

Pilavcioglu, Burak et al.

## Article

# Memes everywhere: The effect of social media memes on consumers' attitude towards brands and their purchase intention

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# Vorwort

Kaum eine andere Disziplin in der Betriebswirtschaft zeichnet sich aktuell durch einen so starken **Veränderungsprozess** aus wie das Marketing. Themen wie **KI und Digitalisierung** oder Nachhaltigkeit und Purpose führen nicht nur zu neuen Geschäftsmodellen, sondern verändern z. B. auch die Kommunikation zwischen Unternehmen und Kundinnen und Kunden. Immer vielfältigere Themen werden zum Gegenstand der **Diskussion in Wissenschaft und Praxis**.

So ist es auch nicht überraschend, dass sich zum Thema „**Future of Marketing**“ bei Google ungefähr 2,2 Milliarden Ergebnisse finden lassen (Stand 29.08.2023).

Dies greift auch die Ausgabe 1/2023 der **PraxisWISSEN Marketing** auf, in der die Marketingcommunity **Antworten auf die Frage nach der Zukunft des Marketing** gibt.

Die Frage nach der Zukunft der **Marketinglehre** war im Übrigen **vor 50 Jahren Ausgangspunkt** für die **Gründung der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Marketing (AfM)**. Wir werfen daher auch einen Blick auf die Anfänge und die Zukunft der AfM.

Die heutigen Entwicklungen berücksichtigend kann man fragen, ob gar das **Marketing zu Ende** ist und sich zukünftig als **Teil der Unternehmenskommunikation** wieder findet. Unabhängig von dieser Einordnung sind nicht nur kontinuierlich neue Inhalte, sondern auch neue Formen der Gestaltung und Verbreitung in den sozialen Medien zu beobachten. Ein Beitrag diskutiert z.B. die Wirkung von **Memes in sozialen Medien**, also kreative Inhalte, die sich vorwiegend viral ausbreiten. Es wird gefragt, wie sich Memes auf die Einstellung der Verbraucherinnen und Verbraucher gegenüber Marken auswirken.

Andere Autorinnen und Autoren gehen einen Schritt weiter und erkunden **Marketingmöglichkeiten und potenzielle Fallstricke im Metaverse**. Sie zeigen das Potenzial des Metaverse für personalisierte und immersive Marketingstrategien auf. Die Entwicklung von Communities, sowie innovative Metaverse-Produkte, wie z.B. NFTs, werden als besonders vielversprechend angesehen. Ebenso wird die **Zukunft von Markenkommunikation und Werbung im Metaverse** diskutiert.

Auch die Marktforschungscommunity ist aufgerufen, die Zukunft der Informationsbeschaffung und -verarbeitung zu diskutieren. So stellt sich beispielsweise die Frage, wie **zukünftig Informationen gewonnen werden**, welche z.B. für die Konzeption von Marketingkampagnen genutzt werden. Geht es zukünftig um das „**Fragen oder Zuhören?**“. So werden in **Kundenbefragungen und User Generated Content** als Datenquellen zur Erfassung der Kundenzufriedenheit miteinander verglichen oder allgemein **klassische Marktforschungsansätze auf ihre Zukunftsfähigkeit** hinterfragt.

Die Herausgeberinnen bedanken sich bei den Autorinnen und Autoren dieser Ausgabe, den Mitgliedern des Beirats, die den Review der Beiträge verantworten und allen anderen Personen, die an der Entstehung dieser Zeitschrift beteiligt sind.

Berlin im September 2023

Andrea Bookhagen

Annett Wolf

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## Memes everywhere – The effect of social media memes on consumers' attitude towards brands and their purchase intention

**Burak Pilavcioglu, Alexander Hodeck, Niels Nagel, Marcus Simon, Timo Zimmermann, Klaus Mühlbäck**

Mit der ungebrochenen Relevanz sozialer Medien und der ständigen Weiterentwicklung der Online-Kommunikation gewinnen Memes zunehmend an Popularität. Es gibt es nur wenige wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zur Werbewirksamkeit von Memes. Die vorliegende Studie soll diese Wissenslücke schließen. Sie prüft, ob Memes einen positiven Effekt auf die Einstellung der Konsumentinnen und Konsumenten zur Werbung, zur Marke und auf die Kaufabsicht haben. Die Ergebnisse einer empirischen Studie zeigen, dass Anzeigen mit Memes, auch wenn sie als humorvoll wahrgenommen werden, nicht signifikant besser abschneiden als Anzeigen der Kontrollgruppe.

With the literally ever-lasting relevance of social media and the constant development of online communication, memes are more and more gaining popularity. So far there is only little scientific research on the advertising effectiveness of memes. This study aims to close this knowledge gap and tests, if memes have a positive effect on consumers' attitude towards the advertisement, towards the brand and on their purchase intention. Results of an empirical study indicate that ads with memes, despite being perceived as humorous, did not perform significantly better than control group ads.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the development of the Internet up to Web 4.0 has changed communication methods on a global scale (Almotairy; Abdullah; Abbasi 2020). Apart from others, companies took advantage of the new communication channels and began to invest in social media marketing. Consumers could like the content or share it within their social network. Ideally, companies create content which would then be shared on a large scale and could attract attention to their products as the content becomes viral.

The performance of social media marketing is constantly measurable as digital communication methods allow companies to track relevant metrics such as engagement rate, like-to-dislike ratio, number of views or comments.

There are certain forms of social media marketing which could enable further engagement of potential customers, such as the use of humor and memes. With the increasing usage of memes among young adults and younger generations, some brands follow the latest trends and add entertaining and engaging content to their social media feeds. They either create memes about their products and services or other types of humorous content at varying degrees (Bond 2020).

The literature on the effectiveness of social media marketing is rich but needs more research on memes and humorous posts in online communication strategies (Chuah; Kahar; Ch'ng 2020). As there is a lack of research on the use of memes in social media marketing, this study could provide a better understanding of the factors under which such stylistic elements could have a positive or negative impact on consumers' attitudes towards the brand and hence their purchase intention.

## 2. Theoretical framework

As humor theories show, there are different types of humor that work in their own way and can induce laughter. Humorous content can also be transmitted in social media, just as it can in offline or traditional media. But social media has also contributed to the sharing of new media formats, thus establishing new forms of humor, such as memes, among others.

The word meme originates from the ancient Greek 'mimema', describing something imitated (Shifman 2014). Dawkins proposed the meme as a "unit of cultural inheritance" (Science Insider 2015, 0:30). Anything can be a meme, which can be communicated from brain to brain, like tunes, images, instructions, or ideas. Davison (2012) defines internet memes as "... a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission", while hereby the term 'culture' distinguishes memes from simply humorous social media posts. He states that a meme consists of three components manifestation, behaviour and the Ideal. Manifestation refers to all visible and actual properties of the meme. Behaviour describes the actions taken by someone, who created the meme. Ideal is the message which the meme creator tries to communicate via the meme, which in the best case might influence culture (Davison 2012).



The meme visualizes the cultural relevance of the scenario described. Depending on the context, the meme's format is used to resemble for example awkwardness, sadness, shocking or confusion and can be either sarcastic or truthful (Adam 2021).

Another difference between memes and humorous virals is that memes are continuously spread with new captions of cultural relevance, while virals remain unchanged and create hype in a short time and then disappear from the scene again. (Conti 2016)

When someone encounters a meme, a new song for example, he is likely to share this song with his social environment, who then would also share that same song with their social circle. The meme is starting to spread from brain to brain rapidly, like a virus during a pandemic (Science Insider 2015, 0:45).

Blackmore et al (2000) identified already three measures, which make a meme a successful one: fidelity, fecundity and longevity.

Fidelity is the meme's ability to maintain its original information while it is being replicated and transferred from one person to another. Here fidelity refers less to the literal precise information transfer but more to the overall message and the underlying meaning transmitted from one to another (Blackmore et al 2000). Therefore, a high fidelity ensures that the original idea is conveyed, but also leaves space to evolve with modifications and new alternations, which increases the lifespan of the meme as a result. According to Blackmore et al (2000), successful memes are not those that are valuable and beneficial to the recipient, but those that the recipient will remember later. Moreover, something that has high relevance to the recipient or a particular group of peers and is fully understood by them, and therefore shared and replicated, is more likely to become a good meme than something that is not understood by a majority of a larger group of people (Knobel; Lankshear 2007).

Fecundity is described as the meme's power, in which it can replicate and spread. The quicker a meme can be replicated, the faster it will spread. Research added the susceptibility factor to the fecundity measure as a meme's time and location features in terms of someone's receptivity to it and his willingness to be influenced by it (Knobel; Lankshear, 2007). For susceptibility it is important how relevant the meme is for current events, how it relates to already existing successful memes and which interests and values are represented in the environment in which the meme is spread (Knobel 2006). The better these conditions are, the greater the susceptibility, and therefore it is in theory more likely that the meme will find resonance with others and thus will be passed from one to another.

The third measure longevity states the more robust the medium is, in which an idea is replicated, the longer the meme will survive and be shared with other people. The longer a meme survives the longer it can be replicated (Knobel; Lankshear, 2007). Written memes are therefore both high in fidelity and in longevity, as the manifested idea leaves little room for error in the replication process (Blackmore et al. 2000).

Moreover, the success of a meme depends not only on these three factors, but also on the medium through which the meme is replicated and disseminated. Online memes can be copied, modified, and uploaded again relatively easy and fast in the internet, which is why memes are high in fecundity. On top of that, the digital environment allows memes to be replicated without any information loss. The internet provides various platforms for diverse peer groups, in which individuals can share their memes with

people with similar interests, which enables a better understanding of the content. Consequently, memes can be replicated and spread through digital networks more efficiently, than through offline channels (Lintott 2016).

While research on memes generally accepts the meme concept, approaches vary on explaining how exactly a meme is being replicated and spread. Because memes are described as the cultural counterpart to the biological gene, the spread of memes is oftentimes compared to the one of a virus or parasite (Heylighen; Chielens 2009), literally in four stages of meme reproduction. The first stage is assimilation. In Heylighen & Chielens' four stage model, assimilation refers to the point when someone is encountered to a meme. Using the virus comparison, this states that a meme must infect, the recipient then becomes a new host of the meme. The meme has to be salient enough to grab the recipient's attention to be noticed.

The second stage is retention. Heylighen & Chielens postulate that memes only become memes when they are stored in the host's memory for a certain period. They add that the longer this period takes, the more opportunities the meme has to spread.

The third stage expression describes how the meme within the hosts memory is converted to a physical format, so it can be expressed to other people. Heylighen & Chielens state that expression can take the form of any media from speeches or pictures created by the host but also unintentional ways of the hosts behaviour like body language or visual appearances.

Once the meme has been converted to an expression, it is ready to enter the fourth stage transmission. For the meme to be transmitted, the meme needs a physical storage unit for the expression, which Heylighen & Chielens call vehicle. This is in accordance with Shifman (2013), who also states that the essence of memes is transmitted via meme vehicles. It is important that the vehicle is sufficient in carrying the information of the meme without any loss or mistakes. Heylighen & Chielens (2009) also proposed criteria, which influence the success of a meme's replication throughout the four stages. They divide these criteria into objective, subjective, intersubjective, and meme-centered categories. Objective criteria are independent from the recipient, subjective criteria rely on the recipient, intersubjective criteria are based on the interaction of recipient and content and meme-centered criteria represent the meme's characteristics itself.

With the Internet and the development of digital social networks, communication evolved on a digital level. Memes are nowadays not just a theoretical concept, for which genes and viruses are used as a metaphorical analogy, but rather real thoughts and material which is spread consciously from oneself to others (Shifman 2013). Davison (2012) defines internet memes as "... a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission". He states that a meme consists of three components: Manifestation, behaviour and the ideal. Manifestation refers to all visible and actual properties of the meme. Behaviour describes the actions taken by someone, who created the meme. Ideal is the message which the meme creator tries to communicate via the meme.

Another approach to define internet memes is that a meme is "an image, a video, a piece of text, etc. that is passed very quickly from one internet user to another, often with slight changes that make it humorous" (Oxford Learner Dictionaries, n.d.). The

term Internet meme refers to any content that appears on the Internet and is redistributed by other Internet users in an imitated or edited form (Dyner 2020). Therefore, anyone can be a creator of new memes and participate. Shifman (2013) sees internet memes as connected content spread by users to peers, which convey a specific thought as a response to a certain socio-cultural context. The meme may appear in any format, such as images, GIFs or videos, and can optionally contain text passages.

It is important to distinguish between a meme and a pure viral. A viral is content, often an image or video, which is widely spread in unchanged form through digital word-of-mouth and quickly creates immense attention (Shifman 2013). The difference between memes and virals is that memes are continuously spread with new captions and virals remain unchanged, create a hype in a short time and then disappears from the scene again. Conti (2016) also shares this view and highlights, that memes, in contrast to viral content, are replicated with slight modifications. Furthermore, he states that a meme is not simply an edited image. Rather memes are a piece of culture in which the creator tries to communicate something to the respective subculture that the recipient can easily relate to, understand, identify with, and modify.

Zittrain (2018) describes five factors, which influence the generativity of memes on the internet and help to understand why and when memes are gaining in popularity. These factors Zittrain refers to as generative technologies, are capacity for leverage, adaptability, ease of mastery, accessibility, and transferability.

Capacity for leverage refers to technology making tasks easier to accomplish. In the case of memes, this means any tool, which helps to create memes, such as Adobe Photoshop but also palettes of meme templates. Today meme generators also exist in the form of smartphone applications.

Adaptability refers to how well something can be modified to broaden its range of uses. Every update of meme generating tools contributes to the ease of mastery factor, which describes how easy users can understand and adapt to new technologies and use them to create or adapt memes.

Zittrain describes accessibility as how easy the public has access to new technologies to use, master and adapt a meme, e.g., to what extent the availability of mobile internet and the bandwidth speeds are increasing globally. Transferability indicates how easily changes can be conveyed to others. Zittrain states that in the internet environment it is easy to replicate content. Given the simple language and structure of internet memes and the fast information sharing environment of the internet, memes are easily transferable from one to another, which allows memes to evolve and replicate quickly in the digital world.

Already Shifman (2014) attempted to classify memes into nine different categories, which was criticized by Dyner (2016), who commented that memes are too complex and constantly evolving, making it difficult to make a classification that is valid in the long term.

This study focuses on image-based memes. In image-based memes, the graphical element is often a snapshot or clip of pop culture, politics, or everyday situations and serves as the basis for later reproduction. It is usually characterized by images with a text caption placed on, above, or next to the image (Osterroth 2015). For example, some memes relate to political issues, while others relate to social or economic issues

(Wiggins, 2019). Consequently, the shared understanding of the context between the meme creator and the recipient is necessary for the recipient to understand the meme and the underlying humor (Gleason et al. 2019).

However, intertextuality is as well an important factor. Intertextuality refers to an image's or text's reliance on additional outside information to achieve deeper meaning than the image or text itself could achieve. Therefore, memes rely not only on the viewer's knowledge of the meme template itself, but also on the viewer's general knowledge of culture, the situational context and humor to understand the intended references that the meme's creator aims to communicate. After all, image-based memes show in a context-related way how the internet community reacts to certain political or social stances and are thereby a tool to participate in politics and society (Shifman, 2013).

These days, many brands have started to use memes in their social media marketing channels, as they have realized that memes are an effective way to communicate online and attract the attention of customers (Bury 2016). Bury compares memes as marketing instrument with the usage of celebrity endorsements and states that consumers are familiar with the concept of memes in their everyday life. Compared to traditional marketing campaigns, such as TV advertisements or sponsorships, memes are not only way more cost efficient, but are also nearly identical to memes created by consumers, which makes it difficult for the audience to determine whether the meme is created by a company or another internet user, unless the meme is posted on the company's social media channel.

Brubaker et al (2018) encourage companies to not only see value in memes as a communication tool from brand to consumer, but to also pay attention to memes created by consumers, which refer to the brand, as this is a great opportunity to gain customer feedback. This opinion is also shared by Csordás et al (2017), who suggest that memes about corporations created by consumers give an indication on how the customers perceive the brand in a non-market research environment. Chuah et al (2020) point out, that memes are an effective tool to especially reach a younger customer segment.

Despite its relevance in today's online media consumption, memes bring also risks to companies, as they cannot control how the audience will react to their postings and they must be aware of a potential backfire from the online audience. The underlying message, which the meme tries to communicate might be decoded differently by individuals based on their own experiences and background (Murray et al. 2014). The internet also has its dark side, as memes can be used to cyberbully an individual, a peer group or companies and organizations (Casey 2018). Brands could as well fail to create memes, which meet the expectations and tonality of the respective target group.

## 3. Objectives and methodology

The main research questions underlying this study are whether meme content in social media marketing can increase brand liking and improve sales for high respectively low involvement brands.

In particular the following leading research questions should be answered:

- Do humorous meme posts increase ad likeability?
- Do humorous meme posts increase brand likeability?
- Do humorous meme posts increase the purchase intention?
- Do humorous meme posts increase the recall of brands?
- Are there significant differences between low-involvement and high-involvement brands with such regards?

Based on research implications of positive affect and affect transfer models as well as findings on advertising effectiveness of humor, this study assumes a mediating effect of positive affect on the dependent variables ad and brand likeability and purchase intention. Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty; Cacioppo 1986) this research assumes that peripheral cues, in this case humor in memes, have a stronger effect on low involvement products than on high involvement products. Finally, this study suggests that memes are likely to increase the recall towards the brand.

This leads to the following hypothesis:

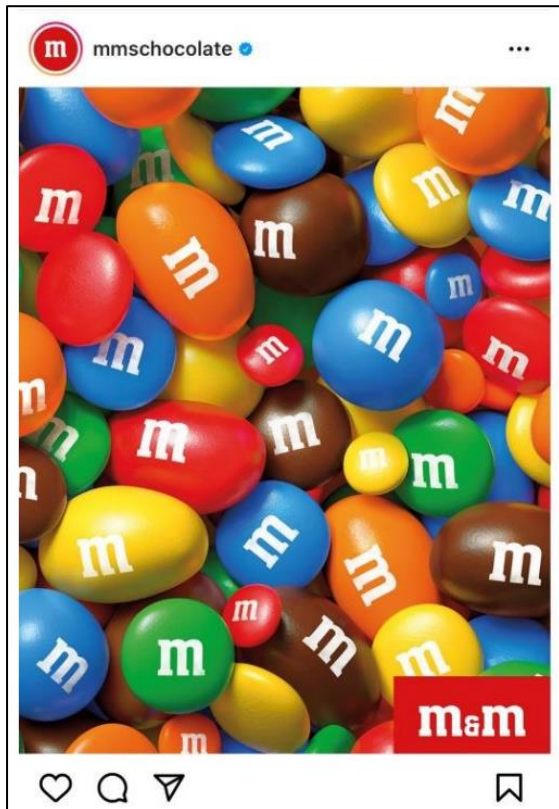
- H1a: If the social media post of a high involvement brand contains a meme, then the attitude towards the ad will be higher, than a social media post of a high involvement brand without a meme.
- H1b: If the social media post of a low involvement brand contains a meme, then the attitude towards the ad will be higher, than a social media post of a low involvement brand without a meme.
- H1c: If the social media post of a low involvement brand contains a meme, then the attitude towards the ad will be higher, than a social media post of a high involvement brand with a meme.
- H2a: If the social media post of a high involvement brand contains a meme, then the attitude towards the brand will be higher, than a social media post of a high involvement brand without a meme.
- H2b: If the social media post of a low involvement brand contains a meme, then the attitude towards the brand will be higher, than a social media post of a low involvement brand without a meme.
- H2c: If the social media post of a low involvement brand contains a meme, then the attitude towards the brand will be higher, than a social media post of a high involvement brand with a meme.

- H3a: If the social media post of a high involvement brand contains a meme, then the purchase intention will be higher, than a social media post of a high involvement brand without a meme.
- H3b: If the social media post of a low involvement brand contains a meme, then the purchase intention will be higher, than a social media post of a low involvement brand without a meme.
- H3c: If the social media post of a low involvement brand contains a meme, then the purchase intention will be higher, than a social media post of a high involvement brand with a meme.
- H4: If a social media post contains a meme, then the recall of the brand will be high than from a social media post without a meme.

For this study and the aim to generalize findings, quantitative research was chosen, in particular a experimental between-subject design. This means that all participants in the experiment were tested with only one treatment each during the experiment. The study evaluates group differences between participants with different treatments. In particular the participants were compelled to pick up on distinct differences, make ratings and hence illustrate effects in a more salient way.

Four different social media postings (see figures 1 to 4) were designed for the purpose of this study. For the high involvement product category, the premium car manufacturer BMW was chosen as a brand. The chocolate brand M&M was picked as low involvement counterpart. For the non-meme variation of these brands previous official postings were selected, which show only the product without any claim or text to ensure a neutral basis. As memes contain verbal elements, the non-meme postings were added with a text box including the products name. The pictures were then edited into a layout which is based on Instagram's typical layout. The top part shows the brand's Instagram account name. The bottom part shows the like, comment and share button. The number of likes were cut out, to prevent from its influence on the evaluation of the ad.





**Fig. 1** Low involvement ad without meme



**Fig. 2** High involvement ad without meme

For the meme version of social media ads, eight different memes were created with different meme formats and different jokes. In a pre-test with a small group of 12 participants the funniest meme out of those options was chosen: The meme using a tuxedo Winnie the Pooh format.

This meme is divided into two halves. The top part shows a bored looking Winnie the Pooh having a text box right next to it. In this text box, a common expression for the respective product is entered. The bottom part of the meme also shows Winnie the Pooh but smiling and dressed in a tuxedo. Right next to it is also a text box, however with a fancy and exaggerated expression for the same product. The humor in these memes lies in the exaggeration and creative formulation in the bottom text box. Winnie the Pooh in tuxedo implies that the exaggeration is an attempt to make the product sound fancier and more sophisticated than it actually is.

For M&M (see figure 3) the top part says “Schokolinsen” (chocolate drops) and the bottom part states “Bunte Perlen aus Vollmilchschokolade mit einer Erdnussfüllung” (colorful pearls of milk chocolate with a peanut filling). For BMW (see figure 4) the top text box says “Elektrofahrzeug” (electric vehicle) and the bottom part states “Vehikel mit vollelektrischem Antrieb, 600 km Reichweite & intelligenter Software” (vehicle with all-electric drive, 600 km range & intelligent software).





**Fig. 3** Low involvement ad with meme (own creation)



**Fig. 4** High involvement ad with meme (own creation)

The online survey took place between February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022, and March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022. 122 participants were recruited for this study, with a median age of 26 years, ranging between 17 and 65 years. Out of the 122 participants, 55 (45.1%) were male and 67 (54.9%) females. 18.0% of the participants have a monthly net income of below 501 €, 23.0% earn between 501 and 1.500 €, 25.4% between 1.501 and 2.500 € and 33.6% earn more 2.500 € per month.

The total sample was divided into four groups. Group one was shown the high involvement brand posting without a meme. This group of 30 participants (10 males) has a median age of 29.00 years. The second group was presented the meme posting of the high involvement brand. This group consisted of 30 participants (16 males) with a median age of 24.00 years. The third group was shown the low involvement brand post without a meme. Here, 32 participants (18 male) have a median age of 33.50 years. The fourth group was exposed to the low involvement brand post with a meme. The last group consisted of 30 people (11 male) with a median age of 25.50 years.

At the beginning of the survey, participants were informed about the background and anonymity of the survey. Next, they were shown four social media posts from four different brands. In addition to BMW and M&M, Colgate and Bauknecht were featured. On the next page the aided recall was tested, the participants were asked to choose from a list of car brands (if BMW is to be rated) or candy brands (if M&Ms is to be rated) the one that was seen before. After that, the participant was shown the target stimulus material again.

To capture the non-observable states of the individual participants emotions, attitudes, and evaluations, and to translate them into measurable variables, a five-point Likert scale was used, which also allows participants to express their indifference. The following constructs and target variables were queried each with these three items:

- The attitude towards the ad
- The attitude towards the brand
- The participant's purchase intention
- Involvement of the participant for memes
- Involvement of the participant for the product category

As this study features a 2x2 factorial between-subject design, a two-way ANOVA (analysis of variances test) was run to compare the means of dependent variables of the four groups for significant differences. Assumptions for the ANOVA test are the homogeneity of variances, which were tested with the Levene's test, and a normal distribution of the variables. Normal distribution was not tested in this study as the Central Limit Theorem can be applied for all four groups. The assumption of equality of variances using the Levene's test was also run for each independent variable.

To check whether meme postings were perceived as humorous, participants were asked to rate the humor level of the posting. ANOVA was run to check if groups presented with memes perceived more humor than groups presented non meme ads. Levene's test supports the assumption of homogeneity of variances,  $F(3, 118) = 1.783$ ,  $p = .154$ . Descriptive statistics can be taken from figure 5. The results of the ANOVA suggest that between no-meme version ( $M=2.1344$ ) and meme version ( $M = 3.7611$ ) are significant differences in the perception of humor ( $F(1, 118) = 73.185$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .383$ ).

Dependent Variable: humor				
Ad Style	Product Category	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
No Meme	High Involvement	1,7889	,90754	30
	Low Involvement	2,4583	1,16628	32
	Total	2,1344	1,09388	62
With Meme	High Involvement	3,8889	,87683	30
	Low Involvement	3,6333	1,22349	30
	Total	3,7611	1,06315	60
Total	High Involvement	2,8389	1,37983	60
	Low Involvement	3,0269	1,32415	62
	Total	2,9344	1,34952	122

**Fig. 5** Descriptive statistics humor

The meme versions of the social media postings, both in case of products with high and low involvement, were able to convey significantly more humor than the ones without memes.

### 3. Research results

#### 3.1 Attitude towards the ad

A two-way ANOVA test was run to verify direct effects of the ad style (with or without meme) and the product category (high or low involvement) on the attitude towards the ad. Results of Levene's test reveal that the assumption of homogeneity of variances is given ( $F(3, 118) = 1.365, p = .257$ ). Descriptive statistics are shown in figure 6 and results of the ANOVA test in figure 7. No significant direct effects of the ad style ( $F[1, 118] = .210, p = .648, \eta^2 = .002$ ) and product category ( $F[1, 118] = 1.121, p = .292, \eta^2 = .009$ ) could be statistically proven. The results show no significant interaction effect between the independent variables on the attitude towards the ad,  $F(1, 118) = 1.805, p = .182, \eta^2 = .015$ . Hence hypothesis H1a, H1b and H1c are rejected.

Dependent Variable: AAd				
Ad Style	Product Category	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
No Meme	High Involvement	3,5333	,87362	30
	Low Involvement	3,5833	,85089	32
	Total	3,5591	,85523	62
With Meme	High Involvement	3,6889	,97058	30
	Low Involvement	3,2667	1,16264	30
	Total	3,4778	1,08294	60
Total	High Involvement	3,6111	,91887	60
	Low Involvement	3,4301	1,01785	62
	Total	3,5191	,97069	122

**Fig. 6** Descriptive statistics attitude towards the ad

Dependent Variable: AAd						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	2,915 <sup>a</sup>	3	,972	1,032	,381	,026
Intercept	1508,780	1	1508,780	1602,539	<,001	,931
Ad_Style	,198	1	,198	,210	,648	,002
Product_Category	1,056	1	1,056	1,121	,292	,009
Ad_Style *	1,699	1	1,699	1,805	,182	,015
Product_Category						
Error	111,096	118	,941			
Total	1624,889	122				
Corrected Total	114,011	121				

a. R Squared = ,026 (Adjusted R Squared = ,001)

**Fig. 7** Between-subject-effects test attitude towards the ad

## 3.2 Attitude towards the brand

Levene's test reveals homogeneity of variances,  $F(3, 118) = .267, p = .849$ . Descriptive statistics are shown in figure 8. No significant effect of the ad style on the attitude towards the brand could be proven,  $F(1, 118) = .131, p = .718, \eta^2 = .001$ . As well no significant effect of the product category on the attitude towards the brand could be proven,  $F(1, 118) = .011, p = .918, \eta^2 < .001$ , see figure 9. Hence there was no significant interaction effect between the ad style or the product category on the attitude towards the brand visible,  $F(1, 118) = 1.578, p = .211, \eta^2 = .013$ . Hypothesis H2a, H2b and H3c are rejected.

Dependent Variable: ABr				
Ad_Style	Product_Category	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
No Meme	High Involvement	3,6667	,97084	30
	Low Involvement	3,8646	,94985	32
	Total	3,7688	,95736	62
With Meme	High Involvement	3,9444	,89735	30
	Low Involvement	3,7111	,96979	30
	Total	3,8278	,93376	60
Total	High Involvement	3,8056	,93738	60
	Low Involvement	3,7903	,95478	62
	Total	3,7978	,94238	122

**Fig. 8** Descriptive statistics attitude towards the brand

Dependent Variable: ABr						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1,529 <sup>a</sup>	3	,510	,568	,637	,014
Intercept	1757,250	1	1757,250	1957,513	<,001	,943
Ad_Style	,118	1	,118	,131	,718	,001
Product_Category	,010	1	,010	,011	,918	,000
Ad_Style *	1,417	1	1,417	1,578	,211	,013
Product_Category						
Error	105,928	118	,898			
Total	1867,111	122				
Corrected Total	107,457	121				

a. R Squared = ,014 (Adjusted R Squared = -,011)

**Fig. 9** Between-subject-effects test attitude towards the brand

## 3.3 Purchase intention

To analyse the direct effects of memes and the product category on the purchase intention, a two-way ANOVA test was run. Respective descriptive statistics are presented in figure 10. Figure 11 shows the results of the ANOVA test. Levene's test indicates homogeneity of variances,  $F(3, 118) = 2.189$ ,  $p = .093$ ). The results of the ANOVA test show that neither the ad style ( $F[1, 118] = .1678$ ,  $p = .198$ ,  $\eta^2 = .014$ ) nor the product category ( $F[1, 118] = 3.633$ ,  $p = .059$ ,  $\eta^2 = .030$ ) have significant effects on the purchase intention. No significant interaction effects could be statistically proven ( $F[1, 118] = 2.652$ ,  $p = .106$ ,  $\eta^2 = .022$ ). Hypothesis H3a, H3b and H3c are consequently rejected.

Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention				
Ad Style	Product Category	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
No Meme	High Involvement	3,1778	,98934	30
	Low Involvement	3,8854	1,02516	32
	Total	3,5430	1,06138	62
With Meme	High Involvement	3,2444	1,03551	30
	Low Involvement	3,3000	1,34007	30
	Total	3,2722	1,18765	60
Total	High Involvement	3,2111	1,00463	60
	Low Involvement	3,6022	1,21442	62
	Total	3,4098	1,12879	122

**Fig. 10** Descriptive statistics purchase intention

Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	10,036 <sup>a</sup>	3	3,345	2,739	,047	,065
Intercept	1410,803	1	1410,803	1154,958	<,001	,907
Ad_Style	2,050	1	2,050	1,678	,198	,014
Product_Category	4,438	1	4,438	3,633	,059	,030
Ad_Style *	3,240	1	3,240	2,652	,106	,022
Product_Category						
Error	144,139	118	1,222			
Total	1572,667	122				
Corrected Total	154,175	121				

a. R Squared = ,065 (Adjusted R Squared = ,041)

**Fig. 11** Between-subject-effects test purchase intention

## 3.4 Brand recall

Recall answers were encoded into dummy variables, with value 1 representing the relevant brand (BMW respectively M&M) and 0 any of the other choices. A chi-square test was run to verify if recall capabilities were dependent on the style of the ad. The relation between the ad style and the recall was significant in the case of the high involvement product,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 60) = 4.286, p = .038$ . Hence it could be stated that memes have a negative influence on the recall capabilities of high involvement product categories.

			Recall High Involvement		Total
			,00	1,00	
Ad_Style	No Meme	Count	0	30	30
		Expected Count	2,0	28,0	30,0
	With Meme	Count	4	26	30
		Expected Count	2,0	28,0	30,0
Total	Count		4	56	60
	Expected Count		4,0	56,0	60,0

**Fig. 12** Crosstabulation recall high involvement

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2- sided)	Exact Sig. (1- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4,286 <sup>a</sup>	1	,038		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	2,411	1	,121		
Likelihood Ratio	5,831	1	,016		
Fisher's Exact Test				,112	,056
Linear-by-Linear Association	4,214	1	,040		
N of Valid Cases	60				

a. 2 cells (50,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2,00.  
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Fig. 13** Chi-square test recall high involvement

Another chi-square test was performed to test the relation between the ad style and low involvement brands. The proportion of participants, who were able to recall the correct brand name were significantly higher in the group with no memes,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 62) = 6.116$ ,  $p = .014$ . Hypothesis H4 as a consequence is to be rejected.

		Recall Low Involvement		Total
		,00	1,00	
Ad_Style	No Meme	Count	4	28
		Expected Count	8,3	23,7
	With Meme	Count	12	18
		Expected Count	7,7	22,3
Total	Count	16	46	62
	Expected Count	16,0	46,0	62,0

**Fig. 14** Crosstabulation recall low involvement

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2- sided)	Exact Sig. (1- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6,116 <sup>a</sup>	1	,013		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	4,764	1	,029		
Likelihood Ratio	6,313	1	,012		
Fisher's Exact Test				,020	,014
Linear-by-Linear Association	6,017	1	,014		
N of Valid Cases	62				

a. 0 cells (0,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7,74.  
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Fig. 15** Chi-square test recall low involvement



## 5. Limitations, conclusions, and recommendations

This study has several potential limitations that may affect the results. First, the creation of a theoretical framework was constrained by the lack of research on the promotional effectiveness of memes in social media marketing. Second, the general validity and representation of the study might be limited due to the usage of various diverse reference groups. Third, creating ads with memes and ads without memes for two product categories requires a different layout of the ads, which inevitably leads to systematic differences. However, the purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how memes in social media marketing for different product categories influence consumers' brand evaluation and purchase intentions.

Under the condition of these limitations, the results of this study indicate that memes serve as a tool in advertising to convey humor. The study was able to reveal three main findings.

First, memes have no significant effect on the attitude towards advertising, the attitude towards the brand, and the purchase intention. Second, no significant differences could be confirmed between product categories with high involvement and those with low involvement when using memes in social media marketing. Third, memes seem to have a negative impact on the brand recall.

To generalize, this study did not show evidence of improved advertising effectiveness of ads with memes, in particular humor does not seem to be more effective in advertising low-involvement products, as no differences were found between high and low involvement products. Moreover, this study shows that the recall is negatively affected by the presence of memes. As the sample included a wide variety of demographic profiles, it is a good representation of the general population and therefore shows that memes do not have a clear advantage in advertising effectiveness when targeting the general population.

The results of this study provide several implications for practice: Brand and communication managers should not use memes in their social media marketing strategy simply to follow trends. Memes are a form of humor and should therefore be carefully planned so as not to offend anyone. Also, brands should be aware of who their target audience is. If a brand has a younger target audience, it might be safe to assume that their clientele also uses memes in their daily lives. Social media use is also dominated by younger generations, and Internet memes are shared via social media, so it is reasonable to assume that memes in this environment are more likely to be adopted by young adults. Therefore, memes would be an appropriate way to fill the brand's social media feed with content. However, there is no particular positive impact onto the consumers' attitude towards the ad or the brand to be expected. In fact, managers must be aware of a possible negative impact onto the brand recall.

In future research, it would be valuable to extend existing findings by examining how different age groups respond to memes. Further research is also needed to determine under what circumstances memes could be an effective tool and under what circumstances they are not. Since there are many forms of memes and humor, different types

of humor should be researched to see if certain types of humor and memes have a weaker respectively stronger effect. Future research could use other product categories, compare established brands with start-ups, and include services. In addition, other metrics relevant to brands should be measured. For example, how memes in marketing affect a brand's credibility, brand positioning, status, and trustworthiness could be studied, especially in high involvement categories. Since research on memes is still not extensive and memes are constantly evolving, there is still much research to be done to better understand the advertising impact of memes.

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## Key words

Memes, humor, social media marketing, attitude, advertisement, brand, purchase intention, brand recall

DIGITALE TRANSFORMATION • IMMERSION  
EXPERIENCE • UX • MARKENIMAGEMESSUNG  
METAVERSE • ADVERWORLDS • CORPORATE  
VALUE • INFLUENCER MARKETING • MEMES  
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