

# Meme and Moment Marketing: A New Guerrilla Strategy of Digital Engagement

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## ABSTRACT

Meme and moment marketing have emerged as contemporary digital communication strategies that enable brands to interact with digitally native audiences through culturally relevant and real-time content. While prior studies have examined emotional appeals and contextual relevance separately, limited empirical research integrates humour-induced emotional arousal, event-brand congruence, and brand salience within a unified consumer engagement framework. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how these factors influence consumer engagement and their subsequent effects on brand awareness and brand attitude within the short life cycles of social media content.

Grounded in the theoretical perspectives of emotional contagion, organizational virality, and brand congruence, the study adopts a mixed-method approach combining systematic content analysis of brand-generated meme and moment marketing posts with a cross-sectional survey of digital consumers. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

The findings reveal that humour-driven emotional arousal and event-brand congruence significantly enhance consumer engagement, which in turn positively influences brand awareness and brand attitude. In contrast, brand salience does not demonstrate a significant direct effect. The results highlight the strategic importance of emotional resonance and contextual alignment in strengthening digital consumer-brand relationships.

**Keywords:** Brand attitude, Brand awareness, Brand congruence, Brand salience, Consumer engagement, Cultural relevance, Digital branding, Digital ecosystems, Emotional arousal, Emotional contagion, Event-brand congruence, Guerrilla marketing, Humour marketing, Meme marketing, Moment marketing, Online virality, PLS-SEM, Social media marketing, Structural equation modelling, Viral communication.

## INTRODUCTION

With the expansion of social media platforms, the nature of brand-consumer relationships has radically altered, and instead of linear persuasion, it is now a participatory co-creative ecosystem of marketing communication (Li, 2023; Kannan and Li, 2017). As consumers gain more and more control over their ability to co-produce, remix and share content, the brands are forced to be creative in their strategies of attracting attention, and building meaningful digital relationships. In this shifting environment, meme and moment marketing are now symbolic expressions of the current guerrilla communication strategies, which entail inscribing brand messages into culturally relevant and emotionally engaging messages.

Reproducible units of digital expression, a combination of image and humour, have been developed by internet memes since they were originally an online phenomenon originating at the grassroots to being used in brand communication (Shifman, 2014; de Leon, 2025). It has been shown that memes can be used to make users more engaged by humour, relatability, and common cultural meaning, which subsequently impact cognitive and affective reactions to branded content (Meer, Khan, and Kanwal, 2022; de Leon, 2025). The results can be attributed to the larger concept that qualities of memes like emotional inducement and topicality influence user internalized conditions and behavioural reactions within digital ecologies (de Leon, 2025). Nevertheless, with such developments, the scholarly research is still disseminated, and a few integrating models exist that help understand how the features of memes are interconnected with other content dimensions to produce brand effects.

Similar to the example of meme-based strategies, moment marketing a trend of using real-time events, trends, and culturally relevant episodes to convey contextual brand messages has emerged in practice and in the literature (Shukla,

2023; Social Research Foundation, 2024). Moment marketing increases the visibility of messages since it anchors them on the current discussion and interests of the audience, making them more responsive to consumers because of their immediacy and relevance to the context (Shukla, 2023; Social Research Foundation, 2024). Even though managerial implementation of moment marketing is quite common, its theoretical description and empirical verification up to now are relatively undeveloped and should be investigated further.

Although the research has acknowledged the empowering nature of individual content strategies, including memes or post-based events, on consumer behaviour, the existing literature has critical weaknesses. To begin with, the academic research is inclined to separate the strategies of memes and moments and forget about their combined power in the context of coherent digital engagement models (Meer, Khan, and Kanwal, 2022; de Leon, 2025). This disaggregation clouds the realization of whether and how synergistically emotional resonance on the basis of memes reacts synergistically with contextual relevance on the basis of moment cues produce consumer outcomes.

Second, much of the research has been done on the superficial behavioural consequences (e.g., likes and shares) without adequately decomposing the psychological processes underlying such effects. In spite of the fact that meme humour and entertainment value are recognised as antecedents to engagement (de Leon, 2025; Meer, Khan, and Kanwal, 2022), the interaction between such emotional stimuli and brand-related constructs, including brand salience and event-brand congruence, has not been thoroughly studied to date in systematic empirical models.

Third, the moderating effect of brand characteristics in determining the responses in the engagement is underwhelmingly discussed. The availability of brand associations within consumer memory, in turn, has been identified as brand salience and has been found to have an impact on attention and persuasion in social media (Schivinski et al., 2016). Furthermore, the relationship between the brand identity and cultural setting is also exerted through event-brand congruence as a perception of brand compatibility that leads to the credibility of the message and acceptance by the consumer (Campbell and Keller, 2003). In informal digital spaces, conscious branding or lack of contextual fit can create resistance or sense of inauthenticity but little empirical research has been conducted on whether emotional resonance and contextual fit can offset a decrease in brand salience.

Fourth, methodological tools in the literature tend to be in the form of single-method designs or descriptive analytics, which restrict the causal inference and generalizability (Li, 2023). Theory-based mixed-method studies with systematic content analysis and structural modelling are strongly required in order to analyze the content characteristics, psychological reactions and brand outcomes in parallel.

All these gaps underscore the need to have an integrative framework that combines the attributes of memes and moment relevance and consider emotional mechanisms and brand moderators. The current study builds a grounded theory of campaign and moment marketing success by relying on the emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, 1994), organizational virality (Berger and Milkman, 2012), and brand congruence schools of thought (Campbell and Keller, 2003). Precisely, this study focuses on the effects of humour-based emotional arousal, event-brand congruence, and brand salience on consumer engagement, brand awareness, and brand attitude in the short life cycles of social-media. Operationalizing constructs by use of validated previous scales, use of systematic content analysis and survey-based structural equation modelling means that the study provides a comprehensive explanation of culturally responsive digital engagement.

The rest of the paper will have the following structure. The second part will be a review of the relevant literature and creation of the conceptual framework and hypotheses. It is then described by elaborate research methodology and analytical procedures. The empirical results are then given and discussed against the existing theory. The paper is summarized with theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations and research directions in future.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Meme Marketing and Consumer Engagement in Digital Ecosystems

Meme marketing is a manifestation of a wider trend of culturally integrated, participatory brand communication. The memes are symbolic digital artefacts that communicate humour, irony and collective meaning and enable consumers to decode brand messages using similar frames of cultural connotation (Shifman, 2014). Empirical evidence recorded recently indicates that branded memes substantially increase consumer engagement, namely, perceived entertainment,

emotional arousal, and relatability of the message (Malodia et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2024). The latter effects are especially strong on digitally native consumers who perceive memes as a radical continuation of online culture, but not typical advertising.

Meer, Khan, and Kanwal (2022) demonstrate that humor intensity, cultural relevance, and other meme attributes have a positive effect on brand attitude and sharing intention through emotional response. On the same note, according to Shen et al. (2024), posts that are made using memes are more effective in eliciting interaction compared to a standard promotional post, especially because the post is written in a relaxed manner and it is participatory. These results are consistent with the work of Berger and Milkman (2012) on the topic of virality, which determines that emotionally evocative information, particularly content arousing high emotions, like amusement, is the focus of diffusion in social networks.

Regardless of these developments, existing literature views meme marketing as a single strategy to a great extent. The previous research mainly looks at the features of memes in solitude, without incorporating them within the framework of larger engagements that can explain contextual relevancy or the moderators of the brand level. As a result, memes are known as an impetus of engagement, yet the interplay between memes and the situational conditions including the real-time events has not been sufficiently theorized.

## 2.2 Moment Marketing and Contextual Relevance in Real- Time Brand Communication

Simultaneous with meme-based approach, moment marketing has become popular as brands are more and more orienting their content to trending events, cultural discussions and shared experiences. Moment marketing is using temporal immediacy as a tool of enhancing message salience and perceived relevance (Kannan and Li, 2017). Ashley and Taten (2015) prove that branded content that is created on the spot in cultural moments creates connection with emotions and increased engagement compared to static advertising forms.

According to recent research, event-based relevance can boost consumer responsiveness, putting brand messages in the context of existent stories, which reduce cognitive resistance and raises the chances of higher interaction (Shukla, 2023). Relational bonds are also reinforced when contextually aligned communications communicate to understand the experiences of the audience by virtue of being attentive of the brand in terms of brand awareness. Nevertheless, scholarly research on moment marketing is still relatively small, and a large part of the literature would be descriptive, as opposed to explanatory.

Importantly, moment marketing has never been properly studied in relation to meme marketing even though they often occur together in reality. The use of memes on cultural moments is frequently a feature of brands, but the impact of emotional resonance of a meme in combination with contextual relevance of a moment has received insufficient scholarly analysis to elucidate the process of engagement. This division is one of the main points of conceptual division.

## 2.3 Emotional Arousal and Psychological Mechanisms of Digital Virality

The emotional contagion theory states that content affective states are transmissible to audiences and affect the attitude and behaviour via the automatic emulation and emotional congruence (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, 1994). In online space, emotionally colored information goes viral faster because of its ability to arouse physiological reactions and desire to share socially (Berger and Milkman, 2012).

Emotional arousal caused by humor is proved to be the mediator in the correlation between the effect and exposure of the content and the engagement results (Malodia et al., 2022; Meer et al., 2022). Emotions of high arousal (amusement, excitement) have a great impact on sharing intention and intensity of interaction. Such processes justify the disproportionate engagement of meme-based content, often using humor and irony as the central dispositions of content.

However, there is a tendency of previous research in operationalizing emotional arousal, without making reference to brand-related construct. Although emotion is also recognized as a force in the aspect of engagement, its interaction with brand salience and contextual congruence is poorly studied. Consequently, the current models have partial explanatory value of translating emotional reactions to sustainable brand results.

## 2.4 Brand Salience, Event–Brand Congruence, and Engagement Moderation

Brand salience is defined as the ease with which brand associations are available in the consumer memory and is a key factor to the allocation of attention and persuasion (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2004). Event-brand congruence is the perceived fit between brand identity and the situational context and it has an impact on message credibility and acceptance (Campbell and Keller, 2003). According to previous studies, the congruent brand-event associations will contribute to processing fluency and consumer skepticism.

Overt branding or poor contextual fit can be highly counterproductive in social media settings, with resistance or inauthenticity being triggered (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). Schivinski et al. (2016) also show that minor branding usually leads to better results than direct promotion in the creation of positive brand responses on the Internet. The implication of these findings is that emotional resonance and contextual relevance can offset their poor visibility of the brand and enable the brand to engage the consumer without being self-promoting.

But there is a paucity of empirical evidence of such compensatory mechanisms. The available literature normally assumes that brand salience and congruence are direct predictors and not moderators that mediate between the emotional content and these factors. As a result, little is studied on the conditions in which low brand salience may be compensated by the emotional and contextual factors.

## 2.5 Methodological Limitations and the Need for Integrated Frameworks

Although the interest in digital engagement among scholars has increased, a significant portion of the literature is based on one-method designs or descriptive analytics, which does not allow making concrete assumptions and integrating theories (Voorveld et al., 2018). Not many studies have used systematic content analysis in conjunction with structural modeling to address content characteristics, psychological processes, and brand performance at the same time.

In addition, other constructs, including meme attributes, moment relevance, emotional arousal, brand salience, and event-brand congruence are seldom factored into coherent empirical frameworks. This piecemeal limit the development in theory and undermine managerial applicability.

## 2.6 Synthesis and Research Gap

Combined with previous studies, it can be argued that memes evoke emotional response, moments affect relevance to the context, emotions influence the virality, and brand congruence influences acceptance of the message. However, these revelations are kept in isolation. Empirical studies on meme and moment marketing are underdone; there is a paucity of empirical studies involving emotional processes and brand moderators and a dearth of mixed methods studies that can account not only for content dynamics but also consumer reactions.

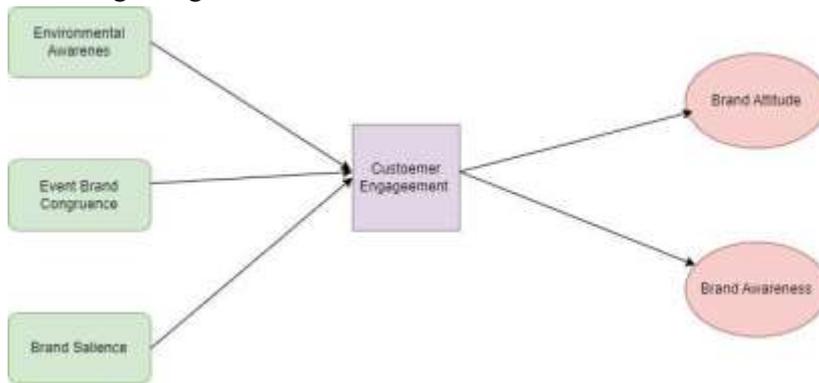
To fill such gaps, the current study creates and empirically confirms an integrative model between the meme attributes and moment relevance and humour-induced emotional arousal, event-brand congruence, and brand salience in describing consumer engagement, brand awareness, and brand attitude in brief social-media life cycles.

## 2.7 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study explains how key elements of meme and moment marketing influence consumer–brand relationships in digital environments. The model proposes that humour-induced emotional arousal, event–brand congruence, and brand salience act as primary antecedents that stimulate consumer engagement with brand content on social media platforms.

Humour-driven emotional arousal captures the ability of meme-based content to evoke positive emotional responses, thereby increasing the likelihood of interaction and sharing. Event–brand congruence refers to the perceived relevance between a trending event or moment and the brand message, which enhances contextual resonance and authenticity. Brand salience represents the visibility and recall strength of the brand within meme or moment-based communication. These three antecedent factors influence consumer engagement, conceptualized as the level of interaction, attention, and participation generated by the content. Higher engagement subsequently leads to enhanced brand awareness, reflecting the extent to which consumers recognize and recall the brand. In turn, increased brand awareness contributes to the formation of a favourable brand attitude, representing consumers' overall evaluation and perception of the brand.

Thus, the framework posits a sequential process where content characteristics drive engagement, which subsequently strengthens brand awareness and ultimately shapes brand attitude, highlighting the strategic role of meme and moment marketing in digital brand communication.



**Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework**

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The research design used in this study is a mixed- method/systematic content analysis and cross-sectional survey to examine the impact of meme and moment marketing on brand and consumer engagement. The digital marketing research is particularly suitable to be studied using mixed- method approaches because it allows triangulating the nature of content and the perception of the audience and enhances the explanatory depth and validity (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Voorveld et al., 2018). In particular, the content analysis was initially performed to extract salient aspects of brand- created meme and moment-based posts, a quantitative survey was carried out to empirically verify the hypothesized conceptual framework.

The design can be attributed to the previous suggestions regarding the need to combine content-level and consumer-level data to observe both stimuli of communication and psychological reactions in the digital setting (Kannan and Li, 2017; Li, 2023).

#### **3.2 Systematic Content Analysis**

An organized content analysis of brand-created meme and moment-based postings was done on official social media accounts of previously chosen brands. The coding of the digital content was conducted according to standard processes of coding digitized content, such as category creation, operationalization of variables, and coding procedures (Krippendorff, 2018).

The coding categories were based on the previous research on meme marketing, emotional arousal, and contextual relevance (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Malodia et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2024). The core dimensions such as humour intensity, emotional appeal, moment relevance, brand prominence and event-brand congruence were used. The evaluation process was conducted using a predetermined coding manual in order to make it consistent and replicable. The results gained here were used in the operationalization of constructs and the removal of items in the next survey tool.

Systematic content analysis is one of the methods which are considered relevant to study such symbolic digital artefacts as memes because it provides the possibility to objectively interpret the elements of visual-textual communication (Shifman, 2014; Krippendorff, 2018).

#### **3.3 Survey Instrument and Measurement**

As per the results given by the content analysis and the literature available, a systematic questionnaire was designed to capture the consumer perceptions and responses. The measurement items were based on the previous scales that were tested validly and measured emotional arousal, consumer engagement, brand awareness, brand attitude, brand salience, and perceived event-brand congruence (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Schivinski et al., 2016; Malodia et al., 2022).

Measurement of all constructs was done by use of multi-item Likert-type scales. Emotional arousal was a measure of

affective reactions of humour; consumer engagement was a measure of behavioural and cognitive interactional tendencies; brand attitude was a measure of evaluative judgement; brand awareness was a measure of brand association recall and recognition; event brand congruence was a measure of perceived contextual fit; brand salience was a measure of brand association availability in memory (Romaniuk and Sharp, 2004). Pilot testing was done to adjust the wording of items and to make them clear before full scale data collection was done.

### **3.4 Sample Characteristics and Data Collection**

The data were collected in the form of primary data of 426 undergraduate and postgraduate students who were enrolled in various universities in Punjab, India. The sample of students was chosen based on their exposure to meme-based material and active users of social media platforms, which is why they were theoretically suitable to study digitally native consumer behaviour (Malodia et al., 2022).

The determination of the sample size was informed by Cochran (1977) formula that offers good estimates when dealing with large populations. On the assumption of the standard confidence and standard preciseness, the final sample of 426 respondents passed the required minimum sample threshold, which guaranteed sufficient statistical power.

The participants were recruited using a purposive sampling approach based on a set of inclusion criteria, according to which: (1) the participants had to use social media actively, (2) had to be exposed to memes and trending online material, and

(3) knew about branded digital content. Purposive sampling will be appropriate when the respondents will be subject to domain experience which is applicable in the case of the study (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016).

The instrument used to gather the data was an online questionnaire that was shared on institutional networks and student communities. Respondents were free to participate and their anonymity was assured.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Procedure**

The conceptual model was assessed with the help of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS. The choice of PLS-SEM was justified by the fact that it is suitable predictive research, complex models, and data that may not be suitable to multivariate normality (Hair et al., 2022). The strategy is broadly used in digital marketing and consumer behaviour studies.

The two-stage analytical process was adopted. The measurement model was evaluated first in terms of internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity through composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE) and Fornell-Larcker criteria. Second, the structural model was tested by path coefficients, effect sizes and predictive relevance. Resampling bootstrapping was used to estimate the statistical significance of the hypothesized relationship (Hair et al., 2022).

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

During the study, ethics were upheld. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants who gave informed consent before taking part. All personally identifiable data were not gathered, and answers were processed solely with the use of academic purposes, in line with the recognized ethical standards of social science studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

## **4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Preliminary Analysis**

Prior to model estimation, the dataset was screened for missing values, outliers, and distributional assumptions. The data cleaning process indicated no substantial missing data, extreme outliers, or severe deviations from normality that would threaten the robustness of the analysis. These preliminary diagnostics confirmed the suitability of the dataset for subsequent PLS-SEM evaluation.

To assess the potential presence of common method bias (CMB), Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The unrotated factor solution revealed that the first factor accounted for less than 38% of the total variance, which is below the critical threshold of 50%, indicating that common method variance does not pose a significant threat to the validity of the findings (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

The systematic content analysis further revealed that high-performing brand posts consistently combined humour-

driven narratives with trending cultural moments while maintaining subtle brand integration. This pattern underscores the importance of emotional resonance and contextual relevance as central content characteristics influencing consumer engagement in digitally mediated environments.

## 4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed in accordance with contemporary PLS-SEM guidelines (Hair et al., 2022). As reported in Table 4.1, the standardized indicator loadings ranged from 0.73 to 0.83, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and confirming indicator reliability. Internal consistency reliability was established, with Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from 0.831 to 0.903 and composite reliability ( $\rho_c$ ) values ranging between 0.872 and 0.928, all above the acceptable cut-off of 0.70. Convergent validity was further supported, as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.563 to 0.703, surpassing the minimum requirement of 0.50 and indicating that each construct explained more than half of the variance of its indicators. Discriminant validity was evaluated using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT). As shown in Table 4.2, the square roots of the AVE values exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations, and all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, confirming satisfactory construct distinctiveness (Henseler et al., 2015). Collectively, these results demonstrate that the measurement model exhibits adequate reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, thereby supporting the robustness of the constructs for subsequent structural model analysis.

**Table 4.1:** Results of Construct Reliability and Validity

Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Composite Reliability ( $\rho_a$ )	Composite Reliability ( $\rho_c$ )	AVE
0.852	0.861	0.891	0.612
0.897	0.902	0.925	0.703
0.872	0.879	0.905	0.671
0.903	0.907	0.928	0.689
0.831	0.836	0.872	0.563
0.884	0.889	0.914	0.654

Source: By author

**Table 4.2:** Results of Discriminant Validity

Constructs	EA	EBC	BS	CE	BWA	BA
EA						
EBC	0.594					
BS	0.623	0.812				
CE	0.712	0.721	0.668			
BWA	0.654	0.776	0.646	0.748		
BA	0.531	0.702	0.586	0.769	0.801	

Source: By author

### 4.3 Structural Model Results

The structural model was evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to assess the significance of the hypothesized relationships. Prior to hypothesis testing, collinearity diagnostics were examined. As reported in **Table 4.4**, all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below the conservative threshold of 3.3, indicating the absence of multicollinearity concerns.

The explanatory power of the model was assessed using the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ). As shown in **Table 4.3**, Brand Awareness demonstrated the highest explanatory power ( $R^2 = 0.75$ ), followed by Consumer Engagement ( $R^2 = 0.73$ ), while Brand Attitude exhibited moderate explanatory power ( $R^2 = 0.48$ ). These values indicate substantial variance explained in the key endogenous constructs.

The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in **Table 4.5**. Emotional Arousal had a strong and significant positive effect on Consumer Engagement ( $\beta = 0.61, p < 0.001$ ), confirming its central role in driving interaction with meme- and moment- based content. Event–Brand Congruence also exerted a significant positive influence on Consumer Engagement ( $\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$ ), highlighting the importance of contextual alignment. In contrast, Brand Salience demonstrated a weak and statistically non-significant effect on Consumer Engagement ( $\beta = 0.08, p > 0.05$ ), suggesting that overt brand visibility does not significantly enhance engagement in informal digital contexts.

Furthermore, Consumer Engagement had a positive but comparatively modest effect on Brand Attitude ( $\beta = 0.19, p < 0.05$ ). Emotional Arousal and Event–Brand Congruence also exhibited significant direct effects on Brand Awareness, whereas Brand Salience remained non-significant.

Effect size analysis revealed that Emotional Arousal exerted a large effect on Consumer Engagement ( $f^2 = 0.41$ ), while Event–Brand Congruence demonstrated a medium effect ( $f^2 = 0.26$ ). The effect of Brand Salience was negligible. Finally, all endogenous constructs reported  $Q^2$  values greater than zero, confirming the predictive relevance of the model.

Overall, the structural model demonstrates substantial explanatory power, statistically significant key relationships, and adequate predictive capability.

**Table 4.3:** Results of Coefficient of Determination (R<sup>2</sup>)

Construct	R <sup>2</sup>	Interpret ation
Consumer Engagement (CE)	0.73	Substanti al
Brand Awareness (BWA)	0.75	Substanti al
Brand Attitude (BA)	0.48	Moderate

Source: By author

**Table 4.4:** Results of VIF Inner values

Endogenous Construct	Predictor	VIF
CE	EA	2.14
CE	EBC	2.32
CE	BS	1.87
BA	CE	1
BWA	EA	2.05
BWA	EBC	2.21
BWA	BS	1.79

Source: By author

**Table 4.5:** Results of Structural Model Assessment

Criteria Variable	Predict or Variable	Hypothe sis Path	Bet a	T- valu e	P- valu e	Significa nce
CE	EA	EA → CE	0.61	12.874	0	Significan t

CE	EBC	EBC → CE	0.42	9.156	0	Significant
CE	BS	BS → CE	0.08	1.327	0.185	Not Significant
BA	CE	CE → BA	0.19	2.418	0.016	Significant
BWA	EA	EA → BWA	0.46	8.742	0	Significant
BWA	EBC	EBC → BWA	0.38	7.391	0	Significant
BWA	BS	BS → BWA	0.07	1.214	0.225	Not Significant

Source: By author

#### 4.4 Mediation and Moderation Analysis

The mediation analysis revealed that emotional arousal functions as a significant mechanism through which meme attributes influence consumer engagement. As shown in Table 4.6, the indirect effect of event–brand congruence on consumer engagement via emotional arousal was significant ( $\beta = 0.256$ ,  $t = 6.384$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that contextual alignment enhances engagement primarily through affective activation. In contrast, the indirect effect of brand salience through emotional arousal was not significant ( $\beta = 0.041$ ,  $t = 1.112$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), suggesting that overt brand prominence does not meaningfully stimulate engagement through emotional processes. These findings reinforce the central role of emotional contagion in transforming culturally embedded stimuli into interactive behavioral responses, indicating that meme attributes operate largely via affective transmission rather than purely informational processing.

The moderation analysis further demonstrated that event– brand congruence did not significantly moderate the relationship between emotional arousal and consumer engagement, and brand salience similarly exhibited no significant moderating influence. This suggests that contextual alignment operates as a direct determinant of engagement ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) rather than as a conditional enhancer of emotional effects. Likewise, explicit brand visibility neither strengthens nor weakens the emotional mechanisms underlying engagement formation.

Taken together, the results indicate a compensatory engagement mechanism in which emotional resonance ( $\beta = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and contextual relevance jointly drive engagement, while brand salience remains comparatively less influential. This implies that high levels of consumer engagement can be achieved through affective intensity and contextual alignment even in the absence of strong promotional visibility.

Table 4.6 Moderation and Mediation Analysis

Criterion Variable	Interaction Term	Hypothesis Path	Beta	T-value	P-value	Significance
CE	EA × EBC	EA × EBC → CE	0.052	1.118	0.264	Not Significant

CE	EA × BS	EA × BS → CE	-0.03 4	0.89 1	0.37 3	Not Significant
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Source: By Author

## 5. DISCUSSION

The present research provides empirical insight into how meme- and moment-based marketing influences consumer engagement and brand-related outcomes in digitally mediated environments. Consistent with emotional contagion theory, the findings confirm that humor-driven emotional arousal serves as the primary mechanism transforming culturally embedded content into active consumer engagement. The strong structural relationship between emotional arousal and consumer engagement ( $\beta = 0.61, p < 0.001$ ), coupled with the substantial explanatory power of the model ( $R^2 = 0.73$ ), indicates that affective activation plays a dominant role in driving interaction within social media contexts. This suggests that engagement in meme-based communication is primarily emotion-driven rather than cognitively processed.

These results extend prior research demonstrating that high- arousal emotions enhance content diffusion and interaction (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Malodia et al., 2022). Importantly, the mediation analysis indicates that emotional arousal fully transmits the influence of meme attributes on engagement outcomes, reinforcing the premise that affective contagion— not direct informational persuasion—explains digital virality. Thus, the study advances emotional contagion theory by empirically validating the affective pathway in branded meme communication.

Event–brand congruence also emerged as a significant predictor of consumer engagement ( $\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$ ), with a medium effect size. This finding confirms that contextual alignment enhances perceived relevance and responsiveness in meme-based communication. However, the absence of a moderating effect suggests that congruence operates as an independent driver rather than a conditional enhancer of emotional effects. This nuance adds conceptual refinement to prior models that positioned contextual relevance primarily as a moderator; instead, the present findings demonstrate its direct and parallel contribution to engagement formation.

In contrast, brand salience exhibited no significant direct or moderating effect on consumer engagement ( $\beta = 0.08, p > 0.05$ ). These finding challenges traditional branding perspectives that emphasize visibility and prominence as central to effectiveness. Instead, the results align with emerging research suggesting that overt branding may undermine authenticity within informal digital cultures (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). The data reveal a compensatory engagement mechanism in which emotional resonance and contextual relevance substitute for explicit brand prominence. Viral engagement, therefore, appears achievable without aggressive promotional signalling, extending brand congruence theory by demonstrating that low salience does not necessarily hinder engagement potential in culturally embedded digital spaces.

The structural model further reveals differentiated pathways to brand-related outcomes. Brand awareness demonstrated substantial explanatory power ( $R^2 = 0.75$ ), indicating that emotionally resonant and contextually aligned content significantly enhances cognitive accessibility of the brand. Emotional arousal and event–brand congruence both exerted strong direct effects on brand awareness, reinforcing the role of affective intensity and contextual fit in strengthening brand recall and recognition.

However, while consumer engagement significantly influenced brand attitude ( $\beta = 0.19, p < 0.05$ ), the magnitude of this relationship was comparatively small. This imbalance suggests that high engagement metrics do not automatically translate into strong attitudinal shifts. Emotional appeal and contextual alignment appear to exert stronger direct influence on brand evaluations than behavioural interaction alone. Consequently, reliance on engagement metrics as proxies for brand-building effectiveness may lead to inflated performance interpretations.

Collectively, the integrated framework contributes to the emerging theory of organizational virality by demonstrating how meme attributes and moment relevance operate synergistically through emotional transmission to generate scalable influence. By empirically linking content characteristics, affective processes, engagement outcomes, and brand-level performance within a single structural model, the study reconceptualizes meme and moment marketing as structured engagement architectures rather than opportunistic digital tactics. From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that brands should prioritize humour-driven emotional resonance and contextual congruence over overt branding strategies. Subtle brand integration within culturally relevant narratives maximizes engagement while

preserving authenticity. Furthermore, managers should recognize that high engagement does not necessarily guarantee positive attitudinal change; therefore, strategic emphasis should be placed on emotional authenticity and contextual meaning rather than solely on interaction metrics.

## 6. THEORITICAL AND PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The research contributes to the digital marketing literature by offering among the original empirically validated models of meme characteristics and moment relevance combined in a single model of consumer engagement. The research substantiates the emotional contagion theory by establishing that emotional arousal caused by humour is the complete mediator of the association between the meme characteristics and engagement outcomes (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, 1994; Berger and Milkman, 2012). Also, the finding that event-brand congruence is an effect driver, not a moderator, streamlines the current conceptualizations of contextual relevance in social media marketing (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Voorveld et al., 2018). The research also adds to the body of brand congruence by empirically determining one of the compensatory engagement mechanisms, i.e., the emotional resonance and contextual alignment counterbalancing low brand salience, thus, defying the classical postulates of branding that assume high visibility and prominence (Campbell and Keller, 2003; Schivinski et al., 2016). All these results contribute to organizational virality thinking through explaining how culturally responsive content architectures of emotional charge create scalable digital interactions as a theoretically based reformulation of meme and moment marketing as strategic forms of engagement instead of tactical content practice.

As a manager, the results offer practical experience in planning culturally appealing online campaigns. Instead of focusing on overt branding, practitioners are urged to focus on humour-based emotional appeal and real-time contextual relevance which prove to be more effective in engaging with the audience and less risky as far as reputation is concerned in informal social media set ups. The insignificant correlation between engagement and brand attitude also warns managers that managers should not use only interaction measures as predictors of brand equity and should not ignore the role played by affective authenticity in influencing consumer judgments. The study can provide evidence-based recommendations to create emotionally captivating, contextually relevant content marketing strategies, which can create sustainable digital brand interactions, and especially with digitally native consumers, by operationalizing both meme and moment marketing based on empirically tested constructs (Malodia et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2024).

## 7. CONCLUSION

This research was motivated by a central challenge in contemporary digital marketing: how can brands cultivate meaningful interaction with digitally native consumers in a fast-paced and culturally saturated social media environment? By integrating meme attributes and moment relevance within a unified empirical framework, the study demonstrates that humour-driven emotional arousal and contextual alignment are the primary drivers of consumer engagement and brand-related outcomes.

The findings indicate that emotionally resonant and culturally responsive content explains substantial variance in consumer engagement ( $R^2 = 0.73$ ) and brand awareness ( $R^2 = 0.75$ ), while engagement exerts a comparatively smaller influence on brand attitude ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Emotional arousal emerged as a significant mediating mechanism between meme attributes and engagement, reinforcing emotional contagion theory in digitally mediated brand communication contexts (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Berger & Milkman, 2012). Furthermore, event-brand congruence functioned as a direct determinant of engagement ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), whereas brand salience demonstrated no significant effect. This pattern suggests the presence of a compensatory engagement mechanism in which emotional resonance and contextual relevance substitute for overt brand visibility.

The study empirically validates an integrative model linking culturally grounded content architecture to consumer interaction and brand-level outcomes. More broadly, the findings reflect an evolving branding logic within informal digital environments: authenticity, emotional intensity, and contextual sensitivity appear more influential than explicit promotional prominence. In this regard, meme and moment marketing should be understood not as opportunistic tactics, but as structured engagement architectures that orchestrate affective and contextual dynamics to generate scalable influence.

Beyond theoretical contributions, the research offers important managerial implications. Brands seeking meaningful digital engagement should prioritize emotionally authentic and culturally aligned communication rather than

increasing promotional intensity. The results suggest that sustainable engagement emerges from relevance and resonance rather than visibility alone. In an environment dominated by metrics and algorithmic dashboards, the study reaffirms a fundamental insight: digital interaction remains deeply rooted in human emotional response and cultural meaning.

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## 9. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors assert that they do not have any conflict of interest in publishing this chapter. The study was carried out in a free manner without any commercial or financial connections that can be viewed as a possible conflict of interest.

## 10. CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

All the authors have received and signed the final copy of the manuscript and agree to the submission and publication of the article. The authors verify that the piece of work is original and published elsewhere.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although it has some contributions, there are a few limitations that should be noted and imply the way forward in future studies. To begin with, the empirical data were gathered among the students of universities in Punjab, India. Although this cohort is theoretically suitable due to their high exposure of the meme-based information and being an active user of the social media ecosystem (Malodia et al., 2022), the results might not be applicable to people of different age groups and cultures. The framework can be reproduced in future research by using cross-national or multi-generational samples to study cultural contingency in meme and moment responsiveness.

Second, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal inference. Longitudinal studies have the potential to examine how repeated exposure to emotionally connecting and contextually compatible content varies brand relations over time. The cause-and-effect nature of the humour intensity, branding visibility and moment relevance may also be further isolated through experimental research.

Third, emotional arousal due to humour was given particular importance in the given study. Future studies might introduce more emotional aspects such as nostalgia, empathy, or moral elevation that have already been demonstrated to influence digital sharing behaviour and brand perception (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Voorveld et al., 2018). It is also important to consider platform-specific dynamics since there is a stark difference in content affordances in social media contexts.

Lastly, with new technologies like generalized artificial intelligence and algorithm-based personalization, the creation of memes and the identification of moments are being rapidly altered. The further research ought to focus on the effects of automated content creation on perceived authenticity, emotional response, and brand trust, which will be becoming a more relevant issue in the digital marketing ethics as of today (Li, 2023).

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## AUTHOR INDEX

Ashley,		C.
Berger,		J.
Campbell,	M.	C.
Cochran,	W.	G.
Creswell,	J.	W.
de	Leon,	L.
Etikan,		I.
Hair,	J.	F.
Hatfield,		E.
Henseler,		J.
Kannan,	P.	K.
Keller,	K.	L.

Krippendorff,			K.
Li,			H.
Malodia,			S.
Meer,			M.
Milkman,	K.		L.
Podsakoff,	P.		M.
Rapson,	R.		L.
Romaniuk,			J.
Sarstedt,			M.
Schivinski,			B.
Shen,			H.
Shifman,			L.
Sharp,			B.
Shukla,			Y.
Tuten,			T.
Voorveld, H. A. M.			

**SUBJECT INDEX**

Brand			Attitude
Brand			Awareness
Brand			Congruence
Brand			Saliency
Common	Method		Bias
Consumer			Engagement
Content			Analysis
Contextual	Brand		Relevance
Online	Brand		Communication
Digital Marketing Strategy			
Emotional			Arousal
Emotional			Contagion
Event-Brand			Congruence
Guerrilla	Marketing		Strategy
Marketing	Communication		Humor Meme
Moment			Marketing
Online	Consumer		Behavior
Organizational			Virality
PLS-SEM			Analysis
Social	Media		Engagement
Social	Media		Virality
Structural	Equation		Modeling
Viral Marketing Communication			