	-1.733	1.910	0.00560	0.0776	.938
Total	1.7954	0.683	0.409	3.434	0.14789	2.6286	.009

5.3 General Discussion

This study examined to what extent a meme's humour style impacts consumer engagement and which social intent signals mediate that relationship. A content analysis of brand Instagram Reels was conducted to test our hypotheses. The results show that different humour styles elicit different levels of engagement by signalling authenticity and relatability. H1 was supported, meaning that self-defeating humour produces higher consumer engagement compared to all

other styles combined. H2 and H3 were also supported, as the effects of memes based on self-defeating humour are mediated by the two social intent signals, authenticity and relatability. Overall, the findings confirm the expected relationships outlined in the theoretical framework. In the following, we will discuss the results in further detail.

5.3.1 Hypothesis 1: Direct Effect of Humour Style

The observation that self-defeating humour significantly increases consumer engagement, compared to the affiliative, aggressive, and self-enhancing humour styles is consistent with extant literature. Our study replicates Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong's (2015) findings in the Instagram Reels context, suggesting that the leverage of self-defeating humour is not bound to a specific social media platform, media format, or author (user vs brand). This provides support for the notion that humour styles play an important role in multimodal communication such as Instagram Reels or audiovisual content in general. Like Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015), we observed that affiliative humour was among the most frequently used humour styles, however we found that self-defeating and aggressive humour styles were the least frequently found in our sample. This is in contrast to their findings that aggressive humour is used as often as the affiliative style. This difference may be explained by their sample consisting of user-generated memes, while ours investigated brand-generated memes. Traditional brand communications project professionalism and competence, whereas self-defeating and aggressive humour carry the risk of being perceived as inappropriate (Chen et al., 2022). However, as indicated by our results, these risks may be mitigated by the humorous delivery itself.

Previous research indicates that negative self-disclosure in the form of humour may actually reduce perceived truthfulness by making the self-critique seem less serious (Hoang, et al., 2023). Thus, humour may act as a mechanism to mitigate the potential risks of self-defeating brand content and in turn, enables brands to close the psychological distance to its audience (Chen et al, 2022; Hoang et al., 2023). Importantly, while the difference in consumer engagement between the humour styles is statistically significant, the observed effect size is relatively small. While this was expected considering the hypothesised mediation, the opaque nature of social media algorithms and its effects on engagement is worth discussing. Social media engagement metrics are known to be highly skewed due to the recommendation mechanisms of the platform's algorithm (Metzler and Garcia, 2023). Although individuals and brands attempt to 'game the system' by utilizing tactics such as click-baiting, the content which ends up being recommended to users cannot be fully understood (Metzler and Garcia, 2023). The sizeable variance of views and engagement between posts from the same brand was also observed in our sample. For instance, four of five *Manscaped* posts had an average of 27,900 views (e.g. *Figure 11*), whereas one single post went viral eclipsing 41 million views (*Figure 12*). While the viral post scored comparably to the other posts on the authenticity measurement, it received the highest relatability score. This may explain why this particular meme received more initial engagement, leading to its propagation by users and the algorithm. Therefore, we will discuss the role of the two mediators and how these signals may function



Figure 11 Manscaped Reel with a Relatability Score of 1 (Manscaped, 2025)



Figure 12 Viral Manscaped Reel with a Relatability Score of 3 (Manscaped, 2024)

5.3.2 Hypothesis 2: Mediation via Authenticity

As predicted, self-defeating humour appears to successfully signal authenticity. This result is consistent with Kale and Sayin's (2024) findings that self-deprecating advertisements reduce perceived self-serving motives and with Bitterly and Schweitzer's (2019) proposition that humorous self-disclosures make the sender appear more truthful, in this case authentic. In this context, memes that are based on self-defeating humour allow for the incorporation of authenticity signals, such as deviation from traditional advertising tactics (i.e., boastful product claims) and embracing the social and entertaining functions of Instagram. This aligns with Holt's (2002) notion that brands attempt to project authenticity through commercial disinterestedness. Interestingly, his prediction that in the future "the question of authenticity will shift focus on the brand's contribution as a cultural resource" (Holt, 2002, p. 87) is perfectly illuminated by meme marketing.

Since memes are culturally transmitted symbols and meanings, brands can benefit from engaging in a cultural exchange with consumers instead of solely focusing on commercial motives. Here, the self-defeating humour style lends itself to signal that a brand is not engaging in strategic impression management by acknowledging imperfections about itself (Audrezet et al., 2018). This logic is what appears to set the humour style apart from the self-enhancing and aggressive humour styles. We propose two main considerations for the mediating effects of authenticity signalling.

Firstly, the measurement of authenticity in this study cannot fully capture whether consumers actually perceive the meme as authentic. Authenticity is a complex, multi-dimensional concept that can be conceptualised in different ways (Morhart et al., 2015). The present study operationalised authenticity from an objective perspective, meaning the brand memes exhibit observable signals that reliably elicit perceived authenticity. However, the theoretical mechanisms through which authenticity elicits consumer engagement is inherently constructivist. This perspective considers authenticity to not be an inherent quality of a subject, but rather the outcome of an individual's projection of beliefs, expectations, and perspectives surrounding, in this case, the brand (Wang, 1999). Consequently, a meme may feature observable indicators of an attempt to signal authenticity, yet the individual consumers may not perceive the brand as authentic based on previous brand knowledge or scepticism. This gap between the objectivist measurement and the constructivist mechanism makes it difficult to generalise how authenticity can be manufactured. For example, in a study of authenticity cues in beer advertisements by Beverland et al. (2008), interviewees pointed to different cues that signal authenticity to different extents. However, as CUT posits, consumers rely on accessible cues, rather than systematic evaluation (Easterbrook, 1959). Therefore, the automatic, heuristic processing that underlies social media usage (Cho and Woo, 2025), may enable the self-defeating humour style to successfully transmit the authenticity signal, thus increasing engagement activities.

5.3.3 Hypothesis 3: Mediation via Relatability

The finding that memes based on self-defeating humour consistently exhibit relatability signals are consistent with previous literature that describes the potential of self-defeating disclosures to facilitate brand-consumer closeness (Chen et al., 2022, Hoang et al., 2023). More importantly, the mediation by relatability aligns closely with the findings of extant social media research. For instance, Malodia et al. (2022) found that relevance, of which relatability is a key part, is a driver of user-generated meme virality. Thereby, content that reflects the audience's own experiences is more likely to garner increased engagement. Our study empirically supports this and extends the context to brand-generated memes on Instagram Reels. Similarly, Taecharunroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) suggest that self-defeating memes uniquely reflect shared experiences that the audience recognises as their own. Thus, when a brand humorously frames its own shortcomings, it may lower the distance between itself and the consumer, inviting the audience to laugh with the brand. This parallels the inverted superiority mechanism addressed in the *Theoretical Framework*.

5.4 Mediation: Authenticity and Relatability

The observed mediation indicates that the effect of humour style cues on engagement is explained by the two social intent signals. This is consistent with other applications of Cue Utilization Theory in the digital context that explain the effects of cues via second-order effects, such as trust (Konuk, 2021; Ryu, 2024; Yang et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2020), and the findings of Shen et al. (2024), who investigated the role of informational cues in memes. Therefore, a

particular humour style cue does not simply lead to higher engagement, but rather through inferences consumers make based on them. Revisiting the relief theory and superiority humour mechanisms (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004) offers additional insights for why these two signals mediate the relationship. Social media offers the unique affordance for brands to directly interact with the consumer in a non-commercially motivated way, thus breaking the mental scheme of advertising. Thereby, the tension of expecting yet another persuasion attempt by a brand is resolved in an unexpectedly, humorous way. Consequently, this tension release may produce a positive effect that directly translates into liking or sharing the post with friends. Additionally, the brand portrays itself as a reachable peer, rather than an untouchable entity (Chen et al., 2022). The instantaneous interpretation of the cue does not require any cognitive evaluation of the brand or the content, which may explain why it is effective. Considering the important role of sharing in meme culture. If someone shares a meme with a friend, triggered by authenticity, the receiver may perceive the sender as vouching for the meme, thus choosing to interact with the brand. Similarly, a meme that is shared due to its relatability is more likely to also be found relatable by the recipient, leading to consequent engagement. This could be explained by the concept of in-group referencing, which posits that individuals of the same social group share common preferences and characteristics (Gaertner and Schopler, 1998).

6 Conclusion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes several theoretical contributions to previous research regarding meme marketing on social media. The discovery of humour style as a cue, and the identification of the effects of those cues on consumers, are the most significant theoretical contributions of this paper. Specifically, the findings of this study add to the understanding of how humour contributes to a meme's success by uncovering the social intent signals that are conveyed by the different humour cues.

Cue Utilization Theory has previously been applied to various social media contexts (Yang et al., 2020), including humour as a cue in memes specifically (Sewak et al., 2025). However, previous research has not investigated the potential differences between humour style cues, nor observed these differences in the real-world setting. Furthermore, previous studies focused mainly on static images and not the more complex audiovisual media. Based on the results, we argue that the low cognitive effort required for scrolling Instagram Reels enables senders to convey information to its audience via cues in the form of humour styles. Specifically, by showing that the self-defeating humour cue is capable of eliciting increased consumer engagement, we establish humour as a central intrinsic cue of brand memes. Moreover, this study reveals that authenticity and relatability are important social signals that may drive consumer engagement. This provides a foundation for further research into how these signals are perceived by consumers and whether the behavioural outcome is directly related to these signals. Additionally, this underpins the understanding of memes as culturally and socially charged digital items which can be strategically used as communication devices.

While previous research mainly shows that humour is a key driver of consumer engagement (Ge and Gretzel, 2017; Sewak et al., 2025), this study identified the most potent humour style. Furthermore, the findings of this study empirically discovered authenticity and relatability to be the social intent signals that may explain the success of the self-defeating humour style. Thereby, we extend the typology of meme humour styles developed by Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) to the context of brand memes. We argue that this expanded typology is necessary to investigate the use of humour by brands specifically, as social media platforms enable peer-to-peer like interactions between brands and consumers that differs from user-to-user communication (Agrawal et al., 2014; Hudson et al., 2015). Consequently, the identified signals that can be transmitted by brands utilizing different humour styles are a valuable contribution to the understanding of how brands can systematically leverage humour outside of traditional commercial communication. In the same vein, while Martin et al. (2003) suggest that the use of self-defeating humour can signal negative emotions, such as low self-esteem,

this study shows that memes based on this humour style can elicit a positive outcome for the sender (i.e., brands).

Third, by showing that authenticity and relatability signals contribute to a brand memes success, we extend extant literature examining the drivers of meme virality in the marketing context. While there is overlap with the findings of Malodia et al.'s (2022) relevance dimension, the authenticity signal is a novel finding that may explain why some brand memes are more successful than others. Moreover, these dimensions may also be relevant for user-generated memes in general, presenting further explanations as to why memes are popular formats on social media.

Lastly, we introduced a novel formula to measure engagement on short-form video platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, explicitly accounting for algorithmic reach and the varying levels of user involvement across different interactions (i.e., likes, comments, and shares). In doing so, we extend Trunfio and Rossi's (2021) aggregated list of social media engagement metrics to include Instagram, which is currently the most widely used social media platform for short-form video content.

By applying and adapting the already established frameworks, this study augments the understanding of successful internet memes in the contemporary social media context. Also, by further exploring the mechanisms of meme marketing, the results provide a theoretical and empirical basis for further research.

6.2 Managerial and Practical Implications

In addition to the theoretical contributions, our study provides several actionable insights for brand managers and marketers interested in employing meme marketing, specifically on Instagram Reels. Our analysis of brand-specific memes provides practical insights for crafting a meme marketing strategy. Brands seeking to increase consumer engagement and signal both authenticity and relatability should post memetic content based on self-defeating humour. Our findings suggest numerous ways to achieve this, for instance by publishing content that positions the brand as a conversational human participant in the online meme community.

Firstly, brands should be aware of the humour styles they employ in their messaging. When applicable, self-defeating humour lends itself to signal authenticity and relatability, which can increase consumer engagement. This is especially important, as less effective styles, such as affiliative and self-enhancing, are most commonly utilised, despite their significantly lower engagement rates. Self-defeating memes are also a valuable tool for brand managers to reflect on their brand's image. This enables them to utilise publicly recognised flaws to signal authenticity or relatability, rather than engaging in counter-messaging which may have detrimental effects. *Duolingo*, for example, acknowledges that its notification system is perceived as invasive and annoying. The brand has successfully managed to turn this flaw into a humorous running gag, thereby normalising and garnering acceptance for their practice. Memes such as the one shown in *figure 13*, suggesting that their owl mascot will hunt you down to a nightclub to make sure you do your lesson, have become an important part of their meme

marketing strategy. Similarly, *Jeppson's Malört*, a wormwood liqueur brand, acknowledges that many people dislike its potent flavour, which the brand commonly jokes about. These memes effectively address widely recognised shortcomings of their brands, thus situating them as relating to the experiences of their consumers, while engaging in an authentic dialogue.



Figure 13 Duolingo Meme (Duolingo, 2026)

Secondly, as previous research has pointed out, self-deprecating humour is not suitable for certain messages or brands. However, marketers can still leverage the positive effects of signalling authenticity and relatability that is afforded by memes. Our conceptualization of authenticity and relatability provides inspiration for meme marketers regarding how to shape their content. For example, shifting away from traditional advertising styles by not mentioning commercial indicators (i.e., calls to action) encourages the motives behind the content to be interpreted as entertainment and commercially disinterested (Holt, 2002). In practice, memes that did this effectively were rewarded with higher engagement levels. Additionally, using familiar meme formats and relevant cultural references appear to exude relatability.

Finally, the weighted engagement metric developed and used in this study provides a more robust and relevant scale than those proposed in extant literature. As discussed in the *Methodology* section, the scale assigns different weights to likes, comments, and shares, thus offering a more nuanced account of how successful a post was. The developed metric provides a universal way for social media marketers to measure engagement, accounting for algorithmic reach, on different platforms.

6.3 Limitations & Future Research

The findings of this study are limited by several factors. Firstly, the humour styles in the sample were unequally distributed. In the sample of 310 memes, there was a considerably lower number of self-defeating and aggressive memes compared to affiliative and self-enhancing memes. Therefore, the combined humour styles may exhibit larger variance resulting in random differences between the two tested groups. Especially since self-defeating memes were mostly posted by brands with established meme marketing strategies (e.g. Ryanair and Duolingo), which generally receive higher consumer engagement. Therefore, future research should investigate the proposed relationships in an experimental setting to isolate the effects. Furthermore, an investigation into how the signals affect consumer perceptions is warranted.

Second, the item-level interrater reliability of several items was below the conventional threshold. More specifically, our items for relatability can all be interpreted as having “fair” agreement, while only one authenticity item scored “substantial”. The poor reliability of the relatability items can be explained by differing levels of knowledge about trending meme formats or cultural references between the coders. Additionally, the inherently subjective nature of the topic and items made consistent coding more difficult, as it relied on the coder’s interpretation of a meme. Regarding the authenticity measurement, the items may overlap with the theoretical definition of self-defeating memes. Consequently, the results showing the effects of self-defeating humour on authenticity may be inflated. However, the findings are still valuable for determining the role of authenticity signalling and the observed effectiveness of the self-defeating humour style. Consequently, more research into how memes can signal authenticity is needed. Moreover, further research is necessary to investigate whether the two social intent signals are cognitively perceived by consumers.

Next, the results of this study are not industry specific, thus prohibiting a generalisation of the results across all brand contexts. Hoang et al. (2023) show that resolving incongruities through humour can increase levels of firm competence. On the other hand, self-defeating humour specifically may have adverse effects for brands operating in high-involvement industries, due to signalling a lack of competence (Hoang et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2024). Additionally, this study only investigated English memes, therefore cultural differences between consumer groups are possible. Further studies should be conducted to investigate whether self-defeating humour is still effective at eliciting consumer engagement, or whether other social intent signals are more relevant, across different cultures and high-involvement industries (e.g., healthcare).

The fourth limitation of this study lies in the algorithmic nature of Instagram Reels as well as the method of gathering engagement metrics. Initially, Instagram’s repost metric was deemed important due to its level of required involvement, however, considering its release in August 2025 and the sampling time frame, we had to exclude it. Since the data was gathered at a single point in time, but the sampling frame spanned from March 2021 to March of 2026, it is possible that older posts may have accrued more views which could lead to less/more engagement. However, it should also be noted that Instagram posts have been found to, on average, receive half of their total engagement in the first 18 hours (Graffius, 2026). Finally, the Instagram Reels algorithm, as mentioned in the *Discussion* section, can lead to skewed engagement metrics.

Despite this, these metrics remain the prevailing measure of social media performance. Therefore, future research may benefit from longitudinal studies that could provide further insight into how different humour styles effect engagement over time.

6.4 Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of this study suggest that brand memes which use a self-defeating humour style generate higher levels of engagement compared to those which employ affiliative, aggressive, or self-enhancing humour. We further uncovered, through mediation analysis, that the effectiveness of this humour style is rooted in its ability to serve as a cue that signals authenticity and relatability. Thereby, we extend previous research to a relevant and popular social media platform and offer a foundation for future research. Researchers in the meme marketing realm can build upon our findings, analysing content on other platforms and across industries, to expand the understanding of meme marketing. Ultimately, this paper provides valuable insights for marketers and furthers the growing literature surrounding memes.

7 References

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Appendix A

Codebook

Variable definitions

Authenticity Item 1: Trad_deviate (0-1)

The meme deviates from traditional promotional content, lacking boastful product/service claims or the meme's primary purpose is to entertain rather than product promotion or sales conversion
Does the meme include price references or a traditional call-to-action?

If yes, code 0. If no, code 1

Code 0 if the caption reads "Don't forget to click the link in our bio to receive 10% off your first purchase"

Authenticity Item 2: Flaw_present (0-1)

The brand discloses something about itself that works against its own commercial self-interest
Would the brand be comfortable with this content being posted out of the meme context?

If yes, code 0. If no, code 1

Code 1 if the meme is posted by a fast food restaurant and mocks its slow service

Authenticity Item 3: Brand_hum_subj (0-1)

The humour is based on the brand's own characteristics, behaviour, or identity rather than "generic jokes"
Does the humour still work if the brand logo is replaced with a competitor or if a competitor were to post it?

If yes, code 0. If no, code 1

Code 1 if the meme's humour does not work the same way once you imagine a competitor posted it

Authenticity: Composite_auth (0-3)

The sum of the 3 binary items: 1-3

Reliability Item 1: Real_experience (0-1)

The meme portrays an experience or situation wherein the brand interacts with the consumer
Does the meme portray a real or implied interaction with a consumer?

If yes, code 1. If no, code 0

Code 1 if the meme is posted by a restaurant and portrays somebody at the drive-thru ordering, inside a restaurant, or eating

Reliability Item 2: Culture_ref (0-1)

The meme employs a trendy or known meme format (or variation of one), trending audio, or pop-culture reference
Can the target audience plausibly recognize aspects of the meme format? Does the audio have a significant number of plays?

If yes, code 1. If no, code 0

Code 1 if the meme says, "POV: you _____". (POV meme is the recognizable format)

Reliability Item 3: Consumer_sup (0-1)

The meme features a conversational, peer-level tone through informal language, direct audience address, or self-awareness
Does the text overlaying the video or the caption include second-person pronouns? Does it include slang?

If yes, code 1. If no, code 0

Code 1 if the caption reads "u aren't gonna believe this" - (This is both informal language and use of second-person pronouns)

Reliability: Composite_rel (0-3)

The sum of the 3 binary items: 1-3

Humour Style Definitions

Affiliative

The humour in the meme is primarily intended to entertain and amuse the audience.

Does the meme portray a sense of brand friendliness and bonding?

If yes, code "Affiliative"

Example: Tito's vodka posting a meme showing an espresso martini and saying that they can't figure out how to make a protein shake

Aggressive

The humour in the meme comes at the expense of a third party, such as a competitor or the consumer

Does the meme make fun of someone or something? Is the joke based on the brand being portrayed as dominant?

If yes, code "Aggressive"

Example: The meme is posted by an insurance company and mocks the fact that life is chaotic and parents are overbearing

Self-defeating

The humour in the meme is based upon exposing or acknowledging a known flaw or shortcoming of the brand

Does the brand acknowledge a past mistake or current flaw and joke about it? Does the brand portray themselves as equal or inferior to the consumer?

If yes, code "Self-defeating"

Example: "Self-defeating" if the meme is posted by RyanAir and mocks its own CEO's idea that there should be standing seats

Self-enhancing

The humour in the meme frames the brand as able to resolve an incongruity or adversity

Does the brand frame itself as able to solve a problem?

If yes, code "Self-enhancing"

Example: Sonic Burgers posting a meme of someone opening a burger, while mentioning that everyone else is getting married and having kids

Statement of AI Use

In the development of this Thesis, no artificial intelligence tools were utilized to draft, improve, or check any of the text. Different AI tools were used for the following purposes:

- Organizing already collected and examined literature into mind maps
- Searching available data collection tools for Instagram Reel metrics
- Inquiring about the functions of Jamovi (i.e., the medmod and meddecide modules)