Digital Meme Marketing as an Informational Service: Effects on Self-Expansion, Brand Attitude, and Purchase Intention in Online Shopping Platforms

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Abstract. Social media marketing has become a central component of contemporary brand communication, and meme marketing humorous, shareable, user-generated content has emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing digital engagement. While global brands have successfully integrated memes into their marketing strategies, the practice remains underexplored and underutilized in Pakistan. Existing scholarship provides limited empirical evidence on how meme-based content influences consumer psychology or behavior in this context. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how meme marketing shapes self-expansion, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions by applying the Value–Attitude–Behavior (VAB) framework. Using a survey of 400 social media users, this research employed 20 adapted items from established scales and conducted reliability testing in SPSS 23 followed by confirmatory factor analysis and structural modeling in SmartPLS. The results confirm that meme marketing significantly enhances self-expansion, which positively influences brand attitudes and subsequently increases purchase intentions. The findings highlight self-expansion as a key psychological mechanism through which meme value is translated into consumer behavior. This study contributes to digital marketing literature by offering theoretically grounded insights into meme marketing and provides practical guidance for Pakistani firms seeking effective, culturally resonant social media strategies.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Memes, Meme Marketing, VAB theory, Self-Expansion, brand Attitude, Purchase Intention

1. Introduction

Humor has long been recognized as a potent tool in advertising to capture customer attention, foster favorable message attitudes, and encourage sharing(Aalberse et al., 2015). Internet memes, characterized as animated GIFs or static labeled images exemplify a prominent form of online humor. Memes are often characterized by their ironic and satirical tone(Zhao et al., 2023). Research suggests that humorous appeals are more successful than functional or deal appeals in generating "likes" and "shares" in brand-generated Facebook posts. This growing interest in humor and internet memes in marketing has given rise to meme marketing, a promising content marketing technique(Wang et al., 2022). Memes are shared among users through various internet-based tools, including social networking and instant messaging platforms. Marketers have realized the potential to transform advertisements into memes, with the viral nature of memes driving immediate customer engagement. As internet users actively share content, brands have adapted to this evolving mode of communication and advertising. Memes are gaining significance and popularity in the marketing strategies of numerous companies. Despite the rising demand for meme-based advertising, there remains a dearth of comprehensive understanding in this field (Malodia et al., 2022).

Marketers employ memes to enhance customer engagement and raise awareness of their products and services. For example, Heinz initiated a meme marketing campaign that revolved around the debate of whether tomatoes are fruits or vegetables. The campaign encouraged users to take sides and utilized hashtags to fuel the conversation. This seemingly simple campaign, with an initial goal of one million impressions, achieved over four million impressions and garnered more than 80,000 engagements on Facebook and Instagram (Buzdar et al., 2016; Farooq & Raju, 2019). Luxury brands like Gucci have also embraced meme marketing, with the #TFWGucci [That feel when Gucci] campaign amassing over 21,000 comments and 2 million likes(Malodia et al., 2022). In Pakistan, however, meme marketing is relatively underutilized, with only a few online brands occasionally employing this strategy.

Memes are a worldwide phenomenon, and this study aims to explore their impact on customers or online shoppers. It also contributes to the existing literature, which lacks material on meme marketing specifically concerning people of Pakistani origin. Meme marketing, a burgeoning field in advertising, is being actively employed by global brands, with significant financial resources allocated to it. For instance, Netflix dedicates approximately 2.23 billion US dollars for marketing purposes(Razzaq et al., 2023a). Netflix generates memes from its web series and incorporates them into its advertising campaigns. However, in Pakistan, the impact of meme marketing on customers remains unclear, and it is not widely adopted by brands for marketing purposes. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring the consequences and results of meme marketing on customers in the context of online shopping.

In Pakistan, the limited availability of literature on meme marketing has resulted in a lack of awareness among online Pakistani brands/platforms about the untapped potential in this field. The scarcity of research studies further exacerbates the challenge of achieving effective social media marketing. The underutilization of meme marketing for advertising is a contributing factor to the underperformance of social media marketing in Pakistan. This research seeks to address this gap and provide insights into how meme marketing impacts online shopping individuals in Pakistan. The study's objectives are to examine the relationship between customers' self-expansion and their brand attitudes under the influence of meme marketing and to investigate the relationship between customers' brand attitudes and their purchase intentions in the context of meme marketing.

2. Literature Review

The literature review encompasses various critical aspects of social media marketing, internet memes, and their implications for brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Social Media Marketing has become an integral part of modern business strategies. It serves as a platform for companies to promote their products, interact with customers, and leverage influencers for brand promotion(Chuah et al., 2020).

The growth of social media users worldwide has been remarkable, making these platforms an attractive market for businesses to engage with potential customers. Organizations have harnessed social media efficiently, reaching a broad audience and enhancing sales through influencer marketing and product endorsements Memes are also employed as part of social media marketing to foster customer engagement and brand awareness (How, 2022; Razzaq et al., 2023a)

Internet Memes, originating from Richard Dawkins, are cultural phenomena that spread from person to person, often with a humorous or ironic twist They serve as vehicles for sharing opinions, feelings, and influencing public discourse (Thapa, 2025). Memes play a critical role in shaping digital communication, allowing individuals to express themselves effectively(Murray et al., 2014).

Self-Expansion is a motivator that drives individuals to seek opportunities for personal growth, acquiring new identities, and integrating novel experiences into their self-concepts(Farooq et al., 2025c, 2025f; Muhammad Farooq, Muhammad Ramzan, 2025). It is a cyclical process consisting of expansion and integration phases, leading to increased abilities and self-concept development. In the context of meme marketing, self-expansion is crucial for shaping customer attitudes and intentions (Huang, 2018; Mashek & Aron, 2013; Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2013).

Brand Attitudes and Purchase Intentions are heavily influenced by consumers' interactions with digital media(Farooq et al., 2025a, 2025g, 2025d). Social media interactions on platforms like memes impact brand attitudes positively and serve as a precursor to purchase intentions(Kaur & Kaur, 2023; Salehzadeh et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2023). Brand websites' quality and the ease of using digital technology also influence consumer attitudes(Lu et al., 2023; Skackauskiene & Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2023).

A Conceptual Model is proposed to elucidate the interplay between self-expansion, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions, offering a holistic framework for understanding the dynamics involved in meme-based marketing(Razzaq et al., 2023b). The literature review thus underscores the significance of social media marketing, the role of memes in modern advertising, and the intricate relationships between self-expansion, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions in meme-driven marketing strategies.

3. Data and Methodology

In the current study, the researcher adopted a positivist approach as the research philosophy to investigate the impact of using memes in marketing through social media on enhancing consumer self-expansion and improving brand image to increase purchase intention(Farooq et al., 2025e, 2025b). Positivism is a research philosophy that emphasizes objective examination of questions and the belief that results can be considered highly objective(Farooq, Yuen, et al., 2024). It operates on the ontological premise that reality exists and necessitates appropriate data collection methods. Positivism aims to establish patterns and relationships between variables that can be applied to different situations and individuals.

The population for this study consisted of social media users engaged in online shopping who were familiar with memes. To manage the large population, the researchers selected COMSATS University Abbottabad as the sample frame. This sample frame included students from various cities in Pakistan, representing the broader population. Sampling was conducted using Morgan's sampling approach, resulting in a sample of 361 respondents selected from the pool of 6,000 students at COMSATS University Abbottabad. The study employed simple random sampling to ensure that each member of the population had an equal chance of being selected as a subject.

The measurement and scales used in the study were adapted from established questionnaires, with questions modified and evaluated on 7-point Likert scales. The self-expansion component included 10 questions, brand attitude measurement used a 7-point Likert scale, and purchase intention measurement also used a 7-point Likert scale. Data collection was carried out through a survey mechanism, utilizing a self-administered questionnaire derived from previous studies. Pilot testing was conducted to ensure

the clarity and accuracy of the questionnaire items. The final questionnaire was distributed physically among the randomly selected respondents, with qualifying questions at the beginning to filter participants based on their familiarity with online selling brands and platforms.

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26 and Smart PLS. Various analyses were conducted, including reliability analysis, descriptive analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. These analyses aimed to determine the relationship between the independent variable (usage of memes in marketing) and the dependent variable (consumer self-expansion, brand image, and purchase intention) and assess the variation in the independent variable's influence on the dependent variable.

4. Results and Discussion

Data collection and analysis in this study involved a group of participants who filled out questionnaires. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed, resulting in 427 survey responses received. Unfortunately, 27 responses had to be disregarded due to missing data and incomplete responses. Ultimately, data analysis was conducted using 400 valid surveys, yielding a response rate of 94.88 percent. The study collected comprehensive demographic data from the participants, which is detailed in the subsequent tables. The gender-wise distribution of the 400 respondents was with 230 (57.5%) responses from males and 170 (42.5%) from females. In terms of age out of the 400 participants, 212 (53%) fell into the 21-25 age group, 105 (26.3%) in the 17-20 age group, 54 (13.5%) in the 26-30 age group, and 29 (7.2%) in the 31-35 age group. For educational qualifications of the respondents, revealing that 291 (72.8%) participants had a bachelor's or equivalent degree, 80 (20%) had a master's or equivalent degree, and 29 (7.2%) had a Ph.D. In terms of income in Pakistan rupees the majority, 266 (66.5%), earned below 20,000, followed by 61 (15.3%) in the 20,000-39,000 income range. Further more significant majority, 258 (64.5%), preferred Daraz.pk, while 78 (19.5%) favored Pakwheels, and only 64 (16.0%) chose Elo.

The analysis also incorporated the concept of standard deviation, which measures data spread from the mean. A low standard deviation indicates that data points are clustered around the mean, while a high standard deviation suggests data points are more spread out. Furthermore to establish the relationship between variables self-expansion, brand attitude and purchase intention structural equations modeling was employed. In the first phase of Structural Equation Modeling it was made sure that the construction is valid and reliable.

rigorous data reliability and validity assessment techniques were employed, utilizing only the latest and credible methods to ensure the robustness of the research findings. The results of construct validity and reliability analyses are presented in Table 1, where Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were evaluated for three key constructs: Brand Attitude, Purchase Intention, and Self-Expansion. All constructs exhibited high internal consistency, surpassing the acceptable threshold of 0.7 for Cronbach's Alpha, as well as Composite Reliability. Brand Attitude, Purchase Intention, and Self-Expansion met the AVE threshold, signifying that they explained more variance than measurement error. Furthermore, to assess discriminant validity, Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) scores were examined, as displayed in Table 2. The HTMT scores, well below the threshold of 0.85, confirm that the constructs are distinct from one another, ensuring their discriminant validity. Consequently, these results affirm the data's construct validity and reliability, underpinning the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

Table 1. Construct Validity and Reliability

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Attitude	0.745	0.840	0.570

Purchase Intention	**0.830**	**0.880**	**0.597**
Self-Expansion	**0.801**	**0.859**	**0.507**

Table 2 Discriminant Validity HTMT Score

	Brand Attitude	**Purchase Intention**	**Self-Expansion**
Brand Attitude			
Purchase Intention	**0.563**		
Self-Expansion	**0.679**	**0.714**	

Table 3 R Square (Regression Coefficient)

	R Square	**R Square Adjusted**
Brand Attitude	0.281	0.279
Purchase Intention	0.382	0.378

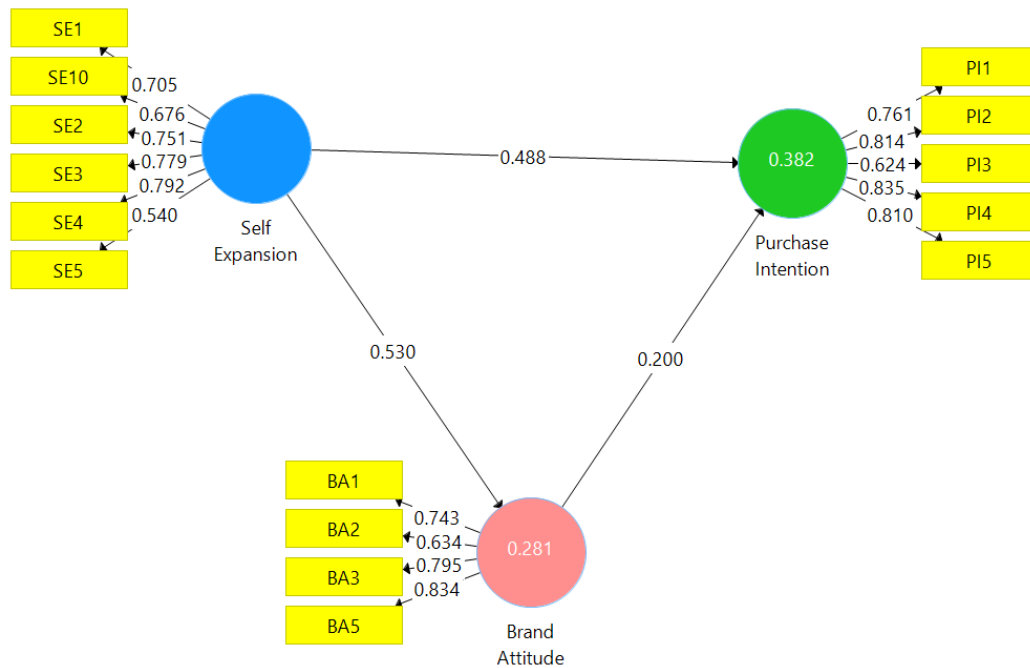For structural equation modeling, the hypothesis direct and specific relations were studied.

Fig.1: SEM Phase 1 Measurement Model Results

Table 4 Direct Relationship between Variables

	Original Sample (O)	**Sample Mean (M)**	**Standard Deviation (STDEV)**	**T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)**	**P Values**
Brand Attitude -> Purchase Intention	0.200	0.196	0.055	3.628	**0.000**

Self-Expansion -> Brand Attitude	0.530	0.534	0.038	13.808	**0.000**
Self-Expansion -> Purchase Intention	0.488	0.494	0.053	9.278	**0.000**

Table 5 Specific Indirect Effect

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
Self-Expansion -> Brand Attitude -> Purchase Intention	0.106	0.105	0.032	3.297	**0.001**

Table 6 Total Indirect Effect

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
Brand Attitude -> Purchase Intention	0.200	0.196	0.055	3.628	**0.000**
Self-Expansion -> Brand Attitude	0.530	0.534	0.038	13.808	**0.000**
Self-Expansion -> Purchase Intention	0.594	0.600	0.040	14.960	**0.000**

The structural equation modeling (SEM) results revealed the direct relationships between the variables, examining specific hypotheses. As depicted in Table 4, the direct relationships within the model were analyzed, and the findings demonstrated statistically significant relationships. Notably, Brand Attitude exhibited a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.200$, $t = 3.628$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that a more favorable brand attitude led to higher purchase intentions. Furthermore, Self-Expansion positively affected Brand Attitude ($\beta = 0.530$, $t = 13.808$, $p < 0.001$) and Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.488$, $t = 9.278$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the pivotal role of self-expansion in shaping brand attitudes and driving purchase intentions. Additionally, Table 5 delved into specific indirect effects within the model. The specific indirect effect of Self-Expansion on Purchase Intention through Brand Attitude was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.106$, $t = 3.297$, $p = 0.001$), emphasizing the mediating role of Brand Attitude in the relationship between Self-Expansion and Purchase Intention. These results provide empirical support for the formulated hypotheses and underscore the intricate dynamics within the proposed model.
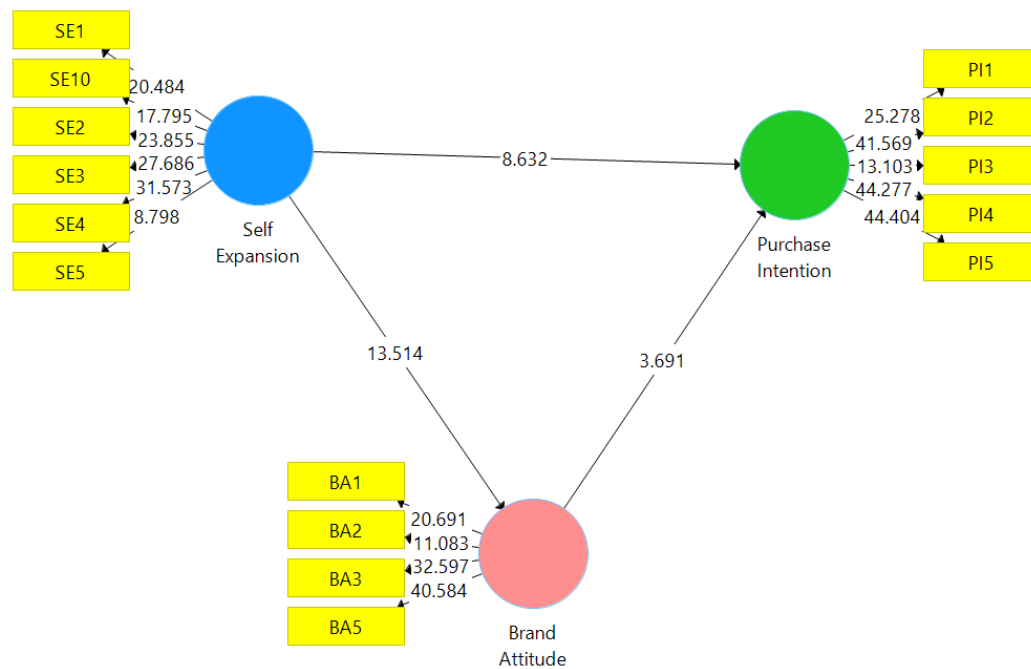
Fig.2: SEM Phase 2 Structural Model Results

5. Conclusion, Implementations & Limitations

This study sought to investigate the impact of memes when utilized by online selling brands for advertising their products and services. Previous research has indicated that internet users often use memes on social media to express their thoughts and feelings, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "user-generated online humor" (Yang, 2022). The findings of this study affirm the positive influence of memes on social media users. Memes have become a prominent tool in social media marketing for several reasons. Firstly, visual memes, which include images, tend to be more persuasive than textual content due to their utilization of visual rhetoric. Secondly, visual memes are renowned for their rapid spread online (Alijoyo et al., 2025; Iyer et al., 2025). Marketers believe that internet memes, when employed effectively and judiciously, possess the potential to captivate audiences and facilitate the virality of a post(Song et al., 2025). Furthermore, memes, because of their humor and entertainment value, have evolved into a prevalent form of internet humor. Memes' virality makes them one of the most straightforward and potent marketing techniques available, particularly for businesses offering goods and services online (Yang, 2022). The study's findings support the notion that businesses that incorporate humorous content related to current trends into internet memes can effectively engage customers, drawing them based on the memes themselves, rather than the products. This is underscored by the study's results, which indicate that utilizing viral memes as a digital advertising medium can enhance brand recall and customer engagement (Malodia et al., 2022). Building upon this research, the study also explores the effectiveness of the Internet meme marketing strategy on social networks and concludes that it can enhance consumers' perceptions of online retailers, encouraging them to revisit websites and engage in online shopping (Lee et al., 2019b).

The study applied the VAB model, a model that has long been regarded as a sound framework for understanding certain consumer sustainability behaviors (e.g., Homer and Kahle, 1988; McCarty and Shrum, 1994), to test the relationships between self-expansion, brand attitude, and purchase intention. In line with previous research, this study supports the idea that values positively impact attitudes, subsequently shaping behaviors. Past research suggests that consumers respond more favorably to brands that represent both their ongoing value priorities and cultural ideas not currently prioritized, compared to brands solely representing ongoing value priorities. Moreover, this research demonstrates

that brands aligning with ideal values, be they cultural or personal, alongside ongoing value priorities, lead to increased self-expansion and more favorable reactions toward brands. Ultimately, this study reveals that self-expansion is a critical mechanism influencing positive consumer responses to brands (Michel et al., 2022). The study employed self-expansion to gauge the influence of memes on online shoppers, and the results affirm a positive connection between self-expansion and meme marketing, concluding that consumers attracted to internet memes are more concerned about the practical impact of memes on their self-expansion rather than their entertainment value. Principles of self-expansion significantly and favorably affect online consumers' sentiments toward brands, echoing previous studies that highlight the role of values in facilitating attitude formation. The alignment between values and attitude in influencing the formation of purchase intentions may offer an additional explanation for these findings . In accordance with this, the study's findings suggest that customers' purchase intentions can be reinforced through their attitudes, which are in turn influenced by the concept of self-expansion, a concept that internet memes have effectively introduced to online shoppers (Farooq, Buzdar, et al., 2024). This aligns with arguments put forth by Voss et al., suggesting that when customers are drawn to online selling brands/platforms that include memes in their posts, they become more intrigued and ultimately make purchases. The study further reveals that customers who prioritize self-expansion are more likely to increase their purchase intentions due to the influence of brand attitudes (Kim, 2006). Consequently, it can be concluded that under the influence of memes, online shoppers experience self-expansion, leading to positive brand attitudes and, in turn, an increased intention to make purchases.

This study contributes to the betterment of the relationship between online selling companies and platforms and consumers who actively purchase online and who also reported being favorably motivated by internet memes. When a business offers customers significant meme content, they develop a personal connection to the brand due to the entertainment value and a desire to make a purchase as endorsed by earlier studies (Nalivaikė, 2025, 2025; G. Zhang & Tian, 2024).

This study demonstrates the high value placed on online memes. This is likely due to both a lack of brand/platform utilization of memes in Pakistan and a general lack of public understanding of memes. Therefore, this study aids in understanding this aspect. Meme marketing specifically is influenced by memes, which is essential for the credibility of online communication as well as the trust of online viewers and potential customers.

The necessity for attachment in marketing literature stems from the fact that customers are currently increasingly resistive to marketing initiatives (Liu et al., 2025; Merkevičius et al., 2024). The study is a significant contribution to meme literature in Pakistan's context where previously the topic was under reviewed. Brands using social media for their advertising will benefit from this study as it provides evidence for positive impacts of memes on people using the social media platforms and shopping online.

The goal of the study was to understand the significance of memes in present-day marketing. According to the literature, social media meme marketing is being used to its fullest potential in other areas of the world and engaging with customers in the most effective way possible through comedy. Unfortunately, Pakistan uses relatively little memes in its social media marketing(I. & S., 2022; Teng et al., 2022). This study's goal was to determine the potential that this meme element held for social media marketing. The findings showed that the memes had a significant impact on changing people's views and their intents to make purchases, however owing to their low usage and lack of knowledge, most respondents were unaware of meme marketing(Razzaq et al., 2023b, 2023a). This study, however, was constrained to a small sample size due to time constraints and a lack of resources, indicating that a larger investigation with a larger population is necessary in this area(How, 2022; T. Zhang & Huang, 2022). In the future, the study may be carried out throughout Pakistan with different sampling procedures by looking at different models and factors that can provide promising findings. Furthermore, the meme marketing can be investigated through different models and examining different variables. Future studies can be conducted more specifically with particular social media platforms and online selling brands. Different

age groups can also be tested in order to identify which generations are more involved and significantly influenced by meme content shared by online sellers.

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