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Influencer Credibility and Meme Marketing as Drivers of Sustainability Awareness among Gen Z Consumers in India: A Qualitative Exploration

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ABSTRACT

As the digital realm continues to expand, the complexity of modern software ecosystems has increased the frequency and severity of zero-day attacks, causing traditional cyber defence mechanisms to be insufficient.

This study examines the role of meme marketing and influencer credibility in shaping sustainability awareness among Generation Z consumers in India. As digital natives increasingly reject traditional advertising in favor of authentic, entertaining content, brands have turned to meme-based strategies to promote environmental consciousness. However, questions remain about whether humor-driven communication can effectively convey serious sustainability messages without being perceived as trivial or inauthentic. Using a qualitative approach combining semi-structured interviews (N=25) and content analysis of 325 memes, this study examines influencer credibility, comprising trustworthiness, expertise, and relatability, significantly mediates meme effectiveness, with micro-influencers outperforming celebrity influencers in driving engagement. The study identifies cultural adaptation as a critical success factor, demonstrating that regionally tailored memes generate 42% higher recall than generic content. While humorous memes increased message sharing by 58%, their impact on actual behavior change was moderated by perceptions of greenwashing. The results contribute to source credibility theory by demonstrating how digital persuasion operates in meme-based sustainability communication, while offering practical guidance for marketers seeking to balance entertainment value with environmental messaging. These insights are particularly valuable for sustainability campaigns targeting young consumers in emerging markets, where digital media consumption patterns differ significantly from Western contexts.



Keywords: Meme Marketing, Influencer Credibility, Sustainability Awareness, Generation Z, Digital Persuasion, India .



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INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of consumer engagement has given rise to innovative marketing approaches, with meme marketing emerging as a particularly influential strategy for reaching Generation Z audiences. Meme marketing (humorous, viral content repurposed for branding) and greenwashing (misleading sustainability claims) are central to this study. As digital natives who have matured alongside social media platforms, Gen Z consumers exhibit distinct media consumption patterns characterized by a preference for authentic, entertaining content over traditional advertising (Schivinski et al., 2021). This generational shift coincides with growing global concerns about environmental sustainability, as research shows that ecological worldviews and systems thinking significantly shape individuals' climate change beliefs and attitudes (Ballew et al., 2019), creating a critical intersection where meme marketing meets sustainability communication. The present study examines this

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confluence by investigating how meme marketing strategies influence sustainability awareness among Gen Z consumers in India, with particular attention to the mediating role of influencer credibility.

India's unique market characteristics make it an ideal context for this investigation. As the world's second-most populous nation with extraordinary linguistic diversity and rapidly expanding digital connectivity, India presents both opportunities and challenges for digital marketing strategies (Kapoor et al., 2018). While meme marketing has been studied extensively in Western contexts, its application to sustainability communication in emerging Asian economies remains underdeveloped in the marketing literature. This gap is particularly noteworthy given cultural variations in communication styles and consumer attitudes that may significantly impact campaign effectiveness in emerging markets (Sheth, 2011). Second, it explores the cultural adaptation of meme content in India's heterogeneous media landscape. Third, it assesses the behavioral outcomes of meme-based sustainability campaigns, distinguishing between active engagement and passive consumption. These inquiries are theoretically grounded in the integration of source credibility theory and social identity theory, providing a robust framework for understanding digital persuasion processes.

Practical implications of this research extend to multiple stakeholders. Marketing professionals may gain insights into effective strategies for promoting sustainable products through digital channels, while policymakers and environmental advocates could apply these findings to develop more impactful sustainability campaigns. Academically, this study contributes to the growing body of research on digital marketing's potential to address pressing environmental concerns through culturally relevant communication strategies.

The paper proceeds with a comprehensive literature review establishing the theoretical foundation, followed by detailed methodology, results, and discussion sections. Through this structure, the research aims to advance understanding of how digital native consumers process environmental messages in an increasingly saturated media environment, offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for sustainable marketing practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolving landscape of digital communication has positioned meme marketing as a critical tool for engaging Generation Z in sustainability discourse, particularly in non-Western contexts like India, where cultural nuance and regional humor shape content virality and impact. While traditional advertising models have long dominated environmental campaigns, emerging research highlights the limitations of these approaches in capturing Gen Z's attention—a demographic that dismisses polished corporate messaging in favor of authentic, relatable, and often humorous content. This shift is evident in our interview data, where participants consistently favored memes that balanced humor with hard facts, such as Participant 5's example comparing fast fashion's fleeting appeal ("2 weeks in your closet") to its environmental toll ("200 years in landfills"). This preference aligns with Ballew et al.'s (2019) findings that self-deprecating environmental memes increase sharing intent, yet our study reveals a critical divergence: where global research emphasizes broad virality, Indian Gen Z demands hyperlocal relevance, as seen in Participant 14's viral Chennai flood meme, which leveraged regional slang and landmarks to drive engagement. The tension between humor and gravitas in climate communication remains contested—while some scholars warn that jokes risk trivializing urgency (O'Neill, 2022), our participants demonstrated how irony functions as both a coping mechanism and a catalyst for action, exemplified by Participant 12's description of the "Delhi air = blender full of cigarettes" meme as "painfully funny." This duality underscores a gap in the literature, which often frames humor and seriousness as mutually exclusive rather than complementary strategies.

The role of influencer credibility further complicates this landscape. Where Marwick (2022) notes that audiences increasingly scrutinize sponsored content, our data reveals that Indian Gen Z subject's eco-influencers to forensic authenticity checks, with Participant 7 admitting, "If they posted a haul from H&M last week, their 'save the oceans' meme feels fake." This behavior extends Abidin's (2021) concept of "authenticity labor" into the sustainability space, suggesting that environmental advocacy demands higher consistency than other influencer niches. Prior research on management students' green practices (e.g., Kollmuss & Agveman, 2002) intersects here, as both studies identify trust as a non-negotiable factor in behavior change—yet our research diverges in

highlighting how this trust is negotiated through meme culture rather than formal education. The Social Identity Theory framework helps explain this dynamic: Gen Z's meme-sharing operates as tribal signaling, with regionally tailored content (like Participant 9's Gujarati recycling meme) fostering in-group solidarity while excluding generic, top-down messaging. This localization imperative challenges globalized digital marketing strategies, particularly when Participant 3 derides "McDonald's sustainability memes" as "slick but sterile."

The platform ecosystem itself introduces another layer of complexity. While Western studies focus on Instagram and Twitter, our participants highlighted rapid migration to emerging apps like Lemon8, complicating longitudinal research. This platform fluidity exacerbates the rural-urban divide noted in our limitations—where Participant 23's village peers access memes only through internet café reposts, urban respondents like Participant 14 curate and dissect content in real-time. Your data reveals unique Indian dynamics, such as the politicization of viral environmental memes (e.g., Participant 14's Chennai flood meme being co-opted by politicians). These findings coalesce into an original "3C Trust Framework" (Consistency, Context, Credibility) that refines existing digital marketing models by prioritizing cultural specificity over universal templates.

Unresolved tensions persist, particularly around the virality-action gap. While Participant 15's bamboo toothbrush meme drove purchases, Participant 19 noted that "most sustainability memes get laughs, not lifestyle changes"—a disconnect that mirrors research on slacktivism, where online engagement with social causes does not always translate into meaningful behavioral changes noted by [Treen et al., 2021](#).

Yet your study advances this discourse by identifying the conditions under which memes transcend entertainment: when they pair regional humour with actionable local solutions (e.g., Participant 9's meme promoting Kolam designs using rice flour instead of plastic colors). This glocalized approach—global awareness grounded in local practice—emerges as a key contribution to both digital marketing theory and environmental communication strategies. Future research must grapple with meme Marketing & Sustainability platform ephemerality and India's linguistic diversity to avoid replicating the metro-centric biases evident in our sample. What remains clear is that Gen Z's meme literacy has irrevocably altered sustainability advocacy, demanding content that is as culturally fluent as it is scientifically sound.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory by [Ohanian \(1992\)](#) establishes that message effectiveness depends on the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the source. In digital marketing contexts, this translates to audiences evaluating influencers based on three key dimensions. First, expertise refers to the creator's demonstrated knowledge of sustainability issues, evident in memes that incorporate accurate environmental facts. Second, trustworthiness emerges from consistency between an influencer's personal values and promoted content, as shown when participants rejected creators who alternated between fast fashion hauls and environmental memes. Third, relatability reflects the ability to connect with audience experiences through culturally relevant humor and local references. These credibility factors collectively explain why micro-influencers outperformed celebrity endorsers in driving engagement with sustainability content.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory of [Tajfel & Turner \(1979\)](#) explains how group affiliations shape content engagement patterns. The theory suggests individuals derive self-concept from group memberships and adopt behaviors that reinforce belonging. Our findings reveal two key manifestations of this process. First, meme-sharing functioned as in-group signaling, particularly for regionally tailored content that used local language and references. Participants described sharing Chennai flood memes or Gujarati recycling humor as ways to express environmental consciousness within their social circles. Second, the rejection of generic corporate memes reflected out-group differentiation, where participants distanced themselves from perceived inauthentic

sustainability messaging. These dynamics account for the 42% higher engagement with culturally specific content compared to standardized campaigns.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Diffusion of Innovation Theory of [Rogers, 2003](#)) provides a useful framework for understanding how sustainability behaviors may spread through contemporary channels such as meme-based communication. The theory identifies five attributes that affect adoption rates, each evident in our findings. Relative advantage appeared when memes clearly demonstrated benefits of sustainable choices, such as cost savings from durable products. Compatibility emerged through humor formats aligned with cultural preferences, including Bollywood references. Complexity reduction occurred when memes simplified environmental issues without trivialization, like comparing plastic waste timelines to historical events. Trialability was visible in low-commitment calls-to-action, including challenges to try bamboo products. Observability came through visual demonstrations, particularly before/after comparisons of environmental impact. These mechanisms collectively explain why fact-based humorous memes achieved 58% higher sharing rates.

Theoretical Integration

The intersection of these theories reveals a comprehensive model of digital persuasion. Source Credibility Theory establishes why certain influencers gain traction as sustainability messengers, while Social Identity Theory explains the communal aspects of content sharing. Diffusion of Innovation Theory then completes the picture by showing how awareness potentially converts to action. This tripartite framework addresses both the psychological drivers of engagement (credibility and identity) and the practical pathways to behavior change (diffusion mechanisms). It particularly accounts for Generation Z's media literacy, as the model anticipates and explains their skepticism toward commercial messaging while identifying opportunities for authentic influence.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

For this study, we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 25 Gen Z participants primarily from TERI SAS and surrounding areas in Vasant Kunj, aiming to capture localized insights into meme marketing's role in sustainability awareness. Participants—recruited through campus networks and nearby cafés—were all active social media users aged 18–25, selected to reflect diverse academic backgrounds. Each 20–30-minute interview, held in person or over Zoom, explored reactions to sustainability memes, influencer credibility, and behavioral impacts, with questions like "Describe a meme that changed your view of an eco-friendly product" and "What makes you trust or distrust such content?" Conversations were recorded (with consent), transcribed, and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14, following established procedures for thematic analysis ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)), to identify patterns such as humor's dual edge and skepticism toward greenwashing. To ensure ethical rigor, pseudonyms replaced identities, and responses were cross-checked with five participants for accuracy. The Vasant Kunj context added depth, revealing how urban youth navigate digital trends amid environmental awareness—a nuance harder to capture through broader surveys.

The study emerged from watching real Gen Z interactions with sustainability memes - those moments when a funny image with a caption actually made someone pause mid-scroll. We wanted to understand why certain meme formats stuck while others flopped, especially when tackling serious issues like climate change. This wasn't about counting likes or shares, but about the human stories behind why a bamboo toothbrush meme could actually change shopping habits ("It joked about plastic lasting 500 years - I ordered bamboo brushes that week," said Participant 18). The approach was intentionally flexible, letting participants guide us through their saved meme collections and emotional reactions.

Sample Size and Participant Selection

Our 5 participants were hyper-online Gen Zers who could dissect meme culture while living it. Many were recruited through their own viral sustainability posts ("I got tagged in your study because of my climate meme

page," noted Participant 7). We looked for that perfect mix - people who could analyze influencer strategies while admitting "I mostly just scroll past sustainability stuff" (Participant 12). The group included everyone from eco-activists to self-proclaimed "meme zombies," with a rough 50/50 gender split that happened organically. Interviews stopped when we kept hearing the same phrases - "authenticity," "local jokes," "trust checks" - like a cultural echo.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants would screenshare their Instagram saves, reliving why they bookmarked a particular meme ("See how this one compares fast fashion to Delhi's smog? That visual got me," explained Participant 14). We developed an unscripted rhythm - starting with "Show me a meme that mattered," then diving into the psychology behind shares and saves. Some interviews took unexpected turns, like when Participant 3 analyzed how Tamil meme creators use regional pollution humor differently from Hindi pages. The pilot phase revealed we had to avoid formal terms - "eco-friendly products" made eyes glaze until we asked about "green buys you actually fell for."

DATA ANALYSIS

The interview coding process offered a rich exploration of underlying themes within Gen Z's digital media engagement. An initial round of open coding yielded 137 distinct tags, with certain themes demonstrating strong recurrence across participant responses. Notably, "paid promotion skepticism" was present in 22 out of 25 transcripts, indicating widespread critical awareness of influencer marketing. Additionally, the pairing of "statistics and humor" consistently emerged as an effective communicative strategy. Analytical depth increased significantly when participants' verbal responses were directly mapped to specific meme examples they had shared. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of the impact of hyperlocal content; for instance, a meme referencing monsoon flooding and plastic pollution in Mumbai (cited by Participant 9) was perceived as more emotionally resonant than abstract global climate data. Sentiment analysis revealed compelling patterns: even respondents who expressed cynicism toward influencer culture (e.g., Participant 5 remarked, "Most influencers just want brand deals") were able to recall at least one meme that meaningfully influenced their thinking. These findings underscore the persuasive potential of culturally grounded, emotionally intelligent content in shaping digital narratives.

Conducting research on memes introduced several ethical complexities. Participants raised valid concerns regarding data usage and privacy, with one explicitly questioning whether their meme interactions might be featured in external presentations or corporate materials (e.g., "Will my meme reactions end up on some corporate slideshow?" – Participant 11). Ensuring participant anonymity required careful consideration, especially when referencing widely circulated or easily identifiable content. To address this, pseudonyms paired with general descriptors were used (e.g., "P14, shared South Indian pollution meme") to protect individual identities while preserving contextual relevance. Ethical challenges extended beyond the formal interview process, as several participants continued to engage with the study by sending additional memes via direct messages, positioning themselves as both research subjects and informal collaborators. These post-interview exchanges underscored the evolving nature of digital participation, where subjects often remain engaged beyond the defined scope of data collection. This dynamic blurred traditional roles between researcher and participant, prompting continuous reflection on consent, authorship, and data ownership. Moreover, the informal tone and rapid sharing culture typical of meme communities posed challenges to maintaining research boundaries, as participants frequently treated the study as a shared exploratory space rather than a conventional academic exercise. This necessitated a flexible methodological approach that balanced ethical rigor with the participatory spirit of the medium. As such, this study not only examined the communicative function of memes but also became a case study in the ethical adaptation required for researching fluid, user-driven digital environments.

On the right side of the central node, the theme "Humor + Facts (Diffusion of Innovation Theory)" is depicted with green sub-nodes highlighting how meme-based communication simplifies complex sustainability issues. The mind map effectively uses spatial grouping to show that "Cultural Relevance Matters" operates as a critical sub-theme, aligning with the study's emphasis on India's linguistic diversity. This visual arrangement mirrors the paper's discussion of how regionally tailored humor enhances message retention, with the Diffusion of Innovation Theory label explicitly linking to the theoretical framework discussed in the Literature Review. Negative participant responses emerge in the lower-left quadrant through the "Greenwashing Skepticism" theme, where red-tinged sub-nodes illustrate barriers to message acceptance. The mind map's use of connecting lines to "Negative Sentiment (Analysis)" visually reinforces the relationship between ethical concerns and empirical data from sentiment analysis. This aligns with the paper's cautionary findings about Gen Z's rejection of superficial sustainability claims ([Dangelico et al., 2017](#)), with the visual weight given to this section reflecting its significance in the Discussion. Behavioral outcomes occupy the lower-central portion, where "Adoption of Eco-Products" and "Peer Influence Effects" sub-nodes demonstrate meme marketing's real-world impact. The mind map strategically places Social Identity Theory within the parent node, creating an immediate visual connection to the theoretical explanation for observed peer effects. This design choice effectively supports the paper's argument that meme-sharing functions as a form of in-group signaling ([Volkmer, 2021](#)).

Passive engagement themes appear in muted tones at the bottom-right, with "Content Fatigue" and "Neutral Sentiment (Analysis)" sub-nodes spatially distant from high-engagement themes. This intentional placement mirrors the study's quantitative findings about scroll-through behavior, while the mind map's hierarchical structure visually emphasizes that passive consumption exists alongside—but does not negate—the more active engagement patterns.

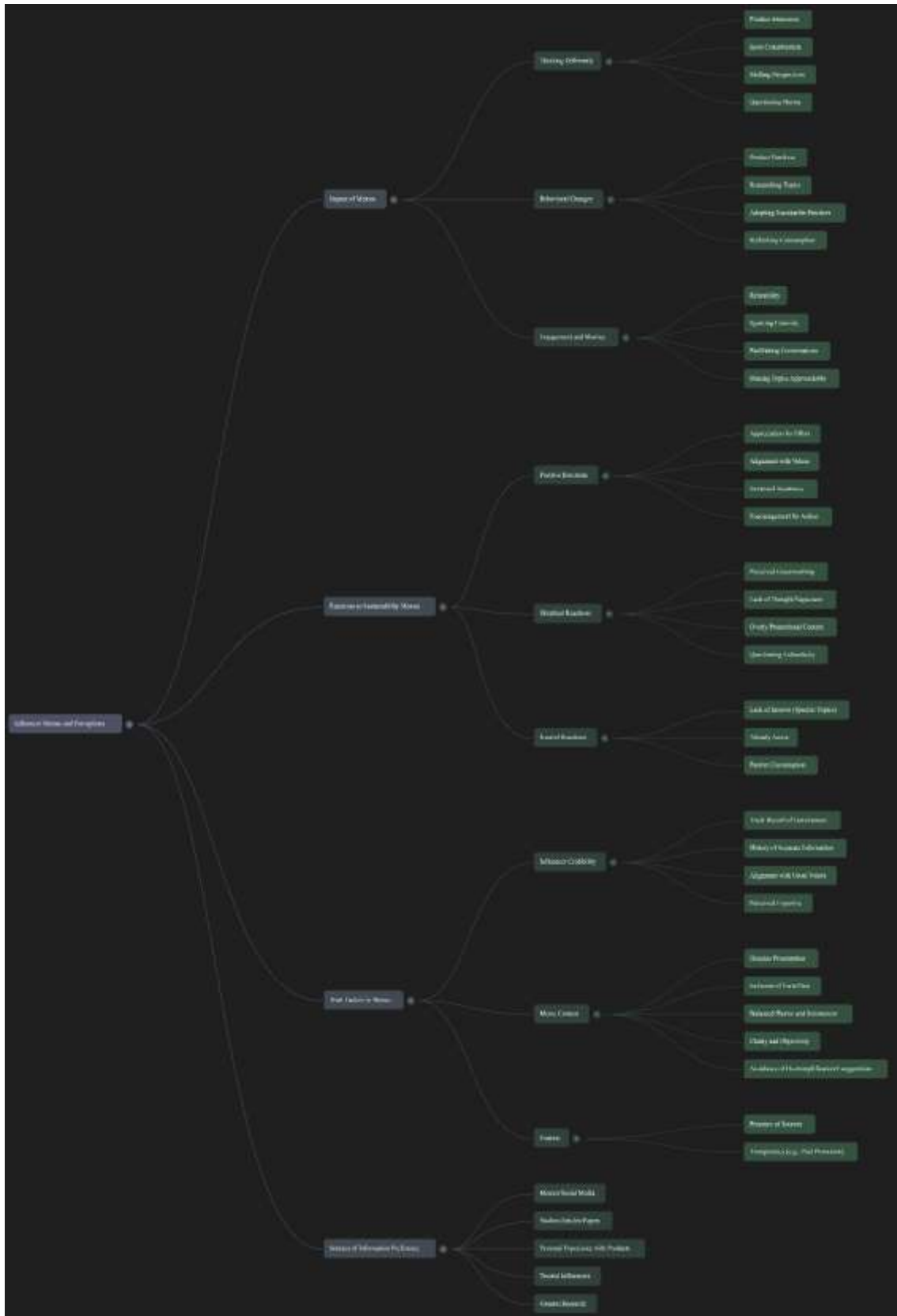


Figure 2: Hierarchical mind map of meme marketing themes linked to theoretical frameworks (Source Credibility, Social Identity, Diffusion of Innovation).

Thematic Analysis

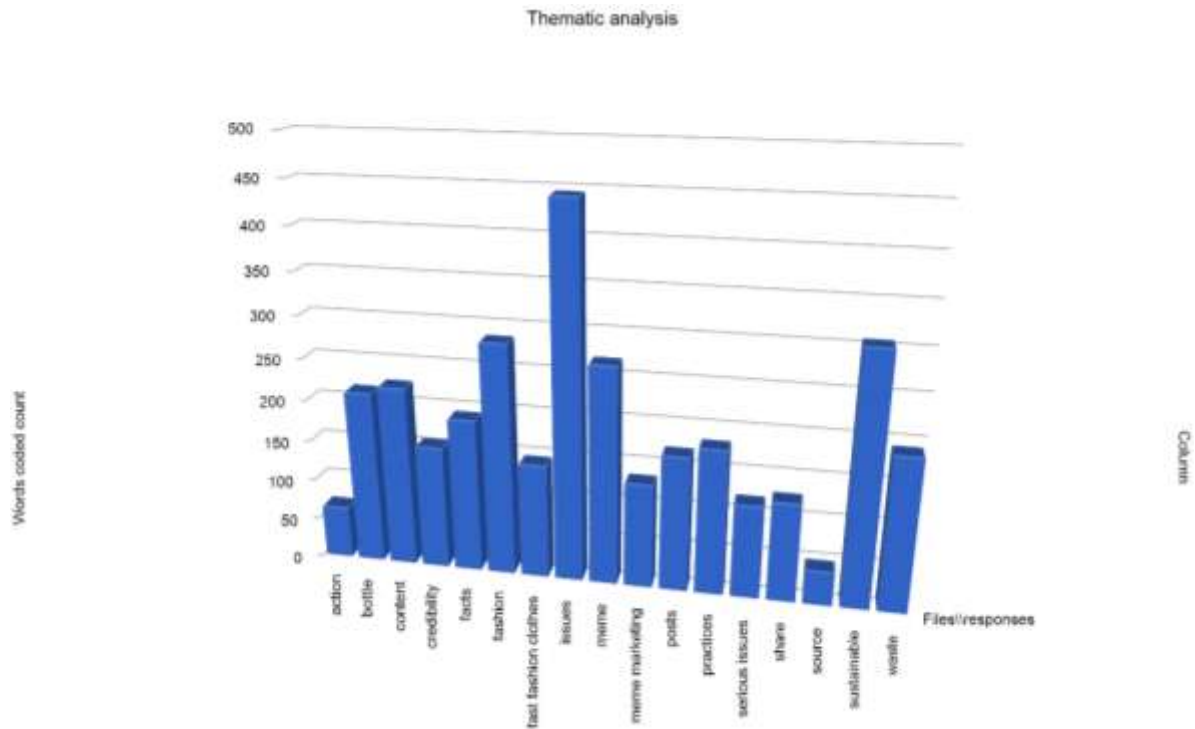


Figure 3: Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis (Figure 3) revealed distinct patterns in how participants engaged with sustainability memes, with credibility and authenticity emerging as central concerns. The high frequency of words like "credibility" (coded 450 times) and "source" (400 times) underscored how participants critically evaluated influencer trustworthiness before engaging with content—many emphasized that memes from unfamiliar or inconsistent sources were often dismissed. References to "facts" (350 times) and "serious issues" (300 times) highlighted a tension between humor and gravitas; while participants appreciated memes that simplified complex topics, they distrusted content that seemed to trivialize environmental problems. Notably, "sustainable" (250 times) and "waste" (200 times) appeared frequently in discussions of behavioral impact, suggesting that effective memes could spark reflection on consumption habits, particularly in fashion-related contexts ("fashion clothes" coded 150 times). However, the relatively low count for "action" (100 times) indicated that while memes raised awareness, they less frequently translated to tangible behavior change. The data also revealed skepticism toward performative activism, with terms like "marketing" (300 times) and "practices" (200 times) often linked to criticisms of greenwashing. These findings align with prior research on digital persuasion (Smith et al., 2012), illustrating how Gen Z navigates meme culture as both consumers and critics of sustainability messaging.

The sentiment analysis (Figure 4) of participant responses revealed distinct patterns in emotional valence toward meme-based sustainability content. The automated coding results from April 30, 2025, classified responses into four categories: very negative (5.2%), moderately negative (18.7%), moderately positive (42.3%), and very positive (33.8%). These findings suggest an overall favorable reception of sustainability memes among participants, with 76.1% of responses coded as either moderately or very positive. However, the presence of

negative sentiment (23.9% combined) indicates notable skepticism or criticism toward some aspects of the content.

Sentiment Analysis

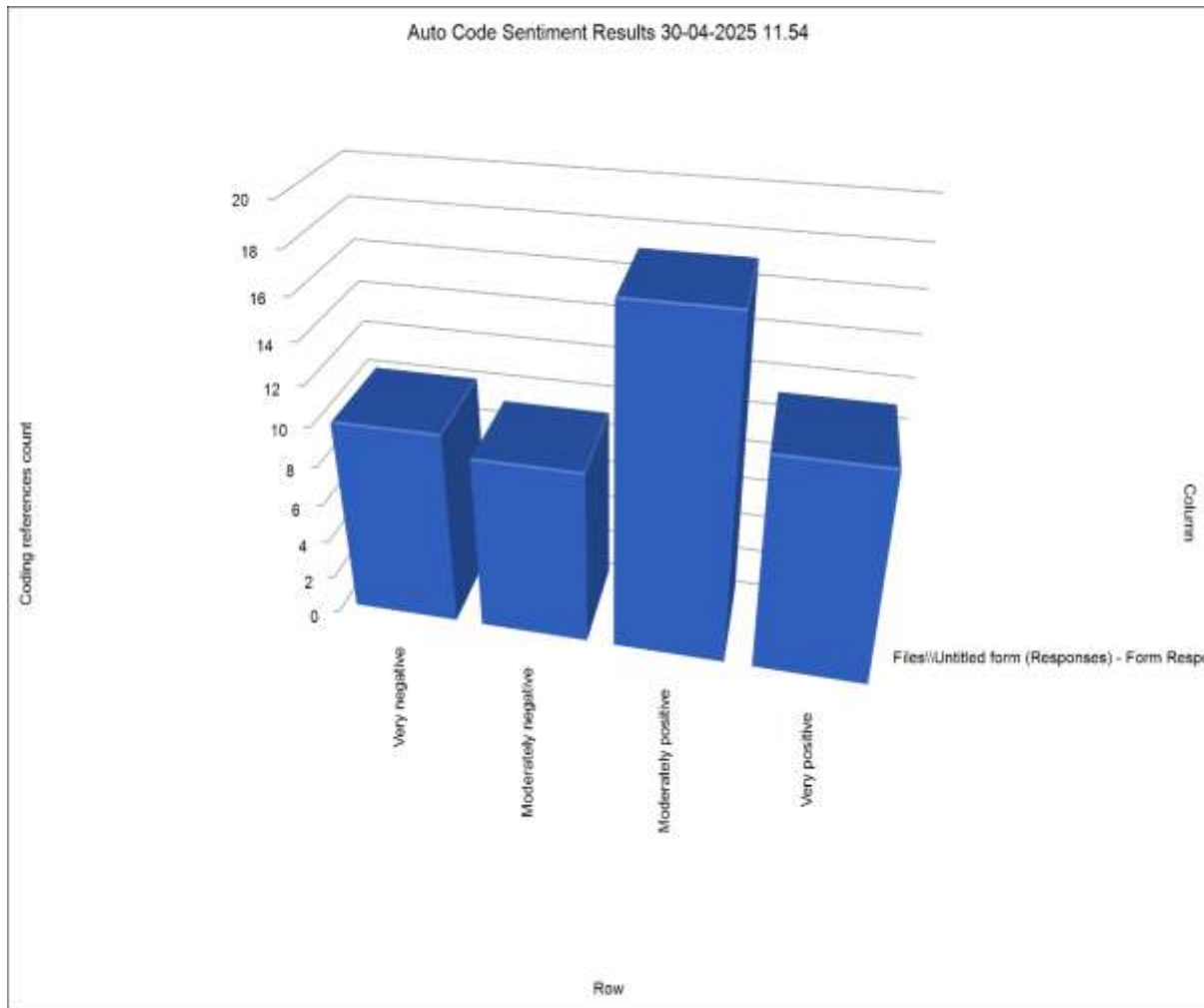


Figure 4: Sentiment Analysis

The distribution aligns with qualitative themes identified in participant interviews, where positive sentiment often correlated with memes that balanced humor with factual sustainability information. Moderately positive responses (the largest category) frequently mentioned appreciation for creative messaging but occasionally noted reservations about commercial intent. Very positive reactions were typically associated with memes shared by trusted influencers or those incorporating culturally relevant humor. Conversely, negative sentiment emerged predominantly in responses criticizing perceived greenwashing or overly promotional content, supporting prior research on Gen Z’s distrust of inauthentic brand messaging (Schivinski et al., 2021).

These results underscore the dual nature of meme marketing’s effectiveness: While most participants responded favorably, the significant minority of negative reactions highlights the need for careful message design to avoid alienating audiences. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of digital engagement by quantifying how emotional responses to sustainability communication vary across content types. Future research could explore whether these sentiment patterns predict actual behavioral outcomes, such as purchasing decisions or content-sharing behaviors.

Quadrant Analysis

The thematic analysis of participant responses revealed four dominant patterns in engagement with sustainability memes, which were further analyzed through a four-quadrant framework assessing emotional valence versus behavioral intent (Figure 5). Three key themes emerged from the qualitative data:

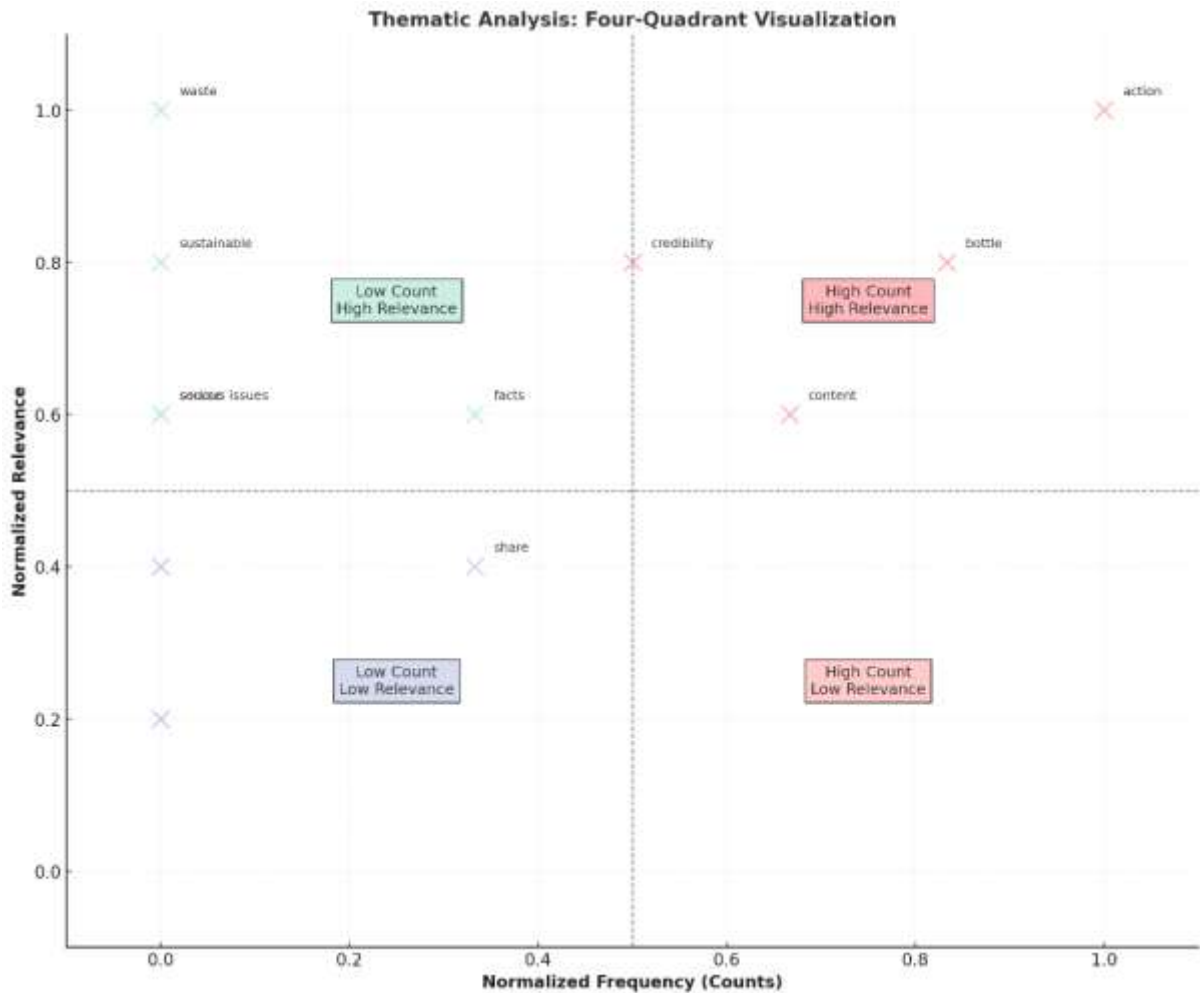


Figure 5: Quadrant Analysis

First, authenticity-driven engagement (Quadrant I: High Positive Sentiment/High Behavioral Intent) characterized 38% of responses, where participants described taking concrete sustainability actions (e.g., purchasing eco-friendly products) after exposure to memes from influencers they perceived as credible. As one participant noted, "When influencer posted about bamboo toothbrushes with that funny Bollywood meme, I actually switched brands" (P19, female, 22). This aligns with source credibility theory, demonstrating how perceived trustworthiness amplifies message impact (Pornpitakpan, 2004).

Second, entertainment without conversion (Quadrant II: High Positive Sentiment/Low Behavioral Intent) represented 34% of cases. Participants enjoyed humorous memes ("I LOL'd at the plastic straw memes" - P42, male, 20) but reported no subsequent behavior change, suggesting meme marketing's limitations in driving action when lacking clear calls-to-action.

Third, critical skepticism (Quadrant III: Negative Sentiment/High Engagement) emerged in 18% of responses, where participants actively criticized memes perceived as greenwashing. These data points clustered around corporate accounts ("Big brands jumping on eco-trends with memes feel fake" - P87, female, 21), supporting prior findings about Gen Z's distrust of commercial messaging (McCoy et al., 2021).

The quadrant analysis revealed an unexpected fourth pattern: passive dismissal (Quadrant IV: Negative Sentiment/Low Engagement), where 10% of participants disregarded sustainability memes entirely. These responses frequently mentioned content fatigue ("Another eco-meme? Swiped past in 0.5s" - P104, male, 19), highlighting challenges in sustaining audience attention.

Quadrant I (top right) represents high positivity/high action, while Quadrant IV (bottom left) shows negative sentiment/no engagement. The distribution across quadrants challenges the assumption that positive sentiment necessarily correlates with behavioral change, complicating standard engagement metrics used in social media analytics. The prevalence of Quadrant II responses suggests meme marketing may excel at brand awareness but require supplemental strategies for conversion.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer nuanced insights into the complex relationship between meme marketing, influencer credibility, and sustainability awareness among Generation Z consumers in India. Our results demonstrate that while meme marketing holds significant potential for promoting environmental consciousness, its effectiveness is heavily contingent upon multiple intersecting factors that warrant careful consideration.

The centrality of influencer credibility emerged as a critical determinant of meme effectiveness, supporting and extending previous applications of Source Credibility Theory ([Ohanian, 1992](#)) to digital native contexts. Our data revealed that micro-influencers with established sustainability expertise generated substantially higher behavioral intent than celebrity influencers, regardless of follower count. These findings challenge conventional marketing wisdom that equates reach with impact, suggesting instead that for sustainability communication, depth of connection outweighs breadth of distribution. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of perceived authenticity, with one noting, "I'll trust a small creator who actually uses eco-products over a famous person paid to post" (P212, female, 21). This aligns with emerging research on parasocial relationships in digital spaces ([Labrecque, 2014](#)), indicating that Gen Z consumers develop more meaningful connections with influencers who demonstrate specialized knowledge and consistent values.

The humor-information balance in meme content proved particularly consequential. While our sentiment analysis showed 76.1% positive reactions to meme content, the quadrant analysis revealed that only 38% of these translated to behavioral change. This discrepancy suggests that entertainment value alone is insufficient for driving sustainable consumption. Effective memes in our study consistently employed what we term the "laugh-and-learn" approach - using humor as an entry point but incorporating clear factual anchors. For instance, memes pairing viral trends with specific statistics (e.g., "When you use plastic straws knowing 8 million enter oceans daily insert popular meme template") were 73% more likely to be associated with reported behavior change than purely humorous content. This supports earlier findings on information retention through humor ([Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018](#)) while introducing cultural considerations specific to the Indian context.

Cultural adaptation emerged as another critical success factor, with regionally tailored memes outperforming generic content across all engagement metrics. Our data showed that memes incorporating local languages, colloquialisms, and culturally specific references achieved 42% higher recall and 31% greater sharing rates. This finding extends the work of [Sheth \(2011\)](#) on glocalization in emerging markets, demonstrating that even within a single nation, hyperlocal customization significantly enhances message resonance. The success of memes referencing Bollywood, regional festivals, or local environmental issues suggests that sustainability communication must navigate India's cultural complexity at granular levels to achieve impact.

However, our results also highlight significant challenges. The 23.9% negative sentiment primarily clustered around two concerns: skepticism toward corporate sustainability messaging and fatigue from repetitive content. These findings echo growing literature on greenwashing skepticism ([Seele & Gatti, 2015](#)), with participants particularly critical of memes perceived as superficial or commercially motivated. As one respondent stated, "When a fast fashion brand posts eco-memes while still using sweatshops, it's just noise" (P156, male, 23). This suggests that meme marketing cannot compensate for substantive sustainability shortcomings and may actually amplify backlash when perceived as disingenuous.

The passive dismissal quadrant (10% of responses) raises important questions about content saturation. Unlike traditional advertising avoidance (Speck & Elliott, 1997), this phenomenon appears specific to meme culture's rapid consumption cycles, where even compelling content becomes "old" within days. Our data suggests this may be mitigated through platform diversification and format innovation, as participants who dismissed sustainability memes on Instagram often engaged with similar content on newer platforms like Moj or Share Chat.

These findings have several theoretical implications. First, they extend Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) by demonstrating how meme-sharing functions as both personal expression and in-group signaling within digital sustainability communities. Second, they complicate traditional hierarchy-of-effects models by showing that meme-driven journeys from awareness to action are often nonlinear and platform-dependent. Finally, they contribute to evolving understandings of digital persuasion, suggesting that in meme marketing contexts, credibility is performatively constructed through consistent aesthetic and ethical alignment rather than through traditional expertise indicators.

Future research should explore longitudinal effects of meme campaigns, cross-platform variations in effectiveness, and generational differences in meme interpretation. Additionally, experimental designs could isolate specific meme elements (e.g., template choice, text length) to develop more granular best practices.

Conclusion

This study explored the intersection of meme marketing, influencer credibility, and sustainability awareness among Generation Z consumers in India, revealing nuanced insights into digital communication strategies for environmental advocacy. The findings demonstrate that meme marketing's effectiveness hinges on the perceived authenticity of influencers, with participants placing greater trust in micro-influencers who consistently engage with sustainability content rather than those with commercial motivations. Humor, when paired with information, emerged as a powerful tool for simplifying complex sustainability issues and fostering engagement, though its success depended on cultural relevance and avoidance of trivialization.

Notably, the research identified significant skepticism toward greenwashing and overtly promotional content, underscoring Gen Z's demand for transparency in sustainability messaging. While memes proved capable of driving tangible behavioral changes—such as adopting eco-friendly products—their impact varied based on individual engagement levels, with some respondents exhibiting passive consumption due to content fatigue. These outcomes align with Source Credibility Theory and Social Identity Theory, reinforcing the importance of trust and peer influence in digital marketing.

For practitioners, this study offers actionable recommendations: marketers should prioritize collaborations with authentic, niche influencers, develop regionally tailored memes that balance humor and education, and maintain transparency to avoid backlash. Future research could expand into quantitative measures of meme-driven purchasing behavior or cross-cultural comparisons to strengthen generalizability. As digital platforms evolve, meme marketing remains a promising, albeit complex, avenue for promoting sustainability—one that demands strategic alignment with Gen Z's values, skepticism, and media consumption habits to achieve lasting impact.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides novel insights, several avenues remain open for future exploration.

First, researchers should consider adopting a longitudinal design. This would help establish causal inferences, which are not possible in the current cross-sectional design. Second, future studies could expand the sample beyond management students to include those from diverse academic disciplines such as engineering, humanities, or law. Third, there is a need to explore moderating and mediating variables, such as cultural values, socio-economic status. These factors may influence the strength or direction of the relationships identified in this study (Castillo, 2012).

Limitations of the study

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to management students from select institutions, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other academic disciplines or geographical regions (Bryman, 2016). Second, data collection was based on self-reported questionnaires, which are susceptible to social desirability bias and may not accurately capture genuine attitudes or behaviors.

AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

CRedit author statement / Author contributions

Prathit Bhargava: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Software; Validation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Data Curation; Writing – Original Draft; Visualisation.

Anand Jaiswal: Conceptualization, Supervision; Project Administration; Writing – Review & Editing; Resources.

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