

MATEUSZ KILJAŃCZYK
AGNIESZKA KACPRZAK

IS IT STILL A MEME? EXAMINING FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PERCEPTION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF MARKETING MEMES

Abstract. The paper examines the consumer perception and effectiveness of internet memes in marketing communication. Two research questions are addressed: Are marketing memes perceived differently than ordinary memes? How do “meme-likeness”, consumer interest in memes, and negative attitudes toward marketing influence their effectiveness? A survey was conducted on a sample of 264 participants, using both paper-based (PAPI) and online (CAWI) methods. Their results indicate that increased company interference in original memes reduced their perceived meme-likeness. A positive relationship was found between meme-likeness and message effectiveness. Contrary to our predictions, neither consumer interest in memes nor negative attitudes toward marketing affected meme effectiveness. This suggests the effectiveness of meme marketing depends more on the authenticity of the message itself rather than on audience characteristics. For marketing practitioners, these findings highlight the importance of maintaining meme authenticity and moderate brand interference rather than targeting specific consumer segments. Limitations include non-representativeness of the sample and the use of memes from only one fictitious company, restricting generalizability.

Keywords: internet memes; meme marketing; marketing communication; cross-modality matching

INTRODUCTION

The term “meme” was introduced by Richard Dawkins in 1976 (Jemielniak, 2019), long before the emergence of the humorous internet content that we

Mgr MATEUSZ KILJAŃCZYK, Doctoral Student at the University of Warsaw, Faculty of Management; correspondence address: ul. Szturmowa 1/3, 02-678 Warszawa, Poland; e-mail: mm.kiljanczyk@uw.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1740-9131>.

Dr hab. AGNIESZKA KACPRZAK, Associate Professor at the University of Warsaw, Faculty of Management; correspondence address: ul. Szturmowa 1/3, 02-678 Warszawa, Poland; e-mail: akacprzak@wz.uw.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1949-9131>.

Articles are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – NonCommercial – NoDerivatives 4.0 International CC-BY

associate with memes today. Dawkins (2021) noted that cultural transmission evolves, just as genetic transmission does. Using the analogy of a gene, he introduced the concept of a meme, defined as “a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation” (Dawkins, 2021, p. 358). As examples of memes, Dawkins (2021, p. 359) lists “melodies, ideas, catchphrases, clothing fashions, ways of making pots or building arches”.

Internet memes represent a narrower concept compared to cultural memes and are defined as “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (Davison, 2012, p. 122). Drawing on Davison’s (2012) definition, this study defines internet memes as humorous graphics shared online.

Internet memes serve as a tool for “meme marketing” (Razzaq et al., 2023, p. 679), which is defined as “a brand-initiated multimodal online communication strategy, executed through imitated and original memes, conveying speech acts through which consumers extract epistemic, emotional, and social values dependent on the contextual knowledge to persuade and engage customers”. In other words, meme marketing can employ two types of memes: imitated memes, which are adaptations of existing ones, and original memes, which are created from scratch by a brand. Memes convey messages designed to evoke specific reactions in recipients, offering consumers useful information, positive feelings, or a sense of belonging to a group. The ability to derive these values depends on consumers’ knowledge of memes (in the case of imitated memes) and general socio-cultural knowledge (in the case of original memes) (Razzaq et al., 2023).

Existing literature points to the advantages of using memes in marketing communications. Grębosz et al. (2016) state that popular memes build brand awareness through viral spread. The viral spread of a meme means that users pass it on to each other (Kasprowicz and Veltzé, 2020). Empirical data appears to support the viral potential of marketing memes (Yang, 2022). Experimental findings indicated that humorous posts – memes featuring a brand on Twitter – generated more positive consumer attitudes and a greater willingness to share them on social media (Yang, 2022). The results of studies conducted so far also point to memes’ ability to generate greater consumer engagement (Bury, 2016; Yang and Hayashi, 2021), their greater persuasive power (Kiljańczyk and Kacprzak, 2023), or their ability to attract attention and provoke discussion among consumers (Bury, 2016).

Internet memes thus appear to be an attractive marketing communication tool (Grębosz et al., 2016; Yang, 2022; Bury, 2016; Yang and Hayashi, 2021; Kiljańczyk and Kacprzak, 2023). Nevertheless, literature suggests that, on the

one hand, consumer-related factors, such as age, meme literacy and benefits for which consumers engage in watching and spreading memes (Razzaq et al., 2023, 2024; Smith, 2022; Malodia et al., 2022), and on the other hand company-related factors, such as authenticity of communication, explicit brand exposure and meme's seeding and distribution strategies (Smith, 2022; Razzaq et al., 2024; Malodia et al., 2022), can significantly influence the reception and effectiveness of meme marketing. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to increase the current state of knowledge on the factors influencing the effectiveness and perception of this form of marketing communication by answering two **research questions**:

1. Are internet memes used in marketing communications perceived differently by consumers than regular internet memes?
2. How do perceived meme-likeness, consumer interest in internet memes and negative attitudes towards marketing affect the effectiveness of meme marketing?

1. FACTORS INFLUENCING MARKETING MEMES PERCEPTION AND EFFECTIVENESS

The literature of the subject provides information on certain factors that may affect the effectiveness and perception of the use of Internet memes in marketing communications such as consumer's age, authenticity of communication, originality of memes used, consumers' meme literacy, explicit brand exposure in memes, and their potential for gaining popularity, which is influenced by a number of other factors listed later in this section (Smith, 2022; Kiljańczyk and Kacprzak, 2023; Yang and Hayashi, 2021; Razzaq et al., 2024; Yang, 2022; Malodia et al., 2022).

Data collected by GWI shows that popularity of memes decreases with age – it is highest among Gen Z and lowest among Baby Boomers (Smith, 2022). Attitudes toward marketing memes are also becoming less positive in each successive generation (Smith, 2022). Smith (2022) also suggests that younger consumers' positive attitudes toward marketing memes apply to situations in which such communication occurs naturally.

Yang and Hayashi (2021) found that posts created using original memes fostered greater engagement compared to those containing memes based on popular templates. Razzaq et al. (2024) found that memes that expose a brand explicitly have a greater ability to evoke positive attitudes and increase levels of engagement than memes that do so subtly. Memes exposing a brand prominently also have a greater impact on narrative transportation, which mediates

the effect of meme type on attitudes and engagement. Narrative transportation can be understood as a process in which the consumer's engagement with the meme content leads to a change in their beliefs. Moreover, one of the factors that strengthen the impact of a meme which prominently features a brand on narrative transport is meme literacy, which was also found to influence effectiveness and overall attitude towards marketing communication using internet memes (Kiljańczyk and Kacprzak, 2023; Razzaq et al., 2024).

Malodia et al. (2022) determined that memes with a higher potential for gaining popularity also exhibit a greater ability to enhance brand retention in consumers' memory. These authors identified several factors influencing this potential, which relate to content, consumers and media. Among the content-related factors, the authors identified relevance, iconicity, humor and spreadability. The identified consumer-side factors were three benefits for which consumers engage in watching and spreading memes. These benefits are escapism, social benefits, and benefits of communicating and receiving information through memes. Among the factors on the media's side were the meme's seeding strategy (which includes choosing the date of its publication) and distribution strategy (which includes working with relevant partners, such as influencers, to increase the meme's reach).

2. OWN RESEARCH HYPOTHESES ON FACTORS INFLUENCING MEME MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS

2.1 ASSUMED IMPACT OF COMMERCIAL USE ON MEME-LIKENESS OF MESSAGES

The literature underscores that internet memes are predominantly crafted by anonymous amateurs who operate purely out of passion, with no commercial interests, and are disseminated through spontaneous, non-economic channels primarily for entertainment (Kamińska, 2011; Kołowiecki, 2012).

These features seem to lose their impact as corporate interference in the meme increases – that is, when it becomes more obvious that the meme was created for marketing purposes, with an institution behind it. As the company's interference increases, the commercial purpose of a given meme and the institution behind it become apparent. Consumers, for their part, might perceive the message's intent not as an attempt to entertain them, but rather as an effort to encourage them to buy a product or service from the company.

It therefore seems that as the company's interference with the meme increases, consumers should perceive it less as a meme. The characteristic of "being

a meme” has been referred to in this study as meme-likeness. The above considerations led us to propose the following hypothesis:

H1: The perception of marketing memes as memes (their meme-likeness) decreases as the company’s interference in the original meme increases.

2.2 ASSUMED IMPACT OF MEME-LIKENESS ON MESSAGE EFFECTIVENESS

Characteristics of internet memes that enhance their appeal as marketing communication tools – such as humor and viral dissemination potential – are inherently gradable (Grębosz et al., 2016; Davison, 2012; Kasproicz and Veltzé, 2020). It therefore seems that they should be more strongly associated with images that are perceived to a greater extent as memes, which in turn should enhance their effectiveness.

Such a prediction is also supported by the fact that communication process can be disrupted by semantic noise, when the message is constructed in a way that makes it difficult for the recipient to understand it (Wiktor, 2013). An image that can be more clearly defined should be more easily understood by audiences. This fact should work in favor of both the most and least “meme-like” images, with the latter benefiting the least from the distinctive qualities of internet memes. A message perceived to a greater extent as a meme should also be perceived as more authentic, a trait that is desired by consumers when memes are used in marketing communication (Smith, 2022). Given the above, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: The perception of images as memes (their meme-likeness) positively affects their effectiveness.

2.3 ASSUMED IMPACT OF INTEREST IN MEMES ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MARKETING MEMES

Previous studies have demonstrated that higher meme literacy enhances both the effectiveness and the overall positive reception of marketing communications employing Internet memes (Kiljańczyk and Kacprzak, 2023; Razzaq et al., 2024). Thus, it is expected that marketing memes will be more effective among consumers who are more interested in internet memes. This prediction aligns with the indication that the form of the message should be tailored to the characteristics of its audience (Wiktor, 2013). Considering the evidence presented, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H3: The level of consumer interest in internet memes positively affects the effectiveness of marketing memes.

2.4 ASSUMED IMPACT OF ATTITUDE TOWARD MARKETING ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MARKETING MEMES

Consumers differ in their attitudes toward advertising (Pollay and Mittal, 1993). Among them, there is a group that Pollay and Mittal (1993) describe as “critical cynics” characterized by a decidedly negative attitude toward the phenomenon. This segment denies advertising even the capacity to provide entertainment (Pollay and Mittal, 1993). In this context, it is important to note that ad persuasiveness was found to drop as consumer skepticism increases (Hernandez et al., 2019).

It seems reasonable to assume that marketing memes – that is, the manifestation of marketing activity – may be less effective for consumers with negative attitudes toward marketing. This prediction is further strengthened by the fact that internet memes can be a tool for criticizing the actions of corporations (Juza, 2013). Using such a tool – whose nature, after all, is non-commercial (Kamińska, 2011) – may provoke negative reactions. In the past, there have been examples of negative responses to businesses using internet memes (Kołowiecki, 2012; Shifman, 2014). Kołowiecki (2012) describes a campaign by 4chan forum users carried out in response to Hot Topic introducing a T-shirt featuring a character known from memes for sale, while Shifman (2014) mentions the criticism faced by T-Mobile for using a Flash Mob (which the author considers one of the genres of memes) for marketing purposes. Consequently, the set of hypotheses has been expanded to include the following:

H4: A consumer’s negative attitude toward marketing negatively affects the effectiveness of marketing memes.

3. METHODOLOGY OF OWN RESEARCH

3.1 RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Our research relied on the survey method was used (Babbie, 2009), and it was conducted in an in-person format using two research tools: a paper questionnaire (PAPI) accompanied by a multimedia presentation and an online survey questionnaire (CAWI).

The study was carried out from January 2024 to January 2025. A total of 294 paper forms and 293 online responses were collected. After excluding respondents who did not meet the study criteria, questionnaires completed incorrectly, and data that could not be merged across paper-based and online surveys, a total of 264 responses were retained for analysis.

3.2 MEASURES

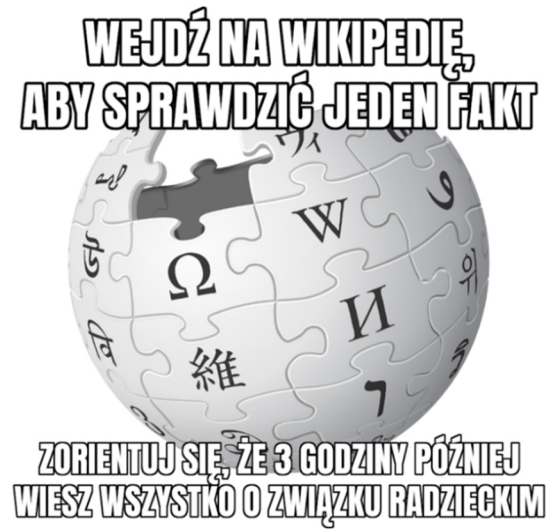
3.2.1 Measurement of the degree to which an image is regarded as a meme (meme-likeness)

The PAPI (paper-and-pencil interviews) technique was employed to conduct the first part of the survey. First, two filtering questions were asked whether participants ever watch internet memes and whether they like internet memes. Only responses from participants who answered affirmatively to both questions were included, as the form of the message should be tailored to the characteristics of its audience (Wiktor, 2013).

Next, respondents were asked to rate the meme-likeness of displayed graphics by drawing a line of the appropriate length for each graphic. This scaling method – reflecting the stimulus intensity with the length of the line – was an adaptation of the cross-modal matching method, which involves matching perceived stimulus intensities across different sensory modalities (Colman, 2001). This method was used to determine the degree to which the studied graphics were considered memes by consumers. In the study presented here, the characteristic of “being a meme” was referred to as “meme-likeness”.

For the first displayed graphic, a line was already drawn on the questionnaires (Figure 1) (Lindsay and Norman, 1991). Participants were asked to treat it as a reference for their evaluations – for example, to draw a line twice as long for a graphic that seemed twice as “meme-like” as the reference graphic. However, as indicated by Lindsay and Norman (1991), participants were asked to avoid thinking about numbers and make judgments based on their feelings. The template of the form is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Reference graphic used in the study



Note. “Go to Wikipedia to check one fact/Realize 3 hours later that you know everything about the Soviet Union.” By Thoji, the Wikipedia logo by Wikimedia Foundation – own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=92159948>.

Figure 2. Template for measuring perceived meme-likeness used in the study

| | |
|-----------------------|-------|
| Reference meme | _____ |
| Non-examined graphics | |
| Examined graphics | |
| ... | |

To control for response bias, respondents assessed a total of eight graphics, including four that varied in the level of company interference and four extra graphics that served as filler items. This approach aimed to prevent participants from detecting the study's focus and adjusting their evaluations accordingly.

The study examined four versions of a meme created specifically for the research, each featuring increasing levels of corporate interference from a non-existing pizzeria called Varsoviano Pizza&Pasta (Figure 3). The order in which participants evaluated the graphics was changed relative to the description provided.

Figure 3. Memes used in the study



Note. Woman in blue: “My New Year’s resolution.” Woman in red: “Pizza Quattro Formaggi.” Own elaboration.

After assessing the meme-likeness of all graphics, participants were shown a QR code leading to the CAWI part of the study.

3.2.2 *Measurement of the effectiveness of marketing messages*

Participants evaluated graphics in an online survey using a five-point scale to assess their effectiveness as marketing messages based on the following attributes: “interesting”, “understandable”, “engaging”, “funny”, and “I could send it to a friend.” This scale was based on Wiktor’s (2013) classification of marketing communication functions, with particular emphasis on the persuasive function. It was further grounded in McGuire’s processual model (1985) and the elaboration likelihood model by Petty and Cacioppo (1990), considering factors influencing the success of persuasion and its progression through the central route, such as attention, comprehension, motivation, and the ability to process the message. Additionally, the scale incorporated attributes relevant to internet memes, such as humor and shareability (Grębosz et al., 2016), recognizing their role in the effectiveness of marketing communication.

3.2.3 *Measurement of interest in internet memes*

The scale measuring interest in internet memes consisted of two types of questions. The first assessed engagement frequency in meme-related activities (e.g., viewing, posting, learning), with responses ranging from *never* (1) to *very often* (5), yielding an average score per respondent (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.748). The second asked respondents to indicate whether three statements applied to them (e.g., belonging to a meme group on Facebook, following meme-dedicated pages, self-identifying as a meme enthusiast) with *yes* (1) or *no* (0). Each statement was weighted based on the proportion of *no* responses, assuming lower agreement signified higher interest (weights: 0.36, 0.14, and 0.50, respectively). The final score, ranging from 1 to 6, combined the weighted second-part responses with the first-part score, ensuring a comprehensive measure of meme interest.

3.2.4 *Measurement of negative attitudes toward marketing*

The study utilized the “cynicism” subscale from the Anti-Commercial Consumer Rebellion scale by Austin, Plouffe, and Peters (2005), which defines rebellion as “open and avowed resistance to institutionalized marketing practices” (Austin et al., 2005, p. 62). This five-item scale, translated into Polish, measures consumer skepticism toward marketers’ intentions (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.897). Following the original methodology, a Likert-type response format was used, though the number of response options was reduced from seven to five (Austin et al., 2005; Babbie, 2008).

3.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

The study sample consisted of 264 students, the majority of whom (60.61%) were women (Table 1). Most of the study participants were born in 2005 (40.15%), while all participants were born between 2000 and 2007.

Management students constituted the majority of the sample, representing 76% of participants, while the remaining 24% were students from other social science disciplines. This sampling choice is justified by the observation that young consumers exhibit a high interest in internet memes and are often the primary target group for this type of marketing communication. Additionally, the inclusion of both business students and students from other social sciences was intended to ensure variability in the level of cynicism towards marketing (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the research sample

| | Variable | Number of participants | % |
|------------------------|---|------------------------|-------|
| Gender | Woman | 160 | 60.61 |
| | Male | 102 | 38.64 |
| | Other | 2 | 0.76 |
| Year of birth | 2000 | 1 | 0.38 |
| | 2001 | 5 | 1.89 |
| | 2002 | 3 | 1.14 |
| | 2003 | 30 | 11.36 |
| | 2004 | 73 | 27.65 |
| | 2005 | 106 | 40.15 |
| | 2006 | 43 | 16.29 |
| | 2007 | 3 | 1.14 |
| Course of study | Management | 201 | 76.14 |
| | Other social sciences (e.g. sociology, psychology) | 63 | 23.86 |

3.4 DESCRIPTION OF THE STATISTICAL PROCEDURE

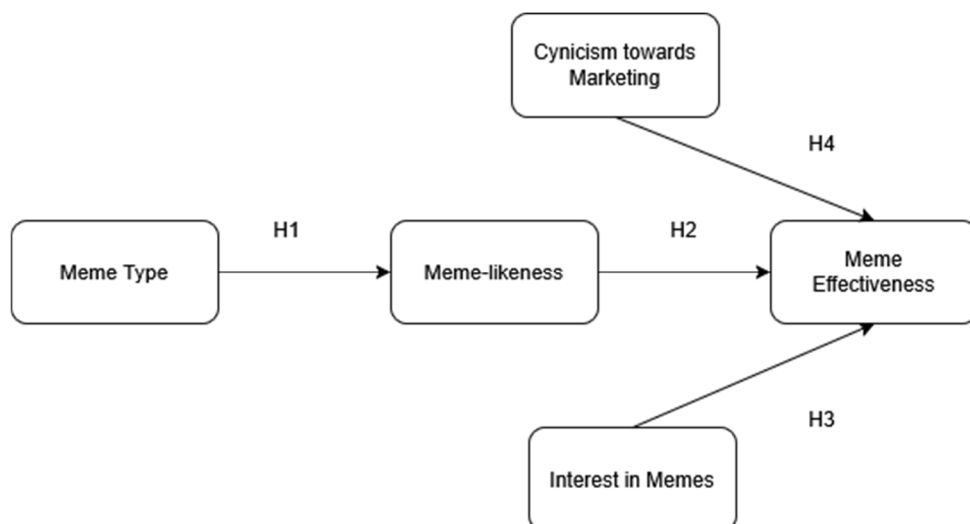
We employed multilevel structural equation modeling (SEM) using the lavaan package (version 0.6-19) in R, with robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR). A multilevel approach was necessary because the data were nested, with multiple meme evaluations provided by each respondent. Traditional single-level SEM assumes that all observations are independent, but in our case, responses

from the same individual were likely correlated. Ignoring this dependence could lead to biased standard errors and incorrect inferences. Multilevel SEM accounts for this hierarchical data structure, modeling within-person variability (how different memes are perceived by the same individual) separately from between-person variability (differences in how individuals overall perceive memes).

Robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) was used to account for non-normality and heteroskedasticity in the data, ensuring robust standard errors and corrected model fit indices. Given that our key mediator, perceived meme-likeness, was highly skewed, we applied a log transformation to normalize its distribution and improve model interpretability.

Our hypothesized model included a within-level mediation pathway where the type of meme influences the log-transformed perceived meme-likeness, which in turn predicts meme effectiveness. Meme effectiveness was operationalized as a latent variable constructed from four adjective-based indicators and one behavioral indicator (likelihood of sharing the meme). At the between-person level, we examined whether individual differences in cynicism towards marketing and general meme interest influenced meme effectiveness. By employing multilevel SEM, we were able to simultaneously model these within- and between-level effects, ensuring accurate parameter estimates while accounting for individual-level differences.

Figure 4. The structural model



4. RESULTS

4.1 MODEL FIT

The overall model demonstrated acceptable fit. The scaled chi-square statistic was significant, $\chi^2(23) = 107.41$, $p < 0.001$. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.935) and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI = 0.906) exceeded conventional thresholds for acceptable fit, and the robust Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.080 (90% CI [0.065–0.096]). Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was 0.038. See Table 2 for a summary of model fit indices.

Table 2. Model fit indices

| Fit Index | Value |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| χ^2 (scaled) | 107.41 ($df = 23$) |
| p -value (χ^2) | < 0.001 |
| CFI | 0.935 (robust: 0.940) |
| TLI | 0.906 (robust: 0.914) |
| RMSEA | 0.085 (90% CI [0.074–0.096]) |
| Robust RMSEA | 0.080 (90% CI [0.065–0.096]) |
| SRMR | 0.038 |
| AIC | 16,436.85 |
| BIC | 16,546.10 |

4.2 REGRESSION RESULT

As shown in Table 3, the regression from type of meme to meme-likeness was significant and negative ($\beta = -0.176$, $SE = 0.020$, $z = -8.895$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. In addition, the effect of meme-likeness on meme effectiveness was significant and positive ($\beta = 0.500$, $SE = 0.042$, $z = 11.982$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. In contrast, the direct effects of the psychographic variables on meme effectiveness were not significant: general interest in memes ($\beta = 0.066$, $SE = 0.049$, $z = 1.342$, $p = 0.180$) and cynicism towards marketing ($\beta = -0.083$, $SE = 0.052$, $z = -1.592$, $p = 0.111$), leading us to reject H3 and H4.

Table 3. Standardized regression estimates

| Structural path | <i>b</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>z</i> | <i>p</i> | β |
|---|----------|-----------|----------|----------|---------|
| Meme-likeness (log) ~ Meme Type (H1) | -0.176 | 0.020 | -8.895 | < 0.001 | -0.210 |
| Meme Effectiveness ~ Meme-likeness (log) (H2) | 0.500 | 0.042 | 11.982 | < 0.001 | 0.554 |
| Meme Effectiveness ~ Meme Type (direct effect) | 0.006 | 0.017 | 0.356 | 0.722 | 0.008 |
| Meme Effectiveness ~ Interest in Memes (H3) | 0.066 | 0.049 | 1.342 | 0.180 | 0.064 |
| Meme Effectiveness ~ Cynicism Towards Marketing (H4) | -0.083 | 0.052 | -1.592 | 0.111 | -0.081 |

The results support the hypothesized mediation: the type of meme significantly influences perceived meme-likeness (H1), and perceived meme-likeness, in turn, significantly predicts meme effectiveness (H2). This mediation process implies that the impact of meme type on meme effectiveness operates primarily through its effect on perceived meme-likeness. Conversely, the direct effects of psychographic variables (general interest in memes and cynicism towards marketing) on meme effectiveness (H3 and H4) were not statistically significant, suggesting that individual differences in these psychographic traits do not directly influence the behavioral outcome in this model.

5. DISCUSSION

The presented results are largely in line with the literature (Kiljańczyk and Kacprzak, 2023; Kamińska, 2011; Razzaq et al., 2024). H1 assumed that the perception of marketing memes as memes (their meme-likeness) decreases as the company's interference with the original meme increases. Its confirmation seems to indicate that a meme used for commercial purposes is a different thing, or is perceived as something different than the same meme not used for such purposes. The greater the company's interference, the greater change in the perception of that meme. This perspective aligns with the idea that memes retain their defining characteristics only if they remain anonymous, amateur creations distributed without commercial intent (Kamińska, 2011). Our findings expand upon this idea by demonstrating that this phenomenon is, in fact, gradable.

H2, which assumed that the effectiveness of marketing memes is positively influenced by their perceived “meme-likeness” was also confirmed. It should be noted that our findings lead to different conclusions than those of the research conducted by Razzaq, Shao and Quach (2024), which determined that memes explicitly displaying the brand generate higher consumer engagement and more positive attitudes. This leads to the conclusion that moderation in brand exposure is necessary when designing a marketing meme.

The lack of support for H3, which posits that interest in internet memes positively affects marketing meme effectiveness, appears initially inconsistent with previous findings (Kiljańczyk and Kacprzak, 2023). However, earlier research focused broadly on humor in marketing, whereas this study directly assessed attitudes toward internet memes specifically. High interest in memes does not necessarily enhance the effectiveness of marketing memes, as it may also come with higher expectations for authenticity. While individuals immersed in meme culture can quickly recognize formats and joke patterns, making them more likely to engage with well-crafted meme content, they are also more discerning when it comes to inauthentic, forced, or outdated memes. As a result, their familiarity with memes does not automatically translate into a stronger persuasive effect of meme-based marketing. Instead, their critical approach may neutralize the expected positive impact, which could explain why the hypothesized relationship was not statistically significant.

H4, which assumed a negative impact of consumers’ negative attitudes toward marketing on the effectiveness of marketing memes, was also not confirmed. Prior research suggests that ad skepticism reduces persuasiveness (Hernandez, 2019), and memes, often used to criticize corporations, may provoke negative reactions when adopted by brands (Juza, 2013; Kamińska, 2011; Shifman, 2014; Kołowiecki, 2012). The insignificance observed here could suggest that skepticism toward traditional marketing may not directly transfer to meme-based campaigns, possibly due to consumers perceiving memes as less intrusive or viewing their commercial use as a separate, more humorous communication format. Alternatively, the humorous and informal nature of memes might neutralize or override typical negative attitudes toward advertising, thus diminishing the potential moderating effect of skepticism. It is also possible, that the impact of a cynical attitude toward marketing would have been established if the study had used well-known brands instead a non-existent pizza place, since consumers’ aversion seems to be mostly aimed at large corporations (Klein, 2021; Austin et al., 2005).

However, since neither hypothesis regarding consumer characteristics was supported, it appears that the effectiveness of meme-based marketing depends more on message characteristics than on audience traits.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to answer the question of how memes used for marketing purposes are perceived in relation to ordinary memes, and what factors affect the effectiveness of this form of marketing communication. Although internet memes are often portrayed in the literature as appealing marketing tools, addressing this issue was particularly relevant since their effectiveness is subject to certain conditions. The objective of this study was to increase the current understanding of these factors.

To address the research questions, four hypotheses were formulated and tested. As a result, two of them were confirmed. As expected, the negative impact of the company's interference on the perceived meme-likeness of the image was established. The term meme-likeness was used to describe the quality of "being an Internet meme". The positive effect of meme-likeness on the effectiveness of marketing memes was also established. However, the hypothesis suggesting a positive impact of consumer interest in internet memes on the effectiveness of this form of marketing communication was not supported, nor was the hypothesis assuming a negative impact of consumers' negative attitudes toward marketing on meme effectiveness.

The conducted study has important theoretical implications. The results we obtained provide empirical confirmation for the claim that memes used for commercial purposes constitute a distinct category from regular memes (Kamińska, 2011), while also expanding this observation by establishing that "being a meme" is not a dichotomous but a continuous variable. The observed relationship between meme-likeness and the effectiveness of marketing memes, on the other hand, provides empirical support for the recommendation that memes should be used naturally in marketing communications (Smith, 2022). The methodological aspect of the study is also noteworthy. The cross-modality matching method was successfully employed as one of the scaling techniques, demonstrating its potential in this research context.

There are also important practical implications of the study. The findings suggest that meme effectiveness is primarily driven by how "meme-like" content appears, rather than by individual differences in cynicism toward marketing

or general interest in memes. This implies that memes can be an effective communication tool across diverse consumer segments, regardless of their pre-existing attitudes toward marketing or their level of engagement with meme culture. For marketers, this means that crafting content that feels authentic to meme culture is more important than targeting specific psychographic groups. Since cynicism and meme interest did not significantly affect meme effectiveness, brands can confidently use memes to engage a broad audience, rather than limiting their use to digitally savvy or marketing-friendly consumers. The key takeaway is that meme success depends more on perceived authenticity than on the traits of the audience consuming them. This insight is particularly valuable for brands hesitant to embrace meme marketing due to concerns about audience segmentation. A well-executed meme can resonate with consumers across different backgrounds, making it a powerful tool for organic engagement and virality.

The main limitation of the study is the unrepresentativeness of the research sample – the study included only representatives of Generation Z. Since meme engagement declines with age and contextual knowledge is key to interpretation (Smith, 2022; Piskorz, 2013), older consumers may be less sensitive to corporate interference, so the effect would likely be weaker in a more age-diverse sample. The generalizability of the results is also limited by the fact that the study used memes of only one company – a fictitious pizzeria.

Another limitation is the fact that study examined only image-and-text memes (Razzaq et al., 2024). The literature emphasizes the need to expand research to include memes that appear in other forms (Razzaq et al., 2024). Considering the popularity of video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, extending future studies to video-based memes seems to be especially important (We Are Social and Meltwater, 2025). A valuable direction for future research would be also an attempt to identify other factors influencing the “meme-likeness” of marketing memes. Qualitative methods could be especially helpful here, as they make it possible to understand deeply how and why certain factors shape the way a marketing message is perceived. The findings of the presented study could also be complemented by a qualitative study aimed at uncovering the reasons why corporate interference affects the perceived meme-likeness of a marketing message, which would advance our understanding of this phenomenon. Additionally, it is necessary to determine the optimal level of corporate interference in a meme – one that would allow for balancing the benefits of using brand-exposing memes, as clearly identified by Razzaq et al. (2024), with the risks of excessive interference, as established in this study.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Austin C. G., Plouffe C. R., and Peters C. (2005), *Anti-Commercial Consumer Rebellion: Conceptualisation and Measurement*, *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing* 14, no. 1, pp. 62-78.
- Babbie E. (2008), *Podstawy badań społecznych*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Bury B. (2016), *Creative Use of Internet Memes in Advertising*, *World Scientific News* 57, pp. 33-41.
- Colman A. M. (2001), *Dictionary of Psychology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davison P. (2012), *The Language of Internet Memes*, [in:] M. Medinberg (Ed.), *The Social Media Reader*, New York: New York University Press.
- Dawkins R. (2021), *Samolubny Gen*, Warszawa: Prószyński Media.
- GlobalWebIndex & Snap (2019), *The Youth of the Nation: Global Trends Among Gen Z. Examining the Lifestyles, Attitudes, and Digital Behaviors of Gen Z*, <https://www.gwi.com/reports/global-trends-among-gen-z> [accessed 4.5.2024]
- Grębosz M., Siuda D., and Szymański G. (2016), *Social Media Marketing*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Łódzkiej.
- Hernandez J. M., Scott A. W., and Affonso F. M. (2019), *The Importance of Advertising Skepticism for Brand Extension Appeals*, *Psychology & Marketing* 36, no. 7, pp. 687-699, <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21205>
- Jemiłniak D. (2019). *Socjologia Internetu*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Juza M. (2013), *Memy internetowe – tworzenie, rozpowszechnianie, znaczenie społeczne*, *Studia Medioznawcze* 55, no. 4, pp. 49-60.
- Kamińska M. (2011), *Nieczne memy. Dwanaście wykładów o kulturze internetu*, Poznań: Galeria Miejska Arsenal.
- Kasprowicz D. and Veltzé K. (2020), *Badania nad memami internetowymi w świetle wiedzy – wyzwania metodologiczne*, *Studia de Cultura* 12, no. 3, pp. 4-12.
- Kiljańczyk M. and Kacprzak A. (2023), *From Humor to Strategy: An Experimental Survey on Internet Memes in Social Media Marketing*, *European Management Studies* 21, no. 4, pp. 4-29.
- Kołodziejcki W. (2012), *Memy internetowe jako nowy język internetu*, *Kultura i Historia*, no. 21.
- Lindsay P. H. and Norman D. A. (1991), *Procesy przetwarzania informacji u człowieka: wprowadzenie do psychologii*, trans. A. Kowaliszyn, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Malodia S., Dhir A., Bilgihan A., Sinha P., and Tikoo T. (2022), *Meme Marketing: How Can Marketers Drive Better Engagement Using Viral Memes?*, *Psychology & Marketing* 39, no. 9, pp. 1775-1801. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21702>
- McGuire W. J. (1985), *Attitudes and Attitude Change*, [in:] G. Lindzey and E. Aronson (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 2, pp. 233-346, New York: Random House.
- Petty R. E. and Cacioppo J. T. (1990), *Communication and Persuasion. Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*, New York: Springer.
- Pollay R. and Mittal B. (1993), *Here's the Beef: Factors, Determinants and Segments in Consumer Criticism of Advertising*, *Journal of Marketing* 57, no. 3, pp. 99-114.
- Razzaq A., Shao W., and Quach S. (2023), *Towards an Understanding of Meme Marketing: Conceptualisation and Empirical Evidence*, *Journal of Marketing Management* 39, nos. 7-8, pp. 670-701. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2158906>

- Razzaq A., Shao W., and Quach S. (2024), *Meme Marketing Effectiveness: A Moderated-Mediation Model*, Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services 78, Article 103702, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103702>.
- Shifman L. (2014), *Memes in digital culture*, MIT Press.
- Smith M. (2022), *Are memes right for your marketing?*, GWI, December 2. <https://blog.gwi.com/marketing/memes-in-marketing>
- We Are Social and Meltwater (2025), *Digital 2025 Global Overview Report*, We Are Social, <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2025/02/digital-2025> [accessed 2.9.2025]
- Wiktor J. W. (2013), *Komunikacja marketingowa*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Wojciszke B. (2011), *Psychologia społeczna*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR.
- Yang G. (2022), *Using Funny Memes for Social Media Marketing: The Moderating Role of Bandwagon Cues*, Journal of Promotion Management 28, no. 7, pp. 944-960.
- Yang X. and Hayashi T. (2021), *Exploring the Effects of Internet Memes in Social Media Marketing Through A/B Testing*, 2021 IEEE 23rd Conference on Business Informatics (CBI), Italy, pp. 97-106.

CZY TO JESZCZE JEST MEM? ANALIZA CZYNNIKÓW WPŁYWAJĄCYCH NA POSTRZEGANIE I SKUTECZNOŚĆ MEMÓW MARKETINGOWYCH

Streszczenie

Niniejsza praca porusza tematykę postrzegania oraz efektywności wykorzystywania memów internetowych w komunikacji marketingowej. Postawiono w niej dwa problemy badawcze: czy memy marketingowe są postrzegane przez konsumentów inaczej niż zwykle memy internetowe, oraz jak „memowość” grafik, zainteresowanie konsumentów memami i ich negatywny stosunek do marketingu wpływają na efektywność memów marketingowych. Badanie przeprowadzono na próbie 264 osób z wykorzystaniem papierowych formularzy (PAPI) oraz internetowego kwestionariusza ankiety (CAWI). Wyniki badania wskazują, że wzrost ingerencji firmy w memy obniża ich postrzeganą memowość. Stwierdzono również pozytywny związek między memowością a efektywnością komunikatów. Wbrew przewidywaniom, zainteresowanie memami i negatywne nastawienie do marketingu nie wpływały na skuteczność memów. Sugeruje to, że skuteczność memów marketingowych zależy bardziej od autentyczności komunikatu niż od cech odbiorców. Praktyków wyniki te powinny skłaniać do koncentrowania się przede wszystkim na zachowaniu autentyczności i umiarkowanej ingerencji marki, a nie na kierowaniu tej formy komunikacji do ściśle określonych segmentów odbiorców. Do ograniczeń badania należą niereprezentatywność próby oraz fakt, że wykorzystano w nim memy zaledwie jednego, fikcyjnego przedsiębiorstwa, co ogranicza możliwość uogólniania wyników.

Słowa kluczowe: memy internetowe; marketing memowy; komunikacja marketingowa; porównywanie między modalnościami