RESEARCH ARTICLE

Meme marketing: How can marketers drive better engagement using viral memes?

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Abstract

Scholars and industry stakeholders have exhibited an interest in identifying the underlying dimensions of viral memes. However, the recipe for creating a viral meme remains obscure. This study makes a phenomenological contribution by examining viral memes, exploring the antecedents (i.e., content-related factors, customer-related factors, and media-related factors), consequences, and moderating factors using a mixed-method approach. The study presents a holistic framework for creating viral memes based on the perceptions of customers and industry stakeholders. Four quantitative studies (i.e., a lab experiment, an online quasi-experiment, an event study, and a brand recall study) validate the theoretical model identified in the qualitative study. The research underlines the potential of viral memes in marketing communications as they enhance brand recall and brand engagement. The study found that viral memes are topical and highly relatable and are thus well received by the target groups, which increases customer engagement and brand recall. Marketers can adopt the findings of this study to design content for memes that consumers find relevant, iconic, humorous, and spreadable. Furthermore, marketers can use customer-related factors suggested in the theoretical framework for enhancing escapism, social gratification, and content gratification for their target customers which in turn shall organically increase their reach within their target segments and enhance brand performance in terms of brand recall and brand engagement.

KEYWORDS

engagement, meme marketing, memes, memetic, virality

1 | INTRODUCTION

The drastic decline in click-through rates (CTRs) and conversion rates in digital advertising indicates that consumers in the digital era tend to avoid advertising and promotional content (Chaffey, 2021).

Advertisers thus struggle to ensure that their advertisements reach consumers (Eguren et al., 2021). Prior research has suggested that consumers are more likely to avoid advertisements by skipping them or scrolling past them (McDonald, 2018). While millennials generally eschew commercial and sponsored content, 84% of millennials are

influenced by user-generated content, such as memes on company websites (Sagin, 2020). Internet memes refer to rapidly spreading and highly engaging content that is shared in various formats (including animation, GIF, tag, image, text, or video) and uses humor, sarcasm, and quiddity to promote an idea or message (Brubaker et al., 2018; Shifman, 2013).

Recently, memes have featured among the most successful modes of marketing communication and have even been recognized among the simplest ways to engage with target audiences. While memes help marketers engage with consumers, adopting meme-based advertising entails multiple advantages (Bury, 2016; Williams, 2000). First, meme-based advertising is highly cost-effective relative to conventional advertising and digital advertising. Second, meme-based advertising leverages existing popular memes, which allows the target audience to relate easily to the advertisement context. Third, given the popularity of memes, marketers can organically connect with their audiences. Finally, memes are easy to create by modifying existing meme templates.

According to a recent social media behavior survey conducted by YPulse,[1] 75% of users aged 13–36 regularly share memes, and 30% of these users share memes daily. Furthermore, Instagram users shared 1 million memes a day in 2020.[2] It is thus evident that internet memes dominate social media and permeate the advertising and marketing world. For example, Paquette (2019) reported that using memes in advertising generates a 30% engagement rate on social media compared to a 1% CTR in the case of Google AdWords.

Marketers are using memes to increase customer awareness of their products and services as well as customer engagement. For example, Heinz launched a meme marketing campaign that sought to extend the debate regarding the tomato's status as a fruit or a vegetable. The company created hashtags for the campaign and asked people to take sides. While the campaign targeted only one million impressions (total reach), in the end, it generated more than four million impressions with over 80,000 engagements (likes, comments, and shares) on Instagram and Facebook (Cole, 2018). Even for a business-to-business (B2B) firm, such as Joseph Cyril Bamford (JCB) Excavators Ltd., a meme with #JCBKiKhudai (digging with JCB) generated publicity worth one million dollars.[3] Luxury brands, such as Gucci, have likewise embraced meme marketing, with the #TFWGucci [That feel when Gucci] hashtag becoming Gucci's highest engaging campaign[4] and generating over 21,000 comments and 2 million likes. A closer examination of the market suggests that a diverse list of brands are now utilizing memes as a tool for engaging their customers. This list includes luxury brands (e.g., Gucci and Prada), food delivery apps (e.g., Swiggy and Zomato), over-the-top (OTT) platforms (e.g., Netflix and Amazon Prime), and dating apps (e.g., Tinder) and others. Integrating memes into advertising thus offers advertisers and marketing professionals a new window for effectively engaging with the customers and increasing the reach of their marketing campaigns. Indeed, meme advertising may help these stakeholders to overcome consumers' advertisement avoidance practices and effectively communicate with their target audiences (Bury, 2016; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015).

A meme disseminates among people via the internet, including social media platforms, instant messaging apps, and other internet-based media platforms (Bauckhage, 2011). Marketers can convert an advertisement into a meme, which, if becomes viral, can produce an immediate response and organically drive customer engagement (Bury, 2016; Williams, 2000). With the active participation of netizens in sharing content online, brands must adapt to this new form of communication and advertising. Undoubtedly, both the importance and popularity of memes are increasing in the advertising and marketing strategies of various firms and brands. Despite this growing demand and acceptance, however, our understanding of the phenomenon of meme-based advertising remains limited.

We identify four significant gaps in the existing literature on memes and related advertising. First, most of the literature is anecdotal or based on qualitative case studies (Brubaker et al., 2018; Chuah et al., 2020; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Scholars have yet to determine the type of content that has the potential to become viral. Marketers must understand this information—i.e. content-related factors (such as language, humor, relevance, etc.)—to create memes with better reach and engagement. However, we are unable to identify relevant literature suggesting content-related factors to inform viral meme creation. Second, we do not yet understand why people tend to appreciate memes as advertising mechanisms or why people tend to follow and share memes on the internet, including on social media platforms. In other words, the types of gratification individuals seek when consuming memes are not clear. We refer to these gratification needs as customer-related factors. Third, the prior literature has not yet clarified the role of media-related factors (i.e., seeding and distribution strategies) that contribute to meme virality. Finally, no prior studies have examined the outcomes of viral memes. A better understanding of viral memes will enable firms, brands, and institutions to create content capable of generating a lasting impact, understand people's motivation to spread memes and better utilize media to communicate ideas via meme transmission.

The current study aims to address the above gaps in the prior literature on meme-based advertising by answering two key research questions (**RQs**): **RQ1**. What are the antecedents and outcomes of viral memes? **RQ2**. What are the boundary conditions of the antecedents and outcomes of viral memes? The current study proposes an overarching conceptual framework for creating viral memes, which will improve the existing understanding and execution of meme-based advertising campaigns. Adopting tenets from schema theory and social contagion theory, this study attempts to better

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[1]Topline: Social media behavior: Vital insights into Gen Z and Millennials' behavior, plans, and views—with major takeaways for brands (2019). URL: https://www.ypulse.com/report/2019/02/20/topline-social-media-behavior2/accessed on July 21, 2021.

[2]Instagram year in review: How memes were the mood of 2020. (December 2020). URL: https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/instagram-year-in-review-how-memes-were-the-mood-of-2020/accessed on August 16, 2021.

[3]#JCBKiKhudai—How a JCB meme created a million-dollar PR for the company (2019). URL: https://yo0ungunindia.medium.com/jcbkikhudai-how-a-jcb-meme-created-a-million-dollar-pr-for-the-company-da6e66782155 accessed on August 16, 2021.

[4]https://anexinet.com/blog/can-brands-cool-measuring-success-guccis-ad-campaign/

understand the content-related, customer-related, and media-related factors that are positively associated with meme virality. The study adopts a mixed-method approach wherein we first conduct a qualitative study and draw insights from 35 in-depth interviews with various stakeholders involved in the virality of memes. These stakeholders include brand managers, influencers, media agencies, memers, and users. We employed theoretical sampling to select the participants and developed the framework using concurrent data collection and constant comparative analysis (Malodia et al., 2021). To measure the virality of memes, we first propose a theoretical conceptualization of the virality of memes using three underlying dimensions (i.e., contraction, transmission, and exposure). Second, we identify three antecedents of meme virality: content-related factors (i.e., relevance, iconicity, humor, and shareability), customer-related factors (i.e., process, social and content gratifications), and media-related factors (i.e., seeding and distribution). Third, we report brand recall and brand engagement as two significant outcomes of viral memes. Finally, we find that brand guidelines and rewards moderate the propositions suggested in the conceptual framework. Therefore, we identify these guidelines and rewards as moderating factors (or boundary conditions). Our study represents an initial attempt to provide a holistic framework for creating viral memes based on the viewpoints of customers and industry stakeholders. Hence, the study makes a novel contribution to the meme advertising literature. The study's findings offer benefits for brands adopting meme marketing and media agencies engaged in creating meme marketing templates and meme marketing campaigns. Next, we conduct four quantitative studies including a lab experiment, an online quasi-experiment, an event study, and a brand recall study to validate the theoretical model identified through the qualitative study.

The study is structured as follows. We begin by reviewing and synthesizing the existing literature on meme advertising and meme marketing. Second, we present our methodology by describing the respondents and the interview process as well as the processes of coding the data and testing the reliability and validity. Third, we develop our conceptual framework and advance our theoretical propositions. Finally, we discuss the implications of our research and propose an agenda for future research.

2 | MEMES IN ADVERTISING

Based on our review, we identify four stages in the progression of the prior literature's conceptualization of memes (see Figure 1). Though the literature has evolved in stages, we do not argue that the four stages have proceeded chronologically. We simply present the stages. In the first stage, the meme functioned as a unit of imitation. Dawkins (1976) first conceptualized the term "*meme*" in the popular book *The Selfish Gene*, arguing that memes function like *genes* by promoting the transmission and replication of social ideas within a population (Bauckhage, 2011). At this stage, a meme referred to the spread of ideas and a social phenomenon based on evolutionary principles (e.g., genes).

In the second stage, memes evolved as a unit of cultural transmission. Evolutionary biologists and, later, cultural scholars utilized the concept of the meme to explain the process of cultural transmission (Davis et al., 2015). The study of cultural information transmission using principles of genetic evolution is also termed "memetics" (Benaim, 2018). At this stage, the meme was used to explain cultural information transfer utilizing evolutionary models, such genetics.

In the third stage, the meme became a unit of internet culture. An internet meme is an idea or concept that replicates and transmits rapidly across internet users (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Used to communicate on social media and web forums, internet memes have become the dominant element of the participatory internet culture (Vasquez & Aslan, 2021).

Finally, in the fourth stage, the meme evolved as a component of linguistic discourse. Arguing that the witty exploitation of words can be employed to create memes (Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018), semiotic scholars have described memes as a form of linguistic discourse. A meme includes a "*word, phrase, expression, iconic imagery or recognizable reference*" (Cannizzaro, 2016). Furthermore, Dynel (2016) found that popular memes leverage vernacular catchphrases full of intentional spelling errors, abbreviations or acronyms, and nonstandard language. Because memes aim to connect with like-minded individuals, marketers adopt them to communicate with customers (Sharma, 2018). In this stage, "memes" have become a mode of internet/online communication and a benchmark of virality.
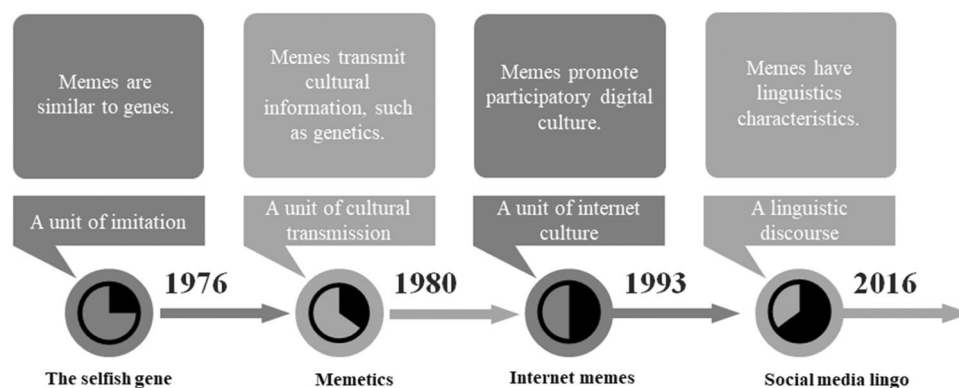

FIGURE 1 Evolution of the meme as a concept.

One reason behind the limited research on memes may be a lack of understanding of meme typologies, formats, and characteristics. Recognizing this possibility, we discuss these three aspects of memes to clarify their conceptualization (see Figure 2). The prior literature has described memes as "cultural unit" (Casey, 2018); later, however, Benaim (2018) argued that these cultural units represent multiple "social ideas" (Benaim, 2018). Therefore, the prior literature defines the meme as a cultural unit that can further be divided into different social ideas. Each social idea is expressed through various typologies, distinct characteristics, and formats (see Figure 2).

2.1 | Characteristics

A meme is defined as "*something that is self-replicating and gets communicated from person to person*" (Shifman, 2013; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Dawkins (1976) identified fidelity (replication through copying), fecundity (rapid transmission), and longevity as three definitive characteristics of memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; p. 200). Scholars have also proposed other salient characteristics of memes. Pech (2003a) proposed the concept of meme fitness, while Cannizzaro (2016) identified ease of copying and translation as significant characteristics of viral memes. Similarly, scholars have noted distinctness, quiddity (Brubaker et al., 2018), and humor as essential characteristics of memes (Sharma, 2018; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Based on the

extended literature, we suggest seven main meme characteristics: fidelity, fecundity, longevity, meme fitness, ease of copying and translation, distinctness, and humor.

2.2 | Typology

Memes can be classified into genres and typologies. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) proposed four typologies of memes based on their purpose: (a) social commentary, (b) absurdist humor, (c) otaku (a Japanese term used for youth obsessed with computers) or manga fandom (a fan community) and (d) hoax. Meanwhile, Segev et al. (2015) used the degree of cohesiveness to classify memes into five families (highly cohesive to noncohesive) using two parameters: quiddity types and generic attributes (Brubaker et al., 2018). Based on the prior literature, we propose five typologies of memes (see Figure 2). We exclude "hoax" as a separate typology because the literal meaning of hoax is a "joke," "trick," "prank," and so forth, and therefore, hoax overlaps with each of the other five typologies.

2.3 | Format

The evolution of memes as a format refers to the ways in which memes are published and consumed by various stakeholders.
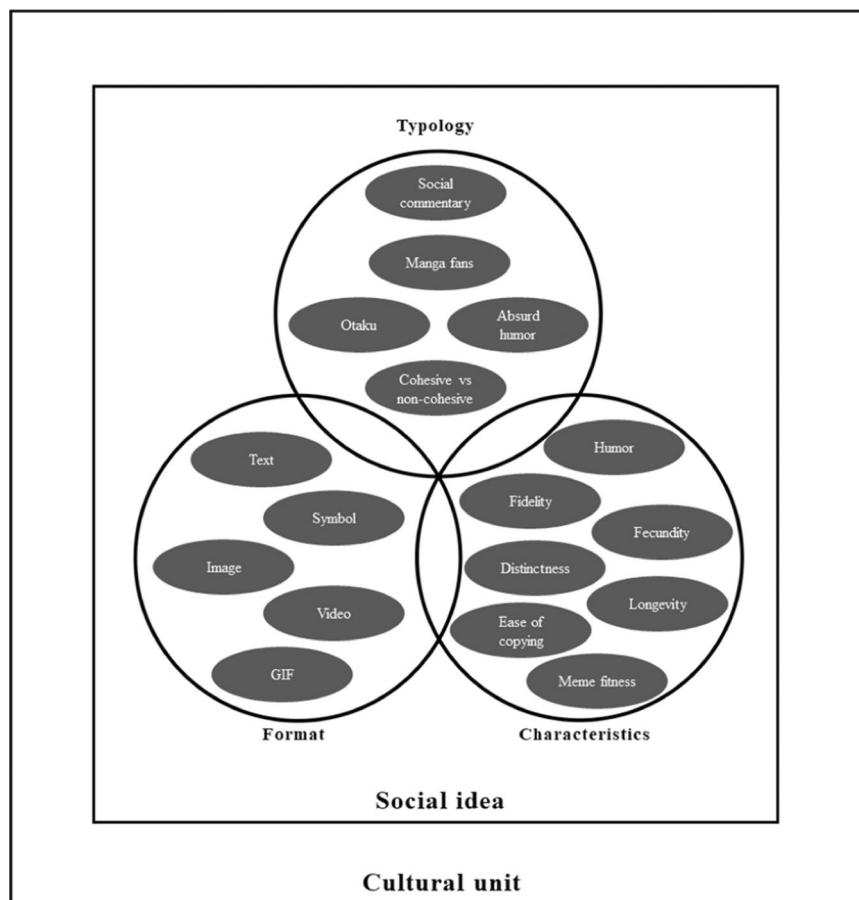

FIGURE 2 Characteristics, typology, and format of memes.

Understanding the evolution of the meme format is important because it also helps us to understand the ways in which memes can be reimagined and reformatted in the context of the constantly evolving internet culture.

We propose a four-stage model to explain the evolution of memes as a format (see Figure 3).

Stage I. Initially, internet memes were a relatively vague form of humor expressed through singular pictures and concepts. Memes were published on websites, such as eBaum.com and 4chan.com.

Stage II. The next popular format used to create memes was known as top-text and bottom-text memes. In this format, either an image or a colored background was used to create humorous memes. Tumblr was the most popular medium employed to transmit memes in this stage.

Stage III. In the third stage, rage comics—multipanel comical illustrations—grew as a popular meme format. Rage comics used humor, frustration, irony, and so forth, as a source of memes. These memes were created with widely available tools, such as Microsoft Paint.

Stage IV. In the late 2000s, memes pivoted to new formats, such as video GIFs, which are now circulated via new-age social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and so forth. The abilities of self-replication and imitation make memes contagious, allowing memetic ideas to go viral with the help of metaphors, such as images, videos, animations, hashtags, and GIFs (Pech, 2003a).

We systematically reviewed the prior literature by analyzing the objective, methodology, and conceptualization of memes, whether the studies have proposed a measure of virality, and the studies' broad findings (see Table 1). To begin, Williams (2000) argued that contagiousness makes memes a suitable media vehicle for conducting advertising and marketing campaigns. The study further found that meme power is a function of two factors: "learnability" and "infectiousness." Williams (2000) also reported that powerful memes are more capable of surviving, and hence, advertisers with a better understanding of meme power are likely to leverage the potential of memes to attain advertising and marketing goals. Pech (2003a) argued that not all memes are successful and identified "meme fitness" and "cognitive hardwiring" as two critical elements for successful memes. Meme fitness refers to the following: (a) the degree of compatibility between a meme and consumers' cognitive hardwiring, (b) the ease of replicating the meme, (c) the ability of the meme to align with the advertisers' communication needs, and (d) the ability of the meme to trigger neural networks (Pech, 2003a). Pech (2003b) reported that innovation is not limited to designing a product; rather, it requires communicating and managing the perceptions of the target segments in innovative ways. Furthermore, using Rip Curl's case study, the study argued that a balanced use of memes can promote innovation and, in turn, impact a firm's profitability. Benaim (2018) extended the debate by identifying memes as an important source of innovation for the cultural industry. The study noted the symbolic value of memes as a resource for cultural innovation (Benaim, 2018; Pech, 2003b).

Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) argued that humor is the key ingredient of the internet meme phenomenon and proposed a framework to guide advertising and marketing practitioners in incorporating humor into meme-based advertising. Using the source–message–channel–receiver framework, the study identified four humor styles: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Furthermore, within each humor style, the study proposed seven types of humor: comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness, and
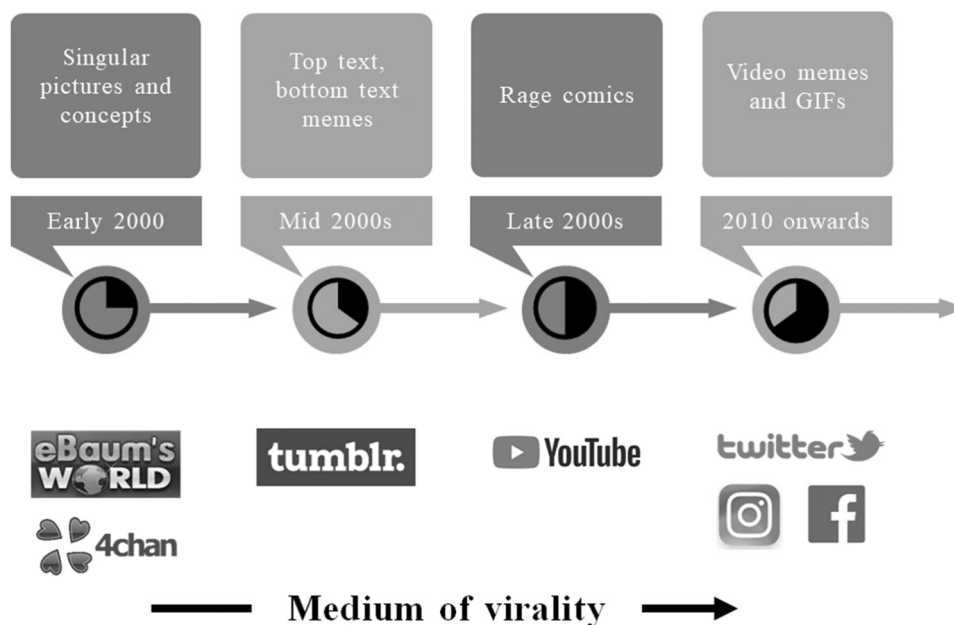

FIGURE 3 Evolution of memes as a format.

TABLE 1 A review of prior meme-related research

Study	Objective	Methodology	Conceptualization of memes	Measure of virality	Findings
Williams (2000)	The study explores the possibility of using memes for marketing purposes.	Qualitative essay	N/A	No	Memes have intuitive appeal among consumers and, hence, can be used to boost the effectiveness of advertisements.
Pech (2003a)	The study attempts to understand why some memes are more successful than others.	Case study analysis	A meme is a tool used by behaviorists to consciously and cognitively communicate ideas and culture.	No	Four criteria can be used to measure meme fitness and explain how cognitive hardwiring affects meme fitness.
Pech (2003b)	The study proposes a relationship between meme management and the profitability of an organization.	Qualitative essay	Memes are self-replicating ideas or thoughts.	No	Memes can influence market perceptions.
Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015)	The study analyses the role of various types and styles of humor in making memes viral.	Content analysis followed by ANOVA	A meme is a communication tool and engagement tool that is pre-dominantly built around humor.	No	The study offers a framework for creating humourous memes using communication theories and viral marketing theories.
Bury (2016)	The study considers how internet memes are creatively used in advertising.	Qualitative essay	Memes involve the juxtaposition of phrases and pictures.	No	Memes make advertisements more memorable.
Csordás et al. (2017)	The study evaluates the potential of internet memes for advertising and marketing.	Case study based	Memes represent the language of the internet culture.	No	Internet memes can augment customer experience on digital media for marketers.
Brubaker et al. (2018)	The study explores how people use memes to engage with organizations.	Content analysis	Brand memes are created using existing meme characteristics and circulated by users to engage with organizations.	No	Memes can help organizations actively engage with the public. The study also provides characteristics of memes.
Benaim (2018)	The study explores the symbolic value of internet memes in the context of symbolic innovations.	Exploratory coding	A meme is a pre-existing parody, pastiche, mash-up, or derivative of a creative remix shared on the Internet.	No	The study identified and classified symbolic innovations while also linking the innovations to internet memes.
Sharma (2018)	The study analyses the behavior of social media users towards memes in advertising.	Netnography	N/A	No	Creatively modifying existing memes presents novel opportunities for marketers to brand over social media platforms.

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Study	Objective	Methodology	Conceptualization of memes	Measure of virality	Findings
Chuah et al. (2020)	The study attempts to understand how youths interpret internet memes in the context of social media marketing.	Content analysis	A meme is a combination of text and images that is shared widely on the Internet and social media.	No	The iconicity of memes can be identified using the language features. Furthermore, highly iconic memes are more influential.
Current study	The study proposes an overarching framework of viral memes in marketing that includes antecedents, moderators, and consequences.	Qualitative: Grounded theory	A viral meme refers to fast-spreading and highly engaging content in text, image, or video format with a high degree of contraction, transmission, and exposure.	The three underlying dimensions of virality proposed in this study can be measured objectively.	The three antecedents are positively associated with the virality of memes. Furthermore, viral memes are positively associated with brand recall and engagement.

surprise. Bury (2016) similarly reinforced the significance of humor in memes by examining a random sample of five internet memes. According to the study, when meme advertisements are created via the comical juxtaposition of catchphrases and pre-existing meme templates, they become memorable and are frequently shared by the consumers (Bury, 2016).

The prior literature has described memes as authentic pieces of user-generated content and, hence, powerful advertising tools (Csordás et al., 2017). Leveraging contemporary and relevant moments enables advertisers to connect with consumers' feelings and thereby create memorable experiences for them (Csordás et al., 2017). Similarly, Brubaker et al. (2018) proposed that memes (a) allow consumers to interact freely with marketers and share their opinions and (b) help marketers to effectively collect feedback about their products and brands. For these reasons, the value of a successful meme transcends any measure of its virality and reach (Brubaker et al., 2018). Most recently, Chuah et al. (2020) examined the association between the iconicity of memes and the type of language features they employ. They found that highly iconic memes use simple sentence structures, avoid slang, and are contextual.

While some arguments favor memes and their potential benefits for businesses, the literature has also highlighted various disadvantages of memes' use in marketing (Casey, 2018; Sharma, 2018). To begin, Casey (2018) argued that memes may create adverse content and thus result in negative outcomes. Similarly, Sharma (2018) asserted that, unlike traditional media, which allows marketing communication to be tightly controlled, memes are uncontrollable and largely user-generated. Therefore, marketers must thoroughly understand the phenomenon of memes before adopting them in their marketing communication strategies (Zappavigna, 2017). Nevertheless, limited studies offer insights into effective content creation and design strategies for memes. The existing research is dominated by case studies, which focus on content analysis techniques to analyze selective meme-based advertising campaigns.

Reviewing the extant literature, we observed that no prior study has identified and presented strategies for creating and designing viral memes. We also did not locate any prior study explaining people's motivation to create, modify and share memes. Furthermore, although the existing literature has employed the lens of viral marketing to explain the transmission of memes (Davis et al., 2015; Sharma, 2018), this theory exhibits several inherent limitations in explaining the transmission of meme-based advertising. First, in viral marketing, the content is transmitted to the masses through media in its original forms (Reichstein & Brusch, 2019). A meme allows participants to creatively modify the content and distribute it as a social phenomenon (Borah et al., 2020). The viral marketing literature has thus far failed to explain the creative mutation and active modification of memes. Because a successful meme requires active participation and strong engagement, the viral marketing literature must further explore the context of meme-based advertising. Additionally, memes can help marketers understand consumer mindsets and offer a platform for social participation and consumer activism. However, the existing literature has ignored the

underlying multi-dimensional factors contributing to meme virality. This study attempts to bridge these gaps in the literature.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Qualitative research design

The current study utilized a qualitative research design to accomplish the following objectives: (a) identify the key antecedents that drive meme virality, (b) capture the perspectives of multiple stakeholders—that is, users, meme developers, memers, media agencies, brand managers and influencers—and thereby understand the virality of memes and (c) examine the possible moderators and outcomes of viral memes. The limited nature of the literature on memes necessitated an inductive research design based on grounded theory to achieve the aforementioned research objectives. According to the grounded theory approach, research must systematically capture and analyse multiple perspectives (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach helps to formulate the relevant concepts and identify their conceptual relationships (Kumar et al., 2019). Therefore, we asked various stakeholders—that is, media agencies involved in creating memes, memers, brand managers, influencers, and users—to share their perspectives and insights.

3.2 | Data collection

We conducted 35 in-depth interviews with 20 meme users, six memers (4 males and 2 females), four influencers (3 males and 1 female) and five brand managers (2 males and 3 females) over 8 weeks. We selected these participants using theoretical sampling and developed the framework using concurrent data collection and constant comparative analysis (Malodia et al., 2021). We invited 75 memers, influencers and brand managers—only those industry professionals who were active on social media and engaged in creating memes or using memes for their brands—through LinkedIn. Of the 75 professionals invited, 15 responded to our request, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted interviews with them via Zoom calls. The 15 respondents fairly represented the profile of the 75 invitees. Table 2 briefly describes these stakeholders and their roles in the meme advertising industry. The memers we interviewed had extensive experience handling reputable brands, and their meme pages had garnered over 2 million followers (Instagram). The brand managers interviewed held senior positions and were responsible for independently managing their respective portfolios of brands. Each of the influencers, meanwhile, had over 500,000 followers (Instagram). The above professionals were working in the Asia-Pacific region and had experience serving global clients for a minimum of 5 years. We interviewed users in the age group of 18–45 because this cohort is the primary target segment for most brands. The consumers were also from the Asia-Pacific region.

We used the approach of unstructured interviewing to avoid any inadvertent or overt biases during the data collection process (Qu & Dumay, 2011). We utilized probing questions to elicit responses in a "nondirective" and "unobtrusive" manner (McCracken, 1988). Probing questions enable further elaboration of an issue and generate deeper insights. Given that the data collection and analysis were interrelated, we also included follow-up questions and sought clarification before ending each interview (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Hence, we adopted an iterative approach to the data collection and coding processes. The unstructured interviews described above allowed us to gather various information regarding the meme marketing phenomenon while offering a sufficient scope for finer analyses. Collectively, the information provided by the various stakeholders was sufficient to validate our research framework.

Providing powerful insights into the meme marketing phenomenon, the interviews helped us capture the diverse perspectives of all stakeholders engaged in meme marketing and enabled us to understand the key drivers of meme virality. Furthermore, we obtained insights into the measures of virality and the consequences of viral memes.

3.3 | Interviews

We conducted in-depth interviews with 35 participants, including 15 industry professionals and 20 consumers. The interviews with industry professionals allowed us to explore the lesser-known domain of meme-based advertising. In particular, these interviews, which lasted an average of 75–90 min, helped us to understand the key drivers of meme marketing campaigns and the factors that make meme-based advertisements go viral. We divided the interviews into two parts. In the first part, each interviewee provided basic details regarding their activities, including a brief overview of their organization, marketing objectives, offerings, key clients, and vendors. In the second part, we used a well-defined interview protocol to explore the following aspects of meme marketing: (a) the factors considered when designing the content of a meme, i.e. how the professionals selected the humor, genre, and format and how they predicted the spreadability of the content, (b) the factors that affect users' consumption and sharing of memes, i.e. how the industry ensures that users will like, share and comment on meme-based advertisements, (c) the factors associated with the seeding and distribution of memes across various media vehicles, (d) the measures of virality, that is, how marketers measure the success of a meme marketing campaign and the expected outcomes of meme marketing, that is, the tangible as well as intangible outcomes that brands expect to derive from investing in meme marketing. Our goal was to understand the virality of memes and the dimensions underlying that virality, which are rooted in the experiences of memers, brand managers, and end users. We structured the interview discussions around three core areas: (a) content-related factors considered when creating and consuming memes, (b) consumer-related factors—essentially the consumption values that consumers seek from memes, and (c) media-related factors affecting the diffusion of memes. We encouraged the memers, brand managers, and influencers to share

TABLE 2 Description of various stakeholders in meme marketing

Stakeholder	Description	Role in the industry	Example
Memers	Memers are creative individuals who design and upload memes to various meme pages. Meme pages are the medium through which both meme lords and memers share memes. Memers who command high popularity are termed 'meme lords'. These are the people who generally start the trend of using a particular template/sound in a meme. In addition to meme lords, a second category of memers act as a catalyst in making a meme viral.	• Meme lords create interest around a topic. • Memers amplify this interest among the masses. • Meme lords and memers often receive compensation from brand managers for creating memes for their brands. • Meme pages have a massive follower base and can help to transmit memes to extremely large audiences.	**Meme Lords**: ShitIndiansSay, GajodharSinghCool **Memers**: AgnikGhosh **Meme pages**: Sagarcasm, memezar
Brand managers	Brand managers are those who identify meme virality and adopt memes for use in their own branding.	• The brand manager's role is to identify meme trends and curate them according to their brand persona. • Managers reach out to both memers and agencies.	Durex, Netflix, Dunzo, etc
Media agencies	Media agencies are the companies that create memes based on the templates made viral by meme lords. They then customize memes to meet their clientele's needs.	• Agencies are organizations that design memes that are consistent with brand guidelines. • Unlike meme pages, which do not rely on guidelines in creating memes, agencies adhere to guidelines and post memes on brands' pages.	DDB, Ogilvy, Schbang
Influencers	Influencers are similar to celebrities with a certain skill set.	Influencers, due to their large follower base, can influence consumers.	Bhuvan Bam is a popular comedian who has 20.7 million subscribers to his YouTube channel BBKiVines.
Users	In this study, we define users as individuals who follow meme pages and are active on social media platforms.	Users are the target segment for brands.	A user can be any individual who views, comments, and shares memes with their network.

their understandings based on their relevant experiences managing meme marketing projects.

Similarly, we conducted semi-structured interviews with users. The interview protocol captured the following information: (a) the meme pages they followed, (b) their social media consumption habits, (c) their preferences about online content, (d) the influencers they followed, (e) the nature of their online activities, (f) the type of content they forwarded to and received from their friends, (g) the type of memes they liked and why, and (h) why they modified and forwarded memes. Insights from these interviews helped us understand the nature and level of each stakeholder's involvement in memes. Meme users were encouraged to share their experiences and participation levels when consuming memes, that is, liking, sharing, and commenting on various memes.

3.4 | Data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed independently by four researchers. Adopting Corbin and Strauss's (1990)

approach, we coded the content of the interviews to identify the zero-order, first-order and second-order categories demonstrated in the recent literature (Kumar et al., 2019; Malodia et al., 2019).

During open coding, we grouped statements with similar intentions into zero-order categories. Next, we identified the patterns between zero-order categories for axial coding and grouped interrelated zero-order categories into first-order categories. We further triangulated these efforts with the help of the academic and practice literature—for example, by consulting reports to explain the relevant context. Finally, we conducted selective coding to re-group the first-order categories into second-order categories (Kumar et al., 2019; Nöjd et al., 2020). The second-order categories offered a systematic understanding of the virality of memes in the context of marketing. We conducted reliability testing in three steps. In the first step, we achieved internal consistency by integrating the independent coding sheets of each researcher (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). Second, we tested inter-rater reliability by appointing a panel of two academic scholars who were unfamiliar with the current study but had to expertise in qualitative research methods. The expert panel

reviewed our coding sheets and the categories we had identified (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding). We measured their agreement with the coding results to calculate Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1968) and thereby assess the inter-rater reliability. Third, we established content validity by inviting the interviewees to review the proposed categories (Kumar et al., 2019).

4 | RESULTS

We identified five second-order factors through qualitative analysis of the interview data: (a) content-related factors, (b) customer-related factors, (c) media-related factors, (d) brand recall, and (e) brand engagement. In addition, we identified nine first-order factors: relevance, iconicity, humor, spreadability, process, social and content gratifications, seeding strategy, and distribution strategy. The reliability index returned a kappa value of 0.87, which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 and thus indicated substantial agreement (Rust & Cooil, 1994). To ensure content validity, we asked the 35 participants to review the categories; 31 accepted the invitation to participate in the content validity phase and suggested minor changes in the open and axial coding vocabulary. We incorporated their suggestions to enhance conceptual clarity and arrive at the final coding (see Table 3). Next, we discuss the results of the coding process.

4.1 | Content-related factors

Content-related factors encompass marketers' efforts to create memes that can become viral and ultimately help brands generate strong awareness, engagement and recall. We propose the follow as content-related factors: *relevance*, *language structure*, *humor* and *shareability*.

4.1.1 | Relevance

We propose that content relevance will positively enhance the likelihood of consumers receiving and subsequently sharing a meme. To ensure a meme's relevance, advertisers must shape the content of the meme as follows: (1) the content must be topical and popular among the target consumers, (2) the target consumers must be familiar with the content, (3) the consumers must find it relatable, (4) the content must be contemporary, and (5) the content must be noncontroversial. Our in-depth interviews best explained this construct as follows:

> Basically, when you are constructing a meme, the architecture has to be such that it has to be from the trailer. If you have noticed, they don't take random

TABLE 3 Coding of qualitative interviews

Zero-order	First-order	Second-order
Popular	Relevance	Content-related factors
Topical		
Familiar		
Watched before		
Contemporary		
Fewer words, more gestures	Iconicity	
Short and crisp		
Simple sentences		
Contextual language		
Use of common words		
Avoids incomplete sentences		
Enjoyment	Humor	
Stupidity		
Humourous		
Quirky		
Self-deprecating		
Self-hate		
Sarcastic		
Wholesome		
Darkly humourous		
Dank jokes		
Emotionally relatable	Spreadability	
Amusing		
Trending		
Connected to users		
Easy to share		
Informational		
Memes are stress busters Watching memes can be fun	Process gratification (i.e. escapism)	Customer-related factors
Memes are dopamine for the mind		
Watching memes when I feel alone and lonely		
Watching memes is the best way to pass the time		
Memes can serve as coping mechanisms		
Seeking validation	Social gratification	
Connecting with others		
Making social presence		

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Zero-order	First-order	Second-order
Tool for social interaction	Content gratification	
Memes are informational		
Memes offer a medium to share ideas and thoughts		
Memes allow individuals to be known as experts		
Time of release	Seeding strategy	Media-related factors
Media of release		
Selection of target audience		
Referral generation		
Use of influencers	Distribution strategy	
Amplification of trending memes		
Use of meme pagesHiring of meme lords		
Guidelines for do's and don'ts	Brand guidelines	Brand guidelines
Guidelines regarding genres		
Guidelines regarding subjects		
Redemption coupons	Rewards	Rewards
Meme contests		
People associate brands with memes		Brand recall
High recall for brands active in memes		
High awareness for brands active in memes		
People share meme-based advertisements		Brand engagement
Brands active in memes have more followers on their social media pages		
People actively create and modify brand memes		
Engagement is high for meme-based posts		

memes from the show; they mainly consider the trailer because a trailer is far more relatable to the audience than the show. So the first thing we keep in mind is the trailer and all the things which resonate with the audience, and then it should be contemporary. [Memer]

Another respondent offered the following comment:

While we ensure that the meme content is relatable and topical for the target audience, we stay clear from any sort of controversy. [Brand manager]

Consistent with our interview data, schema theory also supports the "relevance" construct (Axelrod, 1973). Schema theory proposes that messages with an initial level of perceived relevance are likely to fit the mental schema of the receiver and, hence, capture the receiver's attention (i.e., *contraction*; Fox & Lind, 2020). For example, the video "*Gangnam Style*" went viral globally but was not perceived as relevant in Japan because it did not fit the mental schema of Japanese culture (Fox & Lind, 2020; Lie, 2014). In contrast, a meme that is designed to be relevant to the target audience and fits with their mental schema is likely to go viral in marketing.

4.1.2 | Iconicity

In linguistics, iconicity describes the cognitive component of language represented in signs and words (Chuah et al., 2020; Otterbring, 2021). Iconicity not only offers a measure of the clarity of the intended communication but also plays a significant role in the receiver's efforts to process and comprehend the message (Caselli & Pyers, 2020; Otterbring, 2020; Sung et al., 2022). Because memes are used as a medium of digital communication, iconicity is essential for attaining a minimum threshold of comprehension. As active participants in the construction and transmission of memes, consumers must deconstruct and reconstruct the meanings hidden (iconicity) in them. Successful memes, therefore, must be highly iconic. One of the respondents commented as follows:

A viral meme is always high on the measure of iconicity, i.e. it follows a set of linguistic rules in terms of sentence structure, word choice and writing style. In my personal opinion and experience, memes that are higher in iconicity are easier to comprehend and hence more widely shared. [Memer]

Based on in-depth interviews, we observed that memes with high iconicity have simpler, more complete sentences with fewer dangling elements. To achieve high iconicity, memes should thus adopt commonly used words; in other words, popular lingo makes memes more comprehensible, and short forms should be avoided. Finally, the writing style should be contextual with situational description. For example, one of the industry experts shared the following:

You pick out what you think is the most viral element, and then you use it to create a meme. The fewer the words, the better. People associate better to gestures and emotions than to words. That's the millennial mind strategy. [Brand manager]

Together, sentence structure, word choice and writing style define the overall schema of iconicity in the context of memes. We further argue that these linguistic schemata guide the conscious, participatory and self-initiated cultural transmissions of social ideas.

4.1.3 | Humor selection

Humor is defined as an effort to provoke fun, laughter or amusement (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Analyzing different types of memes and interview data from various stakeholders, we observed that an important characteristic of memes is their use of humor. We identified humor styles ranging from affiliative to aggressive and self-enhancing to self-deprecating. Furthermore, types of humor included bizarre jokes, dark humor, exaggeration, quirky content, parody, puns, sarcasm, self-deprecating jokes, and silliness, among others. Proponents argue that humor is not only an essential element of memes but an essential ingredient for their virality (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). One of the respondents made the following observation:

> Humor is the key ingredient in any meme. If I have to give you a ballpark figure, I would say 90 percent of memes have some element of humor. However, the interpretation of humor varies from user to user. [Brand manager]

Similarly, another respondent commented as follows:

> We use humor as the key ingredient of memes because it creates amusement and an element of surprise while evoking positive emotions in consumers. However, not all consumers are appreciative of all types of humor. For example, millennials love dark humor, but boomers just do not understand dark humor; they are, instead, amused with husband–wife jokes. Therefore, we select the type of humor we use in memes by carefully analyzing the target audiences and the brand in question. [Brand manager]

Humor has long been an important element of communication, and research has argued that humor-induced communication is contagious (Eisend, 2022; Weber & Quiring, 2019). Once initiated, humor is likely to trigger social contagion and elicit a response from users (transmission of humorous content), that is, mimicked behavior (Smoski & Bachorowski, 2003; Weber & Quiring, 2019). In the context of memes, the traditional responses include "liking," "sharing," "commenting on," and active modifying memes. Nevertheless, scholars have shown that the contagion effect of humor may vary with the style and type of humor preferred by the sender and receiver (Gignac et al., 2014; Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010). Therefore, we contend that humor selection in the context of memes involves identifying the most effective combination of the "type" and "style" of humor for a particular audience. Further, based on the above insights from the interviews and relevant literature, we propose that the

selection of an appropriate humor strategy significantly influences meme virality.

4.1.4 | Spreadability

In the context of memes, spreadability refers to the speed and ease with which a meme template can flow across communities on various internet platforms. Mills (2012) identified two characteristics underlying spreadability: likeability and shareability. Likeability is the degree to which the content can stimulate the recipient's interest while shareability refers to the recipient's willingness to further distribute the content (Mills, 2012). The insights from our interviews indicated that once the creating agency releases a meme template via social media and other internet platforms, the transmission and exposure of the meme depend upon its appeal to the recipients, that is, the recipients will like the meme if they find it to be amusing and emotionally relatable. If the meme's topic is trending, topical, and informational and the template is easy to share, moreover, these recipients will be motivated to further disseminate it. Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) argued that when users share a meme, the meme's competitiveness increases as does the likelihood of its selection by other users. One of our interviewees made a similar observation:

> People share memes when they feel amused and the meme affects them either emotionally or cognitively. Immediately, they want others to know and spread it further. Let me give you an example. Recently, there was a meme trending about Dream Eleven.[5] The meme said, "I will do this study; you go and make the team on Dream Eleven". This meme was so easy to contextualize and share that one of the political parties used the template and made a meme about the ruling party, which said something like, "We will do the public service; you go and make a team on Dream Eleven." [Memer]

The above arguments find support in social contagion theory (Hinz et al., 2011). The literature argues that social contagion is a basic premise of viral marketing. Contagion occurs when people develop a positive attitude or behavior toward particular content (Hinz et al., 2011). Therefore, based on our qualitative data and tenets of social contagion theory, we propose that 'spreadability' is an important element of meme content, which positively influences meme virality.

The above discussion suggests that all four content-related factors directly influence a meme's virality. Relevance draws the receiver's attention (i.e. contraction) while iconicity and humor influence the meme's quick transmission or spreadability, which increases the meme's exposure. Thus, we advance the following proposition:

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[5]Dream Eleven is an Indian virtual sports platform.

P1. Content-related factors are positively associated with meme virality.

We test Proposition 1 via the following hypothesis in our quantitative Study 1.

H1: Content-related factors—(a) relevance, (b) iconicity, (c) humor, and (d) spreadability—positively affect meme virality.

4.2 | Customer-related factors

Creating a viral meme involves seeding a meme template and transmitting it over the internet by leveraging consumers' personal social networks. The challenge for marketers, therefore, is to motivate consumers to notice, like, comment on, and transmit the message associated with their brand. Our in-depth qualitative data, triangulation of data, and application of the tenets of the 'uses and gratification' theory (UGT) revealed three types of gratifications that motivate consumers to view and disseminate memes via various internet platforms. UGT explains the types of gratification needs that motivate people to prefer a specific type of media usage (Kaur et al., 2020). UGT takes a user-centric approach to understanding what people do with media; in other words, the theory assumes that people actively select certain media and are motivated to engage with a meme only by their desire for a specific gratification (Dhir & Chen, & Chen, 2017). The three gratification needs to be proposed in this study are "*process (i.e. escapism) gratification*," "*social gratification*," and "*content gratification*." In this section, we discuss these three gratifications as important customer-related factors that are positively associated with meme virality.

4.2.1 | Process gratification

Process gratification refers to gratification derived from the process of engaging in a certain activity, such as searching for something, entertaining oneself, passing time, and so forth (Liu et al., 2010). This study's results identified escapism among the important gratifications users seek when viewing and sharing memes. Escapism refers to the practice of viewing and sharing memes for enjoyment, fun, and pleasure. The existing literature has found 'escapism' to be an important gratification consumer seek when using the internet (Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999) and social media (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Our qualitative study indicated that memes provide an escape from the reality of life into the realm of humor, shared misery, and nihilism. One participant commented as follows:

> I use memes as a stress buster; when I have a lot of stress and am unable to concentrate on my work, I just leave my work aside and go through the memes on my Instagram page. There was a time when I used to follow more meme pages than everything else because that is the kind of content that I personally want so that I have better peace of mind. [User]

Another participant shared a similar sentiment:

> Whenever I see memes, it releases dopamine in my mind, and it catches my attention. [User]

The prior literature has found that escapism motivates consumers to continue using social media (Gallego et al., 2016). Similarly, Gan and Li (2018) examined consumers' continuance intentions to use WeChat, finding that pastime, enjoyment and fun are important motivators for this social application's use. Consistent with the UGT literature and our qualitative interviews, we propose that escapism motivates consumers to view and transmit memes and thus contributes positively to meme virality.

4.2.2 | Social gratification

Social gratification refers to the degree to which individuals seek memes as a medium to connect and socialize with others, express their self-identity and seek validation for their ideas (Kaur et al., 2020). The previous literature has identified social gratification as an important driver of social media and internet usage (Choi et al., 2015; Dhir & Chen, & Chen, 2017; Kaur et al., 2020). According to our analysis of the interview transcripts, consumers modify and share memes to assert their presence in a social group and connect with other like-minded members. During our interviews, one meme user commented as follows:

> What I believe is that memes are a trendy thing to follow on social media. If your peer group/friend circle is into memes, then it may be good to share memes on your social media page to be relevant and stay connected. [User]

Another user added the following:

> What I noticed in our generation is that people go through a lot of alone phases, and when you see a meme that is relatable to you or a meme that has a similar kind of humor, you feel there is someone out there in the world who thinks similarly. Basically, it is a kind of assurance that you are not alone and there are people who think like you. [User]

Based on our qualitative inquiry and UGT, we assert that 'social gratification' is an important predictor of participation in the meme phenomenon. Therefore, we expect social gratification to be positively associated with meme virality.

4.2.3 | Content gratification

Content gratification refers to the extent to which consumers rely on memes as a medium for sharing and receiving informative content

(Kaur et al., 2020). The prior literature has recognized content gratification as an important factor motivating the use of internet-mediated social platforms (Dhir & Tsai, 2017; Stafford et al., 2004). Dhir and Tsai (2017) observed that information seeking significantly influences the intensity of Facebook usage among adolescents and young adults. Similarly, in the context of memes, Shifman (2013) argued that memes play a significant role in communicating ideas and ideologies by manifesting information through memetic content within a specific context. Additionally, our interviews with meme users revealed memes' increasing status among popular news media. One respondent shared the following:

> Whenever trending news breaks out, a large number of memes around that topic start floating on various internet platforms. For example, when the US Capitol incident happened, a huge number of memes started circulating on the internet, and frankly speaking, I log on to news channels only to check out the details of the incident after I find a trending meme in my social network. [User]

The opportunity to contribute content by modifying meme templates or writing commentary on existing memes is the key motivator behind people's engagement with memes. Our interviews indicated that individuals seek appreciation for the information they share via their social media handles; hence, they actively engage in creating memes to showcase their expertise on selected subjects. One participant commented as follows:

> I have created a meme page for my college-related events, and I try to share all news related to my campus through creative memes. Initially, I was the one who created all of the memes, but now my peers are actively participating in content creation. A lot of information at my campus now breaks through my meme page. [User]

Based on the above discussion, we argue that a meme's ability to fulfill users' information-seeking needs will be positively associated with the meme's contagiousness. Hence, we expect that content gratification will be positively associated with meme virality.

P2. Customer gratification needs (process, social and content gratifications) are positively associated with the virality of memes.

To test Proposition 2, we use an online quasi-experiment, that is, quantitative Study 2, and operationalize the above proposition in the form of the following hypothesis:

H2: Customer gratification needs—(a) escapism, (b) social gratification, and (c) content gratification—positively affect meme virality.

4.3 | Media-related factors

Social networks have enabled the successful dissemination of memes and the influencing of target audiences. However, maximizing memes' overall reach and virality requires selecting the appropriate set of media-related factors. Media-related factors are the external drivers that transmit memes and enable their virality. Our qualitative study identified "*seeding strategies*" and "*distribution strategies*" as two important media-related factors that are positively associated with meme virality. We utilize the theoretical reasoning offered by "*social contagion theory*" to explain these media-related factors.

4.3.1 | Seeding strategies

Seeding strategies in the context of memes refer to the selection of attractive seeding nodes, including the initial target segment, media type, and release time. In the context of viral marketing, Hinz et al. (2011) observed that seeding strategies play a significant role in a marketing campaign's success or failure. Using social network theory, Liu-Thompkins (2012) presented important elements of seeding strategies, including the initial target segment, the relationship between the source of the viral message and the initial target segment, the degree of influence exhibited by the initial receivers, and the characteristics of the media. Thus, efforts to target the correct audience as initial seeds and to select the correct media platform are likely to increase a meme's reach and encourage new users to share it. Offering insights on seeding strategies, one respondent commented as follows:

> When doing meme advertising, three things are very important. First, the meme has to be timely. If you need to reach out to the maximum number of people, you have to release the meme while the topic is trending because that is when people are actively search for the trending topic. The second important element is the geographic location where you release the meme because that will become your initial seed. Finally, the third important element in meme advertising is the selection of the right media platform. [Brand manager]

Our qualitative data revealed that effective seeding of memes requires a clear targeting strategy, i.e. selecting the initial seeds, which further generates referral and facilitates the transmission of the meme to a new group of consumers. Using social contagion theory, Hinz et al. (2011) argued that well-networked individuals are actively engaged in the diffusion of viral content and exert significant influence over others in their network. Similarly, we observed that the process of media selection is important. One of the senior representatives of a media agency stated the following:

> The media plays an important role in the diffusion of a meme. Millennials are mostly on Instagram, whereas boomers are more likely to follow meme pages on Facebook. Therefore, if I was creating a campaign for a jewelry firm, I would focus more on Facebook, whereas if my client was a food delivery app, I would do a campaign on Instagram. [Influencer]

Utilizing the above insights and building upon the social contagion literature, this study proposes seeding strategies as a significant predictor of a meme campaign's virality.

4.3.2 | Distribution strategies

Distribution strategies refer to the amplification of a meme through efforts to construct partnerships with relevant stakeholders, such as influencers, meme lords, and meme pages. According to our qualitative research, effective distribution is key to the success of a meme advertising campaign. The amplification of memes must be swift enough to reach the target audience while the topic remains trending. Our qualitative data revealed that meme pages play a significant role in the effective amplification of memes, whereas influencers and meme lords promote the distribution of memes beyond the initial seed. One interviewee commented as follows:

> Brands can leverage memes successfully only if they can reach out to the target audience, so it is important to distribute memes. If you want to reach out to an audience beyond your followers, you need to rope in the right set of influencers, meme lords, and meme pages. [Influencer]

The evolution of the internet and social media has created unique opportunities for the distribution and amplification of digital content. Micro-celebrities and influencers leverage their popularity to disseminate content through online communities and social media sites (Nah & Siau, 2020). Pande (2018) argued that target consumers perceive micro-celebrities to be more authentic than actual celebrities; hence, micro-celebrities can better facilitate engagement. Micro-celebrities trigger emotional contagion among their followers on social media platforms, resulting in a multi-fold increase in the number of views and subscriptions (M. T. Lee & Theokary, 2020). Social contagion theory and field observations suggest that meme virality is subject to the amplification achieved by the distribution strategy. Therefore, we propose a significant positive relationship between distribution strategies and meme virality.

P3. Seeding strategies and distribution strategies are positively associated with meme virality.

The above proposition is operationalized in Hypothesis 3 and further validated using quantitative Study 2.

H3: (a) Seeding strategies and (b) media selection positively affect meme virality.

4.4 | Outcomes of viral memes

We observed that firms utilize meme marketing to create strong brand recall and increase customer engagement. This section discusses "brand recall" and 'customer engagement' as two outcomes of viral memes.

Brand recall refers to the ability of consumers to identify a brand with or without a cue. Strong recall creates top-of-the-mind awareness of a given product or service (Percy & Rossiter, 1992). Though firms acknowledge the significance of digital communications and viral marketing tactics to create strong brands, firms must focus on this complex phenomenon and utilize strategic insights to position their brands well and thereby increase brand recall (Dobele et al., 2005). During our qualitative interviews, we found that marketers use memes to increase brand recall. One of the respondents commented as follows:

> We saw a significant increase in meme impressions from 20 million in August 2019 to 25 million in July 2020. People are actively watching memes shared by brands, and surely, it is increasing brand recall. [Memer]

Another respondent added the following:

> We recently carried out an experiment. First, we asked people to name five brands that are actively using memes in their digital marketing strategy. The top five names were Durex, Netflix, Zomato, Paytm, and Amazon. In the second round, we shortlisted one meme per brand and concealed the brand name. Next, we asked participants to identify the brand name for each meme. The results validated our hypothesis, and the memes that were more viral generated higher recall. [Media agency]

Consumers actively search for memetic content, and viral memes help firms increase brand recall. For example, the most popular meme pages have millions of followers (e.g. on Instagram, @epicfunnypage has 17.2 million followers and @memezar has 16.1 million followers while, on Facebook, @memes has 8.9 million page likes and @epiclol.com has 5.3 million page likes). Carefully selecting and modifying meme templates to build marketing campaigns offer potential seeds for viral memes, which create positive buzz around a brand and, ultimately, improve brand recall (Chan & Lowe, 2020). Thus, viral memes can deliver the desired brand performance metrics, such as awareness and recall.

Brand engagement in viral memes refers to brand–consumer interactions through memes and the co-creation of memetic content. Brodie et al. (2011) conceptualized customer engagement based on two broad dimensions: "*interactive experience*" and "*value co-creation*." Brand seek to increase engagement by interacting with customers through social platforms (Azar et al., 2016). Existing studies related to viral marketing propose customer engagement—measured in terms of comments, likes and shares—as a potential outcome of viral marketing (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). The current research revealed similar observations, indicating that memes enhance consumer engagement measured in terms of likes, comments, shares, and modifications of memes. One respondent commented as follows:

Memes clearly help brands to strengthen their engagement with consumers. It is easy and convenient for consumers to react and respond to memes. We created a meme for a political party, and immediately, people started debating the post and the subject. [Meme lord]

Another respondent added the following:

Our brand is using paid campaigns as well as meme-based marketing campaigns. Memes are winning the engagement battle. [Brand manager]

In the digital era, moreover, firms can measure brand engagement with precision. For example, one of the media agencies shared that commonly used industry metrics calculate engagement with a viral meme as the ratio of total likes, shares, comments, and modifications over total followers.

P4. Viral memes are positively associated with brand awareness and brand engagement.

The corresponding hypothesis for the above proposition is as follows:

H4: Viral memes positively affect (a) brand engagement and (b) brand recall.

4.5 | Boundary conditions

Our study identified two boundary conditions: *"brand guidelines,"* which moderate the association between the antecedents of viral memes and meme virality, and *"rewards,"* which moderate the association between meme virality and outcomes.

Brand guidelines refer to the specific instructions and guidelines brands issue to media agencies to design and distribute memes. Strict guidelines from brands constrain media agencies' ability to design the content of a meme, address customers' gratification needs and select appropriate media. During data collection, one media representative commented as follows:

Working with brands for more than a decade, I have experienced that a meme-based ad campaign is successful only when brand guidelines are consistent and offer adequate flexibility to the creative team. [Memer]

Another respondent added the following:

We have a clear policy to not use political satire and controversial content in our memes. Otherwise, we allow our agency to use their creativity. These simple yet clear guidelines have helped us and our media agency. [Brand manager]

The insights from our qualitative interviews revealed that while it is important to establish brand guidelines for meme advertising, these guidelines should not be excessively specific. Rather, they should allow creative teams the freedom to choose meme colors, infographics, subjects and topics. Therefore, we advance the following proposition:

P5. Brand guidelines moderate the strength of the association between antecedents (content-related factors, customer-related factors and media-related factors) and meme virality.

Rewards refer to incentives, such as cashback, credit points, and gift coupons, which brands—seeking to deepen brand–customer engagement—offer consumers for participating in meme campaigns. We found that incentivizing participation can act as a catalyst for increasing the outcomes of viral memes. One respondent shared the following:

We were tasked to design a meme campaign for one of our clients. To execute the campaign we invited end users to participate in modifying and creating the memes, and shortlisted participants were given gift vouchers. This campaign generated a quick boost in engagement and brand recall. [Memer]

Consistent with our qualitative observations, the existing literature has argued that incentives promote customer engagement and motivate customers to write reviews, provide referrals and rate their experiences (Harmeling et al., 2017).

P6. Rewards positively moderate the outcomes of viral memes.

5 | A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: ANTECEDENTS OF OUTCOMES OF VIRAL MEME-BASED ADVERTISING

Following the coding exercise, our three-stage assessment of reliability enabled us to propose a framework that represents industry practices used in meme marketing. Finally, we organized a panel discussion and presented our conceptual framework to the academic and industry expert panel. Panel members were encouraged to share their feedback and offer suggestions regarding the accuracy of the proposed framework (see Figure 4). This step allowed us to incorporate industry practices and eliminate a few categories that were not explicative of the meme phenomenon being studied.

5.1 | Proposed framework for meme virality

We propose a meme virality framework based on our qualitative research and theoretical analysis (Figure 4). We identify three dimensions to conceptualize meme virality: contraction, transmission, and exposure (Libert & Tynski, 2013). We define contraction as the propensity of users to click on the meme when the brand first shares it; one can also measure contraction in terms of CTR. Transmission is defined as users sharing a meme—either in its original form or by creatively modifying it—via social media. Transmission can also be
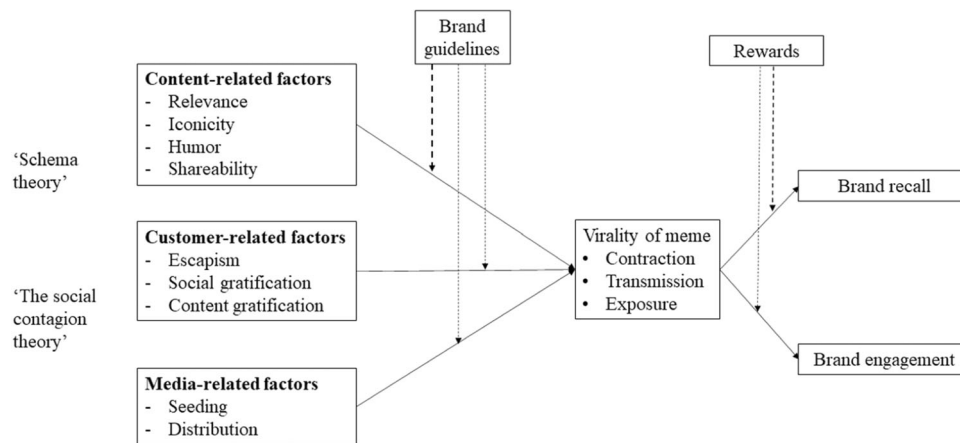
FIGURE 4 Meme virality framework.

measured as the percentage of users sharing a meme out of the total users who click on it. Exposure refers to the spread of a meme when users share it. To support the conceptual framework, we draw upon two primary theories: "*schema theory*" (Murphy, 1990) and "*social contagion theory*" (Sullins, 1991). Rooted in cognitive psychology, schema theory has wider theoretical implications in marketing research, and it has been used to explain the viral replication and mutation of cultural information (Fox & Lind, 2020). According to schema theory, consumers rely on their mental schemata to process content and evaluate its utilitarian and hedonic value (Schulze et al., 2014). Sullins (1991) defines social contagion as "the process by which individuals seems to catch the mood of those around them." Our conceptual framework builds upon this definition to explain the spread of the meme phenomenon as an automatic and continuous behavioral response among consumers to receive a viral meme (contraction) and actively participate in spreading it (transmission and exposure).

Accordingly, the proposed conceptual framework suggests that the content-related factors (relevance, language structure, humor, and shareability) determine contraction in the overall virality of memes. Similarly, the customer-related factors (escapism, social gratification, and content gratification) and media-related factors (seeding strategies and distribution strategies) significantly determine meme virality. In addition to the above determinants of meme virality, we also identify moderators that influence the virality of memes as well as the outcomes of viral memes. We identify these moderators as follows: (a) company guidelines, (b) rewards, and (c) brand categories. Finally, we discuss the following outcomes of meme marketing: (a) brand recall, (b) brand awareness, and (c) brand engagement. Figure 1 elucidates the meme virality framework.

6 | QUANTITATIVE STUDY

The theoretical framework identified using qualitative research was subjected to empirical validation by conducting multiple studies (Table 4). Study 1 aimed at validating Hypothesis 1, Study 2 sought to

validate Hypotheses 2 and 3, and Studies 3a and 3b validated Hypothesis 4. Studies 1 and 2 adopted an experimental research design, while Study 3 analyzed the archival data set collected and coded manually.

6.1 | Study 1

Using an experimental design, Study 1 manipulated relevance, iconicity, humor, and spreadability in meme-based posts from a fictitious brand in the context of a fictitious event. This study attempted to validate the significance of "relevance," "iconicity," "humor," and "spreadability" on the virality of meme-based posts made by a brand.

6.1.1 | Study design and analysis

We recruited 247 subjects from a behavioral lab to participate in the experiment. The participants were asked a screening question (i.e. "I have an Instagram account") before assigning them to an experiment. We designed eight experimental conditions using orthogonal reduction from 2 (relevance: low vs. high) × 2 (iconicity: low vs. high) × 3 (humor: dark vs. self-depreciating vs. amusing) × 2 (spreadability: low vs. high). Forty-seven participants were unengaged respondents and failed the attention test ("I am a human being," 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree). Therefore, we conducted the final analysis with 200 observations (female= 50%, M_{age} = 31.67, SD = 12.21). Participants' average activity on Instagram was recorded via responses to the statement 'I am highly active on Instagram' (0 = highly disagree 10 = highly agree) with mean activity of 6.8 (SD = 2.1). The experiment began with participants viewing a video clip (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-a3P-u6vpM). The clip was then used to create meme-based posts for a fictitious food delivery app, "order_order." Participants were told that this video had gone viral after being played by a news channel, and memes related

TABLE 4 Summary of findings from quantitative studies

Study	Method	Observations	Design	Findings
Study 1 H1	Lab experiment	Instagram post for a fictitious brand "order_order"; N = 200	2 (Relevance: low vs. high) × 2 (Iconicity: low vs. high) × 3 (humor: dark vs. self-depreciating vs. amusing) × 2 (spreadability: low vs. high) **DV**: intention to share **Control**: gender, generation, geography	Relevant memes coupled with iconicity, humor, and spreadability exhibit greater virality. Successful moderation was observed between generation × iconicity, generation × humor, gender × humor, geography × humor, and geography × iconicity
Study 2 H2 & H3	Online quasi-experiment	Participants from an online survey panel (N = 458)	We conducted a CFA and path analysis on five latent constructs measuring customer-related factors (escapism, social gratification, and content gratification) and media-related factors (seeding and distribution) as IVs and intention to share as the DV.	Both customer-related factors and media-related factors significantly impact meme virality. The following moderation effects were found to be significant: gender × social gratification, gender × content gratification, gender × seeding, generation × social gratification.
Study 3a H4a	Event study	Manually collected data from #shweta trend for 15 brands posts on Instagram	Coding the Instagram posts, we compared meme-based posts with non-meme-based posts using ANOVA.	We observed that meme-based posts generate greater customer engagement than do non-meme-based posts.
Study 3b H4b	Brand recall survey	Five memes were randomly selected from a pool of 25 shortlisted brands; N = 127 participants responded to the brand recall survey	Recall rate calculated for the selected brands.	We observed that viral memes that score high on content-related, customer-related, and media-related factors have a greater brand recall.

to this video were being circulated on various social media platforms. After watching the video, the participants were shown an Instagram post made by "order_order" in which the four variables were manipulated (Appendix A). As a measure of virality, participants rated the statement 'I am going to like this post' (0 = "strongly disagree," 10 = "strongly agree') on an 11-point Likert scale. Manipulation checks asked respondents to rate relevance-("In my opinion, this meme is highly relevant"), iconicity-("I could easily understand this meme at the first look"), humor-("I like the humor in this meme"), and spreadability-related questions ("I appreciate this meme" and "I believe my friends will definitely share this meme").

Manipulation checks were conducted. A 2 (relevance) × 2 (iconicity) × 3 (humor) × 2 (spreadability) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on relevance supports the manipulation of using relevance (Table 5). Participants exposed to high relevance experiment conditions rated the content to be more relevant (M_{high} = 6.94, SE = 0.16) than did participants exposed to low relevance conditions (M_{low} = 5.84, SE = 0.14; F [1, 192] = 13.26, $p < .001$, partial η^2 = 0.58). A 2 × 2 × 3 × 2 ANOVA on iconicity yielded a main effect of iconicity, that is, the participants assigned to high iconicity conditions rated the content to be more iconic (M_{high} = 5.60, SE = 0.14) than did participants exposed to low iconicity conditions (M_{low} = 4.72, SE = 0.18; F [1, 192] = 3.89, $p < .001$, partial η^2 = 0.29). In addition, a 2 × 2 × 3 × 2 ANOVA on humor revealed that dark humor had the strongest main effect on the humor condition (M_{dark} = 9.23, SE = 0.16), followed by self-depreciating humor ($M_{self-depreciating}$ = 8.45, SE = 0.18) and amusing humor ($M_{amusing}$ = 7.90, SE = 0.18; F [1, 192] = 16.26, $p < .001$, partial η^2 = 0.63). Finally, participants in the high spreadability condition rated the stimuli to be higher on spreadability (M_{high} = 4.38, SE = 0.09) than did those in the low spreadability condition (M_{low} = 3.84, SE = 0.08; F [1, 192] = 13.28, $p < .001$, partial η^2 = 0.58).

To validate Proposition 1, we conducted a 2 (relevance) × 2 (iconicity) × 3 (humor) × 2 (spreadability) ANOVA on "intention to share the meme post" as the dependent variable. The outcome of the ANOVA showed a main effect for relevance (M_{high} = 7.92 vs. M_{low} = 6.80, F[1, 192] = 11.74, $p < .001$, partial η^2 = 0.06), iconicity (M_{high} = 7.87 vs. M_{low} = 6.85, F[1, 192] = 22.70, $p < .001$, partial η^2 = 0.11), humor (M_{dark} = 7.64, vs. $M_{self-depreciating}$ = 7.14, vs. $M_{amusing}$ = 6.14; F[1, 192] = 35.46, $p < .001$, partial η^2 = 0.28) and spreadability (M_{high} = 7.74 vs. M_{low} = 6.99, F[1, 192] = 20.60, $p < .001$, partial η^2 = 0.10).

6.1.2 | Moderators

We further tested the impact of three moderating variables: target segment (generation), geography (metro vs. nonmetro customers) and gender. Consistent with our theoretical framework, we observed the significant interaction effect of age group—that is, "generation"—with iconicity (F [1,192] = 3.62, $p < .05$, partial η^2 = .67) and humor (F [1,192] = 5.10, $p < .05$, partial η^2 = .92). Similarly, geography—that is, metro versus nonmetro customers—significantly interacted with

TABLE 5 Comparison of means for the experimental conditions

	R-low, I-low, H-2, S-low	R-low, I-high, H-3, S-high	R-high, I-low, H-1, S-low	R-low, I-high, H-1, S-low	R-high, I-high, H-1, S-high	R-high, I-low, H-3, S-high	R-low, I-low, H-3, S-low	R-high, I-high, H-2, S-high
Manipulation checks								
Relevance	5.27^1	6.67^2	6.85^2	5.42^1	7.43^3	6.50^2	6.00^1	7.00^3
Iconicity	4.91^1	5.12^1	4.46^1	5.20^2	6.29^3	4.50^1	5.00^1	5.78^2
Humor	7.91^1	6.00^2	9.08^3	9.20^3	9.43^3	8.50^1	9.40^3	9.00^3
Likeability	3.55^1	4.00^2	3.38^1	3.80^2	4.24^2	4.46^2	3.67^1	4.22^2
Shareability	3.45^1	5.00^2	4.31^2	3.80^2	4.43^2	4.00^1	3.80^1	4.11^2
Dependent variable								
Int. to like	6.21^1	6.00^1	6.69^2	8.00^3	9.14^4	7.50^3	7.00^2	8.33^3

Note: R = Relevance (low vs. high), I = Iconicity (low vs. high), H = Humor (1. dark vs. 2. self-depreciating vs. 3. amusing), S = Spreadability (low vs. high). Significantly different Means are indicated with different superscripts, $p < .05$.

humor (F [1,192] = 6.85, $p < .05$, partial η^2 = .91). We also observed a significant three-way interaction between relevance, iconicity and geography (F [1,192] = 5.89, $p < .05$, partial η^2 = .67). It was observed that gender strongly interacted with humor (F [1,192] = 11.45, $p < .05$, partial η^2 = .99).

6.1.3 | Discussion

The results offer empirical evidence for Hypothesis 1 (H1a–H1d), demonstrating that content-related factors—that is, relevance, iconicity, humor and spreadability—significantly impact the virality of meme-based posts made by brands. Furthermore, the findings of the study suggest that dark humor has the strongest main effect on virality, followed by self-deprecating humor and amusement. We next conducted Study 2 to validate the impact of customer-related factors and media-related factors on the virality of memes.

6.2 | Study 2

The second study employed a quasi-experimental design to explain the influence of customer-related factors (P2: H2a–H2c) and media-related factors (P3: H3a–H3b) on the dependent variable "intention to share a meme-based post."

The participants in this study first viewed a meme in the context of a fictional brand and then answered two questions: (a) "I am highly likely to share this meme" (0 = Highly disagree, 10 = Highly agree) and (b) "In my opinion, this meme will become viral" (0 = No, 1 = Yes). After 1 min, participants were presented with a survey instrument. The objective of the questionnaire was to identify the customer-related and media-related factors influencing the virality of memes. Scale items were adopted from the existing literature and our qualitative study.

6.2.1 | Analysis and results

Four hundred seventy-two respondents participated in the study, of which 458 participants qualified as engaged respondents. The survey results were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to establish the validity of the measurement model, goodness of fit and construct reliability. Further, we assessed the reliability of the five constructs, their uni-dimensionality and validity using the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (Table 6). The item loadings for all five constructs exceeded 0.56 (Hair et al., 1998); hence, item reliability was established. Finally, multicollinearity tests confirmed that the multi-collinearity issue was absent from the research model. Table 7 presents summaries of the model fit indices for both the measurement and structural models.

We adopted a multi-pronged approach to test for common method bias (Chang et al., 2010). First, at the data collection stage, we worded the scale items carefully to reduce ambiguity; in addition, we randomized the questionnaire items and assured the respondents of their anonymity (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Second, we conducted a post-hoc Harman's single-factor test and observed a total explained variance of 21.02%, which was below the recommended cut off value of 50% (Harman, 1967). Finally, we included a common latent factor in the model. The above steps ensured the absence of common method bias, and hence, no further correction of common method bias was required.

To test the impact of customer-related factors and media-related factors on meme virality, we validated the research model (Figure 5) using structural equation modeling. The tested model was found significant (X^2 = 42.68, df = 40, p = .00, X^2/df = 1.067) with satisfactory model fit indices (Table 7). Both customer-related and media-related factors exerted a significant impact on the intention to like a meme-based advertisement. Hence, we observed empirical evidence for proposed Hypotheses 2 (a, b, and c) and 3 (a and b).

TABLE 6 Factor loadings, validity, and reliability estimates

Variable (variance)	Item	Factor loading	$\overline{X}$	σ	AVE, CR	α
Escapism (Dhir et al., 2020; Lee & Ma, 2012)	I watch memes to escape from the routine.	0.78	4.99	1.45	0.54, 0.86	0.81
	I watch memes to take a break from something I should be doing.	0.77	5.37	1.31		
	Watching memes is a time pass activity for me.	0.69	4.99	1.54		
	Watching memes helps me combat boredom.	0.70	5.10	1.45		
Social gratification (Dhir et al., 2020; Lee & Ma, 2012)	Memes help me to connect with others.	0.71	4.80	1.62	0.50, 0.80	0.79
	Memes helps me to share my own likes with my friends.	0.66	4.50	1.48		
	Sharing memes helps me share happiness with others.	0.78	4.90	1.45		
	Sharing memes is an excellent way to exchange ideas with others.	0.68	4.67	1.63		
Content gratification 6.69% (Dhir et al., 2020; Lee & Ma, 2012)	I watch memes to stay updated on topical issues.	0.66	4.23	1.85	0.54, 0.77	0.71
	Memes are a good source of information.	0.71	4.72	1.48		
	Watching memes helps me learn about the latest news.	0.81	4.80	1.62		
Seeding 11.06% Qualitative study	I like memes that are timely.	0.56	5.85	1.28	0.62, 0.76	0.76
	I share memes that are liked by me friends.	0.97	4.24	1.57		
Distribution 8.98% Qualitative study	I follow meme pages for watching latest memes.	0.76	4.94	1.80	0.56, 0.72	0.75
	I like memes that are liked by my favorite influencers.	0.74	4.32	1.70		

TABLE 7 Model fit indices

The goodness of fit measures	Recommended value	Structural model	Measurement model
Chi-square/degree of freedom	≤ 3.00	1.07	1.73
Goodness-of-fit (GFI)	≥ 0.90	0.98	0.96
Adjusted goodness-of-fit (AGFI)	≥ 0.80	0.97	0.94
Normalized fit index (NFI)	≥ 0.90	0.95	0.94
Comparative fit index (CFI)	≥ 0.90	0.99	0.97
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	≤ 0.10	0.01	0.04
Tucker–Lewis fit index (TLI)	≥ 0.90	0.99	0.96

FIGURE 5 Customer-related and media-related factors.
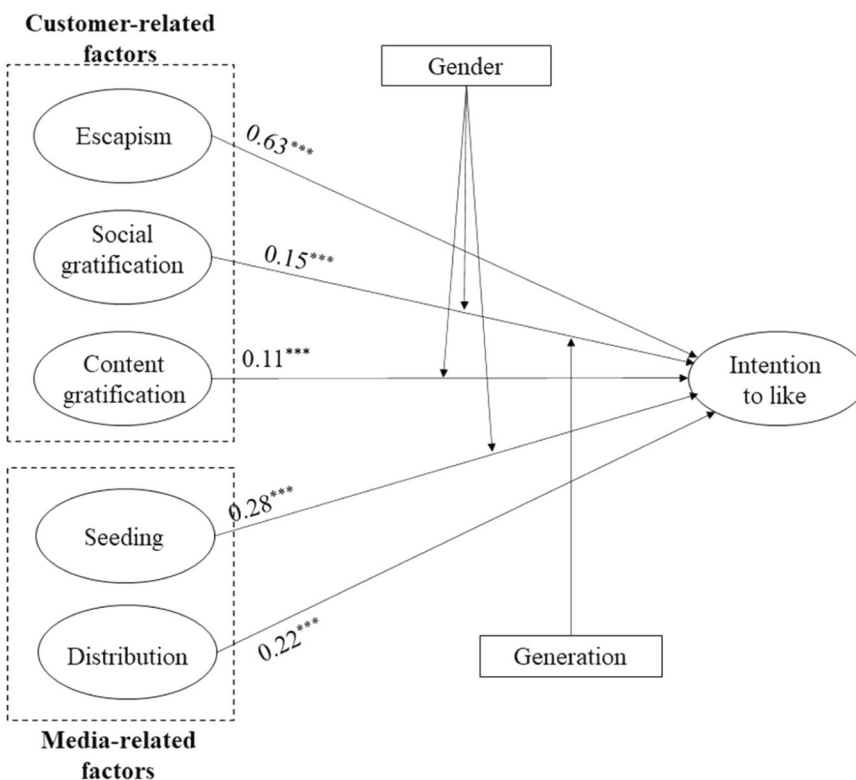
6.2.2 | Moderation

We tested the moderation effects of gender and generation (GenZ, millennials and GenX) on intention to like. We measured the moderation effect using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2015). Using 5000 bootstrap samples to assess the moderation effects, we observed that gender significantly moderated the association between content gratification and intention to like (β = .12, p < .05, CI [0.078–0.553]), social gratification and intention to like (β = 0.34, p < 0.05, CI [0.05–0.618]) and seeding and intention to like (β = 0.32, p < 0.05, CI [0.05–0.593]). Meanwhile, generation only moderated between social gratification and intention to like (β = 0.17, p < 0.05, CI [0.005–0.345]).

6.2.3 | Discussions

Study 2 offers empirical evidence of customer-related factors (H2a–H2c) and media-related factors (H3a–H3b) on the virality of memes. Furthermore, this study provides support for the moderating variables proposed in Proposition 5. We next tested the impact of viral memes on the proposed consequences of viral memes in Study 3.

6.3 | Study 3a

To validate H4a, we adopted the "Shweta your mic is on" template to determine if meme-based advertising generates virality for an online post. The #shweta began trending on February 19, 2021 when a girl

named Shweta left her microphone on during a Zoom meeting and began speaking to someone over the phone. The phone conversation was meant to be private, and its content was intimate. Hence, others on the Zoom call attempted to alert her that 'Shweta your mic is on', which later began trending when someone posted the Zoom recording on social media platforms. Immediately various brands seized the opportunity to engage with their target audiences. Hence, we used this meme as context for validating our hypothesis. We selected 15 brands that leveraged the #Shweta meme, and their memes went viral. To measure the impact of viral memes on customer engagement, we collected data on the 15 selected brands for 12 h from their Instagram posts. We measured engagement as the *number of likes* and *comments*. For comparison, we collected similar metrics for non-meme-based posts shared by the same 15 brands after the meme-based posts. Again, we collected data for 12 h.

6.3.1 | Study design and analysis

We first compared the mean of engagement for meme-based posts (M_{meme} = 2469.20, SD = 627.99) and non-meme-based posts ($M_{non-meme}$ = 1561, SD = 826.92). We tested Hypothesis 4 using the "general linear model" (GLM), observing that meme-based posts had significantly greater engagement than did nonmeme-based posts (β = 908, p < 0.01; Table 8). Overall, we found the model fit and effect size to be significant. Further, we tested the assumption of linearity, normality of residuals, homogeneity, and equality of residual variance.

TABLE 8 Effect of viral memes on engagement

Variables →	Likes		Comments	
	Meme-based	Non-meme based	Meme-based	Non-meme based
Mean	2469.2	1561	25.93	9.33
SD	627.99	826.92	14.05	10.61
R square (effect size)	0.265		0.298	
Overall test of significance F	11.470**		13.33***	
Intercept (SE)	1561.2*** (189.58)		9.33** (3.22)	
β (SE)	908** (268.10)		16.60*** (4.55)	
Levene's Test Of Equality	p > 0.05		p > 0.05	
Homogeneity	Yes		Yes	

**p < 0.01;

***p < 0.001.

6.3.2 | Discussion

Utilizing empirical data from 15 brands and comparing their posts, we provide strong evidence for the advantages of meme-based advertising, finding that viral memes generate higher engagement than do non-meme-based advertising campaigns. Next, we examined the impact of viral memes on brand performance, i.e. brand recall and brand awareness.

6.4 | Study 3b

We conducted a brand recall study by selecting five brands from different categories. Next, we collected 25 memes for the five brands and asked a panel of seven experts to rate the selected memes for content-related, consumer-related and media-related factors on a scale of low, medium, and high. Further, we randomly selected five memes from the pool of 25 and conducted a brand recall survey. Respondents were asked if they recalled the meme and were asked to guess the brand name. One hundred twenty-seven respondents participated in the brand recall study. According to the results, memes with the highest brand recall rates also scored high on all antecedents of virality. We also observed that the virality rank of the meme with the highest recall was also the highest (Table 9).
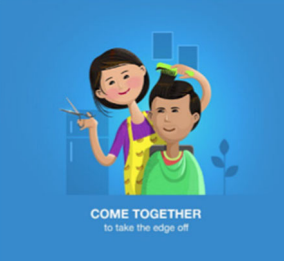
7 | DISCUSSION

After AT&T released the first clickable banner advertisement in 1994, the share of digital advertising was expected to grow by over a 20% compounded average (Beattie, 2020). However, consumers are increasingly averse to digital advertising as evidenced in the continuous decline in the average CTR. Thus, digital advertising currently generates extremely low engagement (Borah et al., 2020). In this context where consumers are eschewing branded content, the current study about meme advertising offers novel contributions to theory and practice in digital advertising. The study assumes that viral memes—as a medium for digital advertising—can increase any firm's brand recall and customer engagement. The implications of this study are profound and offer wide-ranging insights for designing meme content, understanding end users' needs, and selecting appropriate media strategies. The current study proposes a conceptual framework for meme-based advertising, which begins by identifying three antecedents of viral memes, that is, "content-related factors," "customer-related factors," and "media-related factors." Next, we identify two outcomes of viral memes, that is, "brand recall" and "brand engagement." Finally, we identify two moderating factors, that is, "brand guidelines" and "rewards." In this section, we discuss the implications of our research—first for theory and then for managerial practice.

7.1 | Theoretical implications

The current research makes several theoretical contributions. Despite the growing importance of memes in marketing, no prior research has offered a comprehensive conceptualization of memes in the context of marketing and advertising. In this study, we conceptualize and define viral memes using three underlying dimensions of virality, that is, *contraction*, *transmission*, and *exposure*. Adopting a grounded theory approach, this study provides a comprehensive framework for creating viral memes. We suggest various content-related, customer-related, and media-related factors as antecedents of viral memes, and we argue that the relationships between these antecedents and meme virality are moderated by brand guidelines. Furthermore, we identify brand recall and engagement as two important outcomes of viral meme marketing campaigns, which are moderated by the associated rewards. The study's findings thus contribute to our currently limited understanding of meme marketing phenomenon and provide a foundation for future research on memes.

TABLE 9 Memes: Antecedent scores, virality ranking, and brand recall

Meme	Score on antecedents	Virality rank	Brand recall %
	Content-related factors: **Medium** Customer-related factors: **Medium** Media-related factors: **Low**	Third	6.5%
	Content-related factors: **High** Customer-related factors: **Medium** Media-related factors: **Medium**	Second	16.92%
	Content-related factors: **Medium** Customer-related factors: **Medium** Media-related factors: **Medium**	Fourth	7.6%
	Content-related factors: **High** Customer-related factors: **High** Media-related factors: **High**	First	23.08%
	Content-related factors: **Low** Customer-related factors: **Low** Media-related factors: **Low**	Fifth	1.05%

The identification of three types of underlying factors—that is, content-related factors, customer-related factors, and media-related factors—advances our understanding of schema theory, contagion theory, and U&GT while also constructing a new theory about the virality of meme-based marketing campaigns. In particular, theorizing the role of humor, relevance, iconicity, and spreadability in generating virality is among this study's significant theoretical contributions. We argue that meme-based marketing campaigns are likely to exhibit higher virality when they contain the appropriate type and style of humor and are relevant, iconic, and easily spreadable. We further argue that all content-related factors must be employed concurrently to generate greater virality. Our findings align with the current literature on humor, which reports that humor is effective only when it is properly timed and unanticipated (Attardo & Pickering, 2011; Borah et al., 2020; Eisend, 2022; Wyer & Collins, 1992).

Next, we extend U&GT by theorizing the role of escapism, social gratification, and content gratification in meme virality. We argue that social media users are more likely to share memes than other

types of content to signal to others that they are cognizant of contemporary trends. Because memes help social media users connect with friends and satisfy various gratification needs, firms can leverage this phenomenon to reach beyond firms' own social networks. Hence, this study offers interesting contributions to social network theory by discussing innovative ways to expand firms' social networks. Additionally, our findings regarding the impact of media-related factors on meme virality also advance our understanding of seeding and distribution strategies. According to our findings, effective seeding is a function of release timing, media choice, the initial target audience, and referrals. Similarly, a meme-based marketing campaign can become viral if the distribution strategy identifies the appropriate mix of influencers and meme lords and improvises marketing messages using trending meme templates.

7.2 | Managerial implications

The current research has critical implications for practitioners, including brand managers, influencers, meme designers, and media managers. Research has shown that firms preplan and tightly control conventional digital marketing campaigns (Borah et al., 2020). However, consumers tend to ignore and feel disconnected from campaigns that are tightly controlled by brands, which reduces customer engagement. Viral memes, on the other hand, are topical and highly relatable and are thus well received by the target groups, which increases customer engagement and brand recall.

Our study, therefore, offers a blueprint for marketers and brand managers working to create meme-based marketing campaigns. The content-related factors discussed in our theoretical framework can help marketers select meme templates that are capable of going viral. Meanwhile, meme creators, who are positioned at the beginning of the meme chain, can utilize the findings of our study to design memes that consumers find relevant, iconic, humorous, and spreadable. Further, our results highlight measures of relevance, iconicity, humor, and spreadability. Practitioners can employ these measures to evaluate memes and predict the success of meme marketing campaigns.

The customer-related factors discussed in our framework are another unique contribution of our research. A deeper understanding of these factors can help marketers increase the consumption of memes by various customer segments. Meme campaigns designed to enhance escapism, social gratification, and content gratification can help marketers organically increase their reach within their target segments and enhance brand performance in terms of brand recall and brand engagement. Similarly, knowledge of media-related factors can inform efforts to effectively seed and distribute memes. Because meme advertising is a relatively new phenomenon, brand managers in traditional and legacy brands often lack a deeper understanding of it. These brand managers can thus employ the proposed theoretical framework as a quick guide for creating relevant, iconic, humorous, and easily spreadable memes.

The conventional wisdom suggests that memes are most suitable for new and digitally native brands. However, our in-depth interviews reveal that memes are equally suitable for legacy brands. The majority of mainstream brands have yet to leverage the potential of memes in their digital marketing campaigns. The findings of this study encourage brand managers from all sectors to keep a close watch on trending memetic content and leverage this viral phenomenon to create meme-based marketing content. Our findings indicate that viral memes that rate higher on the proposed dimensions generate higher brand recall and customer engagement. All stakeholders must thus consider memes as a component of their digital marketing campaigns, proactively identify effective meme templates and evaluate them by creating a matrix of the proposed dimensions.

7.3 | Limitations and future research directions

While this study provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for designing meme marketing campaigns, it nevertheless has several limitations. In this section, we identify these limitations and reflect on directions for future research. First, we tested the antecedents and outcomes of our theoretical framework via a quantitative study; however, scholars should also validate the moderating variables using quantitative studies. Second, although our study is helpful for marketers working to design and launch meme marketing campaigns, these practitioners still must identify whether an event is meme-worthy or not. Future research might, therefore, build models to predict the suitability of the meme virality framework for various types of events. Third, while our findings suggest brand recall and brand engagement as outcomes of meme virality, we invite future scholars to examine the impact of meme virality on firm performance in terms of firm value. Indeed, a viral meme campaign may increase firm value. Finally, future research should attempt to identify the environmental conditions in which meme marketing can generate the most effective results.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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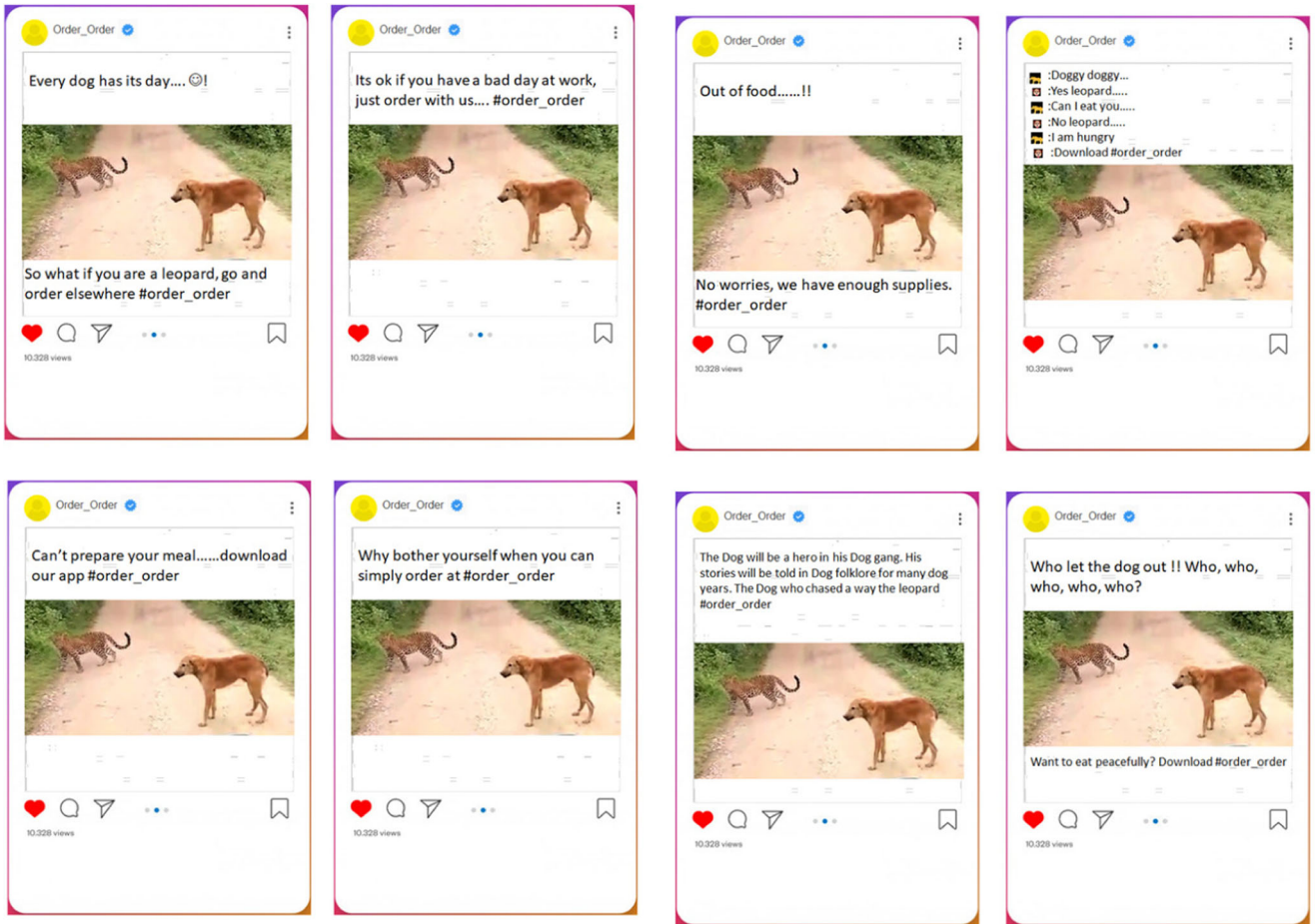
APPENDIX A

(Figure A1)

FIGURE A1 Experimental conditions (Study 1).