

# The Successes & Failures of Meme Marketing: Investigating Cultural Literacy & Authentic Participation



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Figure 1: *Life of a Meme* By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram.

# An Introduction to Meme Marketing

## *Defining Meme Marketing*

- Memes function as cultural signals, not just humor
- Meme marketing uses internet comedy to increase online engagement for businesses through organic reach
- Audiences shape meaning and determine effectiveness
- Marketing is now centered on audience participation

## *The Literacy & Authenticity Gaps*

- Literacy Gap: brand's ability to understand and apply internet culture accurately
- Authenticity Gap: brand's ability to engage in internet comedy as an active participant
- Failure widens these gaps, making brands out to be opportunistic, culturally ignorant, and imitative
- Closing both gaps enables a shared psychological ownership of online humor by both brand and audience

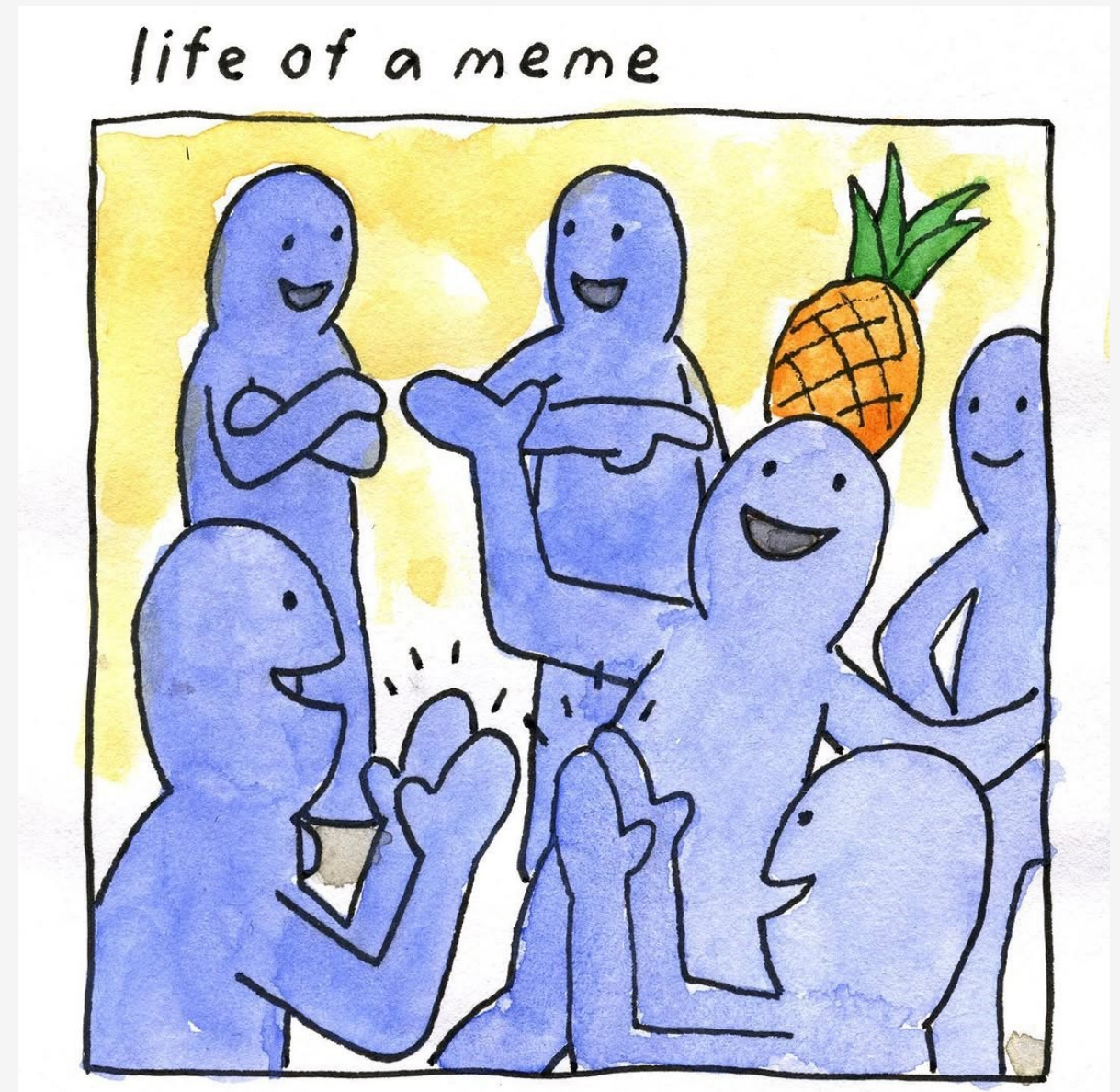


Figure 2: Life of a Meme, pt. 1 of 4 By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram.

# Successful Meme Marketing

## *The Benefits of Meme Marketing*

- High exposure and brand recall
- Engagement-driven conversion
- Cost efficiency and ROI
- Emotional connection and brand humanization
- Two-way communication and audience insight

## *Shared Psychological Ownership*

- Success is collaboration between brand and audience
- Requires cultural literacy and authentic participation
- Instead of being an advertiser, the brand is an active participant in online culture
- Strengthens community with shared humor
- Reliant on brands losing ego and validating their audience

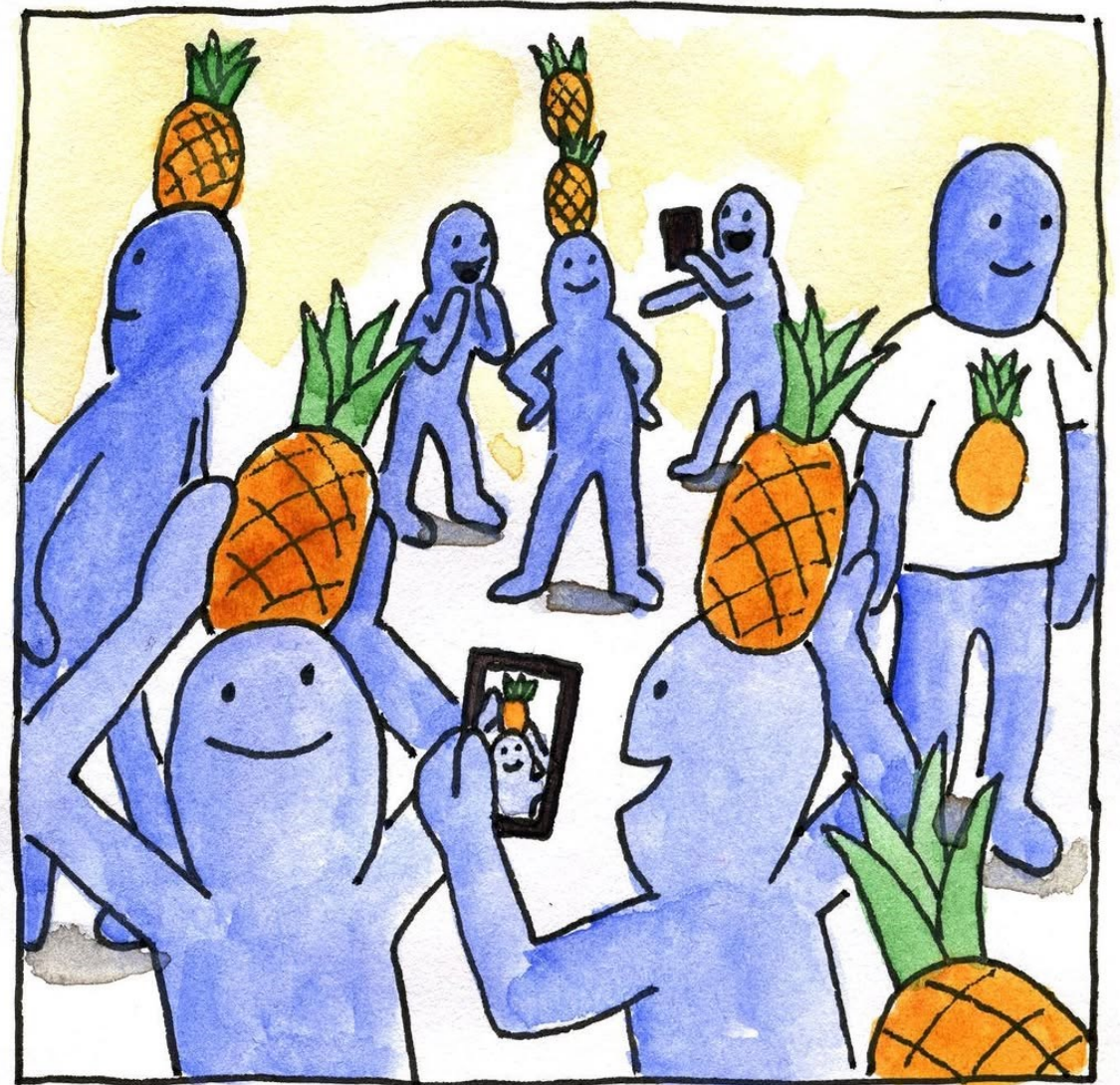


Figure 3: *Life of a Meme, pt. 2 of 4* By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram.

# Case Study 1: Wendy's – '#NationalRoastDay' (2018)



Figure 4: Wendy's Roasting the Mr. Peanut Brand on #NationalRoastDay 2019 By @Wendys, 2019, X.

## Overview

- 24 hour campaign where Wendy's roasted users and brands
- Provided real-time responses across thousands of interactions

## Audience Reaction

- High engagement with users sharing Wendy's tweets
- Significant growth in engagement and followers

## Wendy's Response

- Maintained humorous brand voice after campaign to reinforce identity
- #NationalRoastDay became a yearly event

## Outcome

- Audience became active participants in brand content
- Each shared interaction compounded brand visibility and organic reach

# Unintentional Successful Meme Marketing

## *Differences from Intentional Successful Meme Marketing*

- Non-meme brand content is repurposed by online audience into memes
- Success still depends on cultural literacy and authentic participation
- Brands lose control to audience
- Success requires brands supporting the memes
- Validating the audience builds trust



mee pretending i don't see the grimace shake trendd



Figure 5: McDonald's Response to 'Grimace Shake' Trend By @McDonalds, 2023, X.

# Case Study 2: McDonald's – 'Grimace Shake' (2023)



Figure 6: 'Grimace Shake' Trend Example By @InvertOG, 2023, YouTube.

## Overview

- McDonald's launched a limited-time promotional meal centered around their mascot Grimace
- Featured a purple berry-flavored milkshake

## Audience Reaction

- Online users created content around drinking the milkshake
- Drove sales over 10% in the U.S. and nearly 12% globally

## McDonald's Response

- Did not intervene but playfully acknowledged the trend
- Allowed trend to evolve organically

## Outcome

- The campaign transformed into collaborative storytelling
- Audience participation amplifies reach of branded content

# Failed Meme Marketing

## *The Risks of Meme Marketing*

- High volatility
- Compressed lifecycle
- Perceived as cringe
- Misunderstood context
- Persistent digital memory

## *Incongruity Theory*

- Misalignment between cultural context and brand content
- Cultural illiteracy and insufficient research
- Imitation and exploitation rather than authentic participation
- Can trivialize serious movements
- Negative cases often achieve greater virality than positive campaigns

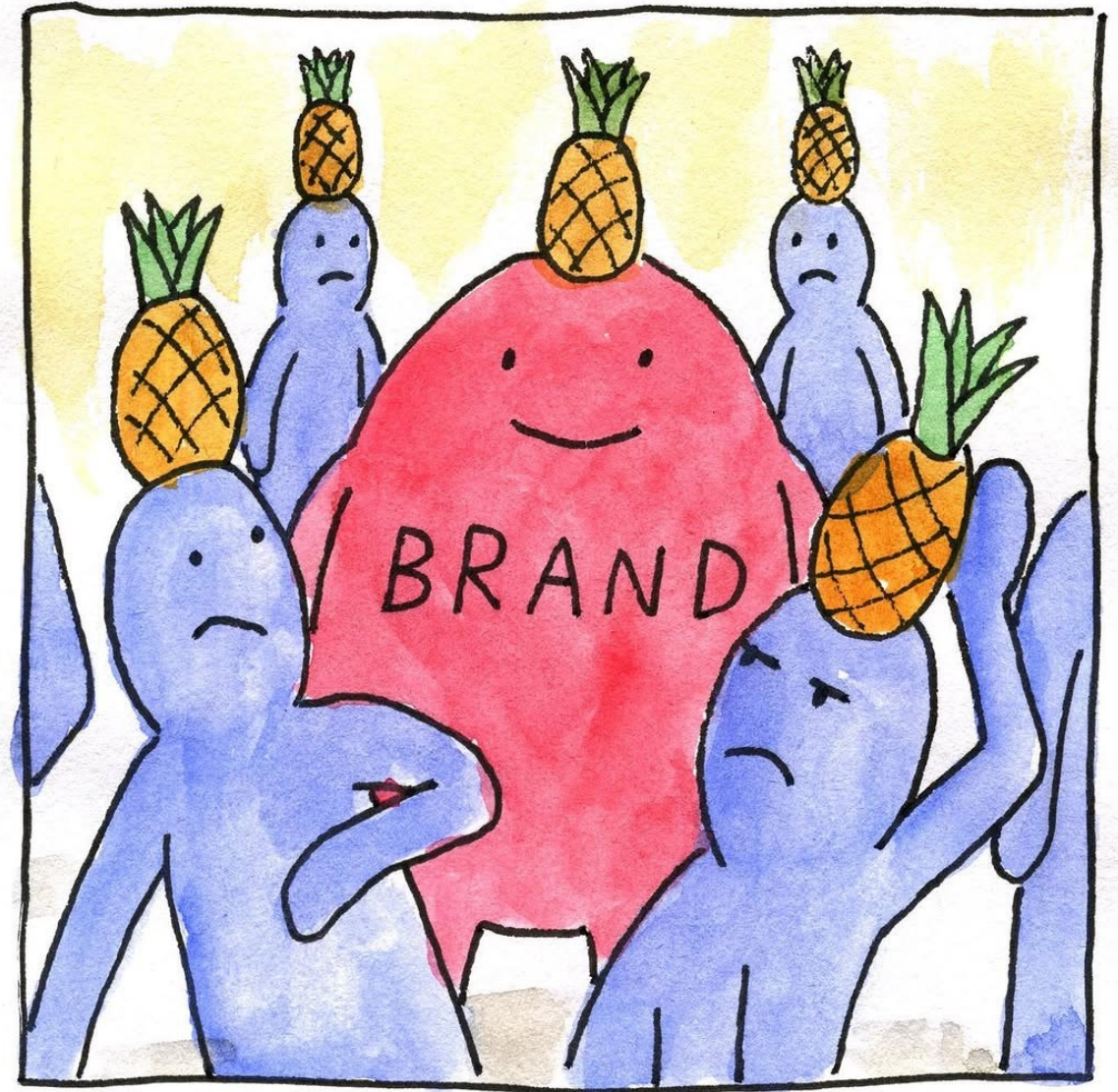


Figure 7: Life of a Meme, pt. 3 of 4 By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram



**Trigger Warning**

Domestic Violence

Figure 1: Life of a Meme By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram.

# Case Study 3: DiGiorno – ‘#WhyIStayed’ (2014)

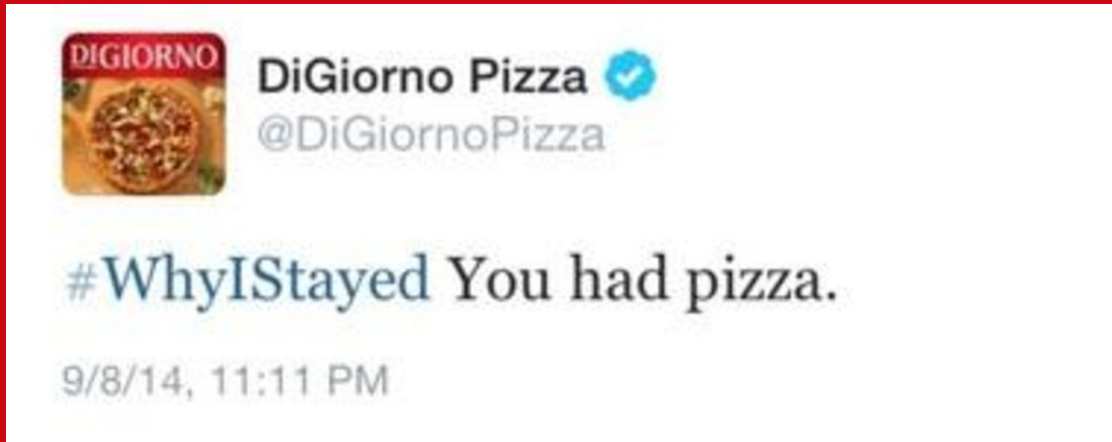


Figure 8: DiGiorno's '#WhyIStayed' Tweet By @DiGiornoPizza, 2014, X.

## Overview

- Following NFL player Ray Rice's domestic violence, #WhyIStayed emerged to give a voice to survivors
- DiGiorno used the hashtag inappropriately, misinterpreting its context

## Audience Reaction

- Immediate backlash
- DiGiorno was accused of insensitivity and exploiting trauma

## DiGiorno's Response

- Quickly deleted the tweet
- Issued individualized apologies to online users, citing lack of research

## Outcome

- DiGiorno's image was damaged due to appropriating a serious issue
- Reinforces need for real-time research and context validation

# Unintentional Failed Meme Marketing

## *Differences from Intentional Failed Meme Marketing*

- Brand personas appear fabricated
- Failure to close literacy and authenticity gaps, even without intent
- Audience reframes narrative through parody or hate memes
- Memes are used for public criticism
- Brand's response depends on acknowledging mistake without being defensive



Figure 9: Kendall Jenner Handing a Police Officer a Pepsi By @MarketingTheRainbow, 2020, YouTube.

# Case Study 4: Pepsi – ‘Live for Now’ (2017)



**Be A King** ✓  
@BerniceKing



If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi.



12:15 PM · Apr 5, 2017

## Overview

- Pepsi released a commercial depicting a protest resolving peacefully by Kendall Jenner offering a police officer a soda
- Tried to align brand with themes of unity and activism

## Audience Reaction

- Immediate backlash due to trivialization and appropriation of Black Lives Matter protests
- Memes reframed the ad as tone-deaf and culturally illiterate

## Pepsi's Response

- Pulled the commercial within 24 hours
- Issued a public apology

## Outcome

- Significant reputational damage
- Reinforces risks of misaligned messaging with cultural context

Figure 10: Bernice King's Response to Pepsi's 'Live for Now' Commercial By @BerniceKing, 2017, X.

# A Conclusion to Meme Marketing

## *Revisiting the Literacy & Authenticity Gaps*

- Successful meme marketing depends on brands being literate in online cultural and authentically participating in that culture
- Failure occurs when brands misinterpret context and imitate it
- Intentional campaigns require research and alignment
- Unintentional cases require adaptability and audience validation
- Failures dehumanize brands and audience loses trust

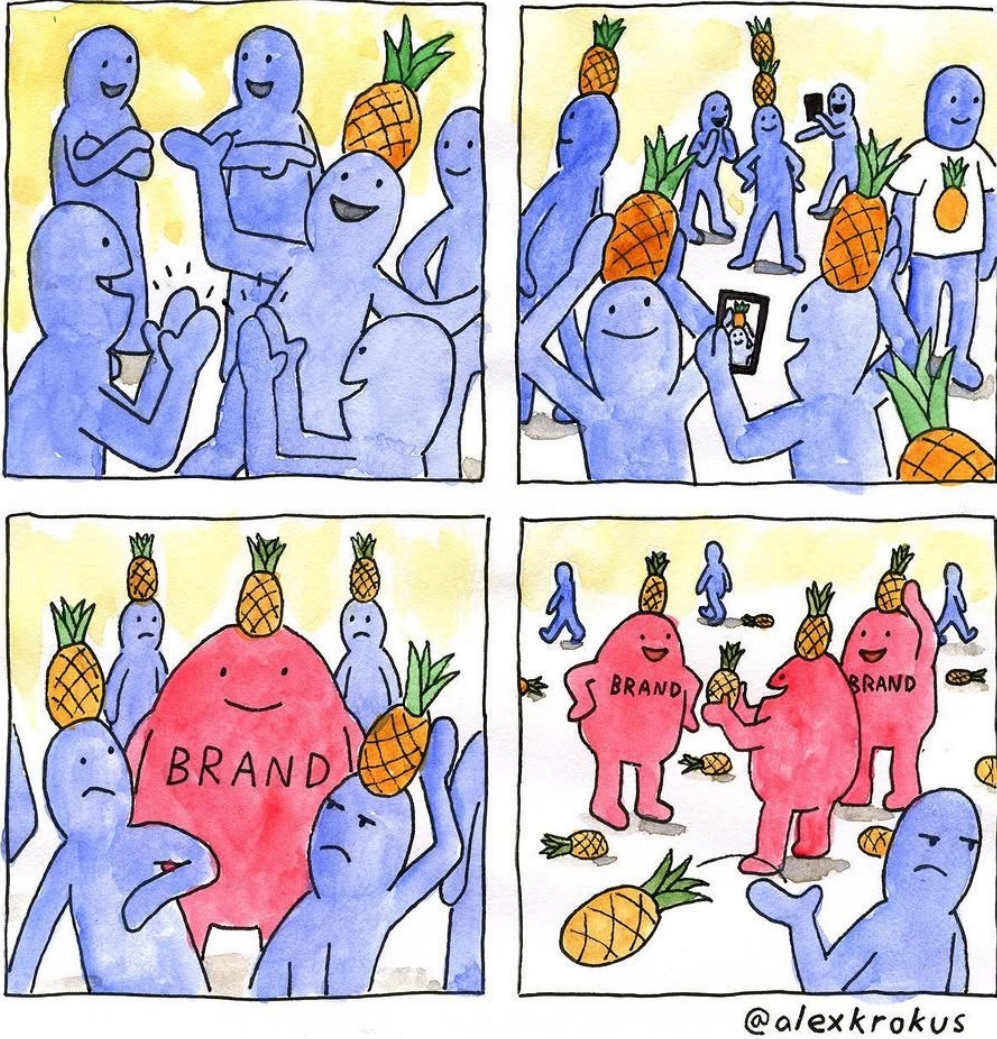
## *Final Takeaways*

- Memes are cultural artifacts
- Meme marketing can increase visibility, engagement, and ROI
- Audience determines effectiveness
- Meme marketing risks reputational damage and long-term ridicule
- Success is dependent on authentic participation grounded in cultural literacy



Figure 11: *Life of a Meme, pt. 4 of 4* By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram

life of a meme



Thank You!

Questions?

Figure 1: Life of a Meme By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram

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