

A Study on Meme Marketing Strategies of Domestic Brands and Optimization Suggestions

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Abstract

In today's era of traffic, the powerful monetization ability of meme marketing has attracted growing attention from brands. However, there is still limited research on domestic brand meme marketing in academic circles. Therefore, aiming to study domestic meme marketing strategies from a macro perspective, an interview was conducted to collect current meme marketing strategies of domestic brands, and a questionnaire was then released to evaluate the application effect of these strategies. The results show that domestic brands have used Internet memes in marketing with the help of artificial intelligence, explored to establish a brand virtual image, and adopted the two-way communication model of User Generated Content (UGC). Nonetheless, current meme marketing strategies have not shown a significant effect on improving consumers' willingness to learn about brands and purchase their products or services. This paper provides improved meme marketing strategies that further arouse the transformable consumption potential of consumers and effectively consolidate the maintenance and expansion of brand communication.

Keywords: Internet memes, meme marketing, brand communication, branding

1. Introduction

The swift progress in mobile Internet technology has not only permeated every aspect of our lives but also created vast opportunities for online gatherings. Amid the flourishing development of social media, individuals are granted the freedom to communicate and engage in discussions about specific topics or events. These interactive contents are refined and elevated to become Internet memes. In the Internet age, Internet memes are regarded as a novel form of cultural communication (Hu & Zhang, 2022). By engaging in the copying, modifying, and recreating of "memes", individuals can experience a sense of participation and joy, while also fostering connections (Xu et al., 2023). As a result, Internet memes have sparked interest among brands in combining them with marketing.

Currently, Internet memes have been applied to brand marketing on the Internet and given full play to their advantages. Malodia et al. (2022) found that viral memes are topical and highly relatable and are thus well received by the target groups, which increases customer engagement and brand recall. By employing Internet memes to interact with consumers, brands can not only attract more potential customers and connect with their target audience organically but also increase brand awareness and user stickiness (Taecharunroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Undoubtedly, the combination of Internet memes and marketing demonstrates significant marketing advantages.

Although brands are now more aware of the importance of Internet memes in their marketing strategies, the research on meme marketing remains limited. Two significant gaps are found in the existing literature on meme marketing. First, most of the literature focuses on the dissemination logic of Internet meme culture (e.g., Wu, 2020; Zhao & Yuan, 2021; Wei, 2023), but the role of Internet memes in brand marketing strategies and the extent to which it stimulates consumers' desire to consume need to be further explored. Second, most existing literature is limited to case studies on the application of meme marketing strategies (Shi, 2020), while macro-level summative research on meme marketing of domestic brands needs to be supplemented.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews and summarizes the existing literature on the 4I theory (Individuality, Interesting, Interaction, Interest), Internet memes, and meme marketing. Section 3 describes the research methodology, including interview and questionnaire design. Section 4 shows the results of interviews and questionnaires, which are further discussed in Section 5. Finally, the significance and shortcomings of this paper are

analyzed and suggestions for future research are proposed in Section 6.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The 4I Theory

In the 1990s, DonSchultz, a marketing professor at Northwestern University in the United States, proposed the theory of network integrated marketing. He believes that in the era of the Internet's incessant evolution, brands should formulate network marketing strategies based on the 4I principles (Interesting, Interest, Interaction, and Individuality). Since the theory of integrated marketing was put forward, network marketing theory has also been upgraded according to the evolution of users and media. From the 4P (Product, Price, Place, Promotion) based on the seller (Bian, 2007), it has evolved into the 4C (Consumer, Cost, Convenience, Communication) oriented by user needs (Mo, 2005), to the integrated marketing 4R (Relevancy, Reaction, Relationship, Reward), and now the 4I. The theory changes the form of communication from "communicator centered" to "audience centered", with more emphasis on consumer participation and orientation. The evolution of integrated marketing theory, from 4P to 4I, reflects a growing recognition of the central role of the consumer in marketing communications, emphasizing the need for a more interactive and individualized approach in today's Internet era.

As Internet media technology continues to evolve, consumers' information-gathering patterns have undergone significant changes, necessitating adjustments in brand marketing approaches. Deng (2020) emphasized that while traditional marketing frameworks struggle to align with today's information diversity, the 4I theory perfectly aligns with the audience-centered communication marketing paradigm inherent to new media. The 4I principle not only aligns seamlessly with the networking trends and diversified marketing ideologies characteristic of the big data era (Wang & Shi, 2016), but it also prioritizes user engagement as a fundamental objective, aligning perfectly with the core demands of marketing in an attention-driven economy (Yang, 2014). The 4I theory provides an ideal theoretical framework for the exploration of meme marketing strategies and their effectiveness.

2.2 Internet Memes

Derived from the Greek word *mimema* referring to something that is imitated, the term "meme" was coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) to refer to small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, which are spread through copying or imitation. However, only memes suited to the sociocultural environment will spread successfully (Chielens & Heylighen, 2005). Under the influence of the cultural background in the digitization age, a contemporary definition of an Internet meme is provided (Shifman, 2013). Drawing on concepts from discourse and media studies, this definition clarifies Internet memes by breaking them into three subdimensions: 1) participation structures -- who is entitled to participate and how, as conceptualized by Arthur & Michelle (2002), 2) keying -- the tone and style of communication, as defined by Goffman (1974), and 3) communicative functions, as conceptualized by Jakobson (1960). These studies have emphasized the influence of social and cultural background on the successful transmission of Internet memes and introduced a multi-dimensional analytical framework to understand the characteristics and functions of Internet memes. They also provide us with valuable perspectives and ideas for understanding meme marketing.

Existing studies are primarily divided into macro studies, which uncover the primary mechanisms of meme communication, and micro studies, which delve deeply into the specific effects that certain meme cultures and social media platforms exert on meme communication.

The macro-level analysis primarily examines the mode of cultural communication of Internet memes. Xiong (2019) argued that the production process of Internet memes comprises three distinct stages: imitation, mutation, and competition. Within the online sphere, netizens consciously and regularly replicate and disseminate the content, form, and significance of the original information, thereby facilitating a more potent propagation and reproduction of Internet memes (Shifman, 2013). He (2022) further elaborated that, after the mutation of language memes, the original informative meaning of the meme ceases to exist, yet it retains the same or a similar pronunciation or form as the original meme. In the culminating phase of transmission, memes vigorously compete for the limited mnemonic capacity of the host, with the victorious meme attaining wide dissemination (Chang, 2014). These studies show that the spread of Internet memes involves multiple stages and is a complex and dynamic process.

Micro studies focus on specific memes that emerge in certain cultures and social media platforms. Memes in different cultures exhibit diverse characteristics: longer survival in screen culture (Gao & Yang, 2023), decreasing resistance within the online youth subculture (Luo & Xu, 2024), and emergence within highly topical communication scenarios (Wang, 2021). From the perspective of social media platforms, memes with longevity, productivity, and high fidelity have an advantage in dissemination on bullet screen video sharing platforms (Huang et al., 2022), and video platforms facilitate meme transmission due to the low threshold of access to film and television dramas (Gao & Yang, 2023).

Internet memes are diverse due to their roots in various cultures and display distinct communication characteristics in modern Internet media.

Internet memes have received extensive attention in the field of communication studies, and various studies have revealed the mechanism of how meme spreads and changes rapidly in Internet culture. In summary, most current studies focus on discussion on the communication logic and growth environment of Internet memes. However, the application of memes in marketing has thus far received scant scholarly attention. So based on the background that Internet memes have been gradually valued by brands and applied to actual marketing activities, this paper explores Internet memes from the perspective of marketing.

2.3 Meme Marketing

With the infiltration of internet slang into people's daily lives, brands have actively introduced meme elements in marketing and carried out so-called meme marketing. Meme marketing, as a multi-modal online communication strategy initiated by brands, persuades and engages consumers by communicating speech acts in which consumers extract cognitive, emotional, and social values based on contextual knowledge (Razzaq et al., 2023). It is a marketing method based on economic considerations, utilizing methods such as creating memes and borrowing memes to integrate internal and external resources of brands, packaging, selling, and disseminating products and brands. Mainly carried out on online media, meme marketing conforms to market value laws and fits the characteristics of specific groups (He, 2022). Because Internet memes correspond with the emotional consumption trend, deconstructive cultural representation, and collective belonging habits of young people, Generation Z plays both the part of the target population and the main body of meme marketing. Currently, domestic brands often start with precise meme marketing through five paths: language, events, self-criticism, audience, and emotions (Sun & Tao, 2021).

Creating memes and playing with memes have become important means of attracting traffic and disseminating information on current Internet platforms, with the advent of the Internet era and the prevalence of social media. The spread process of meme marketing features fission or viral transmission, in which the public plays both the role of receivers and disseminators. The expression forms of Internet memes are diverse, the same is true of meme marketing. So multi-modality refers to the use of combined visual and verbal modes (i.e. form) such as images, plain text, text superimposed over the image, video, audio clips, and GIFs, all of which can be employed in meme marketing (Razzaq et al., 2023). It can be inferred that meme marketing is an effective modern marketing strategy, which makes use of the communication characteristics of Internet memes as advantages to easily realize the rapid spread of information.

So far, most domestic research explores the formation and dissemination mechanism of Internet memes from the perspective of cultural or communication studies. However, when we attempt to seek the application strategy of memes, that is, Internet memes in corporate commercial marketing from the perspective of marketing or brand strategy, it is found that there is very little relevant literature. In relevant research, we found one paper provides an overview of brand marketing creativity for memes (Sun & Tao, 2021), while several research papers use specific case analysis methods to explore the application and effectiveness of meme marketing, such as taking "demotivational culture" as an example to discuss the marketing application of cyber language (Shi, 2020), and taking the revival of clothing brand *Li Ning* as an example to explore the impact of meme marketing on brands in the Internet era (He, 2022). Moreover, foreign scholars pioneered the concept definition of "meme marketing", providing a solution to the problem of academic understanding and conceptual lag in brand meme marketing (Razzaq et al., 2023). It can be concluded that less attention has been paid to the general research on brand meme marketing strategy. Therefore, this paper aims to summarize and discuss the characteristics and strategies of meme marketing of domestic brands from a macro perspective, to provide a reference for a comprehensive understanding of the current application effect of brand meme marketing in China and give inspiration for brands to carry out or upgrade meme marketing.

2.4 Research Questions

This paper proposes the following research questions:

- Q1. What are the current meme marketing strategies of domestic brands?
- Q2. How effective are these meme marketing strategies of domestic brands?
- Q3. How can brands further tap into the benefits of meme marketing in the long term?

This paper summarizes the current meme marketing strategies of domestic brands. It investigates the application effect of these strategies. It also provides optimization suggestions for brands to more effectively carry out meme marketing and maintain and extend its benefits to brand communication.

3. Research Methodology

Internet memes, as a popular Internet term, are widely utilized by Generation Z. Therefore, this paper selects people of

Generation Z as interview participants and recruits research subjects online. At the same time, a questionnaire survey is employed for quantitative analysis, aiming to quantitatively examine the effectiveness of meme marketing, the formation of brand image, and the extent to which it stimulates consumers' consumption desire.

3.1 The Interview Design

To investigate the communication strategies of brand meme marketing, this paper employs a semi-structured interview approach. Six veteran Internet users aged 18 to 25, who were willing to participate, were selected as interviewees. The pertinent information regarding the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewee Information

| Number | Name | Age | Major | Interview length |
|--------|---------|-----|---|------------------|
| 1 | Erin | 18 | Archival Science | 56min |
| 2 | Jojo | 19 | Broadcasting and Hosting | 53min |
| 3 | Gunyins | 20 | International Business | 42min |
| 4 | Eliza | 18 | International Business | 45min |
| 5 | Weasley | 19 | Social Development and Management | 36min |
| 6 | Cavan | 22 | Electronic Information and Electrical Engineering | 31min |

While focusing on the research topic, flexible adjustments are made based on the interviewees' answers to facilitate further discussions on specific details and important events. During the specific interview process, the researcher encouraged the interviewees to independently express their feelings while adhering to the main line of the interview. The researchers also actively fostered a favorable interview environment to obtain rich research materials. After collecting the interview data, two analysis methods were employed: categorical analysis and scenario analysis. This paper categorizes important concepts such as the characteristics and process of meme marketing and analyzes the respondents' feedback on meme marketing through scenario analysis.

3.2 Questionnaire Design

Having gained an insight into domestic brands' meme marketing strategies through in-depth interviews, we proceed to conduct a quantitative analysis using questionnaires to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies. The first part of the questionnaire primarily comprises basic information about the user, including gender, age, and knowledge about meme marketing. It assists us in assessing whether the intended target population for this paper is adequately represented by respondents to the questionnaire. To address research question 2, the subsequent sections of the questionnaire are designed with three types of questions: 1) the effect of meme marketing on promoting consumers to learn about brands; 2) the concrete influence of meme marketing strategies on brand image building; 3) the effect of meme marketing strategies on stimulating consumers' consumption desire. Once the data collection through the questionnaire is completed, we analyze and interpret the data using statistical methods to gain a deeper understanding of the actual effectiveness of meme marketing strategies of domestic brands.

3.3 Questionnaire Distribution and Retrieval

The questionnaire was mainly distributed through two channels: *WeChat* groups and *WeChat* Moments. First, the questionnaire was distributed in *WeChat* Moments with the help of the authors and the interviewees. For example, one of the interviewees helped to share the questionnaire with his circle of friends. Second, the questionnaire was distributed in different *WeChat* groups such as grade groups and club groups. To ensure the authenticity and reliability of the questionnaire data, the demographic data about the respondents is organized in Table 2 as follows. The questionnaire was mainly distributed through two channels: *WeChat* groups and *WeChat* Moments. First, the questionnaire was distributed in *WeChat* Moments with the help of the authors and the interviewees. For example, one of the interviewees helped to share the questionnaire with his circle of friends. Second, the questionnaire was distributed in different *WeChat* groups such as grade groups and club groups. To ensure the authenticity and reliability of the questionnaire data, the demographic data about the respondents is organized in Table 2 as follows.

Table 2. Demographic Data

| Measure | Items | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------|----------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 7 | 4.35 |
| | Female | 154 | 95.65 |
| | Total | 161 | 100.00 |
| Age | Under 18 | 5 | 3.11 |
| | 18-25 | 153 | 95.03 |
| | 26-50 | 1 | 0.62 |
| | Over 50 | 2 | 1.24 |
| | Total | 161 | 100.00 |

A total of 161 questionnaires were collected. In terms of gender ratio, most of the respondents are female, who account

for over 95%. About age distribution, the age group of 18~25 years old occupies the majority of the respondents, who feature Generation Z that familiar with digital technology and greatly influenced by the Internet, instant messaging, and social media. The user profile of the questionnaire is similar to the user portrait in brand meme marketing, so the population reached by the questionnaire is the target population needed for this paper.

4. Results

This section first summarizes the strategies of meme marketing from the interview results under the 4I theory. Then a study of the questionnaire results is conducted to generalize the specific effect of meme marketing strategies on brands.

4.1 Strategies for Meme Marketing Guided by the 4I Theory

Based on the four principles of the 4I theory, this section analyzes the results of the interviews and categorizes the meme marketing strategies used by domestic brands. In terms of individuality, brands use modern technology to track consumer needs and create avatars with their distinctive characteristics. In terms of interesting, brands creatively create and play with Internet memes, incorporate popular cultural elements, associate with various IPs, and work with third parties. In terms of interaction, brands have shifted more towards the two-way communication model of UGC, with consumers as the mainstay of marketing. In terms of interest, brands meet the emotional needs of consumers and also increase brand exposure.

4.1.1 Individuality

According to Weasley, with browsing history and purchase records of consumers on the platform analyzed by big data and artificial intelligence, brands push relevant products and services to consumers and use Internet memes that have attracted great attention from netizens in marketing videos and copywriting, thus making marketing more in keeping with consumer preferences. Eliza mentioned that she has been exposed to personalized recommendations from brands, although not all of them meet her needs.

1) Recommend relevant products and services to me based on my platform browsing history, purchase history, and other data. (from Weasley)

2) At present, the personalized push in my phone is not very suitable for my characteristics. There was a recommendation video on Bilibili that satisfied my likes, it accurately pushed the human body smart chair and I was very interested in smart homes at that time. (from Eliza)

3) Because I often watch the TV series Lotus Tower recently, when I browse Tiktok the peripheral products of Lotus Tower are frequently pushed to me. (from Weasley)

4) I am more impressed with MBTI on Little Red Book, which sends me posts that match my MBTI. (from Erin)

Brands closely track hot topics, events, and IPs on the Internet and associate marketing content with them through memes to gain short-term exposure and reach more potential consumer groups. As examples 3) and 4) mentioned, the interviewees received marketing content that combined brands with current hot topics, including popular movies, TV dramas, circles, etc.

Brands also carry out targeted marketing campaigns towards groups of different genders, ages, and social identities, using memes such as “Loser”, “Gentlewoman”, “Single Dog”, and “Working Stiff” in their marketing content, clearly targeted at consumers of various identities. In the interview, Cavan and Weasley felt that the brands’ meme marketing aimed at their own identity.

5) Marketing by group and age. (from Cavan)

6) Push relevant content and products in combination with my daily scenarios, such as pushing relevant content during specific festivals and activities. (from Weasley)

7) The marketing effect of creating a meme will be better than playing with an existing meme, such as BEE & FLOWER’s “picking up discarded boxes”, which is better than the “79 yuan set” of Florasis because it is unique and easy to form the brand’s marketing symbol. (from Eliza)

Moreover, brands create distinctive online “personas” or virtual images that are highly associated with their products or services and emphasize selling points, and further promote their online image or marketing content into popular Internet memes. By using original mascots and virtual spokespersons, brands showcase their unique features in marketing and interactions with consumers, distinguishing themselves from other brands and leaving distinctive impressions on consumers. Example 7) showed that the respondents approved of BEE & FLOWER’s wise approach to creating a marketing meme.

4.1.2 Interesting

Creatively creating and playing with memes, brands gain the attention and recognition of network users through interaction, thereby inducing secondary promotion of marketing products or services that carry memes by netizens. Driven by fun, netizens voluntarily participate in the recreation and dissemination of meme marketing content, such as shooting videos imitating memes and uploading them on social platforms, which are shown in example 8), or commenting and interacting with memes in various comment sections, which are indicated in example 9). And this progress gradually generates the effect of viral marketing.

What's more, brands combine popular cultural elements in the marketing content of products or services, for example integrating popular games, movies, music, etc. with high online discussion, thus making marketing fresh and contemporary. The integration of popular cultural elements in brand marketing greatly increases the fun of advertising as Weasley said. It brings unexpected feelings to netizens and consumers, narrows the distance between brands and consumers, and effectively attracts consumers.

8) *Imitate the sound and source of the meme to record a video, such as Wanyanhuide. (from Ginyan)*

9) *Users may adapt the meme, like narrating a joke first and ending with the claim "v50". The comments section of the video is more interesting than the video itself, with funny memes. (from Jojo)*

10) *Eggy Party co-branded with various IPs and launched a series of game skins such as Snow King. There are also many interesting moves, such as the popular bear dance, "the viral kemusan" dance, and so on. (from Weasley)*

Brands collaborate with celebrities and professional We Media to creatively insert advertising and marketing content in the creation of their personalized content. In addition, example 12) showed that the endorsement celebrity employed by the brand played with memes in marketing activity, which added fun to brand marketing too.

11) *Bilibili uploader Funny Nestle, who specializes in making sponsored content videos for commercial orders, which contain lots of memes and receive high views. And the movie star Zhang Yuqi always plays memes in advertisement videos. (from Cavan)*

12) *Wang Yuan spoke the meme "Princess, please drink water" during the live broadcast of Haers. (from Jojo)*

As mentioned in examples 11) and 12), by utilizing the accumulated influence of We Media and celebrities, brand marketing can gain intensive and extensive exposure. Meanwhile, with the characteristic style of We Media that is favored by netizens, the inserted marketing advertisements are more likely to be accepted and arouse user attention and consumer engagement.

4.1.3 Interaction

Brands engage in UGC two-way communication mode, where brands and consumers jointly serve as the communication medium. In meme marketing, brands actively connect with consumers, engaging in communication and establishing a communication platform.

13) *I am more impressed with the Little Red Book MBTI, which will send me posts that match my MBTI content. (from Erin)*

14) *Interaction in the meme itself: muscular man from the movie Creation of Gods, others play I also get, I also want to buy products. (from Gunyins)*

15) *I will leave comments in the comment section, and I will also @ friends when I encounter interesting content, or forward it. (from Jojo)*

16) *I will retweet to enter a draw. (from Gunyins)*

17) *Comment on, like, or share related content on the Internet, share the meme that netizens play, copy the content of netizens, and send it to their friends. (from Erin)*

In addition to using BGC one-way communication, the interaction between brands and consumers has turned more into the UGC two-way communication mode (Guo, 2023). By utilizing social media marketing as an integrated component in a marketing communications campaign (Ashley & Tuten, 2014), brands and consumers jointly constitute the communication carriers, and this two-way interaction constantly innovates and enriches the brands' marketing content. Out of fun, netizens spontaneously issue humorous comments online, which gradually gain attention and form a kind of Internet virus, such as "Madmen Literature" and "Crazy Thursday". When the memes created by netizens come to trend on social platforms, brands officially recognize them and then combine them into the marketing of products or services.

Brands, with the interactivity of the Internet, establish communication platforms that center around consumers as the marketing subject, thereby actively fostering engagement between brands and target audiences (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). Contact can be measured by noting whether the consumer links, refers others, clicks, subscribes, and submits an

inquiry or idea (Góme et al., 2019). Through the utilization of major social media outlets, brands initiate interactive topics, inviting netizens to comment (Chen & Yu, 2019). In examples 15) 16) and 17), the brand combined recent hot topics on the Internet to publish topics such as filling in the blanks, discussing, sharing, etc., to trigger interactive comments from netizens. Furthermore, brands integrate Internet memes into the reply content. The examples (13) and (14) support the idea. However, brands also care about the content published by netizens about them and leave messages in the comment section regularly. Activities like lottery are used to encourage netizens to like, forward, and message, expanding the reach of marketing.

4.1.4 Interest

Meme marketing not only helps increase product sales but also provides emotional value to consumers and creates traffic. Meme marketing creates benefits for brands, consumers, and communicators. Interviewees Erin, Gunyins, and Jojo gave their opinions.

18) *When you receive a “like”, you will feel happy inside, have a sense of satisfaction, and also gain emotional value. (from Erin)*

19) *First of all, brings financial benefits to the brand, but also more trust in the brand. For example, BEE & FLOWER makes me feel that it is a very economical brand and will be more recognized by it. (from Erin)*

20) *For related products, increased sales. (from Gunyins)*

21) *More products are sold because more people are paying attention and there is more publicity. (from Jojo)*

22) *Audiences who post relevant content will gain traffic and become Internet celebrities. (from Erin)*

With the help of meme marketing, brands gain a significant amount of brand exposure online, thereby boosting sales in the short term. Internet memes are narrative artifacts, which convey relatable emotional experiences (Pires et al., 2023). Through meme marketing, brands can also effectively cater to the emotional needs of consumers (Liu, 2022). Brands employ humorous language in marketing content creation, which closely aligns with the preferences of younger demographics (Xu, 2023). While brands do not frequently comment on netizens, the brands' responses can make those who are commented on feel satisfied and affirmed. Some brands utilize Internet memes to cultivate a positive brand image and foster consumer trust. By incorporating existing memes into their marketing strategies, brands drive traffic and increase their visibility.

4.2 Analysis of Application Effect of Meme Marketing Strategies

In this section, the questionnaire results are summarized from three perspectives: the outreach effect of meme marketing, the effectiveness of meme marketing strategies on brand image building, and their promotional effect on consumers' purchase intention.

4.2.1 Actual Reach Effect of Meme Marketing on Consumers

First, the actual influence of meme marketing is evaluated by surveying participants' exposure to it (see Table 3). “Contact” signifies that the brands' meme marketing has effectively reached consumers, “Not sure” implies that consumers are uncertain about the effect of meme marketing, and “No Contact” indicates that the brands' meme marketing has not succeeded in reaching the target audience.

Table 3. The reach of meme marketing to consumers

| Degree | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------|-----------|------------|
| Contact | 95 | 59.01 |
| Not sure | 54 | 33.54 |
| No contact | 12 | 7.45 |
| Total | 161 | 100.00 |

According to the influence scope table of meme marketing (Table 3), 59.01% of participants indicated contact, implying that the brand successfully reached a significant proportion of consumers. Meme marketing has gained considerable popularity on the Chinese Internet, successfully capturing the attention of a wide audience (Sun & Tao, 2021). However, some participants remain uninformed about meme marketing, indicating a lack of familiarity with its presence in their daily online activities. Only a small fraction of respondents reported having no exposure to meme marketing, demonstrating that while it has become relatively commonplace, there are still opportunities for brands to refine and optimize the effectiveness of their meme marketing strategies (Shen et al., 2023).

4.2.2 Effectiveness of Meme Marketing Strategies on Brand Image Building

In this section, consumers' willingness to learn about brands and perceptions of brand meme marketing strategies are used to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies on brand image building. Table 4 reveals that after exposure to the brands' meme marketing, consumers' willingness to know about brands did not notably increase. A significant majority

of the respondents, accounting for 74.53 percent, expressed relatively low interest in learning about the brand. This indicates that, despite a baseline level of interest among most respondents, the quality and frequency of marketing campaigns might hinder their motivation to explore the brand further. A portion of respondents exhibited no interest in the brand, either due to a lack of enthusiasm for brands or related products, or a disinterest in meme marketing. Nonetheless, a minority of participants did express interest in learning about the brands. Although the percentage is modest, it signifies the positive impact that meme marketing can have on brand awareness.

Table 4. Influence of meme marketing on consumers' willingness to learn about brands

| Willingness | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------|-----------|------------|
| No interest | 23 | 14.29 |
| Not always | 120 | 74.53 |
| Will | 18 | 11.18 |
| Total | 161 | 100.00 |

Consumers' perceptions of the implementation of meme marketing strategies are further examined. As indicated in Table 5, the majority of respondents perceived the brand's meme marketing strategies as positive, with a smaller proportion holding negative views and an even smaller number expressing a neutral attitude. The questionnaire also investigated the specific perceptions, which were categorized as positive, neutral, and negative. Among the positive views, several categories emerged, including aligning with Internet trends in the current digital age, enhancing consumer interaction and identification with brands, and being creative and humorous.

Table 5. Frequency statistics of consumers' perceptions of brands' meme marketing strategies

| Attitude | Perceptions | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------|--|-----------|------------|
| Positive | They ally with Internet trends. | 104 | 61.55 |
| | They are humorous with creativity and appeal. | 111 | |
| | They enhance consumers' interaction with the brand. | 102 | |
| Neutral | They enhance consumers' identification with the brand. | 40 | 12.58 |
| | They raise concerns about product quality. | 73 | |
| Negative | They are liable to form a stereotypical brand image. | 54 | 25.86 |
| | They bore or annoy consumers with overused memes. | 71 | |
| | They cause doubts about authenticity or credibility. | 25 | |
| Total | | 580 | 100.00 |

The survey also reflected that the majority of participants selected the top three positive perspectives, with 24.84 percent believing that meme marketing helps enhance brand identity (Teng et al., 2022). The main concern among neutral respondents was the quality of the product, with some consumers stating that they were more concerned about the product itself than the marketing tool. Although Internet memes are topical and highly relatable and receive a positive reception from the target audience (Malodia et al., 2022), it is also possible that this segment of the population was unfamiliar with the Internet memes used by the brand. Negative views were categorized as being prone to stereotyping, aesthetically fatiguing, and arousing suspicion of dishonesty and incredibility, which may be attributed to the adoption of stereotypical, overused, and frivolous Internet memes in marketing.

4.2.3 Promotional Effect of Meme Marketing on Consumers' Purchase Intention

This part mainly focuses on the analysis of the promotional effect on consumers' consumption will of those who acknowledged that they were reached by brands' meme marketing. The estimation of the influence degree is arranged in five levels as follows.

Table 6. The influence degree of meme marketing on promoting consumers to purchase

| Degree | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| Not at all | 3 | 1.86 |
| Most likely not | 29 | 18.01 |
| Not sure | 92 | 57.14 |
| Very likely | 36 | 22.36 |
| Definitely | 1 | 0.62 |
| Total | 161 | 100.00 |

Table 6 indicates that the majority of respondents were unsure whether they would be willing to purchase the products after receiving meme marketing, followed by those who were very likely to purchase, those who were most likely not to purchase, and fewer who chose not to purchase at all or to definitely purchase. This suggests that brands' marketing campaigns have had some impact on consumers' purchasing decisions. And it is found that many consumers exhibit a positive attitude towards meme marketing. Meme marketing does not directly motivate consumers to purchase, because most consumers still need more referable information and there exist other factors that influence their purchasing decisions (Xu, 2023). Despite the fact that the group with uncertainty comprises the majority, meme marketing has managed to capture their attention. Therefore, this group of consumers with appealing transformable consumption

potential are those whom brands could strive to win over. So brands need to further adapt and optimize their marketing strategies to enhance their appeal and trustworthiness among potential consumers (Teng et al., 2022).

5. Discussion

This part focuses on the discussion of research questions: 1) current meme marketing strategies of domestic brands; 2) the application effect of these meme marketing strategies of domestic brands; and 3) the optimization suggestions for domestic brands to further tap into the benefits of meme marketing in the long term.

5.1 Domestic Brand Meme Marketing Strategies

When domestic brands carry out meme marketing, their strategies demonstrate considerations of various aspects such as individuality, interest, interaction, and interest. Through the above analysis of the results of the interview and questionnaire, the following representative meme marketing strategies are summarized.

On the basis of brand attributes, cultural characteristics, consumer group positioning, and other brand characteristics (Wu, 2017), brands originally design a brand's virtual IP image and use this virtual IP image as the main body for interesting content creation, attracting netizens to participate in dissemination and secondary creation, so that the brand's virtual IP image and related content form the brand's original meme. At the same time, feelings, images, and experiences from these touchpoints form a set of associations with the brand in consumer memory (Keller, 2009). This makes the brand image more vivid and three-dimensional, thus enhancing brand recognition, and at the same time, the convenience of interaction and creation it brings effectively consolidates consumer stickiness.

Brands associate marketing content with popular topics to gain short-term and extensive exposure and incorporate popular cultural elements such as games, movies, and music into meme marketing content, thus attracting potential consumers from different IP fan groups, then grasping the cultural identity of fans and establishing their consumer cultural identity through IP value realization to achieve commercial goals (Ding & Teng, 2019). The strategy transforms IP fans' cultural identification into consumption intentions to achieve marketing goals.

Brands entrust third parties such as We Media and celebrity endorsers as the main body of PGC (Professional Generated Content) to carry out distinctive meme marketing on social platforms and video websites. PGC satisfies the content-first marketing need in the new media era, as Zhao (2020) concludes that PGC creators can not only provide the audience with higher quality content and audio-visual experience that fan the audience but also vertically position towards specific fields and segmented audiences. Brands leverage the influence of third parties to establish original disseminators which stimulate netizens to participate in re-creation and communication.

Despite the traditional BGC-based marketing method, domestic brand meme marketing reflects the collaborative creation of marketing content by both the brand and consumers, with the engagement and initiative of consumers rising. In the operation of official accounts on social media, brands interact with consumers using memes, officially recognize or incorporate consumer-created marketing content, and implement second-creation incentive plans to actively attract consumers' participation in the value co-creation of brands, which not only promotes the learning, knowledge sharing, and information processing capabilities of brands, but also allow consumers to enjoy personalized experiences, stimulate their sense of ownership, and increase the likelihood of consumers' purchasing products or services "created" together with the brands (Wang et al., 2023).

5.2 The Application Effect of Meme Marketing

The survey results indicate that most consumers have been reached by brands' meme marketing efforts, albeit with a notable minority remaining untouched. Social media serves as the primary channel for exposure to this marketing approach, highlighting its effectiveness. Nevertheless, for a subset of consumers, meme marketing remains a relatively novel tactic (He, 2022). Despite being exposed to brand meme marketing, a significant portion of consumers lack the intention to know more about the brand, adopting a cautious approach towards purchasing its products. A thorough analysis of consumer sentiment towards meme marketing reveals that, while positive reviews dominate, negative feedback cannot be discounted.

According to the perception theory, the characteristics of an item perceived by a consumer at the time of purchase play a decisive role in consumer choice. Chi (2011) suggests that brand activities on social networks must be user-centered as well as message-centered, in other words, brands should get information about their products and services across to consumers while simply gratifying consumers' needs. At present, the meme marketing content of brands mostly revolves around brand promotion, resulting in consumers' brand cognition being limited to Internet memes and rarely encompassing product content (Xu, 2023). In the context of meme marketing, consumers tend to overlook packaging, information, and other product specifics, leading to a decrease in purchase intention compared to when they are informed of the product's characteristics. Additionally, consumer decisions are shaped by interest factors, as consumers often select products or services aligned with their interests. While meme marketing captivates consumers' attention

toward a brand, if the brand's product does not provide the optimal value proposition after cost-benefit analysis, it fails to spark a buying desire.

Brands leverage Internet memes to cultivate a sense of belonging among individual users, thereby enhancing brand identity (He, 2022). Psychological engagement is important because consumers are participants (Schmitt, 2011). Brands are adopting the online culture embodied in Internet memes, effectively blurring the line between brands and consumers. Nonetheless, meme marketing entails certain risks. According to Lin (2022), some Internet memes originating from niche communities have proliferated into the mainstream and subsequently undergone vulgarization. Not only did they forfeit their original uniqueness, but they also introduced aesthetic imperfections and even sparked consumer disgust (Benaim, 2018). Additionally, over-marketed brand Internet memes often impose a sense of advertising pressure on consumers. Consequently, consumers experience negative emotions such as disgust, resistance, and, in some cases, revolt.

5.3 Implications

Brands should always cater to market trends but grasp the balance point of entertainment as well. Emphasizing the importance of personalized consumer needs, brands can conduct targeted audience analysis to better understand consumer behavior and preferences, and track and explore potential consumption hotspots in real time (Li, 2020). Flexible adjustment in the usage and proportion of memes according to different target audiences and marketing purposes contributes to precise and powerful marketing. As a good brand image is not only an important goal pursued by brands in production and operation but also a powerful weapon for them to carry out market competition (Feng, 2015), brands should remember to play with memes moderately and appropriately to prevent consumer annoyance or moral even legal disputes. It is necessary to regularly evaluate consumer feedback and adapt meme marketing strategies promptly.

Great importance should be attached to innovation, so brands are recommended to create original brand memes that match the brand image and indicate selling points of the brand's products or services as well. It forms a unique symbol of a brand and prompts consumer resonance. Taking advantage of brand association, which refers to the natural thinking of other relevant information about a brand when consumers come into visual and auditory contact with information about the brand (Xu, 2021), effectively stimulates consumer purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. To emphasize, ingenious and innovative re-creation of hot Internet memes instead of drifting with current trends is noteworthy for expanding brand communication and maintaining the heat brought by meme marketing. Moreover, brands can integrate humorous memes in multiple forms such as marketing text, image, audio, and video, and carry out various innovative interaction activities like voting, lottery, Q&A, and relay.

Brands should prioritize communication with consumers through social media. Inferred from the interview results, consumers show a slight desire to interact except for the circumstances when marketing content resonates profoundly with their interests. Representing an increasingly important way for brands to communicate with audiences, social media includes online channels for sharing and participating in a variety of activities (Murdough, 2009). Brands can open major social media accounts and open up interactive paths through multiple channels (Liu, 2022). Utilizing social platforms' interactive features, brands can guide real-time discussions on brand-related topics, select high-quality comments for product distribution, and create brand-specific topics synchronized with prize activities, catering to consumer preferences (Chu & Zhou, 2024).

While seeking economic benefits, brands must balance their interests with those of consumers while enhancing product quality. Interviews indicate that while consumers become aware of brands through meme marketing, there is no apparent trend toward increased brand engagement or purchases. Therefore, brands should align consumer interests with meme marketing, integrating it into promotional activities like discounts and gifts (Guo, 2023). This strategy widens brand influence and boosts sales, highlighting the fact that product quality, aesthetics, and affordability are crucial for long-term success ((Razzaq et al., 2024). Brands should also focus on the quality and price of their products, offering consumers beautiful, high-quality, and affordable options to ensure long-term success with the help of meme marketing.

6. Conclusion

From the 4I theory perspective, this paper examines domestic brands' meme marketing strategies and their actual application effect via interviews and questionnaires. As for Q1, the main strategies include personalizing marketing content with Internet memes, designing virtual IP images, associating with pop culture elements, collaborating with influencers, and embracing UGC for enhanced interaction. Also, brands offer emotional value to consumers in exchange for traffic and traffic monetization. With regard to Q2, however, while Internet memes may initially introduce brands, current meme marketing strategies fail to promote consumers' deeper engagement or consumption willingness. Therefore, brands are suggested to highlight their distinctive characteristics and continually enhance the quality of products and services to consolidate network traffic. To solve Q3, the paper also offers theoretical optimization

suggestions, inspired by successful cases, to better execute meme marketing in the Chinese market.

This paper also has some limitations. Firstly, the diversity of the survey subjects is insufficient and the sample size is relatively small. The respondents to interviews and questionnaires are confined to surrounding college students in college student communities, and the target population of college students itself has objective limitations too. This group generally likes online entertainment, but very few have independent economic sources, which leads to biased survey results about the effect on consumer purchase intention. In addition, this paper explored the application effect of meme marketing but did not further analyze the reasons that led to these results. Future research can conduct an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing the effectiveness of meme marketing applications.

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Wen and Ye were responsible for study design and revising. Both authors were responsible for data collection. Wen and Ye drafted the manuscript and revised it. Both authors read, revised and approved the final manuscript.

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Appendix: Interview Content

【Questions】

Individuality:

1. What personalized notifications have you received for your characteristics or preferences?

What do you think is the personalization of meme marketing?

2. What effect do you think personalized meme marketing brings to brand communication?

How do you feel this personalized interaction has affected your relationship with the brand?

How do you think this personalized push will affect your purchase decision?

What negative effects do you think this personalized marketing will have?

3. What are your suggestions for domestic brands' personalized marketing based on memes?

Improvement:

How do you think brands should balance personalization and popularization?

How do you think brands should maintain personalization while avoiding information overload and consumer aversion caused by over-personalization?

How do you think brands should build and maintain personalized relationships with consumers to enhance brand loyalty?

Innovation:

How do you think brands can leverage technologies such as data and artificial intelligence to achieve more refined personalized marketing?

Interesting:

1. What interesting brand meme marketing content have you seen on social media or other channels?

What do you think makes meme marketing fun?

2. What effect do you think fun meme marketing brings to brand communication?

How do you think this form of marketing affects your mood and emotions?

How do you feel these elements contribute to your emotional connection with the brand?

What negative effects do you think this kind of fun marketing will have?

3. What are your suggestions for domestic brands' fun marketing based on memes?

How do you think brands should make meme marketing both interesting and valuable?

For brands, how to create more interesting elements in brand meme marketing?

Interaction:

1. What interactions (comments, likes, or shares) have you had on social media or other channels related to brand meme marketing?

What do you think are the interactive aspects of meme marketing?

2. What effect do you think interactive meme marketing brings to brand communication?

How do you think the interactive elements of meme marketing affect your engagement and loyalty?

How do you feel this interaction has affected your relationship with the brand?

What negative effects do you think this kind of interactive marketing will have?

3. What are your suggestions for domestic brands' interactive marketing based on memes?

What strategies do you expect brands to adopt in terms of engagement to better engage and connect with consumers?

What brand memes do you think are more likely to resonate and engage users?

In the interactive process of brand meme marketing, what kind of response or interaction do you expect from the brand?

What qualities or attitudes do you think brands should display in their interactions?

Interest:

1. What benefits do you think meme marketing brings to the brand and the audience?

2. What effect do you think meme marketing has brought to brand communication under the consideration of two-way interests?

What negative effects do you think this kind of profit-oriented marketing will have?

3. What are your expectations for the future development of interests in the brand meme marketing strategy?

What strategies do you want the brand to adopt in communication to better bring you practical benefits and shopping experience?

What advice do you have for domestic brands on profit-based meme-based marketing?