

A Study on the Influence of Meme-Based Marketing on Brand Perception and Engagement Among Generation Z and Generation Alpha in Chennai

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ABSTRACT

Meme-based marketing, such as humour-based push-notifications by brands such as Swiggy and Zomato, has become an effective digital marketing tool to reach young people, yet its impact on Generation Z and Alpha in regional Indian settings has not been fully explored. The past research has not given enough focus to the cultural diversity of Chennai in terms of Tamil humour, bilingualism, and high digital penetration in terms of social platforms and app notifications. The study aims to assess the effect of meme-based marketing on brand perception and engagement of Generation Z (born 1997–2012) and Generation Alpha (born 2013 onwards) in Chennai, in terms of cognitive-affective responses and behavioural outcomes. This is an exploratory mixed-method research that utilized the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Advertising Literacy Theory. In 2026, 150 Chennai youth (Gen Alpha/early Gen Z) were surveyed (structured surveys, Google Forms), semi-structured interviewed, and analyzed digital content (brand memes) to collect data. Results show that culturally relevant memes have strong positive effects, and Tamil-specific references have better engagement than generic ones. Hypotheses were validated to establish key mediations (e.g., emotions between humour and engagement) and moderations (e.g., the strengthening effect of cultural identity). The participants indicated that they preferred authentic content that is platform-specific but feared inauthenticity and over-commercialization. These findings indicate that local cultural integration, authenticity thresholds, and platform-specific designs should be the primary concern of brands to increase brand recall, attitude, and purchase intentions among the digital natives of Chennai.

Keywords: Meme Marketing, Brand Engagement, Generation Z and Alpha, Social Media Marketing, Cultural Branding

