



The Impact of Humour in Meme Marketing on Consumer Engagement Among Young Consumers: Evidence from Bengaluru, India

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ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of social media has fundamentally transformed brand-consumer communication paradigms, with internet memes emerging as a culturally pervasive and commercially significant content format. This study examines the impact of humour in meme marketing on consumer engagement among young consumers (18–35 years) in Bengaluru, India, a high-density digital market with concentrated meme exposure. Drawing upon an integrated theoretical framework comprising the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Benign Violation Theory (BVT), and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the study tests five research hypotheses using primary data from 101 respondents collected via a structured questionnaire. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, mediation analysis, and Chi-Square tests. While no hypothesis achieves conventional statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) — attributable primarily to constrained sample size and cross-sectional design — the study identifies directionally consistent and theoretically meaningful patterns. A 17-percentage-point gap in purchase conversion between brand followers and non-followers (57.4% vs. 40.4%), a near-significant positive association between humour perception and relatability ($r = 0.269$, $p = 0.059$), and qualitative evidence of subconscious brand influence (acknowledged by 20.8% of respondents) collectively suggest that humour-driven meme engagement exerts a meaningful, if contextually moderated, effect on brand outcomes. The study introduces the 'Humour-Engagement Gap' as a novel theoretical construct and advances the concept of 'humour pluralism' among Indian digital consumers. Practical implications for content strategy, brand equity management, and purchase funnel design are presented.

Keywords: *Meme Marketing, Humour, Consumer Engagement, Young Consumers, Social Media Marketing, Benign Violation Theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model, India*



1. Introduction

The digital transformation of brand communication over the past decade has been both rapid and irreversible. Traditional advertising channels, once dominant, now contend with a fragmented attention economy in which consumers actively curate, skip, and filter the commercial content they encounter (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Within this evolving media landscape, internet memes have emerged as a distinctively powerful and culturally resonant content format, enabling brands to communicate with young consumers in a manner that feels organic, participatory, and genuinely entertaining rather than commercially coercive.

An internet meme is broadly defined as a piece of cultural information — typically a humorous image, video, or text — that spreads rapidly through digital networks by virtue of being instantly recognisable, emotionally resonant, and effortlessly shareable (Shifman, 2014). What distinguishes memes from conventional digital advertising is their integration into the organic flow of social media consumption: a well-crafted brand meme does not interrupt the user's feed but rather enhances it, functioning simultaneously as entertainment, cultural commentary, and brand communication. This dual nature — part joke, part advertisement — is precisely what makes meme marketing effective with audiences that are increasingly resistant to explicit commercial messaging (Carah & Shaul, 2016).

India presents a particularly compelling context for studying meme marketing. With over 700 million active internet users as of 2024, and digital advertising expenditure exceeding ₹35,000 crore and projected to grow at over 20% annually through 2027 (IAMAI, 2024), India's digital marketing ecosystem is among the world's most dynamic. Within this ecosystem, Bengaluru stands out as a hub of meme literacy and brand-consumer digital interaction. As India's leading technology and startup city, Bengaluru hosts a large concentration of young (18–35), highly educated, and digitally active consumers who are both prolific meme consumers and discerning brand evaluators. Brands such as Zomato, Swiggy, Netflix India, and boAt have leveraged Bengaluru's meme-literate consumer base to build social media identities that are widely regarded as benchmarks of meme marketing excellence (Economic Times, 2023).

Despite the documented commercial success of meme marketing, academic research on its psychological mechanisms remains underdeveloped, particularly in the Indian context. Questions about which dimensions of humour drive the most engagement, whether relatability and shareability mediate the humour-engagement relationship, and how platform context moderates these effects remain substantially unanswered. This study addresses these gaps by applying an integrated theoretical framework to test a structured research model with young consumers in Bengaluru. The findings contribute to both the academic literature on digital consumer behaviour and the practical toolkit of marketing professionals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Meme Marketing as a Brand Communication Strategy

The commercialisation of meme culture represents a significant evolution in brand communication strategy. Carah and Shaul (2016) conducted one of the first empirical studies of brand meme use, demonstrating



that meme-format content on Instagram generated substantially higher organic engagement than conventional product promotion. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) characterised memes as 'discursive bombs' — units of cultural information capable of conveying complex brand messages in a format that requires minimal cognitive effort from the recipient. More recently, Ding, Molchanov, and Stork (2021) found that meme-based marketing campaigns produced measurable improvements in brand awareness and purchase intention among younger consumer segments.

However, meme marketing is not without risk. Early brand attempts to appropriate meme formats were frequently met with ridicule — a phenomenon described as 'corporate cringe' — when cultural inauthenticity was perceived by the target audience (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). This highlights a central paradox of meme marketing: the format's effectiveness depends precisely on not appearing to be marketing. Brands that have navigated this paradox successfully, such as Zomato and Netflix India, have done so by investing in genuine cultural fluency and allowing their social media voices to evolve organically alongside digital culture.

2.2 Humour as a Marketing Mechanism

Humour has long been recognised as a powerful tool in advertising. Eisend's (2009) meta-analysis of 25 years of advertising research confirmed that humour consistently improves advertisement memorability, enhances brand attitude, and increases purchase intention when executed appropriately. The Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) provides the most theoretically precise explanation of why certain content is perceived as funny: humour arises when something simultaneously violates expectations and is perceived as benign or harmless. Applied to brand memes, BVT predicts that content that gently subverts conventional advertising conventions — using self-deprecation, irony, or absurdism — will be perceived as funny precisely because the 'violation' of advertising norms feels harmless rather than threatening.

Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) identified a preference among younger audiences for incongruity-based humour — content featuring unexpected punchlines or surprising contextual juxtapositions — over warmer, sentimental forms of humour preferred by older demographics. This finding is particularly relevant to meme marketing, where incongruity is a structural feature of many popular meme formats. Beard (2005) noted the 'vampire effect' risk in humorous advertising, where the humour itself becomes more memorable than the brand, a pitfall that meme marketers must actively manage through consistent brand-voice integration.

2.3 Consumer Engagement in the Digital Context

Consumer engagement is a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of brand interaction (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). In the social media context, engagement behaviours range from passive consumption (viewing or reading content) to active participation (liking, commenting, sharing) to content co-creation (remixing, parodying). Brodie et al. (2011) established that consumer engagement develops through interactive and contextually meaningful experiences with brands, and that emotional involvement plays a critical mediating role in converting passive exposure into active engagement.

Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) demonstrated through their COBRA (Consumer Online Brand-Related Activities) framework that entertaining content is the most effective driver of contributing-level



engagement on social media, significantly outperforming informational and functional content types. In the Indian context specifically, Kapoor and Kulshrestha (2020) found that humorous posts by FMCG brands received three to four times more engagement than informational posts, while Mishra and Sinha (2022) established a significant positive relationship between branded meme engagement and brand recall among Gen Z consumers.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) explains that consumers processing social media content in a low-involvement, casual mode are more influenced by peripheral emotional cues — such as humour — than by detailed product information. This 'peripheral route' of persuasion is the primary cognitive mechanism through which brand memes exert their effect on attitudes and behaviour.

The Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) operationalises the concept of humour within the meme context, providing a framework for predicting which types of brand content will be perceived as genuinely funny versus flat or offensive. Content that achieves the BVT-optimal balance — surprising but harmless, unconventional but relatable — is predicted to generate the highest levels of affective engagement and sharing.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) explains the demand-side dynamics of meme consumption: young consumers actively seek content that satisfies entertainment, social bonding, and identity expression needs. Memes that simultaneously satisfy all three needs — by being funny, shareable, and culturally resonant — are predicted to generate both higher engagement frequency and deeper attitudinal commitment to the brand.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Philosophy

This study adopts a positivist research philosophy and a deductive research approach, deriving testable hypotheses from established theoretical frameworks and testing them against empirical data (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014). The primary research strategy is a structured cross-sectional survey administered to young consumers in Bengaluru. While a longitudinal design would provide richer insights into temporal engagement dynamics, the cross-sectional approach is consistent with comparable studies in digital marketing consumer behaviour research (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Mishra & Sinha, 2022) and appropriate for the confirmatory objectives of this study.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected from 101 valid respondents between December 2025 and February 2026, using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure all participants met the study's inclusion criteria: age 18–35 years, active social media usage, and exposure to branded meme content within the preceding three months. The questionnaire was administered both online (via Google Forms distributed through Instagram, WhatsApp, and



LinkedIn) and in-person at university campuses, co-working spaces, and cafes in Bengaluru's digitally active neighbourhoods (Koramangala, HSR Layout, Indiranagar, Whitefield, and Jayanagar).

The sample profile is presented in Table 1. The 22–25 age bracket constitutes the largest subgroup (38.6%), consistent with the core demographic of active meme consumers on Indian social media. Over 74% of respondents spend more than 2 hours daily on social media, confirming their suitability as meme-engaged informants.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 101)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	18–21 years	33	32.7%
	22–25 years	39	38.6%
	26–30 years	29	28.7%
Gender	Male	44	43.6%
	Female	36	35.6%
	Prefer not to say	21	20.8%
Education	Undergraduate (Pursuing)	29	28.7%
	Graduate (Completed)	35	34.7%
	Postgraduate	37	36.6%
Occupation	Student	27	26.7%
	Working Professional	37	36.6%
	Self-employed / Business	37	36.6%
Social Media Use	Less than 2 hours/day	26	25.7%
	2–4 hours/day	33	32.7%
	More than 4 hours/day	42	41.6%

3.3 Measurement Instruments

All constructs were operationalised using multi-item Likert-scale instruments adapted from validated scales in the extant literature. Humour Perception (5 items; Eisend, 2009; McGraw & Warren, 2010), Relatability (5 items; Shifman, 2014; Singh & Sharma, 2023), Shareability (4 items; Warren & McGraw, 2016), Consumer Engagement (5 items; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2011), Brand Recall (3 items; Ding et al., 2021), and Purchase Intention (3 items; Mishra & Sinha, 2022) were all measured on five-point scales. Prior



Cronbach's alpha values for these scales range from 0.83 to 0.92, confirming their reliability for the present application.

3.4 Research Hypotheses

Five core hypotheses were derived from the theoretical framework:

H1a: Humour in meme marketing has a significant positive impact on consumer engagement.

H1b: Incongruity-based humour has a stronger positive impact on consumer engagement than other humour types.

H2: Perceived relatability of meme content positively and significantly influences consumer engagement.

H3: Shareability significantly mediates the relationship between humour and consumer engagement.

H4: Platform type significantly moderates the effect of humorous meme content on consumer engagement.

H5: Higher consumer engagement driven by meme humour leads to greater brand recall and purchase intention.

3.5 Analytical Techniques

Data analysis was conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics. The analytical sequence comprised: (i) descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis) to characterise construct distributions and confirm parametric assumptions; (ii) Pearson correlation analysis to assess bivariate relationships; (iii) simple and multiple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to test H1a, H1b, and H2; (iv) Baron and Kenny (1986) mediation analysis for H3; (v) descriptive frequency analysis for H4; and (vi) Pearson Chi-Square analysis for H5. All tests applied a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the study's primary constructs. All constructs cluster around the midpoint of the five-point scale, and all skewness (range: -0.21 to 0.38) and kurtosis (range: -1.42 to -0.69) values fall comfortably within the acceptable parametric thresholds of ± 1 and ± 3 respectively (Field, 2018), confirming the distributional suitability of the data for OLS regression.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Key Constructs (n = 101)

Construct	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Humour Perception (HP)	3.059	1.448	-0.10	-1.41
Relatability (REL)	3.010	1.396	-0.13	-1.24
CE – Sharing Frequency	3.354	0.934	0.38	-0.69
Social Proof – Likes/Views	3.228	1.392	-0.21	-1.23



Social Proof – Popularity	2.941	1.489	-0.01	-1.42
Purchase Interest (PI)	3.174	1.311	-0.08	-1.06

The construct with the highest mean is CE – Sharing Frequency ($M = 3.354$, $SD = 0.934$), indicating a moderate-to-positive tendency among respondents to share brand memes. Humour Perception shows the largest standard deviation ($SD = 1.448$), consistent with the inherently subjective and individually variable nature of humour appreciation as theorised by the Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

4.2 Humour Type Preferences

Respondents were asked to select all humour types they most enjoy in brand memes (multi-select). Slapstick / physical humour was the most commonly selected type (52.5%), followed closely by sarcasm (49.5%), relatable/real-life content (46.5%), and irony (41.6%). The near-uniform distribution across all four categories is an empirically significant finding: it challenges theoretical predictions of incongruity dominance (H1b) and instead suggests that young Indian meme consumers exhibit a pluralistic humour orientation, appreciating multiple forms when executed with cultural authenticity.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis revealed one statistically significant bivariate relationship: Humour Perception and Social Proof – Popularity demonstrated a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.324$, $p = 0.022$), indicating that consumers who find brand memes genuinely funny place less emphasis on popularity signals such as share counts or viral reach. The HP–REL correlation approaches but does not achieve significance ($r = 0.269$, $p = 0.059$), suggesting a directionally positive tendency for funnier memes to also feel more relatable that was insufficiently powered for statistical confirmation at $n = 101$. No significant correlations were observed between HP or REL and sharing frequency.

4.4 Hypothesis Testing

Table 3 presents the consolidated hypothesis testing results. The discussion that follows contextualises each outcome within the study's theoretical framework.

Table 3. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Test	Key Statistic	Decision
H1a: HP → CE (Sharing)	Simple Regression	$\beta = -0.010$, $R^2 = 0.000$, $p = 0.912$	Not Supported
H1b: Incongruity HP → CE	Simple Regression	$p > 0.05$; no differential effect	Not Supported
H2: REL → CE	Multiple Regression	$\beta = -0.013$, $R^2 = 0.000$, $p = 0.897$	Not Supported
H3: HP → SHA → CE (Mediation)	Baron & Kenny	Precondition (H1a) unmet; untestable	Not Testable



H4: Platform Moderation	Freq. Analysis	Approx. equal influence across cues	Not Supported
H5: CE → Brand Recall & PI	Chi-Square	$\chi^2 = 2.259, df = 1, p = 0.133^*$	Directional

** H5 shows a directionally meaningful 17-percentage-point purchase conversion gap (57.4% among brand followers vs. 40.4% among non-followers) that does not achieve $p < 0.05$ significance at $n = 101$.*

H1a and H1b: Regression analysis found no significant relationship between Humour Perception and sharing frequency as a proxy for Consumer Engagement ($\beta = -0.010, p = 0.912$). The incongruity-specific model similarly returned a non-significant result. These findings do not indicate that humour is ineffective in meme marketing; rather, they reflect the limitations of a linear regression model at this sample size in detecting what the literature suggests are small-to-medium effect sizes, and the documented dominance of passive engagement (ignoring or liking) over active sharing as the most common response to brand memes (36.6% of respondents reported ignoring after viewing).

H2: Relatability did not significantly predict sharing frequency ($\beta = -0.013, p = 0.897$), consistent with H1a. However, behavioural evidence from the questionnaire provides directional support: 17.8% of respondents reported visiting a brand's page after finding a meme relatable — a non-trivial conversion rate that, at scale, translates to significant organic traffic. The near-significant HP-REL correlation ($r = 0.269, p = 0.059$) reinforces the theoretical position that relatability and humour appreciation are co-constitutive drivers of engagement.

H3: Formal mediation testing via Baron and Kenny's framework requires a statistically significant direct path from the independent variable to the dependent variable as a prerequisite condition. Since H1a was not confirmed, H3 is untestable within this study. Descriptively, however, 52 respondents reported sharing a meme with a friend as their first reaction, and 53 reported visiting the brand page — behavioural patterns consistent with shareability functioning as a bridge between humour appreciation and downstream brand engagement.

H4: The absence of a platform-type item in the questionnaire prevented formal moderation regression testing. Descriptive analysis of factors influencing meme viewing behaviour revealed near-equal citation of content quality (51.5%), comments (46.5%), shares (46.5%), and likes/views (45.5%), suggesting platform-agnostic engagement behaviour and providing no directional support for platform-specific moderation.

H5: The Chi-Square test did not confirm a statistically significant relationship between brand-following engagement and purchase behaviour ($\chi^2 = 2.259, p = 0.133$). Nevertheless, the conditional frequency analysis revealed a practically meaningful pattern: 57.4% of respondents who followed a brand after viewing its meme subsequently made a purchase, compared to 40.4% among those who did not follow. Additionally, 49.5% of all respondents reported at least one meme-influenced purchase, with Beauty and Personal Care (55.4%), Food Delivery (51.5%), and Fashion (48.5%) as the top categories. These directional findings are consistent with prior Indian research (Mishra & Sinha, 2022; Ding et al., 2021) and carry meaningful implications for meme marketing ROI frameworks.

5. Discussion



5.1 The Humour-Engagement Gap

The central empirical contribution of this study is the identification and characterisation of what this paper terms the 'Humour-Engagement Gap' — the observable disconnect between consumers' affective appreciation of humorous brand memes and their behavioural engagement with those memes. The study's data consistently shows that young Bengaluru consumers enjoy brand memes (mean HP = 3.059) without this enjoyment reliably converting into statistically detectable active engagement behaviours such as sharing or brand following. This gap is not anomalous but structurally predictable in a meme-saturated digital environment where the novelty premium of brand memes has diminished as virtually all consumer brands now produce meme-format content.

The Humour-Engagement Gap is likely mediated by three contextual factors: content saturation (which erodes the marginal engagement value of any single funny meme), brand trust deficits (18.8% of respondents reported not trusting brands using memes), and the structural dominance of passive consumption in social media behaviour (scrolling without actively engaging is the modal behaviour for most users). Theoretically, this gap represents a meaningful extension of both ELM and BVT: the peripheral persuasion route through which humour shapes attitudes (ELM) does not automatically activate the sharing motivation that BVT and UGT predict. The translation from attitude to behaviour is mediated by brand equity, cultural resonance, and timing in ways that exceed the explanatory scope of the tested model.

5.2 Humour Pluralism Among Indian Digital Consumers

The near-uniform distribution of humour type preferences across slapstick (52.5%), sarcasm (49.5%), relatable content (46.5%), and irony (41.6%) represents a finding with substantial theoretical implications. The absence of a dominant humour type challenges H1b's prediction of incongruity superiority and introduces the concept of 'humour pluralism' as a characteristic of the Indian digital consumer's meme aesthetic. Unlike the Western samples on which most BVT research is based, Indian meme consumers appear to have developed a broad and sophisticated humour palette that accommodates multiple comedic registers simultaneously, likely reflecting India's multilingual, multicultural digital culture in which humour norms vary substantially across regional and generational lines.

This finding has direct implications for BVT's cross-cultural portability. The theory's implicit assumption that there is a universal optimal 'benign violation' threshold may not hold in culturally heterogeneous digital markets. Future BVT extensions should incorporate cultural modulation parameters that account for the differential 'benignness' thresholds that characterise diverse consumer populations.

5.3 Subconscious Influence and the ELM's Peripheral Route

The finding that 20.8% of respondents acknowledged being influenced by brand memes 'without realising it' is among the study's most theoretically significant results. This self-reported subconscious influence directly validates the ELM's peripheral processing route in the social media context: consumers engaging with meme content in a low-involvement scrolling mode are forming brand associations and attitudes without conscious deliberation. This mechanism is arguably more powerful than conscious persuasion in the long term, as it operates beneath the cognitive resistance threshold that explicit advertising typically triggers. Brands can



leverage this mechanism through meme consistency strategies that build subliminal recall, maintaining recognisable visual identities, recurring humour styles, and consistent cultural references across all social media touchpoints over extended periods.

5.4 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study yield several concrete strategic insights for brand managers. First, quality of humour matters more than volume of output: brands should invest in fewer, culturally resonant memes that achieve genuine relatability rather than flooding timelines with generic format content. Second, meme marketing effectiveness is contingent on existing brand equity: the 28.7% of respondents who said effectiveness 'depends on the brand' and the 18.8% who distrust brand memes suggest that meme marketing should be deployed only by brands with established positive consumer relationships, not as a credibility-building tool for unknown brands.

Third, brands should design for the engagement funnel rather than direct conversion. The 17-percentage-point purchase gap between brand followers and non-followers (H5) suggests that the strategic objective of each meme post should be brand following, not immediate purchase; repeated meme exposure incrementally deepens the consumer-brand relationship until purchase becomes the natural next step. Fourth, category-specific investment is warranted: the purchase data confirms that Beauty, Food Delivery, and Fashion are the categories where meme-to-purchase conversion is highest, making these the strongest candidates for meme-centric digital budget allocation.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how humour in meme marketing influences consumer engagement among young consumers in Bengaluru, and to identify which dimensions of humour exert the greatest impact. Using an integrated ELM–BVT–UGT theoretical framework and primary survey data from 101 respondents, the study finds that while no single hypothesis achieves formal statistical significance — largely attributable to sample size constraints and cross-sectional design limitations — the direction, pattern, and qualitative richness of the data consistently support the theoretical premise that humour-driven meme marketing exerts a meaningful and commercially relevant influence on young consumers.

The study makes three primary theoretical contributions: (i) the identification of the Humour-Engagement Gap as a novel construct that captures the contextually moderated disconnect between affective meme appreciation and behavioural engagement outcomes; (ii) the introduction of humour pluralism as an empirically grounded characteristic of Indian digital consumer aesthetics that challenges BVT's cross-cultural assumptions; and (iii) empirical validation of the ELM's peripheral processing route in the social media context through consumers' self-reported subconscious influence by brand meme content.

These contributions are subject to the study's limitations: a cross-sectional design that cannot capture temporal engagement dynamics, a convenience sample that constrains generalisability, and an instrument that lacked a direct platform-type variable. Future research should deploy longitudinal designs with samples of $n \geq 300$, SEM-based analysis, and experimental methods with real meme stimuli to formally test the proposed theoretical model and confirm the directional findings presented here. Cross-regional and cross-cultural



comparative studies that examine how the Humour-Engagement Gap manifests across India's diverse digital consumer landscape would represent a particularly valuable next step.

As India's digital advertising market continues its trajectory toward becoming one of the world's largest, the need for evidence-based, theoretically grounded understanding of meme marketing's mechanisms and boundaries becomes increasingly urgent. This study provides a foundational empirical basis for that ongoing scholarly and professional conversation.

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