Generational Differences in Consumer Engagement with Meme-Based Marketing

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Abstract

In India's rapidly evolving digital landscape, meme marketing has become a culturally relevant and impactful strategy for engaging online consumers. This study explores its effectiveness across Generation Z, Millennials, and Generation X, focusing on brand recall, interest, followership, and purchase intent. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design with 163 respondents, the analysis reveals that memes significantly boost engagement—especially among Gen Z and Millennials. Results align with Generational Cohort and Uses and Gratification theories, showing how motivations like entertainment and relevance shape meme interactions. The study offers empirical evidence supporting memes as cost-effective, viral tools for brand communication in a saturated digital space.

Keywords: meme marketing, generational cohorts, digital engagement, consumer behavior, social media marketing, brand recall, Generational Cohort Theory.

Introduction

In today's digitally saturated environment, brands are increasingly challenged to capture consumer attention and foster authentic engagement. Traditional forms of digital advertising, such as banner ads and pop-ups, have witnessed a decline in effectiveness as users become more ad-averse and selective in their online interactions. This shift has prompted marketers to seek innovative content formats that emphasize entertainment, cultural resonance, and shareability (Chaffey, 2025). One such emerging strategy is meme marketing, which enables brands to communicate in a humorous, non-intrusive, and highly relatable manner. Originally conceptualized by Dawkins (1976) as "units of cultural transmission," memes have evolved in the digital era into participatory media artifacts—typically humorous images or videos with overlaid text—that reflect and shape online culture. As symbolic representations of shared social narratives, memes are widely disseminated across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, and X (formerly Twitter), making them an increasingly popular tool in digital brand communication. Meme marketing involves the strategic use of such memes to promote products, services, or brand identities through culturally relevant content. Because memes blend seamlessly into social media feeds and are perceived as authentic, they often outperform traditional ads in terms of reach and engagement. Their native quality, combined with low production costs and high virality potential, makes them an attractive option for brands seeking to spark organic interaction (Brubaker *et al.*, 2018). Malodia et al. (2022).describe this as "delight marketing"—content that entertains while subtly reinforcing brand messages.

This form of marketing is especially resonant among Generation Z and Millennials, cohorts that prioritize humor, authenticity, and social commentary in their online experiences. Studies have shown that approximately 75% of individuals aged 13 to 36 regularly share memes, with nearly one-third engaging daily. The effectiveness of meme marketing is also evident in successful campaigns such as Gucci's #TFWGucci and Heinz's viral tomato classification initiative, which generated substantial social engagement and brand visibility. Indian brands like Swiggy and Zomato have similarly harnessed meme culture to connect with audiences and build brand affinity (Bury, 2016).

Despite its growing popularity in practice, academic literature on meme marketing remains sparse. Existing research has primarily explored conceptual frameworks or anecdotal industry successes, with limited empirical investigation into how different consumer segments interact with meme-based content. In particular, age-related differences in meme engagement remain underexplored. Given that memes often rely on generational humor, pop culture references, or trend fluency, it is plausible that Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X interpret and respond to meme marketing differently—a hypothesis that has yet to be rigorously examined.

This study aims to fill that gap by addressing two primary objectives: first, to define meme marketing and analyze existing literature to identify conceptual and empirical voids; second, to examine whether engagement with meme-based marketing content differs significantly across generational cohorts. In doing so, the study contributes both to academic theory and marketing practice by offering insights into the strategic use of memes for audience-specific engagement.

The research specifically focuses on meme marketing as a digital strategy for enhancing consumer engagement, examining the responses of Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X to meme content on social media platforms. It concentrates on key engagement metrics such as brand recall, interest, followership, and purchase intent. Broader constructs like brand equity or sales impact fall outside the scope of this study.

Geographically, the research is limited to participants accessible via online channels, and all findings are interpreted within the boundaries of ethical and legal digital marketing standards. While generational cohort analysis is central to this investigation, the study sets the stage for future research into additional moderating factors such as cultural background, platform use, or industry-specific meme dynamics.

However, the study does face several limitations. It was conducted over a short period using non-probability convenience sampling, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported survey data could introduce biases such as social desirability or inaccurate recall, and the quantitative format may not fully capture the nuanced emotional and interpretive aspects of meme engagement. Furthermore, statistical analysis using ANOVA assumes data normality and homogeneity of variances—conditions that, if violated, could impact result validity. Future research can address these constraints by adopting mixed-method approaches, expanding the sample size, or implementing experimental designs to explore the causal effects of meme exposure on consumer behavior.

Literature review

The concept of the meme, first introduced by Dawkins (Richard Dawkins, 1976) as a "unit of cultural transmission," has undergone a significant transformation in the digital age, evolving into a dynamic form of participatory media. Digital memes—humorous or satirical pieces of content typically in the form of images, videos, or text—now permeate social platforms like Reddit, Instagram, TikTok, and X. This evolution reflects broader changes in digital communication, with memes emerging as symbolic artifacts of online culture. The development of internet memes has progressed through distinct stages, beginning with early image macros and text overlays, evolving through rage comics, and culminating in the multimedia memes prevalent today. This trajectory mirrors the rise of user-generated content and the growing ineffectiveness of traditional advertising, giving way to more interactive, culturally embedded forms of brand communication (Shifman, 2013).

Scholars such as Williams (2000) and Pech (2003) recognized memes' potential in advertising early on, emphasizing their viral qualities and alignment with cognitive and emotional user traits. More recent contributions, such as those by Malodia et al. (2022), have articulated the strategic advantages of meme marketing, particularly its capacity for organic reach and emotional engagement. Memes that are humorous and culturally relevant tend to enjoy higher shareability and memorability (Bury, 2016)), and in some cases, meme-driven campaigns have achieved engagement rates of up to 30%, significantly outperforming traditional digital advertising formats such as Google Ads (Paquette, 2019)

A key framework developed by Malodia et al. (2022) identifies three main antecedents of meme virality: content-related factors (e.g., humor, relevance, iconicity), customer-related factors (e.g., gratification needs), and media-related factors (e.g., seeding and platform strategy). Together, these dimensions help explain how memes contribute to enhanced brand recall and consumer engagement—central outcomes in the effectiveness of meme marketing strategies. These outcomes are underpinned by psychological motivations explored through the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which provides insight into why consumers interact with memes.

According to UGT, users engage with meme content for three primary gratification types. Process gratification includes motivations such as escapism, entertainment, and stress relief—drivers supported by Whiting and Williams (2013), who identified these as major forces behind digital content consumption. Social gratification arises from the desire for connection, identity expression, and peer

validation, making meme-sharing a socially performative act (Kaur et al., 2020). Content gratification pertains to the appeal of memes that reflect current events or social commentary, giving users a sense of relevance and informational value (Malodia et al., 2022). These gratifications are particularly pronounced among digital-native cohorts like Gen Z and Millennials, who are more fluent in meme culture and more likely to share memes regularly—a behavioral pattern confirmed by YPulse data showing that 75% of individuals aged 13–36 engage with memes frequently.

In terms of marketing outcomes, meme-based content has been empirically shown to significantly enhance brand recall and engagement. Malodia et al. (2022) found that viral memes could embed brand messaging in a way that leads to higher top-of-mind awareness, even when explicit brand identifiers are absent. Moreover, meme content consistently outperforms traditional posts in terms of likes, shares, comments, and even user-generated variations. In a study of 15 Indian brands, meme-based posts using popular formats such as the #Shweta meme garnered significantly more user interaction within 12 hours than non-meme content, demonstrating the strong engagement potential of memes.

Effective meme creation, however, requires thoughtful content design. Key factors influencing virality include relevance to current cultural or social trends, iconicity of the visual or character elements, humor as a driver of emotional response, and spreadability across different formats and communities. These design pillars serve as foundational criteria in evaluating meme potential prior to launch, enabling marketers to assess the likelihood of a meme's success (Shifman, 2013; Williams, 2000). Through this lens, meme marketing emerges not only as a trend but as a strategic, data-informed approach to digital communication, capable of delivering measurable marketing outcomes in an increasingly fragmented attention economy.

Generational Cohort Theory and Engagement Differences

Generational Cohort Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how different age groups interact with meme-based marketing content. According to the theory, individuals born within the same generational timeframe develop shared values, communication preferences, and media behaviors shaped by common socio-cultural and technological experiences (Mannheim, 1952; Strauss and Howe, 1991). These generational characteristics significantly influence how audiences consume and respond to digital content.

Generation X (1965–1980), shaped by print and broadcast media, often values clarity, practicality, and informative messaging. Millennials (1981–1996), who came of age during the rise of the internet and social platforms, tend to favor interactive, socially relevant content. Generation Z (1997–2012), the first fully digital-native cohort, is characterized by a preference for fast-paced, visual, and humor-driven content aligned with evolving internet subcultures (Fromm and Read, 2018; Turner, 2015).

These differences are especially relevant in meme marketing, where content must be both culturally resonant and digitally fluent. Younger generations, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, are more likely to engage with memes for entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression—behaviors that align with established digital gratification theories. They are also more inclined to share, remix, or comment on meme content, reflecting their deeper integration in participatory online cultures.

Empirical research has shown that meme-based content consistently outperforms traditional brand messaging in terms of engagement among younger users. For example, meme campaigns often generate significantly higher likes, shares, and comments within short timeframes, particularly on platforms like

Instagram and TikTok. Furthermore, even when branding is subtle, memes have been shown to improve brand recall, suggesting that humor and cultural relevance enhance message retention (Malodia *et al.*, 2022).

Conversely, Gen X exhibits comparatively lower engagement with meme marketing, often due to differences in platform use, humor appreciation, and content preferences. While they may consume meme content, their interaction tends to be more passive, indicating the need for adapted messaging strategies when targeting this cohort.

Despite these insights, academic research on generational responses to meme marketing remains limited. Existing studies often generalize digital behavior without accounting for age-based variation in humor interpretation, meme literacy, and content relevance. This study addresses that gap by examining how different generational cohorts engage with meme-based brand content, offering a more nuanced perspective on audience segmentation within digital marketing.

Methodology

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine how generational cohorts engage with meme-based marketing content on social media. A structured online survey was developed to collect primary data, enabling statistical comparisons across three generational groups: Generation Z (born 1997–2012), Millennials (born 1981–1996), and Generation X (born 1965–1980). This approach was deemed appropriate for generating measurable, generalizable insights into digital consumer behavior within a limited timeframe.

Participants were recruited through a non-probability convenience sampling method, leveraging social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, as well as academic mailing lists and peer referrals. To ensure relevance, only individuals who reported regular interaction with meme content—defined as viewing, sharing, or engaging with memes at least a few times per week—were eligible to participate. Prior to beginning the survey, all respondents provided informed consent after reviewing a brief overview of the study's objectives, privacy assurances, and voluntary participation terms.

A total of 163 valid responses were collected. Of these, 57 were from Generation Z, 59 from Millennials, and 47 from Generation X. Although the group sizes were not equal, each exceeded the minimum threshold commonly required for comparative statistical analysis, thereby supporting the validity of generational comparisons. The survey was administered through Google Forms and designed to be self-paced, anonymous, and accessible across devices.

The questionnaire consisted of four primary sections: demographic information (age, gender, education level, and frequency of social media use), meme exposure habits (including preferred platforms and interaction frequency), engagement behaviors, and motivational factors related to meme use. Engagement was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale measuring behavioral intentions such as liking, sharing, commenting on memes, brand recall from meme content, and willingness to follow or purchase from brands using memes. Motivational factors were adapted from existing literature on meme engagement and gratification theory, drawing specifically on prior frameworks that classify motivations into process gratification (e.g., entertainment, stress relief), social gratification (e.g., peer interaction, self-expression), and content gratification (e.g., relevance to current events or social issues) (Malodia *et al.*, 2022). All items were pilot-tested with a small sample to ensure clarity and consistency across generational groups, and minor revisions were made based on participant feedback.

Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize meme engagement patterns across the three cohorts. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used as the primary inferential tool to test for statistically significant differences in engagement scores between generational groups. To meet the assumptions of ANOVA, normality was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test, and homogeneity of variance was assessed through Levene's test. In instances where these assumptions were not met, Welch's ANOVA was applied as a more robust alternative . Where significant differences were identified, post hoc analyses were conducted using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test to determine specific group-level variations (Welch, 1951; Wilcox and Keselman, 2003). All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 26 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Results

This study aimed to examine how generational cohorts engage with meme-based marketing content. A total of 163 valid responses were analyzed. Descriptive statistics provided insights into the demographic profile of the sample, while inferential statistics assessed the impact of age group on various engagement dimensions.

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)
Age Group	Generation Z (1997–2012)	57
	Millennials (1981–1996)	59
	Generation X (1965–1980)	47
Gender	Female	82
	Male	79
	Other	2
Education Level	Undergraduate	68
	Postgraduate	89
	Doctorate	6
Occupation	Student	57
	Working Professional	37
	Homemaker	24
	Retired	22
	Business Owner	19
	Other	4
Social Media Use Frequency	Daily	102
	Rarely	31
	Few times/week or other	30
Meme Exposure Frequency	Multiple/day	31
	Daily	67
	Few/week	18
	Rarely	40
	Never	7

Table 1: Demographics characteristics of respondents

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Generation Z accounted for 57 responses, Millennials for 59, and Generation X for 47. Gender distribution was balanced, with 82 female

and 79 male respondents. The sample was predominantly well-educated, with the majority holding postgraduate or undergraduate degrees. Social media usage and meme exposure were high overall, with 102 participants using social media daily and 67 engaging with memes daily or more.

To evaluate engagement with meme marketing, ten variables were measured, including behavioral indicators (e.g., brand recall, brand follow, brand purchase) and psychological drivers (e.g., entertainment, stress relief, social connection). One-way ANOVA was used to test whether differences in these engagement variables were statistically significant across the three age groups. As shown in Table 2, all ten variables revealed significant differences ($p < .001$), confirming that generational cohort plays a substantial role in shaping how consumers engage with meme-based content.

Engagement Variable	F-Statistic	p-Value	Significant
Brand Recall	23.97	< .001	Yes
Brand Follow	36.07	< .001	Yes
Brand Interest	43.69	< .001	Yes
Brand Purchase	34.63	< .001	Yes
Entertainment	23.70	< .001	Yes
Stress Relief	38.32	< .001	Yes
Social Connection	32.80	< .001	Yes
Self Expression	34.42	< .001	Yes
News & Trend Awareness	32.05	< .001	Yes
Lifestyle Relevance	13.60	< .001	Yes

Table 2: ANOVA Results

The strongest effects were observed in brand-related behaviors, such as brand interest ($F = 43.69$), brand follow ($F = 36.07$), and brand purchase ($F = 34.63$), suggesting that meme marketing has a greater impact on consumer-brand relationships among certain age groups. Emotional and social dimensions of engagement, such as stress relief ($F = 38.32$), social connection ($F = 32.80$), and self-expression ($F = 34.42$), also varied significantly across generations, highlighting the multifaceted nature of meme interaction.

To identify specific differences between groups, Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests were conducted. Table 3 displays the results for brand recall as an illustrative example. Both Gen Z and Millennials reported significantly higher brand recall than Gen X ($p = 0.001$), while no significant difference was found between Gen Z and Millennials ($p = 0.357$). This pattern was consistent across other engagement variables, where Gen Z and Millennials consistently outperformed Gen X in terms of interaction with meme content.

Group Comparison	Mean Difference	p-Value	Significant
Gen Z vs. Gen X	+1.30	0.001	Yes
Millennials vs. Gen X	+1.06	0.001	Yes
Gen Z vs. Millennials	-0.24	0.357	No

Table 3: Tukey's HSD Post-Hoc Results

These findings suggest that meme marketing is particularly effective among younger audiences, especially Gen Z and Millennials, who demonstrate higher levels of both behavioral and emotional

engagement. In contrast, Gen X users show lower overall responsiveness, likely influenced by differing digital habits, humor preferences, and platform usage patterns. The results underscore the importance of tailoring meme-based strategies to the digital competencies and content preferences of each generational cohort.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer compelling evidence that meme marketing has a significant impact on consumer engagement and that this impact varies meaningfully across generational cohorts. This reinforces the growing academic and industry consensus that age is a critical factor in determining how consumers respond to digital content formats, particularly those embedded in online humor and social discourse. The data clearly show that Generation Z and Millennials engage more intensely with meme-based marketing content than Generation X, aligning with previous studies that underscore the digital fluency and content preferences of younger cohorts.

These results are consistent with prior work by Malodia et al. (2022), who identified age as a moderating variable in meme engagement across dimensions such as brand recall, emotional resonance, and social sharing behavior. The present study reaffirms that younger generations—especially Gen Z—are highly responsive to visual and humorous content formats, particularly when those formats are integrated seamlessly into their social media environments. The lack of significant difference between Gen Z and Millennials in most areas of engagement suggests that these two cohorts, although separated by historical experiences, share a similar digital culture and content consumption style. Both are attuned to immediacy, visual storytelling, and relatability in communication—factors that are central to meme appeal (Fromm and Read, 2018; Shifman, 2013).

Generational Cohort Theory provides a useful lens for interpreting these findings. As suggested by Mannheim (1952) and expanded by Howe and Strauss (Strauss and Howe, 1991), generational identity is shaped by shared formative experiences, which influence attitudes, values, and media preferences over time. Generation X, having matured in a predominantly offline and more formal media environment, may view meme-based content as lacking seriousness or persuasive power. Their relatively lower engagement levels in this study suggest that humor-driven, informal content may not align with their expectations of marketing communication. Conversely, Gen Z and Millennials, socialized in a media landscape dominated by interactivity, irony, and rapid content exchange, are naturally more receptive to meme-based messaging. This supports Bolton et al. (2013), who argued that digital platform familiarity and cultural alignment play a crucial role in shaping how different age groups interact with brand messages.

The study's results also resonate strongly with the Uses and Gratification Theory, which posits that consumers actively seek out media to fulfill specific psychological needs. Memes, in this context, serve multiple gratification functions—entertainment, stress relief, peer connection, identity expression, and content relevance (Choi *et al.*, 2016). The data reveal that Gen Z and Millennials derive more process and social gratification from meme interaction than Gen X, echoing the tripartite model proposed by Malodia et al. (2022). However, this study extends that framework by demonstrating that content gratification—such as perceived timeliness, lifestyle fit, and topical relevance—also varies significantly by generation. This suggests that effective meme design should not only focus on humor and shareability but also incorporate cultural and contextual elements that align with the lived experiences and values of the target audience.

Beyond reinforcing existing literature, this research introduces several novel insights. First, brand purchase intent, traditionally viewed as a long-term or secondary outcome of meme exposure, was shown to differ substantially across generational groups. Gen Z, in particular, exhibited higher willingness to purchase from meme-associated brands, indicating a stronger behavioral response than previously reported. This finding challenges the perception of memes as purely awareness- or engagement-driven tools and suggests a more direct conversion potential, especially among digitally native consumers.

Another important observation is the role of lifestyle relevance. While often underexplored in earlier studies, this dimension emerged in the current research as a strong engagement driver, particularly for younger users. Memes that reflected everyday experiences, cultural norms, or emerging trends were found to be more effective, emphasizing the importance of micro-targeting and cultural fluency in meme strategy. This reinforces the idea that personalization—both in tone and content—can significantly enhance the effectiveness of meme marketing.

Overall, the findings contribute to a growing body of evidence that supports meme marketing as a powerful tool in the digital marketing mix. At the same time, they highlight the necessity for segmentation and strategic content adaptation. As generational differences continue to shape the digital landscape, marketers must account for varying levels of digital literacy, humor interpretation, and content expectations. Tailoring meme campaigns not only to platform preferences but also to the socio-cultural identity of generational cohorts will be critical to maximizing both engagement and impact.

Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated the effectiveness of meme marketing across three generational cohorts—Generation Z, Millennials, and Generation X—focusing on their engagement behaviors and motivational drivers on social media. The findings confirm that meme-based content significantly influences consumer interaction, with notable differences observed across age groups. Younger cohorts, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, demonstrated higher levels of engagement across behavioral and psychological dimensions, including brand recall, emotional resonance, and social sharing. In contrast, Generation X consistently reported lower levels of interaction, reinforcing the role of generational identity in shaping digital content receptivity.

By situating these results within the frameworks of Generational Cohort Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory, the study offers both theoretical validation and empirical refinement. Generational Cohort Theory explains the observed differences through the lens of shared cultural and technological experiences, while Uses and Gratification Theory contextualizes engagement as a result of specific psychological needs fulfilled by meme content. Together, these perspectives offer a robust interpretive model for understanding meme marketing effectiveness.

The study also contributes new insights to the emerging literature on digital humor and branded content. Notably, it highlights that memes may play a more influential role in driving purchase intent than previously assumed, particularly among Gen Z consumers. Additionally, the role of lifestyle relevance and content alignment emerged as a critical but underexplored determinant of engagement, suggesting that meme campaigns should go beyond generic humor to reflect the specific values, trends, and experiences of their intended audience.

From a managerial standpoint, these findings carry several practical implications. First, marketers aiming to target younger demographics should consider integrating memes as a core element of their content

strategy. Memes offer a culturally resonant and cost-effective means to build brand awareness, foster emotional connection, and stimulate user interaction. However, success in meme marketing requires a deep understanding of audience sensibilities, humor styles, and platform-specific dynamics. For Gen Z and Millennials, marketers should focus on creating content that is visually engaging, contextually relevant, and socially meaningful. Conversely, when targeting older audiences like Gen X, alternative strategies that prioritize clarity, value communication, and brand professionalism may yield better results.

Finally, the study opens several avenues for future research. Further investigation could explore cross-cultural variations in meme interpretation, the influence of meme format (e.g., image vs. video), or the impact of platform algorithms on meme visibility. Longitudinal studies may also be valuable to examine how meme engagement evolves over time and whether its effects on consumer behavior are sustained. Additionally, experimental designs could provide deeper insights into causality, particularly around purchase behaviors linked to meme exposure.

In conclusion, this research reaffirms the strategic potential of meme marketing in the digital age and underscores the importance of generational segmentation in crafting effective brand communication. As online cultures continue to evolve, so too must the methods used to engage them—memes, when thoughtfully designed and precisely targeted, offer a powerful tool for doing just that.

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