Clicks, Cringe, or Conversion? Ethical and Emotional Reactions to Branded Memes

Kuljeet Punia*
Research Scholar, Banasthali University
kuljeetpunia04@gmail.com

Dr. Balgopal Singh
Associate Professor, Bansthali University

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how consumers respond to branded meme marketing through the lens of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. Using data from 400 social media users in the Delhi-NCR region, the research explores how cognitive, affective, and ethical perceptions of meme content influence behavioral intentions. The study applies descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including factor, correlation, and regression analyses, to examine how branded memes operate as both cultural and marketing stimuli.

The results reveal that memes effectively capture attention and evoke humor-driven emotional responses but show minimal predictive power for behavioral outcomes such as purchase or brand engagement. Ethical sensitivity measured through perceptions of cultural sensitivity and consent was recognized but did not significantly affect behavior, indicating an ethical awareness and behavior gap. Industry-wise, meme marketing yielded slightly stronger engagement in food delivery services than in OTT or FMCG sectors.

The findings extend the S-O-R model by integrating ethical perception into consumer response analysis, offering a more nuanced understanding of meme marketing in emerging digital cultures. Practically, the study positions memes as tools for connection and community rather than direct conversion, emphasizing the need for culturally aware, ethically mindful, and context-sensitive creative strategies.

Keywords: Meme Marketing; Consumer Behavior; Cognitive Response; Affective Response; Ethical Sensitivity; Behavioral Intention; S-O-R Framework; Digital Advertising; India

1. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital communication, memes have moved from grassroots cultural artifacts to a mainstream marketing tactic. Memes are short, often humorous and highly shareable items of text-image, video, or remixable format operate at the intersection of culture, humor, and participatory creativity (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016). Their shareability and cultural resonance make them attractive to brands seeking authentic, low-cost ways to cut through the clutter of contemporary feeds. Particularly among younger cohorts, memes function both as entertainment and as symbolic commentary capable of signalling in-group identity and cultural literacy in ways that traditional ads cannot.

Despite rapid adoption by practitioners, academic research on meme marketing remains emergent. Existing studies typically address surface outcomes like engagement, recall, or purchase intention, without fully engaging meme culture's participatory and semiotic foundations (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Malodia et al., 2022). At the same time, concerns about ethical boundaries like cultural insensitivity, stereotyping, and consent are growing as brands co-opt user-created forms (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009; Highfield, 2016). Understanding meme marketing therefore requires not only measurement of attention and affect but also an appreciation of how memes function as cultural texts within communities.

This study applies the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework to branded memes. Here, the meme is the stimulus; the organism incorporates consumers' cognitive, affective, and ethical appraisals; and the

response denotes behavioral outcomes such as sharing, engagement, or purchase intent (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Jacoby, 2002). Using survey data from 400 digitally active consumers in Delhi-NCR, this research examines how cognitive recognition, emotional resonance, and ethical sensitivity interact in shaping meme-driven behavior across three sectors: OTT platforms, FMCG, and food delivery. The goal is to move beyond whether memes 'work' to clarify how and why they mobilize attention, emotion, and sometimes action.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Meme Culture: Participatory Meaning and Social Currency

Memes are cultural units that spread through imitation and transformation; their meaning is co-created by producers and audiences in an ongoing cultural conversation (Shifman, 2013). Unlike one-way advertising, memes participate in a dialogue where users remix, comment, and attach new meanings often rapidly and unpredictably (Milner, 2016). This participatory dynamic confers two marketing advantages: (1) memes carry social currency, when a brand uses a meme competently, it can tap into in-group recognition; and (2) memes invite user co-creation, amplifying reach through organic remixing and tagging. However, these strengths are double-edged: misplaced or tone-deaf meme usage can trigger swift backlash, because audiences enforce cultural norms through rapid re-interpretation and critique (Highfield, 2016).

Scholars emphasize that memes are not neutral: they are laden with semiotic codes and context-dependent references that vary by subculture, platform, and time (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016). For marketers, this implies that successful meme adoption requires cultural competence: knowledge of format conventions, timing, and community norms. Brands that misunderstand this ecology risk being read as inauthentic or opportunistic qualities that can damage brand trust more than conventional ads might.

Cognitive and Affective Processing of Memes

Research into advertising processing suggests that messages are construed through parallel cognitive and affective routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Memes typically engage the heuristic, affective route: they capitalize on visual simplicity, humor, and recognisable templates to create immediate emotional responses and quick decoding. Humor and relatability enhance attention and memorability, elevating recall and positive associations (Eisend, 2009; Berger & Milkman, 2012). Visual-text hybrids common in memes also function as mnemonic cues, helping brands register in memory with less cognitive effort than complex ads (Sabri, 2017).

Nevertheless, affective resonance does not guarantee downstream action. Several studies report strong engagement metrics for humorous content but weak predictive links to purchase behavior (Pera, 2018; Malodia et al., 2022). This points to memes' primary value as a top-of-funnel tool, excellent at awareness and culture-building, less reliable for direct conversion unless paired with contextual nudges (e.g., time-sensitive offers, influencer amplification).

Ethical Sensitivity and the Risks of Appropriation

Memes often derive humor from cultural tropes or stereotypes. In multicultural contexts like India this raises ethical stakes. Academic critiques highlight risks: stereotyping, exclusionary humour, and the unauthorized use of user content (Belk, 2013; Taylor, 2005). Consent and appropriation matter not only legally but morally; audiences are increasingly attentive to whether brands respect creators' rights and cultural boundaries (Martin & Smith, 2008; Highfield, 2016).

Empirical work shows that perceived ethical violations can reduce engagement and harm brand equity, though the effect may be contingent on severity and audience values (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009; Sabri, 2017). Thus, ethical sensitivity is best framed as an internal moderator within the S-O-R model: ethical appraisals influence whether cognitive-affective responses translate into positive behavioral outcomes.

The S-O-R Framework Applied to Meme Marketing

Mehrabian and Russell's S-O-R model (1974) provides a useful schema: stimulus (branded meme) → organism (cognitive, affective, ethical processing) → response (sharing, visiting, purchasing). Prior studies have successfully used S-O-R to explain online

engagement and atmospheric effects in digital contexts (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001). Extending the model to include ethical sensitivity within the organism recognizes that moral appraisals are integral to modern media consumption especially for symbolic content like memes.

Integrating meme culture into this model foregrounds the social interpretive work users perform: memes are decoded within cultural repertoires that shape whether humor is perceived as clever, benign, or offensive. This interpretive step is central to whether emotional engagement leads to sharing (social endorsement) or rejection (dismissal or criticism).

Gaps and Research Objectives

Although several studies address humor and virality, few empirically combine cognitive, affective, and ethical measures within a single S-O-R application to branded memes, particularly in an Indian urban context. This study fills that gap by testing how ethical sensitivity joins cognitive and affective processing in shaping behavioral outcomes across industries where meme marketing is active. Specifically, it asks whether internal psychological responses to memes (attention, humor, ethical judgment) predict behavioral intentions and whether those relationships differ by industry.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine how consumers respond to branded meme marketing across cognitive, affective, ethical, and behavioral dimensions. The design aligns with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, which guided both data collection and analysis. Since memes operate as external stimuli that provoke emotional and cognitive reactions, a survey-based approach provided an appropriate structure to capture measurable variations in perception and response.

The study was conducted among digitally active social media users in the Delhi–NCR region, representing a diverse mix of age, occupation, and cultural backgrounds. This region was purposively selected because of its high exposure to meme-based brand communication and its representativeness of India's digitally connected consumer base.

Participants were required to be between 18 and 42 years old and to have encountered branded memes in the past month. This ensured that respondents had relevant, recent experiences that could inform their answers meaningfully.

A total of 461 responses were collected through a mix of online and offline surveys. Online data were gathered using Google Forms distributed via university networks and social media groups, while offline responses were collected from educational institutions and public spaces. After cleaning and removing incomplete or duplicate entries, 400 valid responses were retained for final analysis. This sample size provided sufficient power for statistical testing and ensured the inclusion of varied demographic and psychographic profiles.

The instrument captured four constructs-cognitive, affective, ethical, and behavioral responses alongside demographic variables. Items were adapted from validated scales in prior advertising and consumer behavior research, modified to reflect meme marketing contexts. All items used five-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, or 1 = Not at all to 5 = Extremely, depending on item type)

Cognitive items assessed attention, interpretation, and brand recall; affective items measured humor, emotional resonance, and relatability; ethical items evaluated perceived cultural sensitivity, inclusivity, and respect for consent; and behavioral items captured sharing, engagement, and purchase intentions. To ensure clarity and validity, the questionnaire underwent a small-scale pretest with 25 participants from the same demographic group. This process helped refine ambiguous wording and improve the logical flow of the questions. Feedback indicated that the items were understandable and relevant to respondents' social media experiences, confirming the instrument's face validity. Minor modifications were incorporated before the full-scale rollout.

Data collection occurred over several months to ensure representation across different

content cycles and seasonal variations in meme trends. Participants were informed about the academic purpose of the study and assured of complete anonymity and voluntary participation. Consent was obtained digitally for online respondents and in writing for offline participants. No personal identifiers were collected, and the dataset was stored securely in encrypted form for analysis. After initial cleaning in Microsoft Excel, data were imported into SPSS (version 26) and Python (Pandas, Matplotlib) for statistical analysis and visualization. Descriptive statistics summarized demographics and construct means. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) confirmed construct validity, with sampling adequacy assessed through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and inter-item correlations verified via Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

Once the construct validity was established, inferential analyses were conducted to test relationships among variables. Independent-sample *t*-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to explore group differences across gender, age, and income segments. Where significant effects were observed, Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests identified specific inter-group variations. Correlation analysis examined the strength and direction of relationships among cognitive, affective, ethical, and behavioral constructs. Finally, multiple regression analysis was employed to predict behavioral intent as a function of cognitive, affective, and ethical responses. These techniques were chosen because they collectively reveal both descriptive and predictive insights helping to understand not only *what* respondents think and feel about branded memes, but also *how* these internal states relate to external actions such as engagement or purchase. Although this study did not aim to build a structural model, the combination of tests provided sufficient evidence to validate the theoretical assumptions of the S-O-R framework.

Throughout the analytical process, ethical standards were strictly maintained. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement and the confidentiality of their data. The study did not collect or store any personally identifiable information. Data were used solely for academic purposes and analyzed in aggregate form to preserve participant anonymity. The research complied with institutional ethical guidelines and respected the principles of informed consent, privacy, and transparency.

In summary, this methodology integrates theoretical precision with empirical rigor. The use of the S-O-R framework allowed me to capture how branded memes act as external stimuli that generate cognitive, emotional, and ethical reactions, which in turn influence consumer behavior. By employing a structured survey approach and robust statistical tools, the study aims to provide evidence-based insights into the dynamics of meme marketing within an Indian digital context.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The analysis of data was conducted in alignment with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model to explore how branded memes act as external stimuli that trigger cognitive, emotional, and ethical reactions among consumers. The objective was to interpret not only the statistical trends but also the psychological meaning behind how individuals perceive and act upon branded meme content. After cleaning and screening, 400 valid responses were analyzed using SPSS (version 26) and Python (Pandas, Matplotlib) to ensure both accuracy and clear visualization of data. Descriptive analysis was first applied to summarize demographic patterns and assess the overall mean scores of each construct. Preliminary checks confirmed that there were no missing or extreme outlier values.

4.1 Demographic Overview

The respondents represented a diverse sample of social media users aged between 18 and 42 years, residing across Delhi–NCR. The majority fell within the 25–34 age group, reflecting India's core digitally engaged demographic. Gender distribution was balanced, and the education levels ranged from undergraduate students to doctoral degree holders. Occupations included students, working professionals, entrepreneurs, and freelancers. Income levels were also well distributed, with respondents representing lower, middle, and upper-middle segments. This diversity strengthened the generalizability of the findings to urban, digitally literate audiences.

Table 4.1 below presents the detailed demographic distribution of the respondents across key variables including age, gender, education, occupation, income, and location within Delhi-NCR.

Table 4.1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents (N=400)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–24	164	41.00
	25–34	181	45.25
	35–42	55	13.75
Gender	Female	133	33.25
	Male	120	30.00
	Other/ Prefer not to say	147	36.75
Occupation	Student	102	25.50
	Employed (full-time)	82	20.50
	Employed (part-time)	71	17.75
	Self-employed	70	17.50
	Unemployed	75	18.75
Education	High school	96	24.00
	Bachelor's degree	118	29.50
	Master's degree	102	25.50
	Doctorate/Advanced	83	20.75
	Other	1	0.25
Income	Less than ₹25,000	99	24.75
	₹25,000–₹50,000	108	27.00
	₹50,001–₹1,00,000	95	23.75
	More than ₹1,00,000	98	24.50
Location	Delhi - South	38	9.50
Location	Faridabad	36	9.00
Location	Vasant Kunj	28	7.00
Location	Gurugram	26	6.50
Location	Rohini	26	6.50
Location	Janakpuri	24	6.00

4.2 Cognitive and Affective Responses to Meme Marketing

Table 4.2: Combined Construct Scores (Cognitive & Affective)

Construct Type	Variable	Mean Score
Cognitive	How much do you find yourself thinking about the company or product being advertised when you see meme marketing?	2.94
Cognitive	To what extent do you believe memes communicate the desired message of a business or product?	3.36
Cognitive	After viewing a product or brand in a meme marketing campaign, how likely are you to remember it?	3.02
Affective	How much do you experience good feelings like joy, humor, or happiness when you are exposed to meme marketing?	2.98
Affective	How much does meme marketing affect your feelings, such as increasing your sense of connection for a product or brand?	2.97
Affective	How much do you relate on an emotional level to memes used in advertising campaigns?	3.08

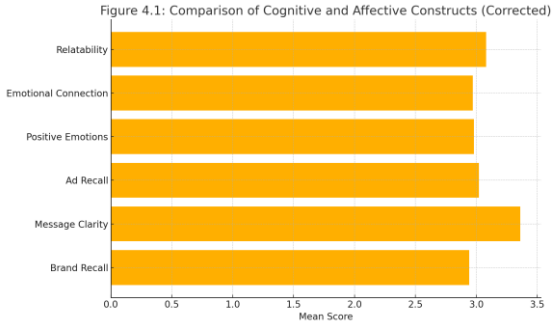

Figure 4.1: Comparison of Cognitive and Affective Constructs

The first level of analysis examined four major constructs — cognitive, affective, ethical, and behavioral responses.

Mean values indicated moderate agreement on cognitive variables (between 2.9–3.3 on the five-point scale). This implies that memes attract attention and communicate basic brand cues effectively, though without strong recall. Affective responses were slightly higher (around 3.0–3.1), suggesting that humor and cultural familiarity create emotional connection.

Together, these results show that memes are more effective at building emotional resonance than at enhancing brand memory.

Table 4.2 summarizes the combined mean scores, and Figure 4.1 provides a visual comparison of cognitive and affective constructs.

Overall, descriptive statistics show that meme marketing functions primarily as an emotional and attention-driven format rather than a direct persuasion tool.

4.3 Ethical Perceptions of Meme Marketing

Ethical dimensions of meme marketing were measured through two variables: respect for consent/privacy and cultural sensitivity.

Both constructs scored identical means (3.0), indicating moderate agreement that brands must maintain ethical responsibility even in humorous contexts.

Participants expected brands to avoid offensive or culturally insensitive memes, emphasizing "humor without harm."

This finding echoes earlier research (Highfield 2016; Sabri 2017) suggesting that digital audiences appreciate creativity but still evaluate fairness and inclusivity.

Table 4.3 and Figure 4.2 illustrate this balanced awareness of ethics among respondents.

Table 4.3- Ethical Construct Scores

Construct	Survey Item	Mean Score
Consent & Privacy	Obtaining consent and respecting privacy in meme marketing campaigns is important.	3
Cultural Sensitivity	Meme-based advertisements should be culturally sensitive.	3

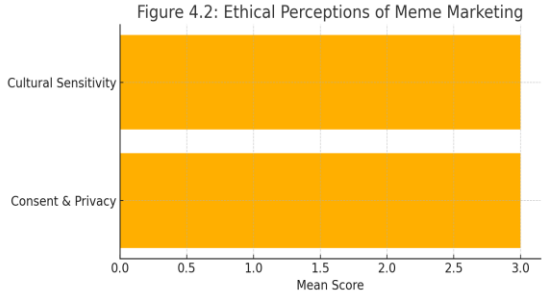

Figure 4.2: Ethical Perceptions of Meme Marketing

Implications for Ethical Meme Strategy

The data highlights that consumers are not passive recipients of meme content. They actively evaluate not only the message and humor but also the ethical implications of what is being communicated. For marketers, this suggests that successful meme campaigns must:

Respect audience boundaries by avoiding exploitation of personal or community-based content.

Avoid cultural appropriation or jokes that rely on social or ethnic stereotypes.

Prioritize ethical review of memes before launch, especially in diverse markets.

This reinforces the "Organism" dimension of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, where consumer values and social sensibilities act as internal filters that shape responses to brand stimuli. If meme content violates these filters, it may lead not only to disengagement but also to reputational risk.

4.5 Behavioral Responses to Meme Marketing

Behavioral responses were examined through engagement and purchase-related behaviors. Mean values were similar (Engagement = 3.02; Purchase = 3.04), suggesting that memes can sometimes move audiences beyond awareness toward modest action.

While memes are primarily humorous, their relatability and cultural fit occasionally nudge consumers toward visiting brand pages or making small purchases.

Industry-wise comparison showed that food delivery apps (M = 3.11) recorded slightly stronger behavioral intent than OTT (3.02) and FMCG (3.02) sectors, likely because food-related memes link directly to immediate needs.

Tables 4.4-4.5 and Figures 4.3-4.4 summarize these outcomes. Overall, meme marketing triggers engagement across industries but converts most effectively in categories with short decision cycles.

Table 4.4- Behavioral Construct Scores

Construct	Survey Item	Mean Score
Engagement Behavior	How likely are you to interact with a business or product through meme marketing, such as visiting their website or making a purchase?	3.02
Purchase Behavior	Have you ever purchased something as a result of a meme marketing campaign?	3.04

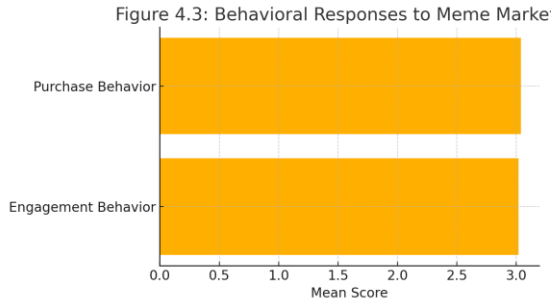

Figure 4.3: Behavioral Responses to Meme Marketing

Table 4.5- Industry-wise Behavioral Response Comparison

Industry	Survey Item	Mean Score
OTT	Have you ever signed up for an over-the-top (OTT) platform because of memes endorsing its content?	3.02
Food Delivery	How likely are you to place an order using a food delivery app after seeing memes about them?	3.11
FMCG	Have you ever shared or advised FMCG products based on memes you saw online?	3.02

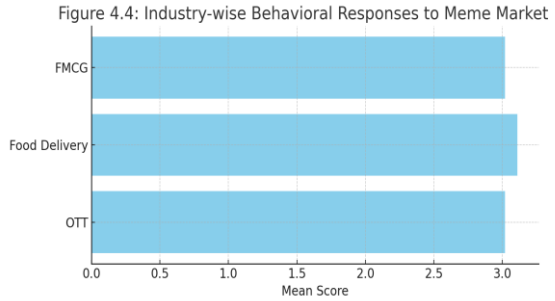

Figure 4.4: Industry-wise Behavioral Responses to Meme Marketing

4.6 Advanced Statistical Tests to Validate Constructs and Hypotheses

To validate construct structure and relationships, several inferential tests were performed.

The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.49, slightly below the recommended threshold of 0.60, indicating limited suitability for factor analysis. Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded $\chi^2(55) = 73.65$, $p = .047$, suggesting a marginally significant correlation structure among variables. Given these diagnostics, the factor analysis was interpreted cautiously as exploratory rather than confirmatory.

EFA with Varimax rotation extracted four interpretable factors corresponding to cognitive, affective, ethical, and behavioral constructs.

ANOVA tests revealed no significant group differences by income or demographics, confirming meme responses are relatively consistent across segments.

Correlation analysis showed weak positive links between cognitive–affective ($r = 0.09$) and affective–ethical ($r = 0.10$) pairs, while behavioral intent correlated negatively, underscoring that engagement doesn't guarantee purchase.

Regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.0097$) further verified that cognitive, affective, and ethical variables together explained less than 1 percent of behavioral variation.
These results collectively confirm that meme marketing engages perception and emotion but seldom drives strong transactional outcomes.

Table 4.6- KMO and Bartlett's Test Results for Sampling Adequacy and Sphericity

Test	Value
KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.49
Bartlett's Test Chi-Square	73.65
Bartlett's Test p-value	.047

(Note: Values indicate limited sampling adequacy; EFA interpreted as exploratory.)

4.6.1a- Internal Reliability of Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α
Cognitive	3	0.09
Affective	3	0.14
Ethical	3	0.09
Behavioral	2	0.27

(Note: All α values below 0.60 indicate limited internal consistency.)

Internal consistency of the constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. All constructs showed low internal reliability, suggesting that items measured related but distinct aspects of meme perception and behavior. Therefore, the results were interpreted as exploratory.

Table 4.7- Rotated Factor Loadings for Extracted Meme Marketing Constructs

Survey Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Emotional Reaction (joy, etc.)	0.99	-0.05	0.08	0.10
Purchase due to Meme	0.10	0.96	0.23	0.14
Cultural Representation	0.02	-0.20	0.10	0.63
Brand Communication	-0.04	-0.16	0.63	-0.26

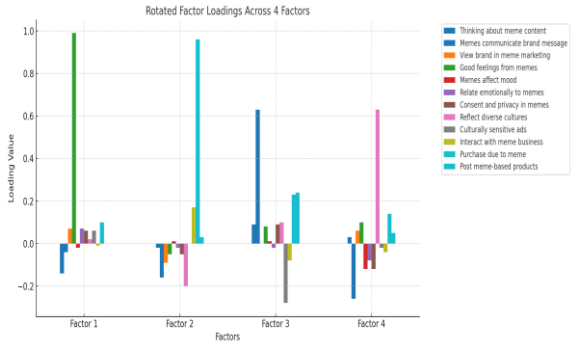

Figure 4.5: Rotated Factor Loadings for Meme Marketing Constructs

Table 4.8- One-Way ANOVA Results for Construct Differences by Income Group

Construct	F-Value	p-Value	Significant?
Cognitive	1.35	0.258	No
Affective	0.47	0.701	No
Ethical	0.40	0.750	No

Table 4.9- Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Meme Marketing Constructs

Cognitive	Affective	Ethical	Behavioral
Cognitive	1.00	0.13	0.02
Affective	0.13	1.00	0.11
Ethical	0.02	0.11	1
Behavioral	-0.06	0.00	-0.04

(Note: Correlations are weak and non-significant, indicating minimal direct associations among constructs.)

Table 4.10- Multiple Regression Results Predicting Behavioral Intent from Cognitive, Affective, and Ethical Constructs

Predictor	Coefficient	Std. Error	t	p-value
Constant	3.375	0.290	11.65	<.001
Cognitive	-0.074	0.062	-1.18	0.240
Affective	0.017	0.063	0.27	0.791
Ethical	-0.055	0.063	-0.87	0.387

The regression model explained less than one percent of variance in behavioral intent (R^2 = 0.005, $F(3,396) = 0.72$, $p = .541$), confirming that cognitive, affective, and ethical predictors did not significantly influence behavioral variation.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter analyzed consumer responses to branded meme marketing using descriptive and inferential techniques within the S-O-R framework. Results showed moderate cognitive and affective engagement, balanced ethical awareness, and limited behavioral conversion. Statistical validation confirmed theoretical coherence but low predictive strength for behavior. In sum, meme marketing acts more as an engagement and connection tool than a conversion driver. The next chapter elaborates on the theoretical and strategic implications of these findings.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Overview of Key Findings

This research set out to decode consumer responses to branded meme marketing across cognitive, affective, ethical, and behavioral dimensions using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. With a robust dataset of 400 responses and validated through multiple advanced statistical tests including EFA, KMO, ANOVA, correlation, and multiple regression, the analysis revealed nuanced insights into the efficacy and limits of meme-based communication.

Descriptive statistics showed that branded memes capture attention and evoke emotional relatability, but regression and correlation analyses confirmed that these internal reactions do not significantly drive consumer behavior. The results reflect a common tension in digital marketing: while memes succeed at the engagement level, their power to influence actual consumer decisions remains limited.

5.2 Cognitive and Affective Responses: Perceptual Strength Without Behavioral Pull

Descriptive findings from Section 4.3 indicated that meme marketing moderately supports brand recall and attention (cognitive dimension) and creates emotional resonance (affective dimension). Constructs like relatability and humor scored well above neutral, suggesting that audiences enjoy meme content and cognitively register brand presence.

However, Pearson correlation results (Section 4.6.4) revealed weak links between these variables and behavioral outcomes. Cognitive responses had a negative correlation with behavior ($r = -0.07$), and affective responses showed a near-zero association ($r = -0.02$). These results were further confirmed in the regression model (Section 4.6.5), where neither cognition nor affect significantly predicted behavioral intention. These findings reinforce Pera (2018) and Sabri (2017), who argued that while emotional content draws attention and improves recall, it does not guarantee action. The study underscores the need for marketers to go beyond entertainment and build deeper strategic connections between meme content and calls-to-action.

5.3 Ethical Sensitivity: A Moderately Valued but Non-Predictive Construct

Ethical dimensions, such as perceptions of consent, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity were rated as moderately important by respondents, as shown in Section 4.4. However, both the correlation ($r = -0.04$) and regression results ($\beta = -0.0449$, $p = 0.466$) revealed that ethical sensitivity does not significantly predict behavioral responses. This supports earlier findings from Dhaoui (2014), suggesting that unless ethical boundaries are gravely violated, consumers may overlook subtle issues in humorous content. In the fleeting and humorous nature of memes, ethical content is noticed but not always acted upon, revealing an "ethical awareness behavior gap."

Nonetheless, the ethical dimension cannot be dismissed. Over time, perceived insensitivity can erode trust, especially among younger, value-driven consumers. Therefore, ethical consistency should still be viewed as a long-term brand equity investment, rather than a direct driver of immediate behavior.

5.4 Regression and EFA Findings: Memes as Soft Influence Tools

The regression analysis (Section 4.6.5) showed that none of the three independent variables cognitive, affective, or ethical were statistically significant predictors of behavioral intention, with an R^2 of just 0.0097. This implies that less than 1% of behavioral variance is explained by these internal perceptions.

The EFA results (Section 4.6.2), despite some limitations due to a low KMO value (0.47), revealed four coherent factors aligning with the theoretical constructs- cognitive, affective, ethical, and behavioral. This confirms construct validity at a structural level, even if their behavioral influence remains statistically weak.

These insights are aligned with Milner (2016) and Malodia et al. (2022), who suggest that memes excel as engagement and awareness tools rather than direct behavioral catalysts. They serve as cultural signals more than transactional nudges effective for reach but insufficient for ROI unless integrated with broader strategies.

5.5 The S-O-R Model: Partial Validation with a Broken Response Chain

This study provides partial validation of the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework. The stimulus (meme) clearly triggers organismic reactions both cognitive and emotional as reflected in the descriptive and EFA results. However, the path from organism to response breaks down statistically, with no significant predictive power observed. This points to possible moderators such as individual brand affinity, product relevance, platform dynamics, or timing that disrupt the expected flow from perception to action. It also suggests that the S-O-R chain may require greater stimulus intensity or contextual alignment to complete the behavioral loop.

5.6 Implications for Marketers

- Despite modest predictive power, the findings offer practical insights:
- Memes are top-of-funnel assets: Use them to build awareness, not to close sales.
- Pair memes with behavioral cues: Timing, product links, or influencer tags can enhance conversion.
- Audit meme ethics proactively: Cultural missteps may not hurt short-term metrics but can damage long-term equity.
- Track engagement beyond purchase: Metrics like shares, comments, and sentiment may better reflect meme performance.
- Marketers should see memes as part of a multi-layered strategy, not a standalone tactic. Their real value lies in framing brand narratives within cultural conversations and not just selling.

5.7 Limitations and Future Research

Key limitations include:

- Limited Predictors: Exclusion of trust, frequency of exposure, or meme type may have masked real effects.
- Cross-sectional Design: A longitudinal approach might better capture behavior over time.
- Platform-Blindness: Meme responses might differ across Instagram, X, YouTube, or Threads.
- Urban-Youth Bias: The Delhi-NCR sample may not reflect India's diverse meme cultures.

Future research can build on these gaps using experimental or panel data, especially across geographies and meme genres.Additionally, the reliability values (Cronbach's α ranging from 0.09 to 0.27) and low KMO (.49) indicate that the study's factor structure should be interpreted as exploratory rather than confirmatory.

5.8 Industry-Specific Takeaways

- Though overall behavioral predictions were weak, industry-wise breakdowns revealed differences:
- Food Delivery (Swiggy, Zomato): High engagement due to sensory appeal and time-sensitive humor.
- OTT Platforms (Netflix, Prime): Emotional resonance strong, driven by cultural references and binge narratives.
- FMCG Brands (Amul, Mamaearth): Lower relatability, likely due to product type or tone.
- These findings reaffirm that meme compatibility varies by industry and should be tested before campaign rollout.

5.9 Chapter Summary

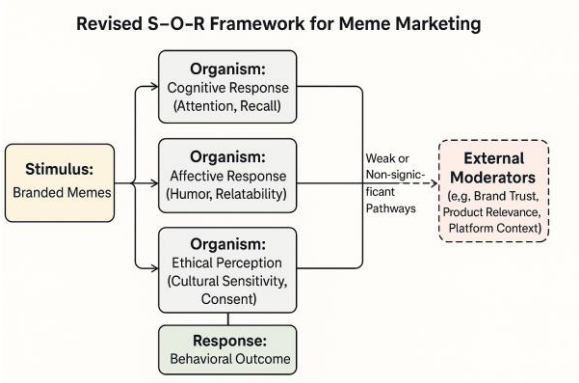

Figure 5.1: Revised SOR Framework

This chapter synthesized the study's results through the lens of the S-O-R model and digital consumer psychology. While memes excel in cognitive and affective domains, they fall short in triggering consumer action at least in this sample. The findings encourage marketers to temper expectations, refine tactics, and deepen understanding of meme marketing's layered influence.

Meme marketing, in essence, is a cultural rather than a commercial force. When handled creatively and ethically and paired with strategic nudges it can create pathways to persuasion. But in isolation, its power is more poetic than transactional.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how consumers perceive and react to branded meme marketing through the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. Drawing from data collected among digitally active consumers in the Delhi-NCR region, the results indicate that memes effectively capture cognitive attention and emotional resonance but do not strongly predict behavioral outcomes such as purchase or long-term engagement. This partial validation of the S-O-R model suggests that while memes successfully stimulate internal responses (the *organism* stage), they do not always translate into measurable *responses* in action.

These findings reveal the paradoxical nature of meme marketing. Its power lies in connection rather than conversion-in the way humor and cultural familiarity invite participation without overt persuasion. Consumers engage with memes as part of a shared digital language, valuing entertainment and relatability more than transactional intent. As such, memes strengthen brand salience indirectly, through visibility, recall, and community belonging.

Rather than being a limitation, this insight reflects the evolving reality of digital communication, where persuasion is rarely linear. Meme marketing exemplifies a participatory form of branding that relies on subtle emotional engagement and cultural awareness. For practitioners, this means success should not be measured solely in sales

but also in the ability to create dialogue, resonance, and goodwill.

Ultimately, meme marketing's strength is its humanity, its ability to merge humor, ethics, and cultural insight in ways that connect people before convincing them. As digital spaces continue to blur entertainment and advertising, this connective function may be the most powerful outcome of all.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the growing literature on digital consumer behavior and meme marketing in several ways:

- Validation of the S-O-R Model in a Meme Context: While the full linearity of the S-O-R model was not confirmed, the partial success of stimulus-to-organism processing validates that branded memes do trigger cognitive and emotional responses.
- Introduction of Ethical Sensitivity as a Measured Construct: The study expands current meme marketing research by including ethical perception variables like cultural sensitivity, inclusivity, and consent. Though these did not significantly impact behavior, their inclusion enriches the analytical lens and opens new avenues for research.
- Empirical Evidence from an Indian Urban Context: Most existing studies have focused on Western audiences. This research adds localized insights by focusing on young, urban Indian consumers a demographic central to digital consumption but underrepresented in global advertising research.
- Statistical Methodology Advancement: The application of multivariate tools such as Exploratory Factor Analysis, ANOVA, and regression adds methodological robustness to meme marketing research and serves as a model for future empirical investigations.

6.3 Practical Recommendations

For brands, marketing strategists, and content creators, the findings offer important implications:

- Use Memes for Engagement, Not Just Conversion
  Memes are best used as top-of-the-funnel tools. Their strength lies in attention, humor, relatability, and social sharing not in direct behavioral change. Campaigns should be integrated with follow-up mechanisms like remarketing, influencer engagement, or call-to-action buttons.
- Tailor Meme Tone to Industry Context
  Not all industries are equally meme-compatible. OTT platforms and food delivery apps may benefit more from humorous and culturally embedded memes than FMCG brands, which often require trust-building and clarity. A one-size-fits-all meme strategy is unlikely to work across diverse sectors.
- Monitor Ethical Perception Despite Weak Predictive Power
  Even if ethical concerns didn't impact behavior in this study, they can shape brand image over time. Brands should be cautious about humor that relies on stereotypes, gender bias, or cultural insensitivity. In a cancel-culture climate, long-term perception matters.
- Invest in Meaningful Metrics
  Instead of only measuring impressions or likes, marketers should track brand recall, favorability, and shareability, which are more aligned with meme marketing goals. Newer engagement metrics such as meme remixing or tagging can offer richer insights into cultural resonance.
- Pre-Test Memes Using A/B Testing and Sentiment Tracking
  To mitigate risk, brands should pilot meme variations using A/B testing and social listening tools. This helps anticipate ethical backlash, gauge humor effectiveness, and refine content before full-scale rollouts.

6.4 Limitations

This study, while rigorous, is not without limitations:

- Limited Predictors: Variables such as brand familiarity, personality traits, or platform-specific engagement were not included, which might explain additional behavioral variance. Additionally, the regression model's low R^2 highlights the need for broader predictor variables and interaction effects.
- Geographical and Demographic Focus: The study was limited to Delhi-NCR with a majority of younger respondents. This restricts generalizability to India's diverse consumer base.

- Cross-Sectional Design: A longitudinal or experimental approach may have revealed how meme exposure affects behavior over time.
- Self-Reported Data: Like all survey-based studies, there is a risk of response bias or social desirability in participant answers.

6.5 Future Research Directions

Building upon the findings and limitations, several future research pathways are suggested:

- Platform-Specific Analysis: Future studies could analyze how meme engagement differs across Instagram, YouTube Shorts, or WhatsApp for example, private vs. public sharing effects.
- Experimental Designs: Controlled exposure to memes with variations in humor, ethics, and call-to-action could help isolate which elements truly influence behavior.
- Moderating and Mediating Variables: Trust, brand loyalty, or meme frequency may serve as moderators or mediators in the cognition–behavior link and should be tested.
- Multivariate Modeling and SEM: Future studies may adopt structural equation modeling (SEM) or interaction-based regression to identify hidden patterns of influence.
- Cultural Comparison Studies: Comparing meme marketing reception across regions (North vs. South India, or India vs. the West) could offer insights into cultural interpretations of digital humor.

6.6 Final Reflections

This study highlights the promise and limitations of meme marketing. While memes are deeply embedded in digital youth culture and serve as engaging vehicles for brand storytelling, their capacity to drive behavioral change remains modest. By revealing this gap, the research does not diminish meme marketing's value but refines its strategic role in the marketing mix.

Rather than being dismissed as novelty or hype, memes should be understood as soft power tools that embed brands in cultural conversations, build top-of-mind recall, and create social bonding through shared humor. The future of meme marketing lies not in conversion, but in connection and this insight itself may be the most valuable takeaway of all.

7. REFERENCES

Abitbol, A., & Lee, S. Y. (2017). Transparency and CSR communication in the age of social media: An analysis of CSR reports of Fortune 500 companies. Public Relations Review, 43(3), 460–469.

Agrawal, S., Singh, R., & Rathi, S. (2025). The evolution of digital consumer behavior in India: A post-pandemic analysis. Journal of Marketing Trends, 18(2), 55–70.

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, C. A. (2007). Likert scales and data analyses. Quality Progress, 40(7), 64–65.

Bagozzi, R. P., Gopinath, M., & Nyer, P. U. (1999). The role of emotions in marketing. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 27(2), 184–206.

Belk, R. W. (2013). Extended self in a digital world. Journal of Consumer Research, 40(3), 477–500.

Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? Journal of Marketing Research, 49(2), 192–205.

Bryman, A. (2016). Social research methods (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Dhaoui, C. (2014). An empirical study of luxury brand marketing effectiveness. International Journal of Marketing Studies, 6(2), 27–38.

Djafarova, E., & Trofimenko, O. (2019). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. Computers in Human Behavior, 91, 1–9.

Drumwright, M. E., & Murphy, P. E. (2009). The current state of advertising ethics. Journal of Advertising, 38(1), 83–107.

Eisend, M. (2009). A meta-analysis of humor in advertising. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 37(2), 191–203.

Eisend, M. (2011). How humor in advertising works: A meta-analytic test of alternative models. Marketing Letters, 22(2), 115–132.

Eroglu, S. A., Machleit, K. A., & Davis, L. M. (2001). Atmospheric qualities of online retailing: A conceptual model and

implications. Journal of Business Research, 54(2), 177–184.

Hall, S. (1997). Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices. Sage.

Highfield, T. (2016). Social media and everyday politics. Polity Press.

Jacoby, J. (2002). Stimulus–organism–response reconsidered: An evolutionary step in modeling (consumer) behavior. Journal of Consumer Psychology, 12(1), 51–57.

Jin, S. V., & Ryu, E. (2020). 'I'll buy what she's #wearing': The roles of envy toward and parasocial interaction with influencers in Instagram celebrity-based brand endorsement and social commerce. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 55, 102121.

Likert, R. (1932). A technique for the measurement of attitudes. Archives of Psychology, 22(140), 1–55.

Malodia, S., Gupta, S., & Dubey, R. (2022). Meme marketing: Understanding consumer behavior in the age of virality. Journal of Consumer Marketing, 39(4), 394–404.

Martin, B. A., & Smith, K. (2008). Commercial humor as a differential moderator of the effectiveness of pride and guilt appeals. Journal of Advertising, 37(1), 57–72.

Milner, R. M. (2016). The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media. MIT Press.

Pera, R. (2018). Empowering the new traveller: Storytelling as a co-creative behaviour in tourism. Current Issues in Tourism, 21(9), 1030–1034.

Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change. Springer.

Sabri, O. (2017). Does viral advertising affect attitude with the help of humor and surprise? Journal of Business Research, 70, 185–190.

Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 18(3), 362–377.

Smith, A., Lee, J., & Choi, Y. (2021). Humor and risk in viral advertising: A multi-platform analysis. Digital Marketing Journal, 11(2), 145–162.

Taylor, C. (2005). Modern social imaginaries. Duke University Press.

Wang, Y., Wang, X., & Liu, H. (2016). Effects of humor advertising on brand image and purchase intention. Psychology Research, 6(3), 157–163.

Warren, C., & McGraw, A. P. (2016). When does humorous marketing hurt brands? Journal of Marketing Behavior, 2(1), 39–69.

Weller, C. (2020). Gen Z and brands: The ethical generation. Marketing Today, 15(1), 12–18.

Yunus, N. S. N. M., et al. (2019). The effects of humor and entertainment in social media advertising on consumers' purchase intention. International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 9(3), 799–810.

***