

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

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Section 1 – An Introduction to Meme Marketing

Figure 1

*Life of a Meme, pt. 1 of 4**life of a meme*

Note. From “eh it was fun while it lasted • #comic #comics #life #of #a #meme #or #trend

#pineapple # 🍍 #brand #corporation # 😊.” By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram.

(https://www.instagram.com/p/CvXW_TbuGVO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=NTc4

MTIwNjQ2YQ==)

1.1. Memes as Communication

Memes are no longer niche internet artifacts. What once started as a fun way to interact with friends and strangers online is now a marketing opportunity for businesses, allowing brand perception to be shaped in real-time through two-way communication channels (Kim & Kim, 2025). Consumers of memes do not just treat memes as jokes anymore, but as signifiers of cultural trends, events, and knowledge (Malodia, Dhir, Bilgihan, Sinha, & Tikoo, 2022). Brands then utilize memes to signify their literacy and authenticity in modern culture, representing a fundamental switch from the previous top-down broadcast model of marketing to a co-creative online ecosystem. Gone are the days of ‘communicator-centered persuasion,’ and in its place is now ‘audience-centered participation.’

1.2. Defining Meme Marketing

Meme marketing is then a strategic communication tool that utilizes images, videos, templates, and culturally relevant humor to spread brand information (Razzaq, Shao, & Quach, 2024). Its entire purpose is to capitalize on the media and humor spread by online users, designed specifically for rapid circulation, imitation, and reinterpretation across digital platforms. By integrating a brand’s identity into existing or original meme formats, the brand is inherently made to be a participant in modern culture, for better or worse. Meme marketing then operates within a system dictated by users rather than brands, where audiences expect organizations to demonstrate cultural literacy and genuine authenticity rather than blatantly impose corporate messaging. In an increasingly online world, organic reach through meme marketing is a vital alternative to traditional marketing, as 30% of internet users currently use ad blockers (Singh & Dhingra, 2024).

1.3. Theoretical Framework

1.3.1. Gaps Between Producer & Consumer

The following two theories are my own, which I have coined ‘The Literacy Gap’ and ‘The Authenticity Gap.’ Both gaps between the brand and the viewer must be closed in order for brands to successfully achieve meme marketing. If the gaps are widened, then the brand and its meme fall victim to them, thus harming the organization’s image and tarnishing their legacy both on and offline.

1.3.1.1. The Literacy Gap

‘The Literacy Gap’ describes the divide that brands must overcome based on the cultural context of internet comedy. Literacy is needed for brands to post memes that are socially relevant, relatable, and humorous to their audience. Successful meme marketing closes this gap, employing informed cultural literacy through research. Failed meme marketing widens this gap, displaying the brand’s ignorance of the culture they attempt to exploit.

1.3.1.2. The Authenticity Gap

‘The Authenticity Gap’ is then a byproduct of ‘The Literacy Gap,’ describing the divide that brands must overcome based on participating in the aforementioned cultural context of internet comedy. Authenticity is needed for brands to post memes that display collaboration with their audience, talking ‘with’ them as opposed to talking ‘at’ them. Successful meme marketing closes this gap, demonstrating genuine participation in internet culture. Failed meme marketing widens this gap, portraying brands’ ventures into meme marketing as opportunistic imitation of online comedy.

1.3.2. The Successful Meme Marketing Theory: Shared Psychological Ownership

‘Shared psychological ownership’ is the idea that a message is jointly owned by a brand and its online audience (Wang, Li, & Su, 2025). This is the core reasoning as to why successful meme marketing cases are effective, as the relationship between the brand and its audience is strengthened over shared humor. To achieve ‘shared psychological ownership,’ cultural literacy and genuine participation must be present in meme marketing.

1.3.3. The Failed Meme Marketing Theory: Incongruity Theory

On the other hand, ‘incongruity theory’ is the misalignment between memes, their intention, and their place in culture (Sewak, Lee, & Haderlie, 2025). This inconsistency is exemplified through a lack of cultural literacy and the inauthentic imitation of internet humor by brands. Humor that takes place in inappropriate settings can make the brand seem tone-deaf to a larger movement and revealing their intention to capitalize on comedy through marketing.

1.3.4. Foundational Theories

1.3.4.1. Meme Life Cycle

Also previously mentioned, a meme’s life cycle is mostly relegated to one to two weeks, although there are special cases where memes persist well beyond this timeframe. The common life of a meme, however, follows a sort of ‘U’ shape, with the beginning of the timeline labeling the meme as ‘niche’ and the end naming it ‘overused.’ The most effective time for brands to utilize the specific meme or trend would then be directly in the middle, while public recognition and humor are at their all-time high (Ward, 2025).

1.3.4.2. Meme-Jacking

‘Meme-jacking’ refers to the process where individuals or businesses hijack popular memes, imitating or remixing them for personal enjoyment or promotional campaigns (Sewak, Lee, & Haderlie, 2025).

1.3.4.3. Original Memes

‘Original memes’ are another type of meme, but are uniquely created. They are trends that are started by a singular person or brand to spread humor or marketing elements (Razzaq, Shao, & Quach, 2024).

1.3.5. Case Study Theories

1.3.5.1. Brand Teasing

‘Brand teasing’ is the technique in meme marketing where corporations’ online personas build relationships with their consumers by making fun of them. This playful teasing increases engagement more than normal humor due to being seen as a uniquely human attribute, making the brand seem less corporate and in turn more affable (Oba, Howe, & Fitzsimons, 2025).

1.3.5.2. Anthropomorphism

The larger umbrella under which ‘brand teasing’ resides is ‘anthropomorphism,’ which is the attribution of human traits to something that is not human. Brands utilize an anthropomorphic style to cause their consumers to assign the entity a human-like mind, connecting with their audience on a human level instead of a capitalistic one (Oba, Howe, & Fitzsimons, 2025).

1.3.5.3. Collaborative Co-Creation

Following the idea of ‘shared psychological ownership,’ ‘collaborative co-creation’ refers to brands officially recognizing or incorporating consumer-created content into marketing materials or overall brand elements (Wen & Ye, 2024). This stimulates a ‘shared psychological ownership,’ cultivating a culture of mutual respect and nurturing two-way communication channels like social media and memes.

1.3.5.4. Narrative Transportation

‘Narrative transportation’ is the psychological idea of the audience’s immersion in a story. If the narrative is effective, then viewers are engulfed in it, whether that be intellectually, emotionally, or (in the case of meme marketing) comedically. ‘Narrative transportation’ is a key mechanism in driving meme marketing success, psychologically drawing the audience into a wholly unique and created world that brands have either created or repurposed (Razzaq, Shao, & Quach, 2023).

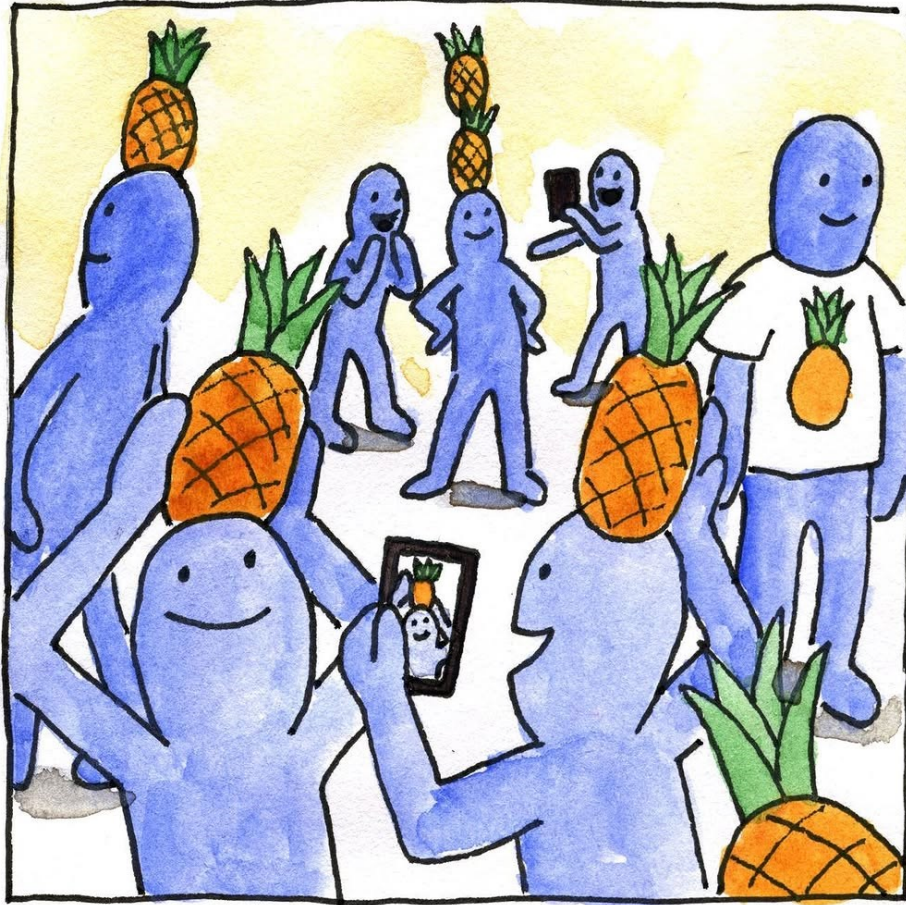
1.4. Thesis Statement

By integrating these theories into meme marketing in its planning, production, and distribution stages, brands can bridge the literacy and authenticity gap. Success requires aligning creativity with strategy, respecting the internet comedy culture in which meme marketing will live online. While authenticity allows the brand’s memes to be seen by its audience as genuine participation instead of forced imitation, literacy demonstrates effective knowledge by the brand of the greater modern online landscape.

These two elements make up a participatory culture, which is the structural environment where meme marketing operates. In this environment, audiences act as collaborators instead of passive consumers. Likewise, brands validate their online viewers through two-way communication channels like social media, avoiding the traditional marketing model of top-down broadcasting. As a result, the only way that meme marketing succeeds is through informed participation grounded in cultural literacy.

Section 2 – Successful Meme Marketing

Figure 2

Life of a Meme, pt. 2 of 4

Note. From “eh it was fun while it lasted • #comic #comics #life #of #a #meme #or #trend

#pineapple #🍍 #brand #corporation #😞.” By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram.

(https://www.instagram.com/p/CvXW_TbuGVO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=NTc4

MTIwNjQ2YQ==)

2.1. An Introduction to Successful Meme Marketing

2.1.1. The Benefits of Meme Marketing

With over 90% of social media users occasionally encountering brand memes (Girdhar, 2024), meme marketing significantly increases brand awareness and visibility (Kumar & Pahwa, 2025). Similarly, findings indicate that meme virality positively affects brand recall, which in turn enhances customer retention (Mi, Tran, Vy, Ngan, & Tam, 2025). Audience interaction then acts as a mediator before purchase, with meme marketing being the first step to gain and retain customers. If a viewer is organically gained through meme marketing on social media and interacts with the post, purchase intention is increased approximately 84% as opposed to if they had passively viewed a traditional advertisement (Rathi & Jain, 2023).

Organic online reach also provides lower production costs than traditional campaigns due to utilizing trends, social media algorithms, and thus cultural literacy. Meme marketing in general then provides higher returns on investments than traditional advertising, as memes are relatively cheap to plan, produce, and distribute online. Finally, memes can foster emotional connections between an organization and its audience by the association between brands and humor, humanizing corporations, making them appear more approachable, and encouraging long-term partnerships (Rathi & Jain, 2023). This creates a two-way communication channel between producer and consumer, allowing brands to gain insight into their audience's needs, wants, and purchasing patterns (Shen, Lee, & Lin, 2024).

By creating and sharing memes, brands recognize the importance of their consumers. The audience feels validated in their humor and interests, strengthening connection and loyalty to the brand. This participatory culture encourages consumer creativity and user-generated content, albeit the meme marketing is culturally literate and genuine (Kim & Kim, 2025).

2.1.2. Shared Psychological Ownership

As previously stated, the core theory defining all successful meme marketing examples is ‘shared psychological ownership.’ This idea exemplifies brands acting as co-creators to their audience rather than invaders to a space where they don’t belong (Wang, Li, & Su, 2025). While authenticity through humor outweighs polished traditional marketing, cultural literacy requires research and a lack of ego by the brand. As we will see, this ‘shared psychological ownership’ strengthens the connection between the brand and its consumer.

2.2. Case Study 1: Wendy’s – ‘#NationalRoastDay’ (2018)

2.2.1. Overview

On January 4th, 2018, Wendy’s launched ‘#NationalRoastDay,’ a 24-hour social media event on X inviting users and brands to request comedic “roasts” (Singh & Dhingra, 2024). Throughout the campaign, Wendy’s responded in real time to thousands of requests, often targeting other brands and individuals with playful insults (@vmlyr6406, 2021).

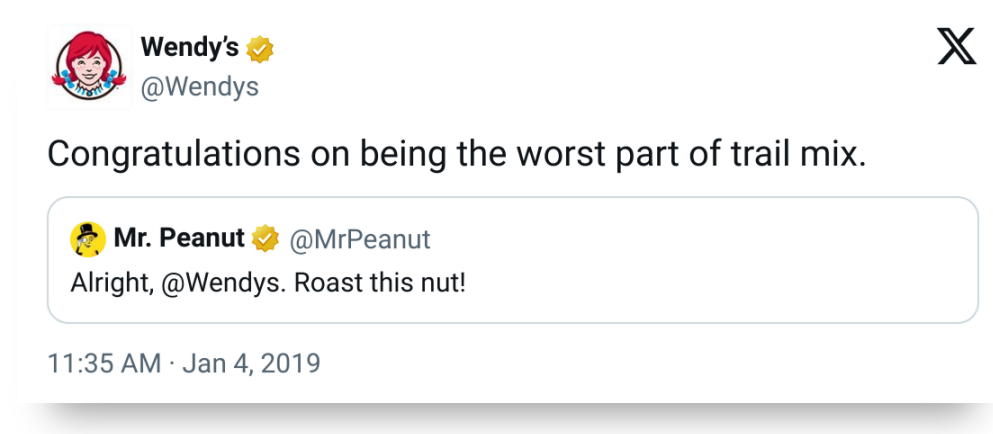
Figure 3

Wendy's Roasting an Individual on #NationalRoastDay 2019



Note. From “This holiday's most returned item. #NationalRoastDay.” By @Wendys, 2019, X.

(<https://x.com/Wendys/status/1081316598479286272?>)

Figure 4***Wendy's Roasting the Mr. Peanut Brand on #NationalRoastDay 2019***

Note. From “Congratulations on being the worst part of trail mix.” By @Wendys, 2019, X.
(<https://x.com/Wendys/status/1081227586620063745>)

2.2.2. Audience Reaction

The campaign generated substantial engagement, with Wendy's gaining more than 350,000 new followers and a 30% engagement increase during the event (Singh & Dhingra, 2024). Online users actively requested roasts and shared responses online, amplifying reach through retweets and screenshots (Oba, Howe, & Fitzsimons, 2025).

2.2.3. Wendy's Response

In response to the widespread acclaim for the event, Wendy's maintained a consistent voice to this new social media identity. The brand engaged both individual users and competing companies, reinforcing its reputation for irreverent humor while sustaining participation throughout the 24-hour campaign. Additionally, January 4th was made to be 'National Roast

Day' for Wendy's, capitalizing on the success of the 2018 event for years to come (@Wendys, 2019).

Figure 5

#NationalRoastDay 2019 Announcement



Note. From “January 4th. You asked, so it’s back. #NationalRoastDay.” By @Wendys, 2019, X.

(<https://x.com/Wendys/status/1080540761106669569?s=20>)

2.2.4. Theoretical Explanations

2.2.4.1. Brand Teasing

By teasing their customers online, the Wendy's brand was able to appear more humanlike and approachable (Oba, Howe, & Fitzsimons, 2025).

2.2.4.2. Collaborative Co-Creation

By inviting participation, the brand validated and welcomed their audience, spreading their creativity through organic reach and shared humor. (Wen & Ye, 2024).

2.2.4.3. Original Meme

Instead of using a preexisting meme format, Wendy's created their own, which was risky, but led to immense success (Razzaq, Shao, & Quach, 2024).

2.2.4.4. Meme Life Cycle

By relegating the National Roast Day event to a single day once a year, Wendy's is able to make their interactions seem more valuable while also not overstaying its welcome and ruining its novelty (Ward, 2025).

2.2.5. Outcome

The '#NationalRoastDay' campaign transformed marketing into a participatory humor performance. Since users voluntarily entered the interaction by requesting roasts, the audience shifted from being mere passive observers of marketing to co-participants in the entertainment.

Public replies created a spectacle where each roast functioned as shareable content, and thus marketing materials for Wendy's.

Following Wendy's example, brands can leverage humor-based engagement when the tone aligns with the overall brand identity and participation is voluntary. By utilizing campaigns that allow audiences to enter the joke, organic reach is amplified and consumer-brand relationships are strengthened.

2.3. Unintentional Successful Meme Marketing

Unintentional meme marketing then follows the same factors of cultural literacy and authenticity to become successful as intentional attempts, but are not explicit marketing campaigns created by brands that utilize memes. Instead, the internet takes over normal non-meme marketing materials and turns them into memes, online trends, and viral humorous content. This 'hijacking' causes the content to either succeed or fail, as the brand loses complete control and the internet takes over the narrative.

While the audience now dictates the perception of the brand and its marketing through memes, the final outcome is dependent on the brand's reaction to becoming a meme. If the brand encourages audience participation in unintentionally successful cases, the gesture is viewed as a blessing on the memes. For a brand to successfully ride the wave of unintentional meme marketing, it must avoid over-correction and forced capitalization on the trend, instead letting the audience lead to further build authentic participation. By being willing to let go in favor of the unintentional memes, cultural literacy is demonstrated and used to garner trust with the audience.

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

2.4.1. Overview

On June 12th, 2023, McDonald's released the 'Grimace Shake' in celebration of one of the brand's original characters' 52nd birthday. The shake was a purple berry-vanilla flavored drink themed around the mascot's purple appearance. It remained a limited-time item for around a month, with the promotion ending around July 9th, 2023 (McDonald's, 2023).

Figure 6

Grimace's Birthday Promotion Announcement



Note. From “YOU’RE INVITED: McDonald’s Celebrates Grimace’s Birthday with Special Meal & Shake.” By McDonald’s, 2023, McDonald’s. (<https://corporate.mcdonalds.com/corpmcd/our-stories/article/celebrate-grimace-birthday-specialmeal-shake.html>)

2.4.2. Audience Reaction

Shortly after the launch of the drink, TikTok users began creating surreal horror-style videos involving trying the drink. The meme consisted of creators drinking it, then cutting to weird situations that happened seemingly because of its consumption. Most examples included the creator passing out and being covered in the purple drink, or even instances where the drink made them ‘evil’ and deranged (@InvertOG, 2023). These memes spread worldwide due to both their and McDonald’s popularity, boosting sales over 10% in the United States and nearly 12% globally for McDonald’s second quarter of 2023 (Hagy, 2023).

Figure 7

‘Grimace Shake’ Trend Example



Note. From “Grimace Shake (TikTok Compilation)” By @InvertOG, 2023, YouTube.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-n89RDOTSk>)

2.4.3. McDonald's Response

In response to the virality of the memes, McDonald's did not suppress their audience. Instead, the brand posed playful Grimace content acknowledging the weird, surreal trend (@McDonalds, 2023).

Figure 8

McDonald's Response to 'Grimace Shake' Trend



Note. From “meee pretending i don't see the grimace shake trendd.” By @McDonalds, 2023, X.

(<https://x.com/McDonalds/status/1673732508503138304?s=20>)

2.4.4. Theoretical Explanations

2.4.4.1. Narrative Transportation

The surreal nature of the videos immersed viewers in the content, leaving more questions than answers. Of course, the drink had not caused the horrifying examples, but the vague information given in each TikTok only pointed the viewer to try the Grimace Shake themselves to see the result (Razzaq, Shao, & Quach, 2023).

2.4.4.2. Meme Life Cycle

Due to the promotion of ‘Grimace’s birthday’ only lasting around a month and the scarcity of the purple drink, the meme increased in virality. This further boosted McDonald’s sales and brand awareness on social media, (Ward, 2025).

2.4.5. Outcome

The ‘Grimace Shake’ and larger ‘Grimace’s 52nd Birthday’ campaign evolved from a regular fast food restaurant promotional campaign into collective storytelling, where users expanded the narrative through absurd reinterpretations. By allowing audiences to reinterpret branded content for their own enjoyment, marketing campaigns’ lifespans and visibility can be astronomically increased. If McDonald’s had condemned the videos and applied restrictive control over their brand, the organic cultural participation would have been suppressed.

2.5. A Conclusion to Successful Meme Marketing

2.5.1. Key Takeaways on Successful Examples

As we have established, the core distinction between successful and failed attempts at meme marketing is the two foundational factors of cultural literacy and authentic participation. Without a clear comprehension of the wider cultural context in which a meme will reside online, the piece of marketing would make little sense to viewers. In some extreme cases that we will examine, the meme may even result in an offensive or cringeworthy failure (Razzaq, Shao, & Quach, 2024). In terms of genuine participation, meme marketing by a brand must not come off as inauthentic or imitative. The meme must be fundamentally funny, relatable, and easy to share. Despite all of these factors being subjective, they must be honest attempts deemed successful by online users (Singh & Dhingra, 2024).

As studies have found that 60% of Gen Z consumers prioritize authenticity and cultural relevance over polished traditional advertising, meme marketing is an incredibly effective tool for businesses (Kumar & Pahwa, 2025). Additionally, 68% of consumers aged 18-34 prefer brands that use humor and align with their cultural values (Singh & Dhingra, 2024), further solidifying the value of meme marketing to generate reach and engagement among the constantly online younger generation (Liu, Huang, Zhu, & Zheng, 2024).

2.5.2. Closing the Literacy & Authenticity Gaps

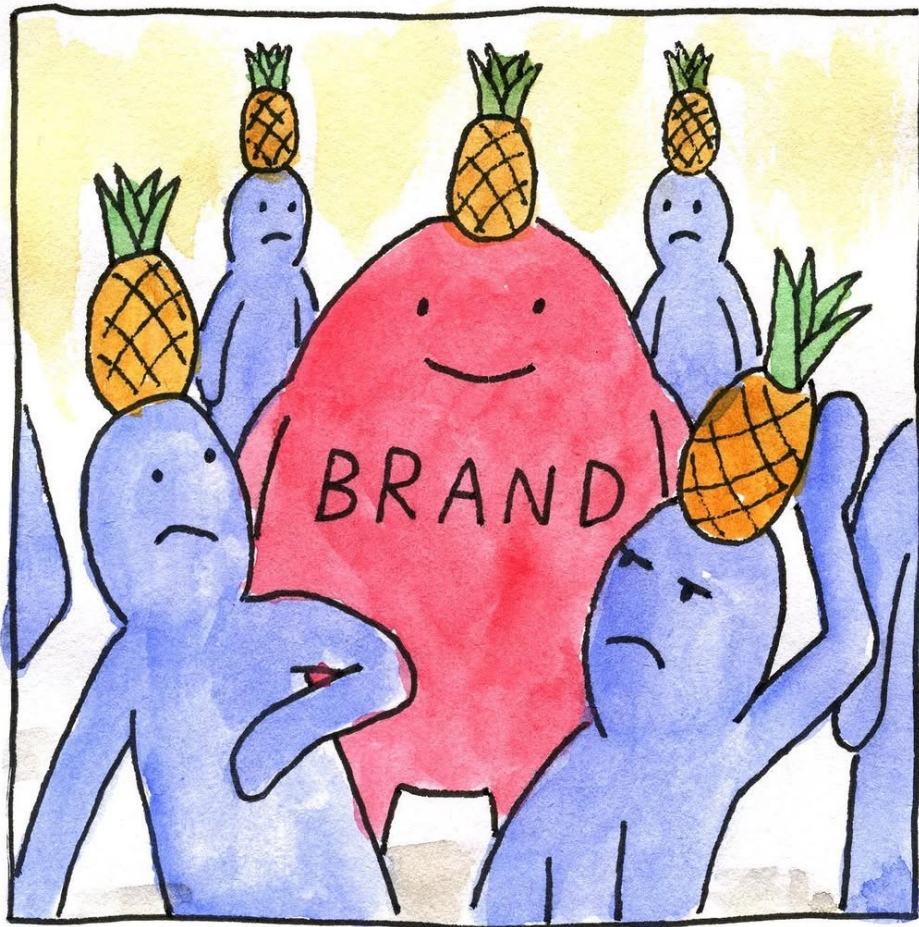
By bridging the literacy and authenticity gaps, both Wendy's and McDonald's were able to succeed at meme marketing. Wendy's fostering of a collaborative and shared ownership of its meme '#NationalRoastDay' exemplified immense cultural literacy through its anthropomorphism and brand teasing. By using an original meme that authentically participated

through common humor, the brand demonstrated genuine involvement in internet culture that was rewarded with high metrics of engagement and reach.

Similarly, McDonald's allowance of its audience to produce their own memes and control the framing of their promotional product 'Grimace Shake' displayed effective cultural literacy. This not only translated to an immense increase in sales with the product and engagement with the company, but also showed sincere engagement with their community, promoting respectable participation even when the outcome was unintentional. Therefore, both brands have succeeded at meme marketing, managing to close the literacy and authenticity gaps in their own nuanced and informed ways.

Section 3 – Failed Meme Marketing

Figure 9

Life of a Meme, pt. 3 of 4

Note. From “eh it was fun while it lasted • #comic #comics #life #of #a #meme #or #trend

#pineapple #🍍 #brand #corporation #😞.” By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram.

(https://www.instagram.com/p/CvXW_TbuGVO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=NTc4

MTIwNjQ2YQ==)

3.1. An Introduction to Failed Meme Marketing

3.1.1. The Risks of Meme Marketing

Memes in general are highly volatile, with any misalignment between timing, intention, and utilization often causing backlash or ridicule. Meme marketing is thus understood to be a high-risk, high-reward venture for brands looking to organically connect with an online audience. There are many pitfalls to the technique, with clear downfalls if research, production, and distribution are ineffective in the eyes of the greater online culture.

For one, memes' lifecycles often peak within one to two weeks of inception. Marketers must act swiftly to leverage memes before they become outdated, making the most of them at the height of their popularity (Ward, 2025). Additionally, the risk of appearing 'cringe' is monumental for brands using meme marketing. While this may seem like a mild concern, long-term reputational damage can take place if memes are not culturally appropriate or used with genuine intentions. (Singh & Dhingra, 2024).

This violation of what the audience expects can reframe the brand as inauthentic, opportunistic, or exploitative for years to come. Similarly, when memes are used in serious contexts for the purpose of marketing, as we'll see, severe backlash can take place. These hazards are even more amplified online, as online events never truly die in the modern cultural consciousness (Mi, Tran, Vy, Ngan, & Tam, 2025).

3.1.2. Incongruity Theory

As mentioned earlier, 'incongruity theory' is at the core of why some meme marketing cases fail. Through a lack of research and cultural literacy, humor is misapplied and the brand is seen as exploitative. These failures stem directly from a structural detachment from digital

culture and its memes. Without fundamental literacy of the culture, there is only an imitation of its ideals. This can trivialize the message of serious online movements and make the brand come off as tone-deaf, with failed meme marketing often spreading faster online than successful meme marketing (Sewak, Lee, & Haderlie, 2025).

TRIGGER WARNING: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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

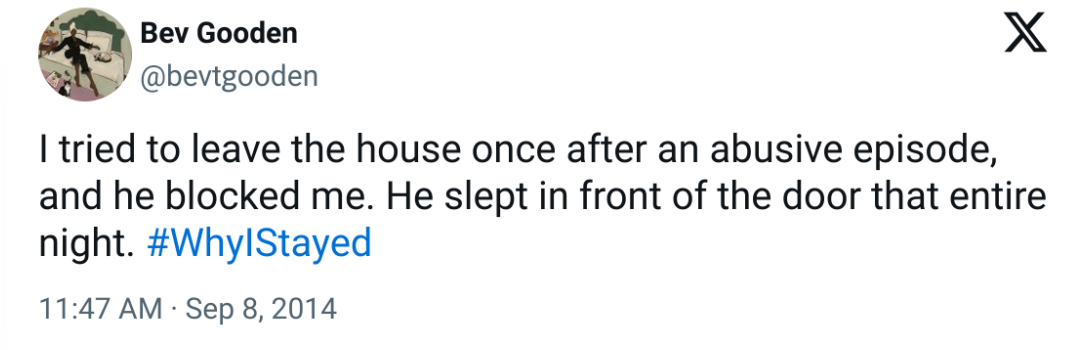
3.2.1. Overview

In February 2014, NFL player Ray Rice physically assaulted his fiancée Janay Palmer in an elevator, with the abuse caught on video by security cameras. On September 7th, 2014, entertainment and celebrity news company TMZ released footage of the incident, prompting public outcry (TMZ, 2014).

In response to the horrifying video, the hashtag ‘#WhyIStayed’ began trending in support of domestic violence victims. Tens of thousands of domestic violence survivors gave personal testimonies with the hashtag, giving personal accounts of fear, dependence, and coercion that kept them in abusive relationships (ABC7 News, 2014).

The following day, on September 8th, the frozen pizza company DiGiorno tweeted out “#WhyIStayed You had pizza,” attempting to participate in the trending hashtag for brand engagement (@DiGiornoPizza, 2014).

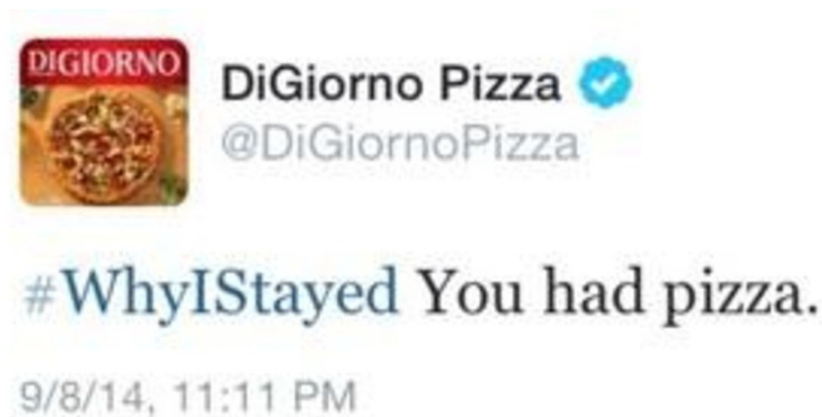
Figure 10

An Account of Domestic Abuse using ‘#WhyIStayed’

Note. From “I tried to leave the house once after an abusive episode, and he blocked me. He slept in front of the door that entire night. #WhyIStayed” By @Bevtgooden, 2014, X.

(<https://x.com/bevtgooden/status/509005057560707072>)

Figure 11

DiGiorno’s ‘#WhyIStayed’ Tweet

Note. From “#WhyIStayed You had pizza.” By @DiGiornoPizza, 2014, X. (Screenshot)

3.2.2. Audience Reaction

Immediate public outcry followed DiGiorno's tweet, with accusations of insensitivity and negative press surrounding the brand. Some examples of fans' criticisms included "Stupid idiot @DiGiornoPizza makes major faux pas with #WhyIStayed joke," "@DiGiornoPizza This is incredibly insensitive & inappropriate. Domestic violence is no laughing matter," and "@DiGiornoPizza Disgusting. How dare you make fun of such a serious situation!" (Stanley, 2014).

3.2.3. DiGiorno's Response

In response, DiGiorno quickly deleted the tweet. Additionally, over the next few days, the brand posted personalized messages to each account that had called out their ignorance and insensitivity. DiGiorno claimed that there was a lack of research into the nature of the hashtag, begging for forgiveness from the public (@HbecerraLATimes, 2014).

Figure 12

DiGiorno's Apology Tweets

Note. From “Well, you have to give it to DiGiorno pizza guy, he's apologizing like nobody's

business after his gaffe.” By @HbecerraLATimes, 2014, X.

(<https://x.com/hbecerraLATimes/status/509207862003109888>)

3.2.4. Theoretical Explanations

3.2.4.1. Anthropomorphism

DiGiorno assigned itself a human-like mind, tweeting as if it had lived through a situation relating to the hashtag's context. Although terribly misusing the hashtag due to a lack of literacy, the brand was trying to appear relatable (Oba, Howe, & Fitzsimons, 2025).

3.2.4.2. Failed Meme-Jacking

By posting with the hashtag, DiGiorno tried to capitalize on a popular trend at the time (Sewak, Lee, & Haderlie, 2025). This failed, however, due to their lack of research into the hashtag's topic of conversation, mistaking it for a meme as opposed to a social movement.

3.2.4.3. Failed Meme Life Cycle

Seeing that the hashtag was trending, the brand was opportunistic and used it quickly without any prior research (Ward, 2025). This obviously failed due to their quick imitation without any informed cultural literacy.

3.2.5. Outcome

The hashtag's meaning reframed DiGiorno's tweet as an appropriation of trauma discourse, transforming their intended humor into a perceived exploitation of a serious social issue. To avoid situations such as this, brands must employ real-time monitoring of social media trends that they plan to utilize. DiGiorno's failure to understand the hashtag's social meaning of domestic violence awareness rapidly produced reputational damage, making the brand seem self-serving in an attempt to profit from trauma bonding victims.

3.3. Unintentional Failed Meme Marketing

Unintentional meme marketing failures occur when personas appear fabricated and relevance is forced. These are complete failures at closing the literacy and authenticity gaps, even when unintentional or unaware of their existence. While intentional attempts at meme marketing must employ cultural research, authentic planning, informed production, and relevant humor to succeed, failed unintentional attempts are marketing campaigns or materials that are ineffective in the eyes of the audience.

In return, viewers convert the failure into parody or hate memes, sometimes even taking it far enough to spread ridicule and cause backlash. Memes then become vehicles for criticism against the brand, where defensive responses can amplify the online teasing or silence can mitigate it. In the end, however, if a brand acknowledges its mistakes and even laughs along with the internet at its failed attempt, it can be seen as a good sport concerning the memes.

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

3.4.1. Overview

In July 2016, Black Lives Matter protests began in the United States in response to the police killings of African American men Alton Sterling and Philando Castile (Ellis, Park, & Imam, 2016). On April 4th, 2017, Pepsi released a commercial titled ‘Live for Now’ featuring celebrity Kendall Jenner leaving a photoshoot and joining a protest out her window. In the commercial, protesters held signs with vague slogans such as “Join the Conversation,” “Peace,” and “Love.” Jenner then approaches a police officer and hands him a Pepsi soda, and the crowd cheers as the tension resolves (@MarketingTheRainbow, 2020).

Figure 13***Kendall Jenner Handing a Police Officer a Pepsi***

Note. From “Pepsi - Live For Now (with Kendall Jenner, 2017).” By @MarketingTheRainbow, 2020, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqQG4cG12dI>)

3.4.2. Audience Reaction

Almost immediately upon release, the commercial received widespread backlash from news media and social media users for its trivialization and appropriation of the Black Lives Matter protest movement (ABC News, 2017). Furthermore, its commercialization of social justice and suggestion that systematic injustice could be solved with a can of soda was offensive and laughable (Blankenship, 2025). Memes began to spread parodying the commercial, with creators focusing on Jenner’s offering of a Pepsi to an officer as the key image exemplifying the company’s (and by proximity, Jenner’s) oblivious marketing (@BerniceKing, 2017) (@wearemitu, 2017).

Figure 14

Bernice King's Response to Pepsi's 'Live for Now' Commercial



Note. From “If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi.” By @BerniceKing, 2017, X. (<https://x.com/BerniceKing/status/849656699464056832>)

Figure 15

A ‘Live for Now’ Parody Where Kendall Jenner Gives a Pepsi to Alien Invaders



Note. From “KENDALL JENNER Pepsi Ad Parody | mitú” By @wearemitu, 2017, YouTube.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U9HYBcw64w&t=0s)

3.4.3. Pepsi’s Response

Within 24 hours, Pepsi pulled the commercial from all of its channels, including social media and television. The company released a statement, writing: “Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue,” (D’Addario, 2017).

Additionally, the company apologized to Kendall Jenner for her involvement in the controversy. Jenner’s sister, Kim Kardashian, commented on Jenner’s remorse and lack of a statement, saying: “I see her at home crying, but in the media she looks another way because she’s not addressing it” (THR Staff, 2017). Ultimately, the failure of the advertisement caused

around a \$100 million loss, including its production, distribution, and hiring of Jenner (Adams, 2020).

3.4.4. Theoretical Explanations

3.4.4.1. Failed Narrative Transportation

The ad failed to immerse viewers in its story due to its blatant commercialization of social injustice protests, showing a complete lack of cultural literacy (Razzaq, Shao, & Quach, 2023).

3.4.4.2. Failed Meme-Jacking

This case completely failed the theory of ‘meme-jacking,’ as it attempted to replicate the protest visuals and social unrest of the times. There were no prior memes involved, but rather actual injustices that were remixed into marketing materials (Sewak, Lee, & Haderlie, 2025).

3.4.4.3. Failed Meme Life Cycle

Similar to ‘meme-jacking,’ Pepsi tried to profit from the trending news at the time involving protests, completely backfiring by trying to make a commercial that seemed relevant (Ward, 2025).

3.4.5. Outcome

By framing protest movements as easily solvable through consumer products, Pepsi’s advertisement was interpreted by audiences as an appropriation of activism. When commercial messaging and marketing simplify political movements, brands risk intense backlash and

extreme reputational damage. In the end, authentic participation with social issues requires immense research and contextual awareness with modern culture, both of which Pepsi failed to display.

3.5. A Conclusion to Failed Meme Marketing

3.5.1. Key Takeaways on Failed Examples

Examples of failing at meme marketing would then be defined by their cultural ignorance and inauthentic imitation. These failures are ridiculed, criticized, and cause outrage that damages the brand's image both in real life and on the internet. In terms of unintentional examples of meme marketing failure, the marketing is so disliked by the general public that it is turned into memes themselves. At their core, they lack any true respect or passion for the audience and its creations, and the internet takes notice, leading to marketing failures that live forever online.

3.5.2. Widening the Literacy & Authenticity Gaps

The two key lessons that must be fundamental to avoid failing at meme marketing are informed cultural literacy through research and authentic participation through humor and respect for the greater online context. While DiGiorno's intentional meme marketing was through the use of a hashtag, its lack of cultural literacy involving '#WhyIStayed' made it seem exploitative and opportunistic. This then causes it to fail at authentically participating in online culture, merely mimicking the work of others to gain engagement without any prior research. Despite DiGiorno's anthropomorphic style of tweet and capitalization on the hashtag's lifecycle, its whole attempt fell flat.

Likewise, Pepsi's commercial 'Live for Now' was so atrociously tone-deaf that it caused incredible ridicule, translating into both real-life criticism and parody memes. Its attempt at meme-jacking an entire social justice movement was blatantly opportunistic and culturally illiterate, treating protests as memes to take advantage of for capitalistic gain. Pepsi's inauthentic imitation of the Black Lives Matter protests similarly caused their marketing to fail, grifting on serious issues with a self-serving attitude. In turn, both DiGiorno and Pepsi completely lacked any cultural literacy or authentic participation, causing the literacy and authenticity gaps to widen between both companies and their audiences.

Section 4 – A Conclusion to Meme Marketing

Figure 16

Life of a Meme, pt. 4 of 4

Note. From “eh it was fun while it lasted • #comic #comics #life #of #a #meme #or #trend

#pineapple #🍍 #brand #corporation #😞.” By @AlexKrokus, 2023, Instagram.

(https://www.instagram.com/p/CvXW_TbuGVO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=NTc4

MTIwNjQ2YQ==)

4.1. Retrospective

4.1.1. Meme Marketing

Meme marketing is either successful due to its cultural literacy, or a failure due to its contextual ignorance. The same can then be said for its authentic participation in internet comedy or its opportunistic imitation of its culture. Intentional meme marketing only succeeds when these two factors are explicitly put in place through both planning and production, respecting the context in which it will reside and actively participating in it. Failure then reinforces the literacy and authenticity gap between organizations and individuals, dehumanizing brands to faceless corporations grifting on online comedy culture.

4.1.2. Unintentional Meme Marketing

Unintentional meme marketing then operates under the same pretenses as its intentional counterpart, but the audience has total control from the moment the content is originally put out by the brand. Organizations must operate with total adaptability, allowing their creations to be changed and commandeered for the greater goal of spreading awareness and visibility of the brand and its product. In cases of failures, brands displaying humility will always outperform attempts to retake control of their image. By responding with either silence or by making fun of their online teasing, brands can appear like a good sport and avoid overly defensive messaging against hate or parody memes.

4.2. Lessons Learned

Besides bridging the literacy and authenticity gaps, meme marketing has a number of foundational concepts that are integral to successful attempts at internet humor. As a basic

fundamental fact, meme marketing is a high-risk, high-reward venture for organizations. Brands must constantly and consistently research, plan, and produce content that is relevant to the current cultural climate, as memes have a shelf life of around one to two weeks. Without it, failure and lasting reputational damage are guaranteed for organizations. Not only will brands become the internet's laughingstock for a short period of time, but the effects of their failure will be felt for the foreseeable future.

4.3. Reexamining the Theoretical Framework

4.3.1. Base Theories

4.3.1.1. Shared Psychological Ownership

In order to succeed, brands must foster a feeling of 'shared psychological ownership' with their audience. By doing so, memes are more than just jokes. The act of posting memes online forms a bond between the producer and consumer, relating over shared humor. Through the remixing and creation of original memes as well as the independent spreading of these memes, viewers and brands share equal amounts of ownership over the comedy. This humanizes the brand, but most importantly closes the literacy and authenticity gaps through brands' contextual understanding of and genuine participation with online culture (Wang, Li, & Su, 2025).

4.3.1.2. Incongruity Theory

When failure occurs, it is due to the inconsistency between what is expected and what is perceived, called the 'incongruity theory.' As we have examined, memes used in serious campaigns are an example of this inappropriate incompatibility, thus leading to backlash among

the public. This theory is the definition of brands falling victim to the literacy and authenticity gaps, distancing themselves from their audience and dehumanizing their marketing (Sewak, Lee, & Haderlie, 2025).

4.3.2. Supplemental Theories

4.3.2.1. Meme Life Cycle

For meme marketing to be successful, it must adhere to the concept of ‘meme life cycle.’ As we have discussed, memes adhere to a life of around one to two weeks, with their most potent time of use being directly between its beginning and end. If meme-jacking a previously established meme by the online culture, complying with its life cycle is obvious and necessary. In the case of a brand creating an original meme, however, a life cycle must be employed so as not to cause it to become a stale and overused marketing tactic (Ward, 2025).

4.3.2.2. Meme-Jacking

‘Meme-jacking’ can also be an effective technique by brands due to using memes that are already popular, but the fundamentals of cultural literacy and authentic participation are immensely important (Sewak, Lee, & Haderlie, 2025).

4.3.2.3. Original Memes

‘Original memes’ then follow the same rules as ‘meme-jacking,’ but is a riskier strategy. Despite this, original memes can yield better results when used in meme marketing due to their unique creation and innovative perspective, so long as they close the literacy and authenticity gaps (Razzaq, Shao, & Quach, 2024).

4.4. The Literacy & Authenticity Gaps

As we have seen, my theories of the literacy and authenticity gaps are integral to meme marketing, with successful cases closing the gaps and failed cases widening them. The gaps between a company and its audience are inherent, but the ability to bridge and overcome them through meme marketing is purely on the organization. Through cultural literacy and authentic participation, this is possible.

Given the immense focus that brands put on meme marketing in the modern day and the wild successes that can come along with it, it should be an easy decision to allocate resources into the research, planning, and production needed to close the gaps. Instead, failures in meme marketing are still common. Through inauthentic imitation and cultural ignorance, the literacy and authenticity gaps are widened. As a result, brands alienate their audience and lose credibility with the public, ruining their public image. Therefore, effective meme marketing requires cultural literacy, allowing brands to authentically participate in the digital community and its rapidly evolving online humor.

4.5. Final Takeaways

In the present day, memes are everywhere. Across all social media platforms, online users are producing, distributing, remixing, and creating memes to spread comedy and engage in shared humor. This makes for a ripe opportunity for brands to use memes as marketing material, posting memes online to increase visibility, engagement, and reach, therefore increasing sales, customer retention, and returns on investments.

As thoroughly examined, meme marketing succeeds when brands operate as authentic participants within online culture and demonstrate cultural literacy in timing, tone, and content.

Inversely, brands that treat memes as traditional advertisements rather than cultural artifacts often experience backlash, misunderstanding online culture and imitating its practices. The perils of failing at meme marketing are then just as monumental as the benefits of succeeding. As I've mentioned, extreme hazards include reputational damage, tarnishing the brand's image, and ridicule from the public.

This risky yet rewarding system is intrinsic to meme marketing, with outcomes from successes and failures alike being seen both on the internet and in real life. While research and planning can be done to determine the most effective production and distribution of meme marketing, the audience ultimately has the final say on whether the attempt is a success or failure. This is especially true with cases of unintentional meme marketing, as brands then lose total and complete control of the narrative.

Therefore, the strongest asset in meme marketing is not budget, but instead adaptive authenticity grounded in cultural literacy. These foundational components of meme marketing are rooted in theory, proven by past examples of both successful and failed cases. Above all else, the closing of the literacy and authenticity gaps must be given the utmost importance throughout the meme marketing process. By focusing on cultural literacy and authentic participation in that online culture, the gaps between a brand and its audience can be closed and successful meme marketing can be achieved.

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