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## Article

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# How to cook a meme: exploring content strategies in brand and user-generated memes on Instagram

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## ABSTRACT

In the realm of marketing, capturing the attention of Millennials and Generation Z individuals, known for their short attention spans and ad-skipping tendencies, presents a formidable challenge for marketers. Memes have emerged as a short form of content infused with humour, allowing brands to captivate their audience. Regardless of their popularity and effectiveness, memes are a nuanced and intricate marketing tool. Understanding the specific types of meme content that generate engagement is critical. Memes are not only expressions but also a platform for voicing opinions. This study compares brand-generated and user-generated memes from food delivery apps on Instagram ( $n=813$ ), using the uses and gratifications theory as an analytical framework. The findings reveal notable differences between these two categories of memes, offering valuable insights for brand managers seeking to craft compelling and impactful meme-based campaigns.

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## Introduction

Socializing is an integral component of human behaviour that involves interacting and engaging with others, establishing bonds in social communities, and fostering a sense of belongingness (Flanagan, 2020). Traditional socializing venues include physical marketplaces, bars, salons, and grocery stores; however, with the rise of the internet, mobile communication, and social media (SM), socializing has taken a digital avatar. Over the years, SM platforms have emerged as one of the leading platforms for socialising (Brinkman et al., 2020; Forsgren & Byström, 2018). A Forbes (2023) report finds that 4.9 billion SM users worldwide spend approximately 2 hours daily on various SM platforms led by Instagram. With SM's massive user base and growing importance as a tool for increasing engagement (Kitchen, 2023), marketers have begun to use Instagram as their preferred channel for communicating with their target audiences (Razzaq et al., 2023).

Due to the excessive branding on SM, Instagram has become cluttered with branding content, which has caused consumers and target audiences to have less engagement and further leading to avoid or skip the branded content (Jung & Heo, 2021; Waqas et al., 2021). To cut through this clutter, and attract users' attention and engagement, memes have emerged as one of the powerful marketing tools (Aleem et al., 2023; Malodia et al., 2022; Razzaq et al., 2023). Memes are like digital sparks that ignite across the internet, spreading concepts, ideas, or trends in forms like images, videos, having catchy phrases. Created with awareness of each other, they can be shared, replicated, and tweaked by users, forming a vibrant tapestry of online culture (Malodia et al., 2022; Shifman, 2013). Memes possess this unique ability to convey intricate messages in a simple, easily digestible manner, making them not just entertaining but also a

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powerful medium for communication (Niebuurt, 2021). They can spread quickly and are highly engaging because they can incorporate humour, sarcasm, quiddity, and ironic texts (Brubaker et al., 2018). Memes have grown in popularity, with one million memes being shared on Instagram per day (Instagram, 2020). As per Forbes (2018b) survey on SM usage, an average millennial views 20–30 memes daily, and 75% of 13–36-year-olds (and 79% of 13 to 17-year-olds) share memes (YPulse, 2019). Memes achieve approximately ten times more reach and garner 60% more organic interaction compared to standard marketing strategies (Forbes, 2018b). Over 60% of individuals express a greater inclination to purchase from companies that incorporate memes into their marketing strategies (Amra, 2023). Therefore, we may say that memes are influential on SM and can have an impact on the world of advertising and marketing.

SM is a bustling arena where both brands and users engage in meme posting. Brand-generated memes cleverly intertwine elements like the brand's logo, slogan, or colours with humour and creativity, delivering a brand message while subtly referencing products, values, or unique selling points, thus establishing brand presence and visibility without directly promoting sales (Razzaq et al., 2023; Vardeman, 2024) whereas user-generated brand-related memes typically contain candid feedback, opinions, and experiences from the brand's products and services in the form of satire, a critique that may harm the brand image (Brubaker et al., 2018). These two types of memes often create ambiguity, posing a challenge for brands. The intent for creating and sharing memes on SM by brands and users is distinct and when brands use memes to communicate, they face a problem as users also create memes about the brand, and these may not always match what the brand wants to say. This poses a challenge for brand managers, as they must discern the implications of memes for their brand and evaluate their impact on public perception. In the context of memes, past studies have either focussed on brand-generated memes or user-generated memes (Brubaker et al., 2018; Malodia et al., 2022; Razzaq et al., 2023), but very few studies have focussed on both. In our study, we compare brand-generated memes with user-generated memes in the context of content dimensions required in a meme along with various styles and types of humour. Based on this, the objective of this study is to investigate and compare different content strategies employed in both categories of memes in the form of message appeal (emotion, information, entertainment, and creativity) with the overarching framework of uses and gratification theory along with various styles and types of humour. This study could help brands differentiate themselves from user-generated content, allowing them to maintain their image, trust, and engagement with their audience. This study significantly contributes both to theory as well as practice. Through a deeper understanding of these nuances, brand managers can better navigate the intricacies of social media marketing and effectively leverage memes to enhance brand engagement and perception. By discerning the intent behind both brand and user-generated memes, brand managers can craft more strategic and impactful social media strategies that resonate with their target audience and reinforce their brand identity. The rest of the article is organized as follows: literature review, research method, results, discussion, implications, future research scope, and conclusion.

## Literature review

### *Memes in marketing*

Meme is a term coined by zoologist Richard Dawkins in his book 'The Selfish Gene', derived from the Greek word 'mimema,' meaning something that can be imitated (Dawkins, 1976; Shifman, 2013). A meme is a piece of information, and a part of cultural texts that can be created, imitated, and replicated on the internet. They can be disseminated briskly via SM forums, online blogs, emails, messaging platforms, and video-sharing websites (Shifman, 2014; Tuten & Solomon, 2018). Memes serve as an innovative communication tool, enabling individuals to easily convey their ideas to a wider audience, circulate them, and share information (Brubaker et al., 2018). Memes typically revolve around current trends, popular culture phenomena, and political topics. Memes are a fusion of text, images, audio, videos, and GIFs, often imbued with humour, and can be crafted individually or as a blend of these elements (Brubaker et al., 2018).

Mememes have become particularly prevalent among the digital generation, serving as a ubiquitous form of communication. Mememes have emerged as a light-hearted and amusing avenue for individuals to

reflect on the happenings of the world around them. Through humorous and often cleverly crafted content, memes provide a platform for people to relate to each other better, finding common ground in shared experiences and cultural references. Additionally, memes serve as a powerful means of expression, particularly when words alone may feel insufficient to convey one's thoughts or emotions. In essence, memes have become more than just fleeting online content; they have evolved into a cultural phenomenon that fosters connection, expression, and understanding in an increasingly digital world (Vardeman, 2024). Memes have become the lingua franca of Gen Z and millennials on SM platforms (Forbes, 2018a; YPulse, 2019). Table 1 presents a comprehensive overview of existing literature on memes from various perspectives.

Memes possess certain characteristics like being humorous where the content is entertaining as one of the intentions is to make people happy (Sharma, 2018; Shifman, 2013), having emotional intensity that can arouse certain emotions in humans post watching a meme and further lead to sharing with others (Shifman, 2013). Another characteristic is easy propagation where one can easily comprehend the meaning of memes without much brain taxation (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Cannizzaro, 2016), fidelity which refers towards the quality of the meme that can be easily replicated further, and longevity i.e., the longer a meme lives, the more it can be remixed in different contexts (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Memes have gained humongous traction on SM for various reasons. First, as they are witty, they tend to attract the audience and keep them engaged with their content when compared to simple texts and serious images, especially in the case of young audiences. Second, memes are cost-effective as they are easy to create with little or no cost when compared with traditional marketing methods. Third, they are in visual formats which are better than any text promotional messages. Finally, memes are relatable to the majority of audiences which leads to more sharing, liking, and commenting and results in high engagement, visibility, and recall.

With such a gamut of advantages of memes, various brands in different industries and sectors like food delivery apps (Uber Eats, Zomato, and Swiggy), over-the-top platforms (Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Voot), grocery delivery apps (Dunzo and Blinkit), dating apps (Tinder and Bumble), fast food chains (McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's) have started incorporating memes in their marketing strategy (Malodia et al., 2022; Dey, 2022). Brands like Gucci and Ola Electric are laying out campaigns where they ask their audiences to prepare memes for them and this precisely showcases that memes have become the most used ways to convey messages maybe by brand or audience (Dixit, 2023; Yang, 2022). This form of communication has become a new pathway for marketers to reach their audiences and keep them engaged and involved.

### ***Categorizing meme message appeal: uses and gratification (U&G) theory***

In advertising, message appeal is a particular strategy or approach which is used to grab attention, arouse feelings, and persuade the target audience to act by making a purchase or an inquiry. The appeal serves as the central theme of the advertising creative strategy because it links the brand to the desires of its target audience and serves as a link between consumers and the advertising content. Content has become essential in today's digital landscape, where consumers have access to vast amounts of information. In past literature, Swanson (1987) promoted a deeper comprehension of the function of message content in U & G theory research. U & G theory is a widely used framework that focuses on why people actively choose specific media to satisfy their needs and desires (Gan, 2017). This theory explains why individuals choose one medium over another and explore the satisfaction derived from using media. U&G theory highlights the active role of the audience in selecting and using media based on their motivations and gratifications which in turn impacts their content consumption (Kamboj, 2020; Smock et al., 2011).

The application of the U & G theory in advertising has facilitated a nuanced understanding of various media formats, allowing marketers to tailor messages effectively by deciphering the gratifying factors within each medium. This theory has been studied in the context of various advertisements on different media types like radio (Katz et al., 1973), newspapers (Elliott & Rosenberg, 1987), television, and digital bulletins (Luo, 2002). Various types of media have led to different motivations, and with new media and content genres constantly emerging, each study on U & G theory creates its way of categorizing these motivations.

**Table 1.** Details of extant literature review on memes.

S.No.	Authors	Research objective	Theory	Methodology	Participant details	Social media platform	Industry/product	Result
1.	(Taecharungroj & Nueanglamnong, 2015)	The study explores various types and styles of humour in memes and the virality effect on Facebook.	Theory of Humour	Mixed Method Approach (Content Analysis & ANOVA)	n = 1000 memes	Facebook	Not Specified	The most common style of humour in Facebook memes is affiliate & aggressive and sarcasm & silliness type of humour.
2.	(Brubaker et al., 2018)	This study investigates how users interact with organisations by producing and disseminating brand-related content online.	Not Specified	Content Analysis	n = 653 memes	Imgur	IT, Beverages and Automobile	Memes help actively engage with people and exhibit engagement strategies.
3.	(Benaim, 2018)	To investigate how the symbolic value of internet memes can be used to spur innovation in the consumption of goods and services.	Not Specified	Exploratory	n = 197 memes	Know Your Meme	Animation, Visual and Film, Video Game, Musical and Dance, Financial, Marketing	Internet memes have become an asset for marketing, as well as the catalyst for many new activities such as merchandise, tailored services, and job roles.
4.	(Sharma, 2018)	The study investigates how brands can engage with audiences amid the growing trend of internet memes.	Not Specified	Netnography	None	Facebook	Comedy Industry	Imitating and modifying memes offers brands an opportunity to market themselves on SM platforms.
5.	(Chuah et al., 2020)	To investigate the iconicity of memes and how it affects their use in local contexts.	Not Specified	Qualitative Study	n = 50 respondents	None	Not Specified	This study provides valuable insights for local businesses planning SM marketing, especially those aiming to capitalize on the increasing popularity of Internet memes.
6.	(Teng et al., 2022)	This study explores does internet memes affect brand image	Social Contagion & Symbolic Value Theory	Delphi Technique & Survey	n = 348 respondents	Not Specified	Marketing	Internet memes enhance the brand image. However, not all meme traits, though, are related to brand image.
7.	(Yang, 2022)	This study explores whether humorous memes increase brand recall, post attitude, and online sharing intention.	Not Specified	Experiment & Survey Method	n = 258 respondents	Twitter	Fashion Industry	Humorous memes in Twitter posts increase the consumer's humour perception which leads to a positive attitude and sharing intention and contrary serious images lead to better brand recall.
8.	(Malodia et al., 2022)	This study prepares a framework for viral memes that have antecedents, moderators, and consequences.	Schema Theory, Social Contagion Theory	Mixed Method Approach	Interview (n = 35 respondents), Survey (n = 458 respondents)	Not Specified	Food Industry	The antecedents were positively related to the virality of memes and memes help in increasing brand recall and brand engagement.
9.	(Razzaq et al., 2023)	The paper suggests using speech acts to increase engagement by using the meme marketing taxonomy as a guide for practitioners.	Speech Act Theory, Theory of Consumption Values	Conceptual and qualitative content analysis	n = 699 memes	Instagram	Food & Beverage, E-commerce, Fashion & Technology	Brands majorly use assertive speech acts in their memes and meme marketing helps in forming a connection and relationship with customers.
10.	(Rogers & Giorgi, 2023)	This study aims to show how the website or platform from which memes are sourced affects studying memes as a collection.	Not Specified	Observation Analysis	None	Know Your Meme, Imgur, 4chan, TikTok, CrowdTangle	Not Specified	This study demonstrates how each website constructs and arranges meme collections in a distinctive manner, which influences how each website conceptualises memes.



With the emergence of new media formats, U & G theory has been studied in the context of mobile phones (Leung & Wei, 2000), the internet (Ko et al., 2013), and SM platforms (Qin, 2020). Prior studies have identified various gratifications that are quite prevalent such as information seeking, social sharing, self-status seeking, escapism, convenience, entertainment, socializing, emotions, and self -presentation (Kaur et al., 2020).

U & G theory is considered as one of the influential theories in the context of communication research (Ruggiero, 2000). Memes have evolved into a creative channel for brands to convey messages with impact, while the U&G theory proves instrumental in deciphering the diverse motivations underlying meme engagement, thus illuminating how memes fulfil individual needs and desires. Prior studies in the context of memes have identified information and entertainment as two certain gratifications under the U & G theory (Rathi & Jain, 2024). Memes display emotions that foster connections with audiences which makes them relatable and engaging (Chowdhury & Chakraborty, 2021). Memes embrace unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas and actively use personal skills and knowledge to combine existing elements into new products, and ideas, and that makes memes creative and novel (Brunello, 2012; Medium, 2023). Creativity as a gratification is new and has been explored in the context of Pinterest (Huang & Su, 2018). This study delves into the gratifications of information, entertainment, emotions, and creativity through the lens of U&G theory, specifically focusing on meme content.

### ***Humour style and humour type***

Humour is present in all cultures, and it is widely used as a messaging tactic in advertising (Toncar, 2001). Humour effectively captures consumer attention, positively impacts the mood, and is widely utilized in print and media advertising (Chan & Lowe, 2021). However, humour does not guarantee success, and overuse of humour may create a negative impact. Using humour in advertising can be tricky and it requires careful consideration (Djambaska et al., 2015). The effectiveness of humorous communication depends on how well the humour aligns with the message (Speck, 1991). Properly utilizing various types of humour in message design is crucial for successful communication. Studying the different types of humour can provide insights into how they impact communication effectiveness (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Various methods exist for categorizing humour, but one of the most commonly utilized approaches, both in print and broadcast media and in the analysis of humour in memes, involves the classification into seven distinct categories (Catannescu & Tom, 2001; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). First is comparison- Creating humour by blending two or more elements to form a comedic situation. Second: personification—ascribing human traits to animals, plants, or objects. Third: exaggeration—amplifying something beyond its normal scale or reality. Fourth: pun—employing language elements to generate fresh and amusing interpretations. Fifth: sarcasm—offering obvious ironic reactions or scenarios. Sixth: silliness—responding to absurd situations by making comical facial expressions. And the last surprise: humour stemming from surprising or unforeseen circumstances. Prior studies have found usage of silliness humour prevalent in television advertisements and sarcasm used more in magazines (Catannescu & Tom, 2001). Previous research on memes has discovered that internet memes often incorporate humour based on sarcasm (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015).

Understanding humour style is essential for comprehending how humorous messages are communicated from the perspective of the sender (Stieger et al., 2011). There are four major styles of humour: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating (Martin et al., 2003). People who have a strong sense of affiliative humour enjoy making funny remarks, telling jokes, and engaging in witty conversations to entertain others and build friendships. Secondly, individuals who lean towards self-enhancing humour typically find humour in everyday life situations and maintain a positive attitude, even during difficult times. They often see the funny side of things and stay cheerful despite challenges. Both of these styles of humour are positive. On the contrary, aggressive humour is a style of humour where people make jokes without thinking about how it might make others feel. They often say things that can hurt or push others away. People who use self-defeating humour make jokes about themselves, often saying funny things that put themselves down, which can make others laugh. Both styles of humour are negative. This study expands on meme content which style and type of humour are employed in brand and user-generated memes. Understanding humour in memes will provide insights into their underlying meaning and purpose.

## ***Meme content dimensions***

### ***Emotional appeal***

This appeal is a persuasion technique that uses emotional content to generate an emotional response to a message (Chou & Lien, 2010; Wang et al., 2014). This appeal arouses feelings, reactions or stimulates psychological, social, or emotional requirements to persuade customers (Alhabash et al., 2013). The emotions can be exhibited both positively (such as happiness, satisfaction, love, hope) or negatively (such as anger, sadness, and anxiety). Past researchers have identified emotion as a critical component that has a significant impact on a message's effectiveness (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Advertisements with emotional appeal have created positive word of mouth in the context of television and radio (Rizwan et al., 2013; Teichert et al., 2018). Using emotions in memes could be a brilliant strategy, especially since memes have become a spectacular medium for brand communication.

### ***Informational appeal***

In this appeal brands convey a message about their product or services that is detailed, provides clarity, and persuades customers to make a buying decision (Laskey et al., 1989). A rational or informational appeal highlights the brand's practical worth, economy, popularity, convenience, health, performance, and durability (Dix & Marchegiani, 2013). In the context of television ads, Resnik & Stern (1977) found that informative advertisements help consumers make informed purchasing decisions, and information plays a critical role in shaping consumer attitudes on electronic commerce websites (Gao & Koufaris, 2006) and SM advertising (Taylor et al., 2011). Informative advertising on SM platforms captures users' attention, encourages them to relate ads with positive images, and can even convince them to share messages with their friends (Lee & Hong, 2016). Memes have emerged as a new medium for brands to communicate their messages, and they may have the potential to become an ideal blend of humour, wit, and information.

### ***Entertainment appeal***

Entertainment is a significant component of an advertising message that encourages audiences' behaviour to continue following the brands more often (Kang, 2005). This appeal provides fun, enjoyable, and refreshing elements to attract consumers' attention and keep their interest (Gavilanes et al., 2018). Past research suggests that increased entertainment value motivates frequent SM usage and increases consumer hedonic needs (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). The entertainment message helps to reach more consumers and effectively engage them, and entertaining and funny content influences the attitude towards brand advertisements (Dehghani et al., 2016; Tsanget al., 2014). Knowing that memes are humorous, witty, and entertaining, they may assist brands in increasing visibility and shares.

### ***Creative appeal***

Researchers have a history of studying creativity in radio, billboard, and television advertising (Belch & Belch, 2013; Janssens & Pelsmacker, 2005; Wilson et al., 2015). Aaker & Myers (1982) discovered that creative advertisements increase information processing, recall, and attention; and Hartley and Patti (1988) indicate that creative advertisements generate positive attitudes and purchase intentions. Anderson (2004) discovered that the Apple iPod received positive reviews due to innovative advertisements that stood out in the crowd. As per a Harvard Business Review (2013) study, the product categories that heavily invest in creative advertising are body care, chewing gum, food and beverages, and fast-moving consumer goods. In today's context, consumer brands like Nike, McDonalds, Imperial Blue, Burger King, Heinz Ketchup, and other brands have made heads turn with their unique and creative ads (Williams, 2022). Creative advertisements provide a brand with a competitive advantage over its competitors in the industry, as well as the opportunity to stand out. The creative ad is considered creative when it elucidates novelty, unexpectedness or unpredictability and an element of surprise (Haberland & Dacin, 1992; Smith & Yang, 2004).

Brands on SM employ various message appeals and humour to generate engagement, indicating that their intended message is well-received by the target audience (Kusumasondjaja, 2018). Memes generate



engagement via likes, comments, and shares. When users actively interact with marketing content by liking, commenting, or sharing, they enhance its potential virality and contribute to its spread and impact among broader audiences (Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2018). This organic engagement fosters a dynamic cycle of interaction, amplifying the message's reach and influence across digital platforms.

In this regard, this research explores the following questions:

RQ1: What content dimension do brands and users use in their memes on SM platform Instagram?

RQ2: What style of humour strategy do brands and users use in their memes on SM platform Instagram?

RQ3: What type of humour strategy do brands and users use in their memes on SM platform Instagram?

## Research method

The study relies on content analysis as its primary methodological tool, which involves systematically examining large datasets of video, image, or text to discern patterns, trends, and frequencies, allowing researchers to draw meaningful insights (Stemler, 2001). Over time, there has been a significant increase in the utilization of content analysis within the communication field and across various industries including social media, television advertisements, and newspapers. It involves conducting a systematic review of extensive datasets to establish organized categories using methodological coding systems and this process proves invaluable in simplifying intricate data for improved understanding (Weber, 1990). Previous research has applied content analysis across diverse domains, including skincare and cosmetic websites (Seelig et al., 2021), luxury fashion branding (Ahn & Mundel, 2018), and television advertisements (Chan, 2020). Additionally, content analysis has been employed to investigate topics such as health advisories related to COVID-19 (Deng et al., 2022) and post-pandemic advertising trends (Sharma & Meena, 2024). In this study, the theoretical framework consists of the U&G theory elements including emotional, informational, entertainment, and creative appeal, alongside humour style and humour type. These frameworks are utilized to analyse message strategies among both brand and user-generated memes, aiming to dissect the underlying narrative techniques within meme content.

## Data collection

Instagram is the second most-used platform by marketers to promote their products and services (Statista, 2023). This platform has the highest user base from ages 18 to 34 which comprises mainly two generation cohorts: Gen Z and millennials (Statista, 2024a). Instagram focuses on images, short videos, and reels which makes it more appealing and engaging than text-only posts. Due to its young demographic usage, and engagement, Instagram has become one of the most suited platforms for our research on meme marketing as memes are highly popular among the young population (Vardeman, 2024). Instagram has its highest user base in India (Shewale, 2024). According to a Forbes India (2022) report, Zomato, and Swiggy are two brands that started the meme marketing trend in India and are still one of the best meme content creators on Instagram. Both brands operate within the online food delivery app sector, a market largely influenced by Gen Z and millennial users, making them ideal subjects for this study (Sudra, 2023). Zomato holds the title of the most downloaded app globally, closely followed by Uber Eats and Swiggy (Statista, 2024b); notably, Uber Eats in India was recently acquired by Zomato. Hence Zomato and Swiggy become the leading brands in the food delivery space, especially in India. The online food delivery app industry has grown in popularity especially post-COVID as there has been significant change in eating habits and order-ins due to friendly applications, the ability to reach large customers at a lower cost, and the ability to choose food at one's convenience with little hassle (McKinsey & Company, 2021). It is expected that this industry will become a permanent fixture in the dining space over the next few years. Gen Z and millennials highly use food delivery applications, and because of their frequent usage of social media, they are often the target audience. Due to these significant reasons, our study selects Zomato and Swiggy as two brands for the study. To simplify the study, image macro memes i.e., memes with text above or below the image were selected (Dynel, 2016). Image macro comes across as one of the most common memes and is easily recognizable by people on the internet (Ayele et al., 2020).

The data consists of memes posted by brands and users between 1st January 2022 and 31st July 2023. Instagram's search function was used to gather user-generated memes, and posts with the appropriate hashtags (such as #zomatomeme, #zomatomemes, #swiggymeme, #swiggymemes #foodeliverymeme, and #foodeliverymemes) and posts that were only in English were used for the study. A total of 813 memes have been collected of which 457 are brand-generated and 356 are user-generated memes. 27 memes were dropped because they did not meet the earlier criteria of image macro memes and the English language. The decision to discard such memes has been mutually decided by the authors.

## Coding procedure

Memes are part of digital and pop culture having varied references and understanding their subtle and latent tone requires manual coding. According to Caliandro and Gandini (2016), when it comes to examining the communicative, purpose, sarcasm, and symbolic meanings of socially and culturally sensitive data, manual content analysis is considered to be the best. With this intent, the authors developed a coding procedure based on the memes extracted from Instagram. Specific coding topics include content appeal (emotional, informational, entertainment & creative), humour style (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, self-defeating), humour type (comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness, surprise) and the coding guide was developed for the inclusion or exclusion of each category and subcategory (Tables 2–4). The presence and absence of each item were coded as (0- No and 1-Yes). The total score of each item more than 0 would reflect its slight presence of it, a zero score would reflect its complete absence and 1 would reflect the complete presence of it (Sharma & Meena, 2024). In terms of message appeal, humour style and humour type coders recorded whether the meme emphasises which subcategory of each category with the help of the text or the image/photo in it. A single meme can encompass various content appeals and combinations (Jacobson et al., 2023). It is important to note that the appeals found in memes created by brands may differ from those in memes generated by users, highlighting the diverse nature of meme content but according to previous research, a single type of humour style and humour type exists in a meme and would be coded likewise (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Most popular internet meme websites like Knowyourmeme and Imgur were used to understand the context of the few memes whose context was not recognised by coders to code the content of memes (Lewis et al., 2013; Razzaq et al., 2023).

## Intercoder reliability

Two coders, unaware of the research objectives, conducted coding for both brand and user-generated memes ( $n=321$ ) utilizing a coding scheme provided by the researchers. Initially, a pilot study was undertaken with a randomly selected sample of 140 memes, exceeding the recommended 10% threshold suggested by Wimmer and Dominick (2013). The pilot study yielded a 78% agreement in coding between the two coders. Subsequently, the researchers revisited the coding scheme with the coders and proceeded to analyse an additional randomly selected 10% of the total memes as pilot studies, repeating this process until both coders reached a unanimous 100% agreement in their coding process. Overall, three pilot studies were conducted. Following this, one coder coded a random selection of 391 memes, while the other coder coded the remaining 422 memes. Additionally, a random sample of 270 memes was coded by both coders to assess reliability. Intercoder reliability for the final coded data was assessed

**Table 2.** Meme content dimensions coding scheme.

S. No	Meme content dimensions	Description and coding criteria
1.	Emotional (Ashley & Tuten, 2014; Kusumasondjaja, 2018)	The message emphasizes psychological and social needs, generating emotions like happiness, sadness, love, romance, and concern, without providing clear explanations of facts or practical advantages.
2.	Information (Ashley & Tuten, 2014; Kusumasondjaja, 2018)	The message should emphasize the practical advantages of using the brand, such as ease, excellence, dependability, effectiveness, or durability.
3.	Entertainment (Gavilanes et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2010)	A message having enjoyable, fun, and refreshing humorous elements.
4.	Creativity (Smith et al., 2008)	Advertisements with unconventional or out-of-ordinary aspects, present a variety of viewpoints or concepts in a novelty aspect.

**Table 3.** Meme humour style coding scheme.

S. No	Humour style (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015)	Description	Coding criteria
1.	Affiliative	Affiliative humour meme creators use humorous remarks, jokes, and witty banter to make people smile and strengthen bonds.	The meme's creator provides a positive explanation of another person's circumstance.
2.	Self-Enhancing	Self-enhancing humour meme creators have a light-hearted outlook on life, are amused by paradoxes, and can remain humorous under pressure.	The meme's creator uses a positive example to explain their own circumstance.
3.	Aggressive	Aggressive humour meme makers express their humour by saying things that are likely to offend or alienate others without thinking about the potential consequences.	The meme's creator uses a negative explanation to describe another person's circumstance.
4.	Self-Defeating	Self-defeating humour meme creators amuse others by acting or talking in mockery and making fun of themselves.	The meme's creator uses a negative example to describe their own circumstance.

**Table 4.** Meme humour type coding scheme.

S. No	Humour type (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015)	Description	Coding criteria
1.	Comparison	Combining two or more elements to create a comic situation.	Meme becomes humorous due to comparison.
2.	Personification	Provides objects, plants, and animals with human characteristics.	In the meme, personification serves as a source of humour.
3.	Exaggeration	Putting too much emphasis on or magnifying something.	The overstatement of some aspects is what makes the meme funny.
4.	Pun	Using linguistic components to derive humour from new meanings.	The unusual language usage makes the meme funny.
5.	Sarcasm	Blatantly ironic actions or circumstances	The meme communicates ironically or expresses a component that is not the sender's true intention.
6.	Silliness	Putting on a silly face in absurd circumstances.	The illogicality of the elements, including the character, person, and situation, makes this meme humorous.
7.	Surprise	Funny things happen in unexpected circumstances.	This meme is funny because it contains some unique components.

**Table 5.** Descriptive summary of content dimensions in brand-generated and user-generated memes.

Main category	Brand generated memes (n=457)		User generated memes (n=356)	
	Frequency	Percentage*	Frequency	Percentage*
Emotional	386	84%	214	60%
Informational	92	20%	282	79%
Entertainment	367	80%	334	94%
Creative	431	94%	212	60%

\*Note: The total of each column is greater than 100 because brand and user-generated memes may contain more than one content appeal.

using Krippendorff's alpha test with 10,000 bootstrap samples, revealing high reliability across all coding categories ( $\alpha > .88$ ) (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

## Results

Brand-generated and user-generated food delivery app memes from Instagram were used to analyse the presence of different meme content dimensions, humour styles and humour types. RQ1 was related to finding the content dimension used by brands and users in their memes on the social media platform Instagram. Surprisingly, the findings suggest major differences in the content appeal employed in both categories of memes. Results in Table 5 show that brands use creative appeal the most in their memes ( $n=431$ , 94%), the second most used appeal is emotions ( $n=386$ , 84%), then entertainment ( $n=367$ , 80%) and least used is informational ( $n=92$ , 20%). On the contrary, in user-generated memes

**Table 6.** Number of content dimensions in brand and user-generated memes.

No. of content dimensions in memes	Brand generated memes ( <i>n</i> = 457)		User generated memes ( <i>n</i> = 356)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
0	0	0%	0	0%
1	58	13%	22	6%
2	71	16%	120	34%
3	236	52%	76	21%
4	92	20%	138	39%

**Table 7.** Descriptive summary of brand-generated and user-generated humour style memes.

Main category	Brand generated memes ( <i>n</i> = 457)		User generated memes ( <i>n</i> = 356)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Affiliative	233	51%	40	11%
Self—Enhancing	47	10%	35	10%
Aggressive	120	26%	221	62%
Self—Defeating	57	12%	60	17%

**Table 8.** Descriptive summary of brand-generated and user-generated humour type memes.

Main category	Brand generated memes ( <i>n</i> = 457)		User generated memes ( <i>n</i> = 356)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Comparison	51	11%	40	11%
Personification	36	8%	21	6%
Exaggeration	71	16%	72	20%
Pun	35	8%	12	3%
Sarcasm	90	20%	159	45%
Silliness	113	25%	26	7%
Surprise	61	13%	26	7%

entertainment was the most used appeal (*n* = 334, 94%), second most used is informational (*n* = 282, 79%), followed by emotional (*n* = 214, 60%) and creativity (*n* = 212, 60%).

Each brand and user-generated meme could be coded to have more than one content appeal; as a result, 1276 content appeal strategies were identified in brand-generated memes and 1042 in user-generated memes. When the number of strategies used simultaneously in posts was examined, the findings revealed that both categories used one, two, three, and four strategies per post (Table 6). In summary of brand-generated memes, 13% (*n* = 58) contain one appeal, 16% (*n* = 71) contain two appeals, 52% (*n* = 236) contain three appeals and 20% (*n* = 92) contain all four appeals. Whereas, in user-generated memes, 6% (*n* = 22) have one appeal, 34% (*n* = 120) have two appeals, 21% (*n* = 76) have three appeals and 39% (*n* = 138) have all four appeals. In brand-generated memes, three appeals were used simultaneously and the highest were emotional, entertainment, and creativity whereas, in user-generated memes, the four appeals (emotional, informational, entertainment, and creativity) were used the highest.

RQ2 explores the use of the style of humour in brand-generated and user-generated memes. Table 7 shows that brand-generated memes highly use the affiliative style of humour (*n* = 233, 51%) when compared to self-enhancing (*n* = 47, 10%), aggressive (*n* = 120, 26%) and self-defeating (*n* = 57, 12%). Conversely, user-generated memes use the aggressive style of humour the most in their memes (*n* = 221, 62%) when compared with affiliative (*n* = 40, 11%), self-enhancing (*n* = 35, 10%) and self-defeating (*n* = 60, 17%).

RQ3 examined the type of humour strategy used by brands and users in their memes on Instagram. Table 8 depicts that brands highly use silliness type of humour more than any other (*n* = 113, 25%) when compared to comparison (*n* = 51, 11%), personification (*n* = 36, 8%), exaggeration (*n* = 71, 16%), pun (*n* = 35, 8%), sarcasm (*n* = 90, 20%) and surprise (*n* = 61, 13%). Contrastingly, user-generated memes

predominantly employ sarcasm as the most prevalent form of humour ( $n=159$ , 45%) when compared to comparison ( $n=40$ , 11%), personification ( $n=21$ , 6%), exaggeration ( $n=72$ , 20%), pun ( $n=12$ , 3%), silliness ( $n=26$ , 7%), and surprise ( $n=26$ , 7%).

## Discussion

This research was an attempt to analyse the difference between brand-generated and user-generated memes in the category of food delivery apps on Instagram in different aspects like meme content dimensions, humour style and humour type.

First, from the lens of meme content dimensions, brand-generated memes typically prioritise emotions and creativity in order to connect with audiences on a deeper level. They also use emotions, entertainment, and creative appeal together highly. The probable reason can be that too much brand-related information may distract users' leisure time spent on SM. Memes present brand-related information in an entertaining manner, serving a dual purpose of providing information while enhancing leisure time use of SM. Brands are creating memes that can stick in consumers' minds and further lead to brand recall and engagement (Malodia et al., 2022). On the contrary, user-generated memes focus on entertainment and informational appeal dominantly over emotion and creative appeal. This category uses all four content appeals simultaneously more than any other category. Information is focused more here when compared with brand-generated memes because these memes emerge from genuine experiences, opinions, and their audience's feedback to the brands (Brubaker et al., 2018). For example, user-generated memes on food delivery apps usually have information about the sentiments of people on their recent stock prices, quick delivery services, surges in delivery charges and frequent mobile notifications sent by these brands. These kinds of information are not usually shown by brands as they might get restricted by their branding guidelines and image maintenance.

Further from the aspect of humour style, brands have used affiliative style of humour in television and SM ads (Cruthirds et al., 2012; Ning et al., 2022) and our study also found that brand-generated memes highly use the affiliative style of humour. As the affiliative style of humour explains the situation of someone else positively, brands probably incorporate this as they prefer to maintain distance from negative events like boycotts or cancel culture, trolling, and controversies. Brands believe in using positive memes to enhance brand image, foster community engagement, and strengthen optimistic brand image. In contrast, the most common style of humour found in user-generated memes was aggressive humour. This style of humour explains the situation of someone else in a negative way. SM users ply this type of humour to express their frustration, anger or criticism towards unfair social customs or discomfort from any brand offerings like quick delivery service policy which endangers the delivery person's life by delivering a food package a few minutes early. Sometimes, strong reactions are triggered by negative humour which increases engagement on these memes. However, brands should look at what users are saying via these negative memes and make possible amends.

Furthermore, brand-generated memes had silliness as the most used humour type. Silly memes are humorous due to their silliness in elements like situations, characters, or persons. The probable reason to employ this humour could be that it allows brands to showcase their creativity which further captures users' attention, and leads to more engagement via reactions, comments, and shares. Silliness creates an enjoyable experience for its audience, and they tend to be more memorable and thus are positive and least controversial. In contrast, user-generated memes predominantly featured the use of sarcasm. Sarcasm involves expressing opposite meanings with ironic or satirical twists. This type of humour is used for criticizing, commenting, or drawing attention to specific issues, behaviours, or situations. It is relatable and usually made from anonymous accounts which are free from receiving backlash and often spark conversations and debates.

## Implications

This study has theoretical and managerial implications. In terms of theoretical implications, existing literature has focussed on gratifications such as emotion, information, entertainment, and creativity in the context of SM (Dolan et al., 2019; Huang & Su, 2018; Luo, 2002). But this study investigates all four

gratifications simultaneously in the context of brand and user-generated memes, which was not found in previous studies. The use of U&G theory explained the effectiveness of brand and user memes on Instagram at the content level. Overall, the study finds that brand-generated memes use emotional, informational, and creative content dimensions along with the affiliative style of humour and silliness type of humour on the contrary user-generated memes focus on all four appeals - informational, entertainment, emotional, and creative dimensions and uses the aggressive style of humour with sarcasm type of humour.

In terms of managerial implications, this study asserts significant implications for brand managers, media agencies and small businesses. SM is primarily dominated by millennial and Gen Z generations, who have a shorter attention span and prefer interactive, engaging content, thus meme marketing has become a preferred way of marketing to millennials and Gen Z. Previous research highlighted that meme marketing is gaining traction as many brands are incorporating it into their SM strategy and receiving ample engagement (Razzaq et al., 2023; Sharma, 2018). In sync with previous studies, this study's content analysis substantiates that brand-generated memes highly use emotional, entertainment and creative message appeal in their memes. By this brand managers can use such message strategy in their brand memes as well by showcasing themselves as a fun and cool brand that stays trendy and has a light-hearted way to present their views on topical issues. By poking fun at themselves they can create a more authentic and positive brand image that aligns with the interest of the young demographic. Further, our study reveals that user-generated memes focus on informational appeal along with emotional, entertainment and creative appeal in their memes, brand managers can meticulously seek their audience's perception of their brand and its services from user memes and can act accordingly. It is one of the best ways to seek honest feedback from the online community.

One of the ways to make an advertisement effective is by grabbing the audience's attention. Existing literature regards humour as a trailblazer in capturing attention, creating positive effects, and engaging audiences, all of which benefit brands (Chan & Lowe, 2021; Zhu et al. 2022). This study focuses on different styles and types of humour that can be used in brand and user-generated memes, as understanding humour can be difficult due to its subjective nature, cultural differences, and context. In the context of brand-generated memes, affiliative styles of humour and silliness types of humour are highly used. Both kinds of humour fall under the category of positive humour, so brand managers should use negative humour cautiously as it could get them into trouble or be misinterpreted as mean-spirited or offensive by different SM users. This could result in backlash, trolling, and adverse publicity. Whereas user-generated memes had an aggressive style of humour and sarcasm type of humour present in their memes. This signifies that both categories use a negative kind of humour which tries to take a dig at the brand's offerings and services. Brand managers can seek what upsets their audiences and rectify coming forward if it's in their capacity else, they can quietly ignore it. These findings can help brand managers and campaigners plan their message strategies significantly without hurting their communities' sentiments. If brand managers want their audience to pay attention and like them, they must use emotions, entertainment, and creativity in their content with positive humour to continuously engage them.

### Limitations and future research scope

There are several limitations in this study. In this section, we outline these limitations and explore future research directions. First, this study involves a single category of memes i.e., food delivery apps, future researchers can explore other different categories of memes as well. Second, the study includes only one type of meme (image macro), we encourage future researchers to explore other genres of memes like videos, plain text, videos, GIFs etc. Third, the present study analyses various content appeals, humour styles and types on Instagram platforms. Future studies can analyse other SM platforms like Meta (Former Facebook), Snapchat, Threads or X (Former Twitter). Furthermore, this study was focused on the Indian context. Subsequent research endeavours could expand the scope by exploring brands across a wider geographical spectrum. Further studies in the context of memes can research new content appeals and popular references to create viral and engaging memes.



## Conclusion

SM use has become ubiquitous, and with approximately 4.89 billion SM users worldwide, this space has become crowded. Brands are constantly exploring new strategies to engage with audiences and grab their attention. Memes have emerged as one short form of content that has the potential to go viral and keep consumers engaged (Malodia et al., 2022; Razzaq et al., 2023). Previous studies have focussed on the foundations and outcomes of memes, but this study focuses on the content of memes by using U&G theory which can benefit brands in engaging their audiences. The findings of this study assert that brand-generated memes have emotional, entertainment and creativity in their memes with the affiliative style of humour and silliness type of humour. This reveals that audiences like to engage with light-hearted and entertaining content from brands. Whereas user-generated memes focus on informational appeal along with emotional, entertainment and creativity appeal with the aggressive style of humour and sarcasm type of humour. This signifies users use memes as a way of expressing their rage towards brands which could also work as feedback. These managerial implications can assist brand managers and meme makers in organisations in understanding the audience mindset and their preference for a specific type of content in memes under each category, which can help them in building brands.

## Authors' contributions

Ms. Ashima Agrawal: Conceptualization and Design, Drafting the paper (Original Draft), Addressing the comments, Dr. Daneshwar Sharma: Conceptualization and Design, Reviewing and Editing, Final approval of the manuscript, Dr. Manoj Kumar Mishra: Research Methodology, Analysis of Data, Interpretation of Data, Dr. Mohd. Asif Shah: Reviewing and Editing, Dr. Alam Mumtaz: Revision and Addressing the comments, Dr. Vinay Khandelwal: Drafting the paper (Original Draft), Revising the paper.

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## Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings of the study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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