

MEMES, MINDS, & MARKETING:  
HOW GENERATION Z PERCEIVES AND PROCESSES  
MEMETIC ADVERTISEMENTS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement of the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Media Research and Practice: Strategic Communication  
2022

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## ABSTRACT

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### Memes, Minds, & Marketing: How Generation Z Perceives and Processes Memetic Advertisements

This mixed-method research explores how the digitally native Generation Z relies on the use of cognitive heuristics and heuristic information processing strategies to interpret and contextualize internet memes intended specifically for advertising. Major companies have recently begun hiring content creators who specialize in creating memetic (i.e., meme-based) advertisements in an attempt to broaden their following among younger social media users. Despite this development, scholarly work on memetic advertising is scarce and no previous studies have directly linked internet memes to cognitive heuristics. This dissertation attempts to fill these gaps, with a specific eye toward the generation that is most receptive to online memetic communication.

Qualitative focus group evidence suggests that Generation Z social media users primarily rely upon memes for humor and social connectedness and employ multiple credibility heuristics when evaluating advertising memes. Quantitative experimental evidence suggests that familiar brand names are regarded more favorably than unfamiliar brand names due to name recognition and heuristic associations with brand reputation. Specialized knowledge structures and understanding of ongoing cultural narratives are implicated in digital natives' heuristic processing of memetic content. Ultimately, this dissertation provides foundational insights into how members of Generation Z perceive and process the memes they encounter on social media and applies these insights to prescriptive advice for brands seeking to use internet memes as advertisements.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Margaret Vardeman, my 98-year-old grandmother. Ten years ago, I made her promise me that she would not leave us until after I earned my doctorate. She has kept her promise despite two heart attacks, type II diabetes, and COVID-19. She has never willingly used a computer in her life and would not understand a word of this dissertation. I dedicate it to her.

Thank you to Robert Vardeman, my father. I hope I make him proud.

Thank you to all of my friends, here, there, and everywhere. I could not have done this without their ongoing support and encouragement.

Thank you to the Department of Advertising, Public Relations & Design at CU Boulder, which took me in as a young, naïve M.A. four years ago and has been a supportive, collaborative environment every step of the way. Being among the department's first doctoral cohort has gone from thrilling, to mundane, to all of the existential crises one has when working through a Ph.D. program. My memories will eventually turn sweet and nostalgic. I am honored to have been here during the early days of the department and hope to be a worthy alumnus.

Thank you to Dr. Erin Willis. During my second year in this program, I was possessed by the crazy notion that I wanted to teach, from scratch, a Psychology of Advertising course to undergraduates. Erin was instrumental in making my dream a reality. I hope this inspires future doctoral students to propose new classes in their areas of specialty. It can be done!

Thank you to the Department of Mass Communication at Towson University for recognizing my abilities as a teacher-scholar and offering me a tenure-track position. This prospect helped me power through the more overwhelming parts of the dissertation process by giving me a concrete incentive to cross the doctoral finish line on time.

Thank you to my committee, without whom there would be no finish line to cross.

Thank you to Dr. Harsha Ganga. Harsha helped me make my Master's research publishable and was my first collaborator after I moved to Colorado. Our lunch on the Hill with Dani Quichocho when she and I were prospective students is one I will not soon forget.

Thank you to Dr. Toby Hopp. As professor, DGS, and sounding board for research-related questions, Toby has helped me in countless ways throughout this program while always making me laugh with his wry sense of humor.

Thank you to Dr. Kelty Logan. Her advertising expertise never fails to impress me, and her vibrant personality never fails to keep me on my feet. I hope she forgives me for jinxing the final exam for her first-year ad class.

Thank you to Dr. Ben Shear. Ben taught two of the most enriching methods classes I have taken and can do more with R than I could ever hope to. His willingness to serve as the extradepartmental member of my committee means a great deal to me.

And last but certainly not least, a huge thank you to Dr. Erin Schauster, my advisor and committee chair. Her support and advice throughout the last four years—from collaborating on research, to preparing me for comprehensive exams, to helping me tame this wild dissertation—have been invaluable. I cannot adequately express my appreciation for Erin taking me on as her first Ph.D. student. This may be the first dissertation she has chaired, but it will not be the last. She is an inspiration.

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## INTRODUCTION

The distracted boyfriend turning to ogle another girl as she walks away. The blonde woman pointing and yelling at a white cat. The cartoon man wiping his brow as he sweats the difficult choice of pushing one red button or the other. For anyone who has spent even a limited amount of time on social media, these are all familiar examples of popular *internet memes*.

Shifman (2014) defines internet memes as:

(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users (p. 41).

The appeal of internet memes is far-reaching. Social networking site (SNS) users of all ages appreciate them, but they are most popular among younger demographics (Enberg et al., 2021). Generation Z—roughly designated as individuals born between 1997 and 2012—have a particular affinity for internet memes due to having been socialized online to a greater extent than any previous generation. By extension, they appear to be more receptive to the messages contained within memes (Madden, 2019). Seeking to capitalize on this, major companies are beginning to hire employees who specialize in creating *memetic* (i.e., meme-based) content to advertise products and services to potential consumers. Given that internet memes are most celebrated among SNS users under the age of 25, it follows that these companies are preferentially targeting Generation Z in their memetic advertising campaigns (Lemée, 2021).

To date, there has been little academic research on memetic advertising (e.g., Chuah et al., 2020; Kao et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Sharma, 2018) despite a strong showing in popular press and other Web-based sources (e.g., Carr, 2021; Enberg et al., 2021; Lechner, 2020; Rao, 2021; Tiffany, 2021). As such, there is much that is not yet understood about this approach to digital advertising. Of specific interest in this dissertation is how Generation Z individuals use

*heuristics* (i.e., adaptive mental shortcuts or rules of thumb that enable humans to make complex judgments quickly and at little expense to their finite cognitive resources; Gigerenzer, 2001) to process the internet memes they encounter on SNSs, and how this automatic information processing style (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999) influences their attitudes toward memetic advertisements and the brands that employ this emerging strategy.

Content oversaturation motivates this focus on heuristics and heuristic processing. It is undeniable that the Web has become an extremely cluttered virtual space. Regardless of the generation to which one belongs or the type and form of message one encounters online, people are naturally predisposed to employ heuristic information processing strategies when confronted with more content than their minds can thoroughly apprehend (e.g., Kahneman, 2011; Simon, 1955). However, scholars in communication and psychology believe that as a result of growing up during an unprecedented era of technological advancement, Generation Z's cognitive structures (i.e., mental frameworks that organize and store information about a given topic) have been particularly affected by constant internet connectivity and habitual SNS use (Klimmt et al., 2018; Vorderer et al., 2018). Since Generation Z has demonstrated a natural fluency in the language of memetics and internet trends (Mendez-Reguera & Cabrera, 2020), it stands to reason that specialized cognitive structures may be facilitating their knowledgeability. Evidence indicates that, when viewing memes, SNS users make use of *mental models* that allow them to process, organize, and comprehend incoming information (Abdel-Raheem, 2020). Mental representations of mutually reinforcing memetic content are referred to as *co-adapted meme-complexes* (Dawkins, 1976), or *memeplexes* (Blackmore, 1999). It has been posited that the memes stored within these cognitive structures are informed by ongoing cultural narratives that guide memes' production and dissemination and simplify their subsequent comprehension (de

Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, & Literat, 2021). This simplification of comprehension appears to be a consequence of heuristic processing.

This research aims to examine how these cognitive factors intermingle, with a specific eye toward how Generation Z perceives and processes internet memes intended as advertisements. Thus, operating under the assumptions that (1) Generation Z are naturally fluent processors of memetic content as a result of the point in human history at which they were born; and (2) the information overload and content clutter that are endemic to SNS platforms and to the Web in general have led internet users to process the majority of the information they encounter online heuristically, this dissertation seeks to examine how Generation Z internet users display evidence of heuristic processing when viewing memetic advertisements. Given that Generation Z is currently between 10 and 25 years old and will soon rise to greater prominence, understanding how they cognitively process the information they encounter online has implications not only for advertisers trying to capitalize on this compact form of messaging, but also for society at large.

Owing to the paucity of extant scholarly research on memetic advertising and the absence of studies linking internet memes to heuristic processing, an exploratory sequential mixed-method design was employed for the present research (Cresswell, 2014). A series of qualitative focus groups was first conducted to explore Generation Z participants' perceptions of manifest memetic advertising content. These focus groups provided foundational insights into how *digital natives* (i.e., citizens of developed nations born after the introduction of the World Wide Web, Prensky, 2001) perceive and leverage heuristic cues embedded in memes, how they engage with memes relative to other SNS users, and how cultural and brand narratives guide their cognitive processing of memes. Data from these focus group sessions informed the design of an online, quantitative experiment to test whether the use of a specific cognitive heuristic related to brand

name recognition and reputation influenced participants' attitudes toward memetic advertisements containing either real or fictitious brand names.

The structure of this dissertation is as follows. Chapter 1 introduces *memetics* (i.e., the academic study of memes), examines why traditional memetics failed to gain traction among social scientists during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and argues that a new, digital memetics has viably superseded traditional memetics in recent years. Chapter 2 traces the practice of memetic advertising from antiquity to the internet boom, providing necessary historical context. Chapter 3 introduces contemporary memetic advertising and outlines considerations for internet virality and memetic success. Chapter 4 focuses on the characteristics of Generation Z and, as a result of their online socialization and affinity for memes, positions them at the center of digital memetic advertising. Chapter 5 gives an overview of heuristic processing, identifies multiple heuristics of import, and emphasizes the cognitive components driving the present research. From there, Chapter 6 details the research methods for both the qualitative and quantitative phases of this dissertation, Chapter 7 provides a summary of qualitative findings, Chapter 8 provides a summary of quantitative results, and Chapter 9 provides a comprehensive discussion of the insights drawn from the present research and presents its theoretical and practical implications. A brief conclusion ends the dissertation.

## CHAPTER 1: MEMES AND MEMETICS

The term "meme" was introduced into the lexicon by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Taken from the Greek word *mimeme*, meaning that which is imitated, Dawkins defined a meme as a "unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*" that is passed from one individual to another (p. 249, italics in original). In his conceptualization, memes are units of replicable cultural material that are comparable to genes as units of replicable biological material. Just as genes fight for survival via biological propagation, memes fight for survival via cultural propagation. The fittest endure while the rest are removed through processes of natural selection. Hofstadter (1983) elaborates on Dawkins' fundamentally Darwinistic view:

Memes, like genes, are susceptible to variation or distortion—the analogue of mutation. Various mutations of a meme will have to compete with one another, as well as with other memes, for attention, that is, for brain resources in terms of both space and time devoted to that meme (p. 18).

Memes are, therefore, an inherently social-psychological concept. They require cognition and consciousness to be understood and they depend upon human culture for their subsistence (Castelfranchi, 2001). Within the broad parameters of this definition, everything cultural that has potential to catch on and be recognized in popular consciousness is a meme. Melodies, slogans, catchphrases, fashions, celebrities, car designs, and images are all memes that can propagate by moving from one brain to another (Blackmore, 1999). For Dawkins, an avowed atheist, the concept of God is an especially fit meme because it has enjoyed a longevity that has spanned millennia (McGrath, 2004).

Dawkins' emphasis on imitation undergirds much of the scholarly thought pertaining to the spread and replication of memes. He explains that memes reproduce by leaping from brain to brain, undergoing small mutations with each passage. The material contained within the meme is

therefore not transferred identically from host to host but altered via mechanisms of imitation through which humans naturally receive and transmit information. As such, a meme is altered gradually over time. In this way, on a macro level, human culture varies from generation to generation in much the same way as the human gene pool does. In her book *The Meme Machine*, a detailed theoretical unpacking of Dawkins' meme-gene analogy, Blackmore (1999) argues that our ability to imitate and our propensity to do so is what makes human intelligence special.

When I say 'imitation' I mean to include passing on information by using language, reading, and instruction, as well as other complex skills and behaviours. Imitation includes any kind of copying of ideas and behaviours from one person to another. So when you hear a story and pass on the gist to someone else, you have copied a meme. The important point is that the emphasis on imitation allows us to rule out all kinds of things which cannot be passed on and therefore cannot be counted as memes (p. 43).

In addition to clarifying Blackmore's definition of imitation, this excerpt provides additional guidance as to what can be considered a meme and what should not be. As she emphatically exclaims, "Not everything is a meme!" (p. 42). Behaviors acquired through classical and operant conditioning are not memes, nor are behaviors acquired through contagion. Yawning and laughter, for example, are highly contagious actions, but they are not memetic because they are innate and therefore not products of imitation. When someone yawns and this triggers a yawn from someone else in close proximity, that person is not conforming to Thorndike's (1898) definition of imitation as "learning to do an act from seeing it done" (p. 50). Rather, humans are born pre-equipped to yawn and the individual is simply doing so as the result of an automatic stimulus-response process. By contrast, Blackmore argues that everything that has been learned by true imitation (e.g., vocal sounds, body postures, specific ways of manipulating physical objects) *is* memetic, and this forms the basis of her theory.

The concepts of imitation and replication frequently commingle in the memetics literature. Dawkins' original definition of a meme (1976) was premised on the biological concept

of a replicator, or a system that makes copies of itself with assistance from another system (Heylighen & Chielens's, 2009). Memes, as should be clear from Blackmore's (1999) preceding definition, copy themselves when one person imitates another. According to Dawkins, all good replicators—be they genetic or memetic—possess three characteristics:

1. They need to have *longevity*. The longer a replicating pattern survives, the higher the likelihood that it will be copied. Heylighen and Chielens (2009) describe a sand drawing as a poor memetic replicator due to its high probability of erasure. Text chiseled in stone is considerably more permanent.
2. They need to be *fecund*. That is, they need to be able to proliferate quickly, efficiently, and yield large numbers of copies.
3. They need to have *copying-fidelity*. If a meme mutates too quickly or dramatically, the original essence of the meme will be overshadowed by its mutations. Thus, the more accurately and precisely the original meme is copied (or imitated), the likelier it is to be recognizable after having been transmitted to multiple hosts. It is expected that all memes will undergo small mutations with each transmission, but the most robust replicators are those that have been imitated faithfully.

### **Criticisms of Dawkins and Traditional Memetics**

Dawkins' meme-gene analogy (1976), while superficially appealing, has not yielded much empirical support. By and large, the subfield of memetics has been criticized for overextending its biological parallels and for downplaying the agentic role that people play in the evolution and transmission of memes (e.g., Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018).

Numerous problems with the theorizing in the seminal memetics literature have been noted, perhaps the most significant of which is that the meme as defined does not offer a clear

methodology for researchers who wish to investigate memetic phenomena (Jameson, 2011). Esteves and Meikle (2015) comment that "rather than adding anything new or useful to our understanding of communication, Dawkins's word most often works as an unacknowledged synonym of a perfectly good word that already existed and that still works just fine. That word is 'idea'" (p. 563). Indeed, Dawkins himself uses the word "idea" almost interchangeably with his own term. "If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain" (Dawkins, 1976, p. 172), he writes by way of a general explanation for how memes travel from person to person. If we accept Esteves and Meikle's criticism, the challenge for scholars becomes daunting, as the diffusion of ideas is a notoriously difficult phenomenon to measure (e.g., Gick & Holyoak, 1987). An unignorable reason for this difficulty is that the memetics scholars of the late 20th century failed to specify a concrete memetic unit (Blackmore, 1999). Brodie (1996) cites Beethoven's fifth symphony as an example of a meme. Dennett (1995) argues that it is the *first four notes* of Beethoven's fifth symphony that constitute a meme. A reader might understandably be confused. Is the symphony the meme or are the notes that comprise the symphony the meme? How does this distinction transfer to non-musical memes to which notes and movements do not apply? If we embrace Dawkins' claim that God is a meme, we cannot equate the concept of God with the first four notes of Beethoven's fifth symphony just because both are ostensibly examples of memes. This issue of measurement contributes greatly to memes' reputation among social scientists as a "conceptual troublemaker" (Shifman, 2013, p. 362) and calls for a retooling of memes' overall definition.

Equally problematic is the often-overlooked disjunction between the processes of sexual

reproduction and those of the social transference of thoughts and ideas (Jameson, 2011). Dawkins' meme-gene analogy (1976) provides a convenient and easily comprehensible metaphor, but as Jameson points out, "there is no reason to expect that a cultural replicator would evolve the same sexual replicating machinery" (p. 8). Blackmore (1999) acknowledges that while we know how human bodies copy and store genes, our understanding does not extend to the mechanism that copies and stores memes. The human brain must be the site of meme copying and storage, but cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists are challenged to this day by the precise structure and utility of the brain's complex functional networks (e.g., Power et al., 2011; Stanley et al., 2013). Further, the distinction between the brain as a physical entity and the mind as an intangible abstraction that brain functions give rise to (e.g., Fischbach, 1992) calls the matter of human agency into question. People cannot choose their genes, but they—individually and collectively—can choose their memes. Brodie (1996) and Lynch (1996) both argue that memes are viruses of the *mind*, but they scarcely allow for agentic control over which memes get processed and which get discarded. Ideas are not actual viruses, but to extend the analogy, much has been written about the ways in which people can consciously and unconsciously inoculate themselves against certain ideas (e.g., Banas & Rains, 2010; McGuire, 1961).

Blackmore (1999) also notes that even though Dawkins' concept of memes is rooted in the Darwinian tradition, memetic evolution as described is essentially Lamarckian. Biologically, this pertains to the difference between genotype (i.e., set of genes) and phenotype (i.e., observable expressions of genes). In a time when trait heritability was not yet understood, Lamarck speculated that phenotypic expressions could be passed on to progeny. We know today that this not true. German biologist August Weismann famously cut off the tails of hundreds of mice over several generations and found that, despite this, each new generation of mice was still

born with fully functional tails (e.g., Hurst, 1999); thus, alteration of phenotype does not directly affect genotypic transmission. Since memes are not fully analogous to genes, they do not possess a complementary genotype/phenotype split. This inconvenient theoretical snag created a rift between *externalists*, (i.e., memeticists who believe that memes are directly observable and do not exist outside of the physical artifacts themselves, Gatherer, 1998), and *internalists* (i.e., memeticists who believe that memes are cognitive manifestations that are created and held in memory, Heylighen, 1999). By way of reconciling this disagreement, Blackmore (2003) embraces both externalist and internalist viewpoints, arguing that memes necessarily have both a cultural and cognitive component. Returning to the language of imitation introduced above, the direct expression of an idea or action is what must be copied rather than the imperceptible mental activity from which the idea or action originated. Blackmore uses the example of an unwritten family recipe that gets handed down from generation to generation. Because there is no formal template, each successive iteration of the recipe is imitated as opposed to the original concoction. All memes, Blackmore argues, must be imitated in this way.

Naturally, these criticisms cast doubt on the discipline of memetics. As a result, the subfield has failed to gain traction among social scientists, many of whom argue that it "rests on incoherent and baldly conjectural assertions" (Poulshock, 2002, p. 70). Thus, the idea of a meme as a selfish replicator analogous to genetic material amounts to armchair philosophizing and is considered metaphorically flimsy and scientifically inadequate (Vada, 2015). Because of this, Dawkins has distanced himself from the meme-gene analogy in recent years, claiming that he never intended for his metaphor to be taken literally (Burman, 2012).

### **Memes in the Internet Age**

Much of the initial scholarly writing on memetics (e.g., Blackmore, 1999; Dawkins,

1976; Dennett, 1995; Durham, 1991; Lynch, 1996) was published prior to the advent of Web 2.0 in the Y2K era, which signaled the introduction of social networking sites (SNSs) and recast the internet as an interactive space. In contrast to the one-way conduit of information that characterized Web 1.0, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2016) describe Web 2.0 as "a collection of web services that facilitate interaction of web users with a site to create user-generated content and encouraging certain behaviours online such as community or social network participation and user-generated content, mashups, content rating, use of widgets and tagging" (p. 677). Since this innovation occurred, the popular conception of memes has changed substantially (Huntington, 2016). In the internet age, memes are commonly understood as digital artifacts propagated through SNSs in which given texts and images are easily copied, changed, and repackaged (Shifman, 2012).

Distinct from Dawkins' (1976) original conceptualization, internet memes are not single cultural entities like slogans or jingles, but collections of content that enjoy widespread circulation and exposure among diverse audiences on various SNS platforms (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021). These memes are visual and intertextual, referencing a broad array of multimedia sources and real-world events (D'Angelo, 2009). As such, they have been called "the mediators of cultural evolution" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 1889). At face value, memes may appear insignificant or superficial, and are often dismissed as silly, esoteric pieces of ephemera that are shared and soon forgotten. However, while convenient to characterize memes and meme producers as frivolous, both continue to influence SNS culture and are thought to exemplify its underlying perspectives (e.g., Milner, 2013). Because of this, Shifman (2014) argues that meme research should not be concerned with tracking the original piece of content that gives rise to its numerous derivatives, per se, but rather should focus on exploring the discourses that memes

give rise to and the sociocultural connections they foster. Thus, in line with both the externalist and internalist viewpoints in traditional memetics, the assumption that internet memes require both interpersonal and intrapersonal processes undergirds much of the scholarship on internet memetics (Shifman, 2014). This now represents a growing subfield that is distinct from Dawkinsian/Darwinian memetics and is relatively unencumbered by that discipline's pseudoscientific criticisms (Vada, 2015).

Importantly, the concept of imitation emphasized by Dawkins (1976) and Blackmore (1999) retains its center-stage position in internet memetics, as internet memes are characterized by small but significant changes made to various templates that remain recognizable despite their alterations (Shifman, 2014). Here, Blackmore's (1999) exclamation, "Not everything is a meme!" (p. 42) can be unpacked more definitively. While everyday Web users might colloquially refer to any message or joke that gets passed around SNSs as a meme, this is an overgeneralization that strips the term of its fundamental attribute of imitation. For example, a topically relevant or amusing *tweet* (i.e., a short message posted to the SNS Twitter) might get shared across platforms and reach an audience of millions, but it cannot be classified as a meme unless a key element of it has been deliberately repurposed from a preexisting and identifiable source or if it follows a pre-established format or pattern. Similarly, a photo, image, or video clip that enjoys comparably wide circulation is only memetic if it knowingly imitates another photo, image, or video clip, respectively. With this premise in mind, Shifman (2014) advances the following definition of an internet meme.

(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users (p. 41).

Shifman's definition is adopted throughout this dissertation, with the caveat that the word "meme" is used in reference to both the group of digital items (e.g., the distracted boyfriend meme) and to single items within the group (e.g., a specific iteration of the distracted boyfriend meme). This allays concerns about the lack of a well-defined memetic unit addressed in the previous section by providing two distinct levels of measurement for the same overarching concept. Within this framework, one can investigate a meme as a body as well as investigate the individual components comprising that body.

### **Types of Internet Memes**

Shifman's definition (2014) also provides considerable flexibility to memetic communication. Any group of digital items that meets her three criteria can be regarded as an internet meme, regardless of format or modality. Just as the Web is overflowing with multimedia of every shape, size, and color, it follows that memes also come in several varieties. Three of the most prominent are described below.

**Image macros.** The most common and widely shared meme format on SNSs is the *image macro*, a broad term describing stationary images that contain overlaid text that has been deliberately added (KnowYourMeme, 2021). Image macros are named after *macro instructions*, which are "scripts that save time and effort for a programmer by replacing a lengthy or repetitive task with a set of defined procedures" (Brideau & Berret, 2014, p. 309). This applies to memes because online meme generators take user text and automatically place it over a preexisting image in consistent and standardized ways. A Web user can visit a meme generator, choose a certain meme template, and input the new text that they want displayed on top of that image. The meme generator then displays the text in the same font and in the same location from one meme to the next, producing a sense of unity that makes all memes of that particular type appear related. For example, compare the two "philosoraptor" memes in Figure 1. Both employ the

same base image (i.e., a cartoon drawing of a dinosaur that appears deep in thought), but while the overlaid text is different in the two images, the text's font and placement remain the same. Additionally, the aim of the text—to make a cheeky, pseudo-intellectual joke in question form, as if the dinosaur were a philosopher pondering the complexities of life—is identical. It is this harmonious relationship from one image macro to the next that endows it with the memetic qualities that meet Shifman's criteria (2014).

### **Figure 1**

*Two Examples of a Typical "Philosoraptor" Image Macro*



Many image macros consist of the three distinct elements present in Figure 1: a base or background image, top text that sets up the joke or message, and bottom text that delivers either the joke's punchline or the crux of the argument (Brideau & Berret, 2014). However, more generally, any stationary base image with overlaid text may be considered an image macro; following the top text/bottom text format is not necessary. Other popular forms of image macros include LOLCats (i.e., photos of cats with deliberately misspelled captions that generally reference what is occurring in the picture), demotivational posters (i.e., parodies of motivational posters often consisting of an image framed in black with a white-font caption intended to humorously discourage moral strength and to diminish the reader's self-esteem), and reaction images (i.e., photos of people responding to something, typically with humorous facial expressions and added text reflecting that emotion), though many other types exist and are too

numerous to detail here (KnowYourMeme, 2021; Shifman, 2014). Image macros are the most often shared and most frequently replicated type of memes because they require limited technological skill to modify and are quickly digested by SNS users (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017). Image macros are also among the oldest varieties of internet meme, dating back to 2004 and gaining popularity throughout the second half of the 2000s decade (KnowYourMeme, 2021).

**Videos.** The advent of user-friendly video-sharing websites like YouTube in the mid-2000s ushered in a new era of user-generated, bottom-up content on the Web (Shifman, 2012). No longer restricted by technological barriers, users could record, upload, and share their homemade video content more easily than had been previously possible. Furthermore, as the popularity of YouTube continued to grow, so did the potential for each user's video content to reach a large number of viewers. Consequently, individuals who were previously considered consumers and audiences in the Web 1.0 era were able to transform themselves into producers and distributors once Web 2.0 came to fruition (Lessig, 2008). Over the span of only a few years, YouTube became symbolic of participatory media culture (Van Dijk, 2009) and therefore became fertile ground for memetic activity.

Abiding by the three definitional criteria for memes outlined in the previous section, a memetic video can be classified as any clip uploaded to YouTube, TikTok, or similar video-hosting website that gets parodied or imitated by other users as a result of having achieved viral success. This can be accomplished either by copying the elements of the original video or by re-editing that video's footage (Shifman, 2012). One of the earliest YouTube memes was "Leave Britney Alone!," a 2007 video uploaded by user Chris Crocker. In the video, Crocker—a young, feminine, gay male—expressively decried the mass media and general public's constant heckling of popular music star Britney Spears. The video's histrionic tone was instrumental to its appeal

and spread. Numerous direct parodies and imitations appeared online, often dutifully copying the visual aesthetics and setting of Crocker's original video (Shifman, 2014). Other recognizable video memes include the Nyan Cat (Shifman, 2014), the dramatic chipmunk (Benaim, 2018), and the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, the last of which spawned 17 million unique imitations (Burgess, Miller, & Moore, 2017).

**GIFs.** An abbreviation of Graphics Interchange Format, GIFs are brief (i.e., several seconds or less) animated images that loop and automatically replay themselves (Kanai, 2016). GIFs have been present in Web settings since the early 1990s. Similar to reaction image macros, GIFs frequently become memes when used as a reaction to other Web content (Miltner & Highfield, 2017). While nonetheless a prominent form of memetic communication, GIFs become memes less often than image macros and videos due to the somewhat more sophisticated technological ability required to produce a GIF (Miltner & Highfield, 2017).

**Summary.** While by no means an all-encompassing categorization of the varieties of memes that exist in cyberspace, image macros, videos, and GIFs represent the three most familiar and prevailing on SNSs (Shifman, 2014). Owing to how easily created and shared they are, image macros will be the focus of this dissertation. Unless otherwise noted, henceforth the terms "meme" and "image macro" will be used interchangeably while videos, GIFs, and other types of memes will be identified specifically. With theoretical and typological overviews in place for memes in general, let us now focus on memes intended specifically for advertising, beginning with their historical context.

## CHAPTER 2: A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEMETIC ADVERTISING

An exhaustive history of memetic advertising is difficult, if not impossible, to recount. Chief among the complicating factors is the meme's status as a "conceptual troublemaker" (Shifman, 2013, p. 362) discussed in Chapter 1. The inconsistencies from scholar to scholar, and from scholar to layperson, regarding the formal definition of a meme make the task of tracing memetic advertisements through the centuries substantially trickier than, for instance, the similar task of tracing print advertisements through the centuries. What constitutes a print advertisement is commonly agreed upon; what constitutes a meme (much less a memetic advertisement) is a point of contention. Thus, the historical details that follow may in some cases pertain more to the series of events that were necessary to produce a cultural and technological landscape in which advertisements and deliberate imitations could thrive than to memetic advertisements specifically.

If we subscribe to the criticism advanced by Esteves and Meikle (2015) that Dawkins' conceptualization of a meme (1976) is nothing more than a dressed-up synonym of the word "idea," a history of memetic advertisements would necessarily date back further than the earliest human writings. It is reasonable to assume that before those earliest instances of symbols being engraved in Sumerian tablets, people had ideas that spread via word-of-mouth (WOM). Memes are commonly understood to be fragments of culture and, as such, the advancement of oral traditions from one generation to the next can be considered a memetic process. The extent to which oral self-promotion played a role in prehistoric society, however, is unclear. The genesis of marketing practice likely occurred when ancient tribes grew beyond their insular, self-sufficient origins and bartering for goods such as food, animal furs, and weapons became necessary. As tribes continued to increase in population and converge with other tribes, trades

emerged whereby specialized craftsmen and artisans began peddling their wares and competing with similar vendors—an act accomplished through WOM and via the creation of branding and brand reputation (Presbrey, 1929). Kremers (2017) has referred to WOM as "the oldest type of marketing we know" (p. 1), pointing to its effectiveness as a means of interpersonal communication. Even so, this early form of oral salesmanship cannot be called advertising, *per se*, even as it sowed the seeds for the future advertising industry.

### **Historical Development of Memes as Cultural Artifacts**

Instances of what might more accurately be called advertisements began to appear during the Bronze Age, around roughly 2250 BCE (Beard, 2017). Moore and Reed (2008) argue that "brands and branding have existed for as long as it is possible to trace artefacts of human existence" (p. 419) and provide numerous examples of square seals impressed into stone and bronze by craftsmen who worked in the Indus Valley during that time. These seals, which most often depicted animals or geometric shapes, are thought to have been for trademarking and have been excavated from various archaeological sites throughout ancient Sumer. According to Wolpert (2000), the purpose of these seals was to communicate "the identity of the sender of a certain piece of merchandise, or the authority allocated by an individual or state department to a particular agent who carried the seal impression" (p. 188). Goods bearing these seals were transported throughout the region with the express intention of advertising their creators. A brand's symbol or logo is an inherently memetic concept, ripe with potential for imitation and parody. Documenting the extent to which such brand seals and logos were imitated and parodied in ancient civilizations is beyond the present research, but commercial branding nonetheless dates back several millennia and has since been inextricable from advertising. It is further believed that Greek potters in the Iron Age used trademarks to differentiate between competing

brands, and that point-of-sale advertisements are engraved on the walls of ancient Pompeii and Herculaneum (Beard, 2017).

A major leap forward occurred during the Han Dynasty in China (206 BCE to 220 AD) with the invention of paper. Following this were the world's first advertisements containing pictures and words (Eckhardt & Bengtsson, 2010). Approximately one thousand years later, Bi Sheng—an 11th-century Chinese artisan and engineer—invented movable type technology, which in turn produced product wrappers, banners, lanterns, and pictures that were all used for advertising and promotion (McDonough & Egoff, 2000). Movable type was more famously pioneered in Europe in the 1440s by German inventor Johannes Gutenberg, and this is where most formal histories of mass communication begin, despite the technology having already been present in China for four centuries (Tungate, 2013). Gutenberg's press nevertheless streamlined the process and kickstarted the Printing Revolution. From the mid-15th century onward, typed paper has remained a ubiquitous medium in most societies. Beard (2017) comments that advertising clutter, far from a modern state of affairs, became a problem in London almost immediately after movable type reached English shores, with tack-ups and handbills soon covering most available public spaces in taverns, town halls, and cathedrals.

### **Trade Cards: The First True Memetic Advertisements?**

The early 1600s saw the introduction of *trade cards* (later referred to as *shopkeepers' bills* or *tradesmen's bills*), small square or rectangular precursors to business cards which often contained ornate drawings, maps, and brand logos for retailers (Berg & Clifford, 2007). Trade cards were printed in variable sizes and often issued to customers to remind them of having shopped at specific businesses, as well as to inform them of newly available products. These trade cards would typically exchange hands numerous times, traveling from shopkeeper to

servant to master and mistress, thereby guaranteeing "the cumulative social impact of these cards and the advertisement-images they bore" (Kim, 2002, p. 139).

Most commonly circulated in London and Paris, trade cards were often expensive to produce, visually elaborate, and intended to persuade customers to return (Beard, 2017). In this way, trade cards may represent the first genuinely memetic form of advertising. Sellers were quick to jump on the trade card bandwagon, imitating the basic card-stock template and retooling it for their own purposes. Importantly, trade cards were not intended for mass advertising, but rather to closely target consumers living within a close radius of the retailer in question. They also functioned to garner attention from tourists and international buyers who might return home and further circulate the cards or provide the retailer with good WOM. "The point of reference was the shop, not a prior advertisement. It is claimed that the trade card related to a more genteel way of advertising, a way of promoting goods through an image of refinement and taste" (Berg & Clifford, 2007, p. 150).

Although trade cards may have existed previously, the earliest known example was produced in 1622 by French hatmaker George Marceau. As can be seen from Marceau's design (Figure 2), trade cards bore illustrations from the beginning. Wood cuts, as in Marceau's card, gradually gave way to engravings throughout the 1700s and 1800s, which allowed artists the luxury of drawing finer lines and imbuing their work with greater detail (Berg & Clifford, 2007). Over time, trade cards became one of the most popular types of ephemera, and many collections—mostly from post-1800 United States and England—still survive today (e.g., Burdick, 1939; Jay, 1987).

Trade cards represent an important extension not only of the history of memetic advertising, but of the history of advertising in general. Art historians and theorists have mainly

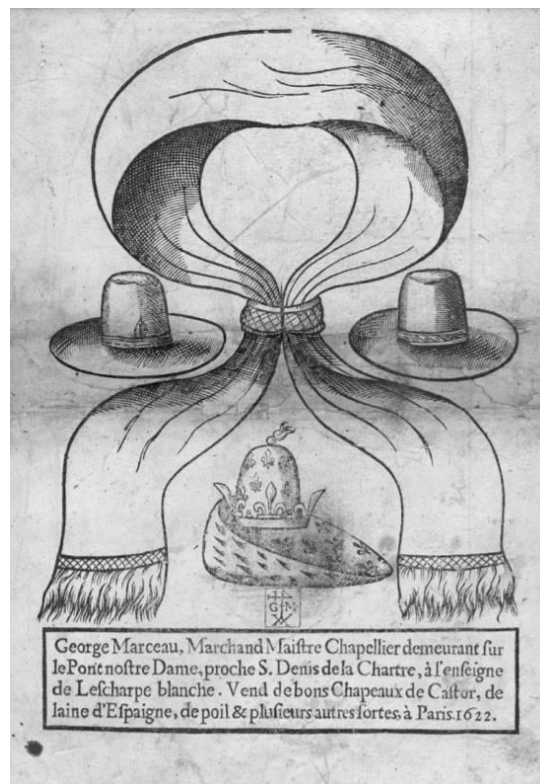
concentrated on the development and proliferation of advertising through newspapers. These newspaper ads were, to some scholars' way of thinking, so banal that they eventually gave rise to the more vibrant and creative advertising imagery of the 20th century (Wischermann, 2000).

Trade cards, however, tell a somewhat different story.

Trade cards offered the retailer the opportunity to educate his or her public, making the new familiar and therefore accessible. Trade cards taught customers how to appreciate new inventions that added to ease, comfort and glamour. George Burrow used his patent knee buckles, 'so constructed as not to catch the stockings or cloaths', as the focus of his trade card, which not only explained in words how to use his invention but also provided a detailed illustration of the device (Berg & Clifford, 2007, p. 156).

## Figure 2

*George Marceau's 1622 Trade Card*



As will be discussed later in this chapter, trade cards mark an early instance of what Klapp (1941) calls "imitation-value." The above description of Burrow's card hints at an attempt

by the retailer to teach consumers about the functionality of his product, thereby opening the doors for a memetic, imitative action capable of spreading from the ad itself to the minds of those who viewed it. Berg and Clifford's quote also emphasizes the importance of familiarity, which is essential for the heuristic processing of memes (to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 and in the present research). Further, trade cards were often based upon visuo-textual templates that combined imagery with pithy messages intended for a targeted, typically literate audience (Stafford, 1994). In this way, they are not unlike present-day internet memes.

The interplay of visual image and advertising text was neither a surviving cultural expression of pre-literate societies nor a harbinger of the text and picture imaging of the twenty-first century. The visual element of this eighteenth-century consumer advertising had its own historical framework in recognizable texts and images. It thus effectively engaged the consumer in a profusion of products. The images contained messages and references that were not confined to any single product but referred to a universe of commodities. New products joined other sets of products; product images conveyed fashion or modernity, or possibly tradition, quality and taste (Berg & Clifford, 2007, pp. 158-159).

Although trade cards were born of their own tradition and cultural moment, the so-called "universe of commodities" mirrors the intertextual nature of contemporary internet memes (e.g., D'Angelo, 2009), which cannot be self-contained and must draw upon a variety of references to culture, commerce, and other relevant topical considerations (Shifman, 2014). Berg and Clifford's language about new products joining other sets of products echoes Dawkins' (1976) and Blackmore's (1999) discussions of memplexes, or mental representations of mutually reinforcing memes. Trade cards thus enabled product images and product sets to commingle with tradition in a memetic fashion, with each individual card simultaneously enlarging and fortifying the memplexes of servants, masters, mistresses, tourists, travelers, and anyone else who might acquire and circulate them.

Following trade cards from their inception and noting instances of memetic imitation vis-a-vis layout, typography, artistic style, and other aesthetic features over time is outside the scope of this dissertation, but it stands to reason that one shopkeeper's trade cards would have naturally influenced the design of another's, which in turn would have influenced many more due to the wide distribution they enjoyed and the diverse array of individuals they reached. Trade cards remained in heavy circulation for approximately 300 years before being superseded by the modern, more standardized business card (Beard, 2017). This allowed for several generations during which memetic imitation was likely the norm.

### **The Rise of Newspapers and Print Advertising**

The word "advertisement" first appeared in 1655 as a modification of "advices," which itself was derived from the Latin "si quis" (Frederick, 1925). Likewise, the world's first newspapers were also produced throughout the 17th century, and "many in Europe as well as the American colonies primarily existed to carry advertising" (Beard, 2017, p. 242). Thus, between the arrival of trade cards in 1622, the entry of the word "advertisement" into the lexicon 33 years later, and the ongoing creation and distribution of periodicals that enabled sellers' marketing communications to reach wider audiences than ever before, this period was crucial for paving the way toward modern advertising techniques.

More than a century later, the Industrial Revolution modernized and revamped the printing industries in both Europe and the Americas. The direct consequence of this was that newspapers became substantially easier to produce and less expensive for citizens to purchase. "From being precious items gingerly passed from reader to reader, they became suddenly accessible to everyone" (Tungate, 2013, p. 9). As a result, print advertisements were able to reach a wider audience than was previously possible. Magazines, especially those intended for

female audiences, likewise enjoyed wider circulation and became louder voices in the cultural conversation (Tungate, 2013).

As print advertisements grew easier and more cost effective to produce throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they quickly became ubiquitous. Advertisements' frequent placement on roadside posts gave rise to the term "poster," which has become common in English vernacular (Tungate, 2013). It is nearly impossible to imagine a discussion of present-day internet activities without referring to posts that people make on social networking sites (SNSs) and in other forums. The concept of posting derives from these physical advertising strategies. Indeed, affixing a print advertisement to a roadside pole and posting a meme intended for advertising to an SNS platform can be seen as equivalent actions that are merely separated by many decades' worth of technological advancements.

### **Imitation-Value in Advertisements**

The bedrock of memetics is imitation (Blackmore, 1999; Dawkins, 1976). In one of the earliest studies of imitation in advertising, Klapp (1941) analyzed a body of over 20,000 print ads published between 1900 and 1940 and found a dramatic increase over time in the frequency of ads which contained photographs of people engaged in behaviors that were "functionally relevant" to the product (p. 245). Specifically, only 16.2% of ads printed in 1900 that were analyzed for the study contained such photographs, whereas 67.1% of ads contained this type of imagery in 1940 (by contrast, ads containing photographs of people engaging behaviors that were functionally irrelevant to the product only account for between 4% and 10% of the ads that were analyzed, a total which fluctuated over time rather than steadily increasing). Advancements in photographic technology during these four decades no doubt aided this trend, but the

implications of this uptick in terms of memetics is also meaningful. Here, Klapp expands on what he calls the "imitation-value" in this body of advertisements.

The problem of the interpretation of these findings now comes to the fore, and especially the relation between "functionally relevant" pictures of people and what is here designated as "imitation-value" in advertising. This interpretation is based upon certain assumptions: (a) the effect of a picture of a human being, say, using or "demonstrating" a product is not merely "intellectual" (illustrative or explanatory), but also unconscious and psychological; (b) people are imitative, wittingly and unwittingly; (c) typical relations of person to person are sympathetic, emphatic, or identificatory; that is to say, implicitly one tends to put oneself in the other's place and imagine having a similar experience, which may be called "vicarious" experience (p. 248).

Klapp's (1941) discussion of imitation-value conspicuously presage's Blackmore's (1999) argument that the automatic and unconscious propensity for imitation is the characteristic that makes humankind unique.

Importantly, the description here is not of advertisements imitating one another—although there would have been much competition via imitation occurring in the advertising world at the time—but rather of people seeing photographs of products being used in advertisements, living vicariously through the imagery at first, then presumably imitating the depicted behaviors on their own after making a purchase. In this manner, a photograph of a man smoking a cigarette has high imitation-value (i.e., is likely to be copied by a consumer who buys the advertised brand of cigarettes), whereas a functionally irrelevant photograph of a model who is not shown smoking a cigarette has little to no imitation-value. Klapp (1941) attributes the steady increase of ads featuring high-imitation-value photographs to the psychological effect it has on the consumer. Namely, it allows them to envision themselves using the product through an imitative process, thereby forging a closer emotional attachment to the product and the brand than functionally irrelevant imagery engenders.

The focus of Klapp's (1941) study highlights an additional reason why documenting the history of memetic advertising is a challenging endeavor by raising the question of what is being imitated and by whom. On one hand, a historian might investigate instances of advertisers and brands imitating themselves or each other by transforming the aesthetics and concepts of the ads they produce from one iteration to the next. On the other hand, it is equally plausible to investigate—as Klapp does—the potential for consumers imitating the actions, usages, and ideas expressed in those advertisements and how product knowledge spreads from mind to mind based upon the advertising effort.

While conceptually distinct, both processes fall under the banner of memetic advertising. As discussed in Chapter 1, Blackmore (2003) mediates the oppositional internalist and externalist memetic viewpoints by subscribing to the notion that a meme requires both a directly observable, external artifact (e.g., Gatherer, 1998) and some cognitive manifestation of that artifact (e.g., Heylighen, 1999). Therefore, the visual properties of the print advertisements that Klapp analyzed and the potential for ad-inspired agentic imitation that he speculates about are, in a sense, two sides of the memetic advertising coin. For the purposes of this historical account, however, it may be more useful to take an externalist standpoint and spotlight how elements of the visual, textual, and conceptual elements of physical advertisements have been imitated across different ads and campaigns rather than trying to tackle the relatively more slippery task of how ads inspire imitation among the public. Nonetheless, Klapp's article remains essential in its illustration of how a meme requires a sociocultural component to complement the physical artifact itself, and how this is not possible without the active participation of consumers who encounter and are influenced by the advertisements that they see.

## Lord Kitchener, Uncle Sam, and You

One of the earliest and most iconic instances of a widely imitated advertising image paired with a complementary textual message dates to 1914 England. In an effort to encourage young men to join the British Army at the start of World War I, graphic artist and propagandist Alfred Leete drew a poster depicting Horatio Herbert Kitchener—then Britain's Secretary of State for War—pointing directly at the viewer, accompanied by the text, "Britons, [Lord Kitchener] wants you. Join your country's army! God save the King." Two years later, American artist James Montgomery Flagg, working under an approaching deadline for literary news magazine *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, saw Leete's poster and re-drew it in service of the United States' war effort. Flagg replicated Kitchener's pose, replaced Kitchener's face with his own, added wrinkles, gray hair, and a distinctly American red, white, and blue outfit, and altered the caption to read, "I want you for U.S. Army." To this day, American citizens can immediately identify the man in Flagg's drawing as the fictional Uncle Sam (Capozzola, 2008).

### Figure 3

*Lord Kitchener and Uncle Sam*



Although Flagg's Uncle Sam poster ultimately became the most famous iteration of this recruitment ad, Canada, Russia, Germany, Italy, and Brazil also imitated the template. All of these offshoots retained the attention-grabbing visual trope of a stern, authoritative male figure pointing directly at the audience with the aim of promoting military recruitment (Capozzola, 2008). After the war ended, Flagg described his contribution and those of its imitators: "A number of us who were too old or too scared to fight prostituted our talents by making posters inciting a large mob of young men who had never done anything to us to hop over and get shot at. ... We sold the war to youth" (Tungate, 2013, p. 19).

Later, in the 1980s, Ad Council and the United States Forest Service again imitated Flagg's poster by replacing Uncle Sam with wildfire prevention mascot Smokey Bear. In their version, a cartoon bear points at the audience with the caption, "Only you" (Figure 4). Not included in the text but implied is the rest of Smokey Bear's long-running catchphrase, "...can prevent forest fires" (Martin et al., 2014).

#### **Figure 4**

*Smokey Bear Imitating Lord Kitchener and Uncle Sam*



Although not specifically identified as memetic in the scholarly literature, the visual and thematic similarities of these images have not gone unnoticed in internet meme culture. A 2013 comedy sketch from the TV series *Key & Peele* portrays a student in a classroom whispering a joke and getting no response, only to have his classmate tell the identical joke more audibly and receive uproarious laughter. From this sketch, the internet meme Guy Who Made the Joke vs. Guy Who Said It Louder became popular on SNSs throughout 2019 (KnowYourMeme, 2019). One iteration of this internet meme featured Leete's original 1914 Lord Kitchener poster alongside the text, "Guy who said the joke." This was juxtaposed with Flagg's 1916 Uncle Sam imitation alongside the text, "Guy who said the same joke but louder" (Figure 5), a reference to the recruitment posters' memetic qualities and the fact that Flagg's copy ended up as the more successful and enduring of the two.

**Figure 5**

*Internet Meme from 2019 Emphasizing the Memetic Qualities of Lord Kitchener and Uncle Sam*



## **Fine Art in Memetic Advertising**

Just as Flagg did with Lord Kitchener, the most widely adopted strategy for memetic advertising is to imitate a preexisting work of art or otherwise incorporate it into the visual scheme of a targeted advertisement. However, identifying such approaches as memetic advertising is anachronistic in many cases. That is, while the use of famous art in advertisements is a time-tested practice, neither an academic nor an ad practitioner would have used this terminology prior to the Y2K era when the foundational literature on the subject of memetic advertising was published (e.g., Gelb, 1997; Marsden, 2002; Williams, 2000). Nonetheless, as Satoru Iwata, the late CEO of Nintendo, commented, "I am afraid to say that the history of entertainment is also the history of imitation" (Iwata, 2010, p. 2). Advertising, often a form of entertainment unto itself, is not exempt from Iwata's appraisal. Thus, while memetics is the scholarly study of how imitations spread through culture and are perceived by audiences, it is fitting to retroactively apply a memetic label to the widespread use of popular art in traditional advertisements.

Visual references to famous works of art in ads are effective because these works are eminently recognizable. People evaluate that which they recognize more favorably than that which they do not, a cognitive processing shortcut known as the *recognition heuristic* (e.g., Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 2011; Thoma & Williams, 2013). So powerful is the recognition heuristic that marketers were wielding the power of the familiar in their advertisements long before cognitive psychology and advertising became research-intensive disciplines (Tungate, 2013). Consequently, a full-scale historical account of how famous art has been imitated and repurposed in traditional advertisements is likely impossible or would at least occupy the pages of multiple large volumes; however, several salient examples are discussed in this chapter.

By virtue of being the most famous work of art in history, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is also the most imitated and repurposed painting in advertising (Brooks, 2020). Figure 6 contains a 1980 ad by Italian sparkling water brand Ferrarelle in which the first three panels feature an imitation of the Mona Lisa, each with a distinctly different hairstyle. "Still?" reads the Italian-language caption in the upper left corner. "Sparkling?" reads the caption in the upper right. "Or Ferrarelle?" reads the caption in the lower left. The two hairstyles in the top row—straight and curly, respectively—are merged in the lower left panel to emphasize Ferrarelle's message that their product is "a water capable of combining the best of both worlds" (i.e., still and sparkling; Ferrarelle, 2019).

**Figure 6**

*1980 Ad by Ferrarelle Imitating da Vinci's Mona Lisa*



A 1983 black-and-white print advertisement for New York Life Insurance (Figure 7) likewise alters the Mona Lisa's hairstyle, makeup, smile, gaze, jewelry, and accessories from panel to panel in an Andy Warholesque fashion (to be discussed later in this chapter) to

communicate the notion that whole life insurance is a wise investment for all, regardless of personal appearance.

### Figure 7

1983 Ad by New York Life Insurance Imitating da Vinci's Mona Lisa



More recently, in 2008, haircare brand Vidal Sassoon ran an ad in Russia for a hairdryer that also endowed da Vinci's iconic subject with an unconventional hairdo. And in 2011, the KitKat candy brand broke the mold by removing the woman from the painting altogether. By presenting an empty seat against da Vinci's familiar background with the product caption, "Have a break, have a KitKat" (Figure 8), the ad implies that the Mona Lisa is absent because she is taking a break. This image is unto itself a parody of a 1982 television commercial for KitKat in which the paintings in a gallery come to life after hours and enjoy the candy bar (GrubcoTV3, 2008). While these are but four examples of how advertisers have utilized da Vinci's masterpiece, there are myriad others (see Strumwasser & Friedman, 1992, for a critical examination of how the advertising industry has parodied the image). As long as *Mona Lisa* remains a potent and universal meme, the painting will continue to be imitated.

## Figure 8

2008 Ad by Vidal Sassoon and 2011 Ad by KitKat Imitating da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*



Of course, *Mona Lisa* is not the only classical artwork to have featured prominently in advertisements over time. Da Vinci's other iconic painting, *The Last Supper*, has also frequently been parodied by advertisers. Owing to the painting's religious overtones, however, these ads have often been met with controversy. For example, a 1998 French ad for the relaunch of VW Golf—a make of Volkswagen discontinued in 2021—depicted a modern-day rendering of da Vinci's painting with the caption, "Let us rejoice, my friends, for a new Golf has been born" (Mallia, 2009, p. 178). In response, the official French league of Bishops issued a writ against Volkswagen and its partner ad agency DDB France, which then removed 10,000 billboards featuring the image (Mallia, 2009). In 2004, a *Last Supper* parody promoting the UK Channel 4 television series *Shameless*, which depicted the debaucherous characters from that program in place of Jesus and his disciples, became England's most complained-about print advertisement that year (Mallia, 2009). Equally contentious was an ad by French fashion house Marithé and François Girbaud in 2005, which substituted the characters from da Vinci's original painting with

well-dressed women and eliminated the painting's setting in favor of a more austere, blank backdrop (Figure 9). While there was nothing visually explicit about the ad itself, it was nevertheless banned by Italian magistrates in Milan (Arie, 2005) and was found to violate French blasphemy laws. Girbaud was given three days to retract all instances of the ad or be subject to steep fines (Mallia, 2009).

**Figure 9**

*Controversial 2005 Ad by Marithé and François Girbaud Imitating da Vinci's The Last Supper*



Additional examples of famous works of art in advertising are numerous. As Peluso et al. (2016) point out, luxury brands seem especially apt to co-opt recognizable works of art. They attribute this to what has been called the *art infusion effect*, "in which the sense of excellence typically associated with an artwork spills over onto a product, thereby increasing consumers' evaluations of that product and intention to buy it" (p. 2193). Research on the art infusion effect suggests that consumers automatically associate the prestige of the depicted artwork with the prestige or value of the advertised product, creating a spillover effect (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008; Newman & Dhar, 2014). However, while previous research has suggested that the presence of any art in luxury advertisements—even that which is not especially renowned or widely

known—serves to augment consumer evaluations, Peluso et al. (2016) demonstrate that the recognizability of the artwork consistently bolsters the infusion effect. Psychologically, this can be ascribed to heuristic processing. Since the reputations of famous works of art like *Mona Lisa*, *The Last Supper*, and others are cognitively accessible, audiences who view these ads use the paintings' reputations as *anchors* for how they assess the advertised brand and product (Huettl & Gierl, 2012). As described by Tversky and Kahneman (1974), anchors are cognitive biases that influence an individual's judgments based on a particular reference point. The classic example of the anchoring heuristic is that people who are asked to estimate the product of  $1 \times 2 \times 3 \dots \times 9$  ballpark the figure considerably lower than people who are asked to estimate the product of  $9 \times 8 \times 7 \dots \times 1$ , even though the values are identical. Unwilling to expend finite cognitive resources to calculate the true product, people heuristically use the first few numbers of the equation as their anchor and base their estimates upon limited information. Peluso et al. (2016) argue that the same cognitive mechanism can be implicated in the art infusion effect, particularly where recognizable works of art with cultural cachet are concerned.

**Effectiveness of fine art in memetic advertising.** In a content analysis of 244 print advertisements that feature fine art, Hetsroni and Tukachinsky (2005) found that classical art (which they define as "Western art from ancient Greece to the middle of the 19th century," p. 99) comprised 64.5% of all pieces depicted or reproduced in those ads, while modern art ("Western art from the second half of the 19th century to our time," p. 99) accounted for 29.9% and non-Western art ("art that was created in non-Western cultures," p. 99) accounted for a scant 5.6%. Among the classical art represented, the authors identified Renaissance paintings and sculptures as the most predominant artistic style, perhaps owing to many of those pieces' prominence in popular culture and their high degree of recognizability. Regardless of style or epoch, 94.1% of

ads featuring fine art took a soft sell approach ("No discounts, bonuses or special offers are given to potential shoppers. No declaration of promotional or end-of season sale is made. Price is not mentioned," p. 99) and 79.8% of ads contained a promise that the advertised product was of high quality.

Based upon the frequency with which advertisers employ these approaches, it may be inferred that the average consumer heuristically associates fine art with prestige; thus, the incorporation of familiar, Western art naturally augments the advertising message without the brand having to expend additional creative energy to convey their purported stature and value. The recognition heuristic therefore does much of the heavy lifting for the brand's creative team. This could explain why the works of da Vinci and other Renaissance artists are so commonplace in contemporary ads: they may comprise a memeplex in the popular consciousness that is linked to evaluations of prominence and importance.

Hetsroni and Tukachinsky (2005) supplemented their content analysis with a survey of advertising creatives and found that 100% of the practitioners who participated expressed a personal preference for modern art, but only 10% thought that modern art was "appropriate for ads" (p. 101). By contrast, the remaining 90% indicated that classical art was most appropriate. This discrepancy between personal preference and the works of art selected to appear in these ads speaks to an understanding of what consumers are likely to recognize and respond favorably to. While the authors do not elaborate upon these statistics, they imply that appropriateness in this context is a proxy for audience receptivity. Classical art is therefore more "appropriate" because it is more familiar. In a different study, Hetsroni (2005) reports that among surveyed individuals from the general public, more than half of people who both did and did not have personal experience with art reported personally favoring Renaissance art to other styles. Modern

art was met with a moderate degree of favorability from both groups, while neither group indicated a preference for non-Western (specifically prehistoric, Egyptian, or Far Eastern) art. Again, these preferences are presumed to be a function of familiarity and previous exposure.

An earlier study by Maxwell (1999) reinforces this idea while implicitly suggesting which types of memetic advertising approaches are more effective for certain market segments. On the basis of school attended, engagement with the arts, and parents' occupation and level of education, she split a sample of college students into high cultural capital (HCC) and low cultural capital (LCC) groups. In a series of interviews, she found that students in the HCC group responded favorably to ads that incorporated famous works of art in their original form. However, relative to LCC students, HCC students responded unfavorably to ads that parodied famous works for humorous effect. Further, LCC students suggested that the presence of art in an advertisement increases the product's value for them "by signaling that the ad's target audience is defined by their higher income and social status" (p. 99). Both HCC and LCC students indicated that audiences' knowledge and recognition of the artwork depicted in an ad is crucial for understanding the ad's underlying message, and that art is perceived as an effective way for advertisers to segment their audience by demographic features like age, education, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. While serious, unaltered reproductions and humorously altered reproductions both constitute memetic advertising, it appears that college-age consumers with greater knowledge and appreciation for art are relatively less receptive to parodic imitation. This underscores memes' appeal as socially defined. They resonate most similarly with people who share common interests and backgrounds (e.g., Huntington, 2016; Shifman, 2014).

Maxwell's (1999) findings also implicitly suggest heuristic processing when viewing and assessing advertising content. Participants, particularly those in the HCC group, appeared to

automatically associate paintings like *Mona Lisa* with product attributes. A 1995 print ad for the Ford Ranger DaVinci featuring a visual reference to *Mona Lisa* elicited responses like, "It's a smooth, safe ride," "*Mona Lisa* says classy," and "It will last longer because the *Mona Lisa* has been around forever" (p. 110). Again, the mere presence of *Mona Lisa* influenced consumer impressions of the vehicle's quality and attributes without additional communications from the brand. Recognition of the meme's source material, together with the cultural literacy necessary for positioning *Mona Lisa* as an illustrious and "classy" artifact, appears to account for how the overall advertisement is perceived. Further, HCC students were more critical of products in ads that parodied or altered recognizable works of art rather than reproducing them faithfully. HCC students described an ad for Royalty Vodka featuring a parody of Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* as "clever and creative" (p. 110), but perceived the product itself as cheaper and less desirable than LCC students who viewed the same ad. Thus, brands and advertisers that leverage the memetic qualities of fine art by including it in their ads must simultaneously match the presentational tone of the artwork itself (i.e., serious or humorous) with the product being sold and the audience they are trying to reach. As in all cases, the meme must match the audience's mindset and the content must align with the interests of the group.

This may be why other car brands also make frequent use of recognizable Western artwork. Two examples are presented in Figure 10. The top ad, a print advertisement created by DDB for Volkswagen in 2008, is not a faithful reproduction of a painting by Spanish surrealist Salvador Dalí but imitates the artist's famous style. The colors, distorted objects, and dreamlike atmosphere are immediately identifiable as Dalíesque (van Niekerk & Conradie, 2016). This is an intriguing extension of the art infusion effect, since the painting itself is not a direct illustration of the product nor an indirect depiction of its quality. If it were, the message would

ostensibly be that the Polo BlueMotion is a weird and wonky vehicle that does not behave as one would expect it to. Instead, Volkswagen relies entirely upon audiences' ability to recognize Dalí's style and associate their product with his distinctiveness and acclaim. By contrast, in the bottom portion of Figure 10, an ad from the same era by French car company Renault Mégane uses the stylistic peculiarities of Spanish cubist Pablo Picasso to illustrate the relative normalcy and reliability of their vehicle. By juxtaposing the facial deformity of Picasso's painting (captioned "without air-bag") with the sleek, sturdy image of the Mégane (captioned "with air-bag"), the brand cleverly leverages the audience's cognitively accessible knowledge of Picasso's style (i.e., odd and unsafe) while also encouraging them to associate Picasso's cultural significance with the vehicle being advertised (albeit without the entailing oddness or questionable safety). Taken side-by-side, the Volkswagen and Renault ads illustrate two distinct and successful ways in which the art infusion effect can be achieved through memetic imitation.

### Figure 10

*Volkswagen Ad Imitating Dalí and Renault Mégane Ad Imitating Picasso*



## Andy Warhol

When it comes to challenging an audience's mindset and capturing its imagination, one man remains unparalleled in modern commercial art. There is perhaps no figure in 20th century pop culture more emblematic of memetic advertising than Andy Warhol, and perhaps no individual more responsible for taking certain brand images and embedding them in mass consciousness. Warhol began his career in shoe advertising, drawing footwear for *Glamour* magazine in the late 1940s and later designing shoes for manufacturer Israel Miller (Danto, 2009). Throughout the 1950s, he became one of the central personalities in the burgeoning *pop art* movement, his contributions to which remain his most famous. In general, pop art utilized subjects "that anybody walking down Broadway could recognize in a split second—comics, picnic tables, men's trousers, celebrities, shower curtains, refrigerators, Coke bottles—all the great modern things" (Stokstad, 1995, p. 1130). Indeed, Warhol's greatest innovation was taking the mundane and prosaic objects of everyday life that people heuristically link with their own experiences and transforming those objects into vibrant, unique works of art.

Perhaps the most consequential memetic advertisement ever created was Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*, a series of 32 images produced between November 1961 and April 1962 (Scherman & Dalton, 2009). Intended as pop art and not as advertisements, per se, the series vexed the Campbell's brand at first because the pieces were unauthorized and not part of an official ad campaign. However, owing to successful exhibitions and strong WOM, Warhol's name became synonymous with Campbell's and the company was forced to reconcile with the fact that these 32 images represented a more memorable and striking portrayal of their products than had ever been created in-house (Schroeder, 1997). Throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, their soup was primarily marketed and sold to working-class families. By marrying the

now-unforgettable images of soup can labels with the trendy, innovative pop art scene, Warhol significantly increased the brand's market share and broadened its appeal to near-universal status. No longer the food of the less educated, blue-collar consumer, Campbell's soup became a "common denominator of experience across every age and class" (Varnedoe, 2001, p. 42). Eventually, in the 1980s, Campbell's officially commissioned Warhol to paint a series of dry mix soup cartons (Honnef, 1991).

As a holistic piece, *Campbell's Soup Cans* is indisputably memetic. Each individual image is itself an imitation of a preexisting product, while at the same time also an imitation of the 31 other images in the series. As can be seen in Figure 11, the paintings vary little from one to the next. Every canvas is cut into identical dimensions, features an image of a Campbell's can drawn the same way and at the same size, centered against a plain white background, and placed within an identical wooden frame. The only difference between images is the variety of soup being depicted, with each can advertising a different flavor. In only one instance, the canvas depicting cheddar cheese soup (row 2, column 3 in Figure 11), Warhol adds yellow labels which read, "New!" and "Great as a sauce, too!"

*Campbell's Soup Cans* represented a standardized visual inventory of the many types of soup that the Campbell's brand offered, rendered in a way that was both groundbreaking and, owing to the humdrum nature of the subject matter, widely accessible (Schroeder, 1997). An individual image from this series taken out of context might be perceived as random and ineffectual, but considered as a meme—a unified, self-aware, self-referential body (Shifman, 2014)—the series has achieved a longer shelf life than the canned goods themselves. The complete, 32-canvas series is on permanent display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and remains a curiosity to this day (Scherman & Dalton, 2009).

**Figure 11**

*Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans (1962)*



Warhol did not abandon the Campbell's soup concept after his original series but did eschew some of the memetic properties of those paintings. Subsequent works varied in height, with some as short as 20 inches and others as tall as six feet. Some images depicted cans with torn or peeling labels, open lids, and crushed or dented cylinders (Bourdon, 1989). Overall, Warhol's Campbell's soup art unfolded in three distinct phases: the seminal 1961-1962 phase described above, a 1965 phase during which he substituted the brand's red and white chromatic scheme for a larger and generally arbitrary variety of colors, and a final phase in the late 1970s during which he reversed and inverted the images to resemble photo negatives (Bourdon, 1989). All three phases are memetic insofar as they comprise a complete, imitative oeuvre dealing with variations of the same subject. However, the works produced during the first phase remain both the most famous (Grudin, 2010) and the most faithfully memetic.

Though momentous in its cultural and commercial impact, *Campbell's Soup Cans* was far from the only memetic advertisement Warhol created during his lifetime. In 1962, shortly after the exhibition for the Campbell's series, he drew *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*, a single canvas featuring 112 (seven rows of 16) nearly identical glass bottles of Coca-Cola. Unlike his soup cans, which had employed colors that authentically re-created the labels of the Campbell's brand, *Green Coca-Cola Bottles* was a rougher, more rudimentary, almost pencil sketch-like composition with certain bottles drawn more faintly than others (Scherman & Dalton, 2009). As with *Campbell's Soup Cans*, each bottle was simultaneously an imitation of a product as well as an imitation of the other bottles with which it shared its canvas. In his own words, Warhol's impetus for creating this work echoes Varnedoe's above comment about the "common denominator of experience":

What's grand about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same thing as the poorest. ... You can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke, and no amount of money can get you a better Coke (Kleiner, 2008, p. 984).

Once again, Warhol took a commonplace item, turned it into art, and in doing so transformed public perceptions of it. A personal favorite subject, he created a total of 15 separate pieces of art related to the Coca-Cola brand throughout his career (Danto, 2009).

Other brand products painted by Warhol included Heinz ketchup bottles and Brillo soap boxes, both of which were also precise imitations of commercial packaging that raised comparable questions about where to draw the line between art, advertisement, and objects which the populace view as pedestrian (Schroeder, 1997). Owing to its propensity for imitation, much of Warhol's signature pop art style can be considered memetic regardless of whether he was depicting brands and products. Possibly the most famous of all of Warhol's works was his

*Marilyn Diptych*, also from 1962, in which he juxtaposed 25 artificially colored images of actress Marilyn Monroe with 25 messy, faded-out black-and-white images, all taken from the same original publicity photograph. A series of 50 imitations unto itself, the *Marilyn Diptych* has been imitated by countless other artists and manufacturers since its creation and has become what Adams (2004) calls a "secular icon" in popular culture (p. 90). Monroe, though not a product in the sense of Campbell's Soup or Coca-Cola, was a one-woman brand with prevailing fame and appeal. As such, the unceasing reproduction of Warhol's chosen image—together with the myriad ways in which Monroe's hair color and skin color are altered from one iteration to another—remains a striking memetic advertisement for one of America's most beloved film stars.

Schroeder (1997) provides a succinct summary of Warhol's greatness and legacy.

Mr. Warhol was among the first to point out that we are a country united, most of all, by commercialism. He opened our eyes with art. Whether silk-screening soup cans or Marilyn Monroe, he showed us that the things we know best and react to most instinctively are those images brought to us via mass markets, mass media, and mass production (p. 497).

Warhol accomplished this feat by creating brand motifs that, like the items he depicted, could be easily disseminated, altered, and repurposed. While much of his most famous work predates Dawkins' introduction of the concept of the meme (1976), the aim of Warhol's work aligns neatly with the units of replicable cultural material that Dawkins described. Over the past seven decades, the images of Campbell's soup labels, Coca-Cola bottles, and Marilyn Monroe's smiling, artificially pastel-colored visage have leapt from mind to mind, firmly embedding themselves in the popular consciousness as both ads and art. As with any true memetic original, Warhol has spawned countless imitators who have perpetuated his signature repeating, brand-

motif style. To this extent, his impact on art culture and consumer culture is incalculable (Grudin, 2010), as is his impact on meme culture.

### **Absolut Vodka**

Arguably the most quintessential memetic advertising campaign of the pre-internet era—and one to which Warhol even contributed in 1985 (Tungate, 2013)—is the distinctive series of ads produced by TBWA Worldwide for Absolut Vodka, a Swedish liquor brand that remains available worldwide (Matus, 2014). First launched in 1980, the Absolut campaign is founded on a simple but distinctive visual template that spawned many iterations and permutations during its 27-year run (De Luce, 2019). The canonical version of the Absolut print ad features a centered image of a clear glass vodka bottle with an illuminated halo over it, spotlighted against a plain black background. The tagline reads simply, in the brand's characteristic font, "Absolut perfection." The template is inherently memetic, allowing for small but appreciable alterations to be made to both the visual composition and the pithy tagline while still retaining the uniquely recognizable essence of the original.

Figure 12 presents the original TBWA Absolut ad from 1981 in the center of its top row and surrounds it with four examples of memetic imitations that the brand created during the campaign's run. This tableau features multiple aspects of Shifman's (2014) definition of a meme: "a group of items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance which were created with an awareness of each other" (p. 41). Each image prominently displays an Absolut bottle as its focal point and makes small, but meaningful adjustments to the visual and textual content as necessary for the objective of the specific advertisement. For instance, the ad in the top right corner for Absolut Citron—a lemon-flavored vodka—presents the central liquor bottle as a lemon presser and alters the bottom caption to read, in lemon yellow type, "Absolut

squeeze." The location-specific ads in the bottom row recast the bottle as a swimming pool surrounded by palm trees for warm, sunny Los Angeles and depict the lettering on the bottle blowing away as a nod to Chicago's nickname the "Windy City."

**Figure 12**

*The Original 1980 Absolut Vodka Print Ad and Four Memetic Imitations*



Since its inception, ads from the Absolut Vodka campaign have been analyzed for their rhetorical qualities (Kenyon & Hutchinson, 2007), their global marketing strategy (Musonera & Hemley, 2008), and *brand morphing*—a memetic concept describing how "brand meanings change among different groupings of consumers as facilitated by ad practitioners' efforts to accommodate, reinforce, and create diverse cultural meanings across different international markets" (Kates & Goh, 2003, p. 59). The Absolut campaign was one of the most successful and highly regarded of the modern age. The brand's sales increased from approximately one million liters per year in 1980 to nearly one hundred million liters per year in 2007 (Musonera &

Hemley, 2008) on the strength of the campaign, which was voted by advertising professionals as the most well-crafted and original on the market in a 2002 study (White, Shen, & Smith, 2002). Although Absolut discontinued the series in 2007, the ads remain memorable, distinctive, and fundamentally imitable.

Although Figure 12 presents only five examples, it is estimated that the Absolut brand ran over 1,500 versions of the ad, all of which adhere to the same basic template (De Luce, 2019). In this way, the only aspects of Shifman's (2014) definition to which the Absolut campaign does not conform is that the print ads were not originally conceived as digital items and were not circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users (although many have since found their way onto the Web). Nonetheless, if all 1,500 or more Absolut ads were collected and presented alongside one another as in Figure 12, the spectacle would not be significantly different from that of viewing every instance of an internet meme (or, indeed, from viewing Warhol's complete *Campbell's Soup Cans*). Absolut appears to have presaged the rise and popularity of internet memes, while discontinuing its iconic campaign at roughly the time when such memes were starting to gain traction on SNSs and other Web-based venues.

### **CHAPTER 3: MEMETIC ADVERTISING ON THE INTERNET**

The introduction of the internet radically altered advertising practice. As discussed in Chapter 1, the World Wide Web ushered in an era of interactivity and spiderweb-like communication that challenged the models that advertisers had relied on for centuries (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016). Ads quickly invaded cyberspace and the flurries of banner ads, pop-ups, and pop-downs with which internet users are now intimately familiar became inseparable from the experience of Web surfing (Ratliff & Rubenfeld, 2010). While there are no official figures, it is estimated that internet users in the early 2020s are exposed to between 6,000 and 10,000 advertisements every day but are so inundated by these selling attempts that only a handful are acknowledged or attended to (Carr, 2021a). The demands of modern life are so multifarious and time-consuming that consumers on the internet and social networking sites (SNSs) not only encounter more information per day than people did at any other time in history, but also have limited time and ability to process this information. As a result, they are quick to reject advertisements and brand messages that have unlikable or negative qualities, or simply fail to garner attention (Vasile, Mototo, & Chuchu, 2021).

Over the past few years, brands have begun to use internet memes as an advertising tool to bolster likability and cut through the advertising clutter endemic to these platforms (Chuah, Kahar, & Ch'ng, 2020). As discussed throughout Chapter 2, memetic advertising campaigns predicated upon imitation and parody were present long before the average citizen could even dream of owning a home computer. In 2022, information and communications technologies (ICTs) and internet culture have evolved to a point where online memetic advertising is viewed as a logical and viable avenue (e.g., Carr, 2021b; Lechner, 2020; Rao, 2021; Tiffany, 2021). SNSs provide brands an opportunity to initiate and participate in conversations with consumers

in ways that were not possible in the Web 1.0 era and before. Prior to the popularization of social media, mass advertising depended upon one-way communication; today, SNS platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) "invite users to engage in dialogue with the companies whose products they invest in and provide companies the opportunity to listen and respond effectively" (Carrington, 2015, p. 145). Since internet memes have gradually become "an integral and significant aspect of participatory culture" (Vickery, 2015, p. 1450), memetic advertising stands as a relevant and emergent way for brands and companies to forge and maintain connections with consumers.

This strategy appears particularly relevant in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which beginning in 2020 resulted in heavier internet and SNS use than in years prior due to the necessity of physical distancing. During this pandemic, memes surged in popularity to become the third most-shared type of web content, following personal status updates and non-memetic video clips (Enberg et al., 2021). In response, brands like Bud Light have begun recruiting Chief Meme Officers (CMeOs), or "internet-savvy content creators who [have] been hired by a company with the intention of establishing a strategic brand persona in order to communicate their values and beliefs to consumers" (Song, 2020, p. 1). Broadly speaking, this position entails remixing and repurposing extant, recognizable internet memes, though in-house resources may also be mobilized to create novel content that the brand hopes will become memes (Enberg et al., 2021). While Bud Light initially offered its prospective CMeO a monthly salary of \$5,000 to produce memetic advertising content, bandwagon-hopping companies like cryptocurrency outfit Gitcoin have since posted CMeO job calls offering candidates up to \$120,000 annually (Lemée, 2021). As Twitter user Nat Eliason writes in a May 26, 2021 tweet highlighting both the generational nature of this fledgling position and its apparent lucrativeness, "This is a six figure

meme making job at a legit company. No matter how silly your kid's interests seem... don't ever tell them they should give them up for a 'real job'" (Eliason, 2021). Furthermore, Bashir (2021) has proclaimed the CMeO as "possibly marketing's best force multiplier right now" (p. 1), citing consumer reliance on smartphones and other connected devices, increased market saturation, and the prevailing global conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. He ends his brief op-ed by asking rhetorically why hiring a full-time memetic advertising leader is not already a universal business practice.

While CMeO is a new position as of 2020, brands have nonetheless incorporated internet memes into their advertising campaigns since at least the late 2000s because memes have a built-in audience that recognizes and appreciates them (Sax, 2012). Possibly the most high-profile example of an ongoing memetic advertising campaign is that of global fast food chain Wendy's, which since 2017 has been posting humorous, oftentimes lightly sassy, memes on their Twitter profile "to spread their playful brand personality through interactions with customers and other companies on Twitter, where they can share content demonstrating the brand's engaging personality" (Kao et al., 2020, p. 103). The campaign has been a success by SNS standards, more than doubling the brand's volume of mentions and retweets on Twitter (Kao et al., 2020). However, not every SNS-based viral marketing strategy has yielded the same favorable results. For instance, McDonald's—a longtime competitor of Wendy's in the quick service restaurant market—launched a Twitter campaign in 2012 called #McDStories in which the brand encouraged patrons to share anecdotes about their dining experiences. Unfortunately for the franchise, the idea backfired as people began posting unfavorable comments like, "These #McDStories never get old, kinda like a box of McDonald's 10-piece Chicken McNuggets left in the sun for a week" (Hill, 2012).

Taken together, the case studies of Wendy's and McDonald's illustrate both the positive and negative aspects of using memetic strategies for advertising. If a brand can target an audience with appropriate and authentic content like Wendy's has done, it stands to gain both recognition and support (Enberg et al., 2021). On the other hand, the McDonald's failure stands as a prime example of how meme-based campaigns can cede control of the brand message and enable others to alter it to fit their own purposes (Sharma, 2018). Either way, these efforts indicate that brands can create memetic multimedia advertising campaigns to extend the lifespan of an ad through reproduction, modification, and transmission (Murray et al., 2014). Whether an individual campaign is successful or not, brands are becoming increasingly cognizant of the potential for memes on SNSs to increase their visibility, bolster consumer experiences and engagement, and help build long-term relationships with the types of consumers who are most receptive to this form of communication (Capitello et al., 2014; Tiffany, 2021).

Memetic advertising has received little attention in academia despite having inspired coverage from numerous popular press and Web sources (e.g., Carr, 2021; Enberg et al., 2021; Lechner, 2020; Rao, 2021; Tiffany, 2021). Sharma (2018) used an internet ethnography approach to analyze the behavior of Facebook users in India and to construct a typology of individuals who regularly engage with memes. These categories include casual commenters (i.e., people who comment and tag their friends in meme posts on Facebook but do not contribute anything additional), opportunists (i.e., people who seek to take advantage of new brand incentives and are most likely to engage with memetic advertising attempts), whistleblowers (i.e., people with a predilection for complaining and who actively voice their dislike of a meme), and smart consumers (i.e., people who reject poor memetic advertising attempts outright but are prone to being impressed by other, more well thought-out strategies). However, while it is valuable to

classify the sort of people who are likely to view and respond to these brand strategies, the study does not utilize this typology beyond simple description (Sharma, 2018).

Lee et al. (2019) employed the value-attitude-behavior model (VAB, a social psychological framework used to interpret the impact of consumers' values on their attitudes and behaviors toward specific objects) in a survey study of Taiwanese citizens. The authors found that advertising memes that focus on the hedonic value of the product or brand are most likely to positively impact consumers' purchase intentions. That is, memetic advertising appears to be most successful when brands can leverage the fun and entertaining qualities of memes and construct a message consistent with that. More recently, Stepaniuk and Jarosz (2021) report from their analysis of Facebook memes made by Polish travel agencies that emotionally positive language (as opposed to emotionally neutral or negative language) tends to be more persuasive and promotes increased audience engagement in the form of liking, commenting, and sharing.

Along similar linguistic lines, Chuah et al. (2020) examined the iconicity (i.e., the match between image/text and intended meaning) of memes used in brand advertising strategies by interviewing a small sample of Malaysian citizens between the ages of 15 and 30. Overall, the authors found that high-iconicity memes typically feature short but complete sentences, common vernacular with minimal use of slang words or phrases, and common use of personal pronouns such as I, me, and we. They conclude by integrating these findings into prescriptive advice for brands looking to capitalize on the memetic advertising trend. "It is not enough to merely select a meme to loosely relate to the product or services. It has to be straightforward yet meaningful" (p. 941).

Little additional scholarly work on memetic advertising within SNSs has emerged as of 2022. Although foundational writing on memetic advertising exists (e.g., Gelb, 1997; Marsden,

2002; Williams, 2000), these texts are typically outdated, indebted to the controversial field of traditional Dawkinsian/Darwinian memetics described in Chapter 1, and do not foretell the internet meme boom. Thus, while the more contemporary studies reviewed above provide a first step for which types of consumers to target (Sharma, 2018) and how to do so effectively (Chuah et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Stepaniuk & Jarosz, 2021), much empirical research in this area remains to be done, particularly as brands continue to roll out attention-grabbing memetic advertising campaigns and offer large, competitive salaries to prospective CMeOs and content creators (Enberg et al., 2021; Lemée, 2021).

### **Internet Virality**

Web-based content can spread in the blink of an eye. This phenomenon is colloquially referred to as *virality* due to the term's association with contagion and rapid proliferation. Tellis et al. (2019) define internet virality as content "achieving a large number of views in a short time period due to sharing" (p. 2). They go on to explain that virality has profound implications for advertisers who wish to quickly communicate messages to large market segments because of how easily and readily able consumers are to share personally appealing content with their online friends and acquaintances. Along similar lines, Sohn, Gardner, and Weaver (2013) define *viral marketing* as "marketer-initiated consumer activity that spreads a marketing message unaltered across a market or segment in a limited time period, mimicking an epidemic" (p. 22). If a piece of content becomes viral, it can potentially receive millions of unique views without requiring any additional input, intervention, or funding from the creator. The low cost and ease of proliferation inherent in viral marketing campaigns have prompted many companies to deemphasize *paid media* such as online display advertising in favor of *earned media* where consumers transmit the advertising messages themselves (Tucker, 2015).

Berger (2013) identifies six main principles underlying why internet content achieves viral success. These are (1) *social currency*, or whether the content's message is capable of influencing others in a positive way and therefore capable of increasing the social capital of those who share it; (2) *trigger potential*, or whether the message is associated with either immediate or ongoing aspects of people's lives that "trigger" a personally relevant response and therefore encourage the propagation of that message; (3) *emotion*, or whether people have a strong—typically, though not necessarily, positive—affective reaction when they view the content; (4) *publicness*, or whether the content can be easily accessed and imitated; (5) *practical value*, or whether the content contains information that is perceived as useful and serving an identifiable purpose; and (6) *story value*, or whether the content is presented in the form of an engaging narrative, which is cognitively easier for people to store and recall than raw facts and information (see also Wyer, 2004 and the discussion of narratives in Chapter 4 of this dissertation). A successful internet advertising meme should therefore adhere to one or more of these principles for optimal results (i.e., one that has an appreciable impact on a given consumer and/or one that experiences wide circulation due to having been shared numerous times). If internet users come to associate social capital, personal relevance, affect, accessibility, pragmatism, and/or ability to tell an engaging story (respectively) with a brand through the content it shares on SNSs, the companies associated with those brands will be better able to shape and maintain consumer perceptions moving forward—competences that are central to brand sustainability and longevity (e.g., Schultz & Block, 2015).

Virality and memetic status are interrelated but not equivalent. *Spreadable media*, defined by Carter and Arroyo (2011) as any content that permeates throughout SNSs and other relevant digital platforms, typically achieves virality in tandem with becoming a meme.

However, not all viral content is memetic (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Every digital item that becomes a meme begins its journey as spreadable media. It is only after an item gets altered by a Web user who is distinct from the original content creator that the spreadable media becomes an emergent meme (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). "Emergent memes are altered spreadable media yet are not iterated and remixed further as separate contributions. A remix or alteration becomes a separate contribution when awareness, distribution, and modification reach a critical mass" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 1897). In other words, the very first imitation of a piece of spreadable media is what transforms the spreadable media into an emergent meme. From there, imitation may either halt or proceed further. If the emergent meme continues to produce additional imitations and remixes, the "emergent" qualifier gets dropped and the media can be said to have reached meme status. If no other imitations and remixes are created, the content remains an emergent meme. Notably, the content's status as spreadable media, emergent meme, or meme is not a reflection of its popularity. All three can become viral. Rather, the distinction is one of how often the original media have been copied and repurposed. A meme, as specified by Blackmore (1999) and Shifman (2014), and emphasized throughout this dissertation, requires an act of imitation. In general, the most successful memes are those which ultimately achieve a high degree of virality.

### **Memetic Success in Advertising**

In a nonempirical discussion, Murray et al. (2014) outline a six-stage lifecycle model of memes designed to predict success in memetic advertising. These stages are:

1. *Transmission.* Content creators share a meme on an SNS platform or elsewhere on the internet, thereby expressing knowledge and information to audiences and prospective consumers.

2. *Decoding*. The SNS platform or webpage enables the audience to perceive the meme. Thus, the transmitted information is received. It is during this stage that heuristic processing should occur (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; see Chapter 5 for a more comprehensive discussion of heuristic processing).
3. *Infection*. The perceiver comprehends the message embedded in the meme.
4. *Storage*. Once processed in working and short-term memory, the meme is transported to the individual's long-term memory store (for a review of the types and functions of human memory, see Cowan, 2008). It is here that the contents of the message are saved for future use. This dissertation argues that specialized memetic cognitive structures are implicated in this storage.
5. *Survival*. Essentially, retention of the message contents. The individual's memory of the meme does not decay and experiences no interference from other memes or other incoming information.
6. *Retransmission*. The meme moves from one individual to another by using an SNS, messenger service, or webpage as a conduit. If retransmission occurs often enough, virality is achieved.

Of course, this basic outline for memetic (re)transmission raises a host of ensuing questions about which memes will be selected by audiences, what their selection criteria will be, and what additional factors favor the spread and survival of memetic messages. Spitzberg (2014)

succinctly describes meme transmission (which he refers to as *diffusion*) on SNSs:

Given an adaptively fit meme delivered by a competent source, the subsequent success of the meme's diffusion is likely to depend on the degree to which the social network is uniquely receptive to the meme. The social networks in and through which a meme is propagated are likely to occasionally mediate, and likely moderate, the replication of memes. Memes may be selfishly inclined, but their successful replication is likely to

depend on the degree to which a coherent, coordinated (i.e., altruistic) social network system facilitates such replication (p. 321).

In other words, the meme's production and attributes must be carefully considered, then strategically aimed at the target audience among whom the meme is most likely to resonate. Given the complexity of SNS platforms and the diverse interests of those who use them, it should be expected that success will vary on a case-by-case basis depending on the content itself and the aims of the producer.

Nonetheless, adherence to certain guiding principles can help to facilitate successful transmission. For brands specifically interested in advertising, Murray et al. (2014) recommend investing in content producers who are likely to produce memorable, high-quality memes. The need for skill and specialized knowledge in this area is the clear incentive behind Bud Light, Gitcoin, and others creating the CMeO position (Enberg et al., 2021; Lemée, 2021; Song, 2020). Furthermore, Murray et al. emphasize that simplicity is key in attracting and maintaining an audience—advice which accords with Chuah et al.'s (2020) suggestion that memetic advertising content be "straightforward yet meaningful" (p. 941).

As will be described in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, SNS users' cognitive experience with memes is likely driven by cues (Naab & Schnauber, 2016; Strack & Deutsch, 2004), which in turn activate heuristics (Bellur & Sundar, 2014). Since people are not predisposed to deplete their finite cognitive resources haphazardly (e.g., Kahneman, 2011), a meme that demands a high degree of attention or focus may be less successful and less spreadable than a relatively more straightforward one. A robust strategy for attracting attention without taxing someone's cognitive resources, therefore, is to link the meme conceptually to primordial drives like fear, food, and sex (Brodie, 1996). The prevalence of these themes in traditional forms of advertising throughout history speaks to timeless human impulses (Cochrane & Quester, 2005; Harris, Bargh, &

Brownell, 2009; Reichert, 2002). Lastly, and perhaps self-evidently, there must be a good fit between the format in which the content is presented and the architecture of the SNS or webpage (Murray et al., 2014). For instance, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are well suited for the sharing and diffusion of image macros, whereas YouTube—which is dedicated exclusively to video content—is not.

Transmission is only the first in Murray et al.'s (2014) six-stage model, and thus only the first hurdle that needs to be cleared. In order for the transmitted information to be successfully received and decoded, it should fit into the audience's existing memeplex. The memeplex, as defined by Blackmore (1999), is a collection or grouping of memes operating in a mutually supportive or symbiotic relationship. For SNS users, a memeplex is tantamount to a *mental model* designated for the retention of thematically related memetic material (Abdel-Raheem, 2020; Mastro et al., 2007). Mental models represent "a general idea of a specific phenomenon, as understood by the individual" (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Ortiz, 2007, p. 351) and serve "to process, organize, and comprehend incoming information, make social judgments, formulate predictions and inferences or generate descriptions and explanations of how a system operates" (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Davies, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2004, p. 349). Research suggests that a combination of textual and pictorial stimuli promotes the construction of mental models (Glenberg & Langston, 1992; Wyer & Radvansky, 1999), lending credence to the assumption that people may have a mental predisposition to decode the memes they encounter online with relative ease. A meme that is aesthetically or conceptually similar to other memes that have been previously encountered therefore has a better chance of being decoded, comprehended, and stored in an individual's memetic mental models (i.e., stages two, three, and four in the above model) than memes that are substantially different.

Complicating this relationship somewhat is the necessity for the meme to be perceived as novel and separate. "Advertising must be sufficiently original to constitute as something worth reception by the host" (Murray et al., 2014, p. 339). A challenge for the meme producer or CMeO is to find an appropriate balance between the originality of the new meme and similarity to older memes existing within the audience's memplex. Reinventing the wheel is therefore not advisable, but the new meme also should not be perceived as fungible with those that have already been decoded and stored. Lastly—consistent with the guidelines around the successful transmission of memes already outlined—the successful decoding, infection, and storage of memes are also fostered by simplicity, brevity, and appeals to human nature or biological drives (Murray et al., 2014).

After being stored in long-term memory, the meme may either survive or decay. The memes that are likeliest to be remembered and thus retained in the long-term memory store are those that are most congruent with the individual's external, culturally contingent environment—a condition that Murray et al. (2014) term *sociotype fit*. "The sociotype is the particular way the meme is understood and enacted in a specific culture or subculture. If memes are consistent with the sociotype, they provide a context for other memes, and increase their own probability of survival" (p. 340). In advertising terms, this highlights the importance of adhering to each component of the segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP) model (e.g., Varadarajan, 2010). A brand wishing to create memes that survive in long-term memory needs to not only divide the internet and SNS landscape into distinct segments and select which of those segments are most likely to be receptive to the memetic advertising campaign, but crucially to also position itself in a way that speaks to the cultural or subcultural affinities of those targeted segments. Since internet memes are most likely to be seen by younger SNS users (e.g., Enberg et al., 2021),

it follows that a brand's memetic advertising campaign will be optimally effective and memorable if it taps into youth culture in a vibrant and entertaining way that accords with the recommendations listed above (Murray et al., 2014; Vasile et al., 2021).

At this juncture, one of two outcomes may occur: either the meme will simply be remembered by the prospective consumer but not travel further, or it will be retransmitted to others via the medium through which it was received, thereby completing all six stages of the postulated meme lifecycle. The process then begins anew with a different host (Murray et al., 2014). For advertisers, both of these outcomes may differentially be viewed as successful. A memetic advertisement that does not get retransmitted but nonetheless results in a purchase or monetary transaction benefits the brand, as does a meme that does *not* result in a purchase for that specific individual but *does* get retransmitted to other potential consumers. Achieving a combination of these outcomes is therefore ideal, whereas achieving neither denotes a lack of success (Capitello et al., 2014).

Meme retransmission can be facilitated through various strategies. Perhaps the most common is to link the meme to a celebrity or well-known public figure (Pringle, 2004). In the parlance of SNSs, this may be an *influencer*, or nontraditional celebrity who is famous among a niche audience and has subcultural cachet with that demographic due to how they have leveraged social media to establish themselves (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). For a CMeO or other advertiser, *astroturfing* the meme—in this case, paying celebrities or influencers to share a brand's advertising content or otherwise promote the brand—may inspire retransmission among loyal followers (Gunders & Brown, 2010). *Connectors*, or individuals who are adept at networking without necessarily being celebrities or influencers, are a prime target for keeping the meme mobile in this way (e.g., Gladwell, 2002). Since repurposing and remixing are vital for

memetic success in general (e.g., Shifman, 2014), the brand should also be open to the meme mutating and changing as it moves from one host to another. Although this can backfire, as in the case of the #McDStories incident (Hill, 2012), it is also an attainable way of extending the life span of the ad campaign without additional expenditures (Murray et al., 2014). Using preexisting meme templates that are already stored within the memeplexes of the targeted segment—and therefore possess heuristic value—is another way that advertisers can appropriate consumers' prior memetic knowledge in the hope that they will associate that knowledge with a certain brand (Murray et al., 2014). Indeed, this is the foundation for the art infusion effect described in Chapter 2, which may account for the widespread use of popular art in advertisements (Peluso et al., 2016). Naturally, these prescriptive suggestions are not a panacea for the challenges surrounding getting a meme or other piece of content to go viral and will necessarily vary depending on the aims and goals of respective advertisers, but they nonetheless comprise a blueprint from which a memetic advertising campaign can originate.

An additional and crucial element is to ensure that the memes are aimed at an optimally receptive demographic. With this point in mind, we turn to the generation of individuals among whom internet memes are most valued.

## **CHAPTER 4: GEN-Z SOCIALIZATION THROUGH MEMES AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Generation Z, roughly designated as individuals born between the years 1997 and 2012, have commonly been labeled as digital natives (Dimock, 2019). Defined as people who "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1) and who were "raised in an environment in which they were surrounded by technology and who possess technological skills different from those possessed by the members of the prior generation" (Akçayıra, Dündar, & Akçayırc, 2016; p. 435), digital natives have a notably divergent outlook on society, the world, and everyday life than their elders, owing to the rapid technological advancements made over the past quarter-century (Selwyn, 2009). The advent of the smartphone in the late 2000s—which coincided with the oldest of the Generation Z cohort reaching adolescence—enabled citizens to take the internet with them anywhere and access it anytime. As such, a typical digital native living in the First World today (i.e., those people living on the side of the digital divide where such technologies are widespread) is often simultaneously engaged in face-to-face physical interactions as well as immersed in a computer-mediated environment (Vorderer, Hefner, Reinecke, & Klimmt, 2018).

Scholars in communication and psychology believe that the pervasiveness of these technological affordances is altering digital natives' perceptions of social reality, identity processes, needs, and motivations (Vorderer et al., 2018). The ways in which Generation Z individuals process and retain the messages they encounter online is thought to vary appreciably from how the same messages are apprehended by older internet users. This development has profound implications for marketing communication and consumer behaviors, along with other far-reaching, societal-level consequences (Klimmt et al., 2018). If the condition of being permanently online and permanently connected (POPC) is effecting changes to the cognitive

structures of those who are most apt to be socialized via the internet, social networking sites (SNSs), and smartphones, the overall fabric of society will also be altered, particularly as Generation Z individuals reach reproductive age and beget a future generation of digital natives (Mihailidis, 2014). Consequently, it is important for scholars to focus on the ways in which digital content is apprehended and processed by these younger individuals.

### **Generational Cohort Theory and Generation Z Consumerism**

Generational cohort theory (GCT) argues for the value of studying the attitudes and behaviors of commonly designated birth groups (e.g., Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials) as distinct entities, and is a long-standing basis for market segmentation (Goldring & Azab, 2021; Howe & Strauss, 2007). Scholars agree that a generational cohort experiences different social, technological, economic, and political developments than the cohorts that precede and follow it, and that the dynamic interaction of these developments within society instills generational values that remain in place throughout the cohort's collective lifespan (Rentz, Reynolds, & Stout, 1983). According to Howe and Strauss (2000), generational cohorts are defined by three key conditions: awareness of group membership, commonly held beliefs and perspectives, and a communal appreciation for significant positive and negative macro-level occurrences. Generational cohorts have appreciably different collective memories (Schuman & Scott, 1989), prefer different media (Holbrook & Schindler, 1994), and hold contrasting opinions about social factors like religiosity, familial and workplace life, and gender roles (Schewe & Noble, 2000). Moreover, different cohorts display varying patterns of product consumption (Rentz & Reynolds, 1991) and purchasing behaviors (Parment, 2013). Accordingly, Rindfleisch (1994) asserts that "cohort generations present a conceptual variable that may help researchers gain a better understanding of consumer socialization processes and outcomes" (p. 474).

From an information consumption standpoint, Generation Z differs most from prior generations in that they were exposed to a greater volume of content at an early age (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014). Given that most of this computer-mediated content is branded and commercialized (Goldring & Azab, 2021), their cohort has developed considerable brand knowledge, has clearly defined brand preferences, and more strongly links brand engagement to self-concept (i.e., how one perceives their own behaviors, abilities, and unique characteristics, Markus & Werf, 1987) than prior generations (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). A direct consequence is that, having grown up with the internet and SNSs perpetually at their fingertips, Generation Z expects brands to be reputable and authentic and often uses SNS engagement metrics such as comments and likes to gauge collective attitudes about brand communications (Goldring & Azab, 2021). Whereas prior generations relied upon word-of-mouth (WOM) among social groups to evaluate brands and products, the cohort of digital natives habitually *crowdsources* (i.e., consults a body of internet users, many of whom may be unfamiliar, to obtain desired knowledge) and bases its judgments upon collective opinions (Lim & Parker, 2020). Thus, through the process of online socialization engendered by its POPC status, Generation Z has emerged from its formative years as a cohort that collectively possesses a high degree of personal connection with brands and the digital marketplace. As a result, brands have developed marketing strategies to increase awareness and Generation Z market share within these virtual spaces.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Generation Z individuals appear to respond more favorably to social media marketing than to traditional, offline approaches. This in turn has a positive impact on their awareness of brands, loyalty toward brands, perceptions of advertised products, and self-reported intentions to purchase those products (Ninan, Roy, & Cheriyan, 2020). In line with their

penchant for crowdsourcing, scholars believe that Generation Z prefer social media marketing not only because of a territoriality stemming from perceiving SNSs as their domain, but also because digital platforms have enabled them to listen to brand communications from both sides. Official promotional messages and consumer opinions and experiences are merged on SNSs in a way that paints a more comprehensive and detailed picture than traditional advertising provides (Tabassum, Khwaja, & Zaman, 2020). Consumer testimonials and electronic word of mouth appear to influence the cohort's attitudes and purchase intentions just as much as the advertising messages that give rise to such discourse (Pauliené & Sedneva, 2019). By and large, it appears that Generation Z individuals view built-in SNS metrics such as likes, reactions, and comments as extensions of everyday social life (Katz et al., 2021). As a result, the importance of Web 2.0 interactivity and the social ties that SNSs facilitate cannot be overstated when advertising to Generation Z on social media.

### **Social Connectedness Online**

Oftentimes for digital natives, looking at computer-mediated content throughout the day is an impulsive—as opposed to planned—behavior facilitated by automatic, positive affective reactions (Van Koningsbruggen, Hartmann, & Du, 2018). A key reason why positive reactions arise from the habitual checking of internet content is the feeling of social connectedness that arises from being POPC (Vorderer et al., 2018). Humans are a social species with an innate need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Traditionally, people have satisfied this need by forming dyadic interpersonal relationships and becoming members of personally relevant social groups. Throughout much of human history, this was accomplished through physical, face-to-face interaction—a reality that the advent of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and SNSs has altered dramatically (Licoppe, 2004). These new technologies not only afford

internet users the ability to remain POPC and to interact in increasingly complex ways without having to share a physical space, but also enable the formation and maintenance of larger social groups than is often possible in strictly face-to-face environments (Knop-Huelss, Winkler, & Genzel, 2018). Thus, SNSs functionally open "an imagined shared social space" (Panek, Bayer, Dal Cin, & Campbell, 2015, p. 385) for social groupings that are both formal (e.g., professional networking) and informal (e.g., family and friends).

The content on SNSs that digital natives access impulsively is often shared by others with whom an individual associates, whether they are real-life or virtual acquaintances (Kietzmann et al., 2011). In this way, SNSs provide users with outlets to form and maintain relationships, increase their social capital, and obtain social support (Allen et al., 2014). In general, it takes little for people to feel attached to one another and to eventually perceive themselves as members of a social group (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sherif, 1954). Simple sorting into groups based on arbitrary characteristics such as music preference and sports team fandom quickly gives rise to ardent ingroup versus outgroup favoritism (Smith, 2010). Because of this, SNSs are naturally fertile ground for group *homophily*, the idea that similar individuals tend to associate with each other more than with dissimilar others (e.g., Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Since SNS users logically have more favorable attitudes toward content that is shared by friends than content that is shared by strangers and will actively shape their computer-mediated environments to reflect subjects and ideas of personal interest to them (Aiello et al., 2012), it stands to reason that the periodic, oftentimes impulsive viewing of such content will bolster their feelings of social connectedness. Specific to Generation Z, Davis (2012) found that casual interactions on SNSs increased adolescent users' overall sense of belonging. Such interactions grant users a means by which they can strengthen their existing relationships by communicating via

combinations of pictures and text (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). This effect is especially pronounced in situations where SNS users cannot interact in-person (Tiwari, Lane, & Alam, 2019), owing to geographic disparities, social distancing, and other obstacles.

In general, social groups can be characterized by the type of attachment that members have with the overall group (Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994). Within groups based on *common bond*, group membership is determined by personal affinity and defined along the lines of characteristics such as feelings of similarity, knowledge, liking, and perceived homogeneity (Sassenberg, 2002). Within groups based on *common identity*, group membership is determined based on shared interests that result in "identification with the group as a whole, its goal and its purpose" (Sassenberg, 2002, p. 28). While groups based on both common bond and common identity are prevalent on SNSs, members of common bond groups are more likely to be attracted to each other as distinguishable individuals, while members of common identity groups are more likely to be attracted to one another due to feeling connected with the group's purpose, character, or value (Coker, 2021). For example, people with whom an individual graduated from high school might form a common bond group, whereas people with whom an individual shares certain ideological beliefs or consumer preferences might form a common identity group (Knop-Huelss, Winkler, & Penzel, 2018). Content shared by both types of groups on SNSs is likely to show up in a user's newsfeed.

**Social connectedness and memes.** Due to their status as a "ubiquitous form of communication, especially for younger generations" (Anderson & Keehn, 2020, p. 57), internet memes play a sizable role in this feeling of social connectedness. Humphreys (2018) posits that the mundane elements of SNSs "represent broader social values" (p. 6), which may be especially true for a cohort that simultaneously lives both online and offline. Given that internet memes

have the power to at once represent, transform, and reconstitute the social media landscape (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) and that they thrive on what Marwick (2013) calls a "social, affective bond" (p. 13), it stands to reason that digital natives have an affinity for memes—particularly those which accord with common bonds and/or common identities (Aronson & Jaffal, 2021; Coker, 2021; Sassenberg, 2002). So closely tied are internet memes to the sociocultural experiences of those who view them that Anderson and Keehn (2020) view them as "consciousness building" (p. 57). As Evnine (2018) comments:

Broadly speaking, people start using [memes] in ways that connect them to certain affects and/or narratives, others respond and imitate, there is consolidation and refinement through the early stages of a meme's history, and so there comes to obtain the requisite association between images, on the one hand, and affective dimensions and implied narratives, on the other (p. 307).

Thus, by virtue of speaking to a relevant topic within a virtual space specifically designated for "socially constructed public discourses" (Shifman, 2014, p. 8), memes are capable of shaping the collective's mindset and influencing its actions. All memes demand shared knowledge to some extent, and to process them generates "barriers of discursive specificity" (Yus, 2018, p. 123) that have a strengthening effect on ingroup membership.

Meikle (2016) provides a concise summary of a meme's social properties: "An internet meme is a shared representation of online interaction. The rules and structures of each instantly recognizable meme are a representation of the communication practices and the particular online space in which it was developed" (p. 55). Gal et al. (2016) expound on this, arguing that memetic practice—taken to encompass all activities performed by both meme producers and audiences, who generally overlap (e.g., Shifman, 2014)—is not merely an expression of existing sociocultural norms, but also a tool for negotiating them within a virtual environment. Thus, memes are not only reflective of social norms, but also play an important role in how these

norms develop and change over time. Ingroup membership-strengthening through adherence to social norms and group validation is therefore thought to be the primary goal in meme communication since personal identities "are simultaneously properties of the group itself because they could not exist without some degree of consensus from the group" (Postmes & Baym, 2005, p. 224).

### **Memes and Narrative Advertising**

An important connection between memes and Generation Z consumerism, beyond their social nature, is that the cohort appears to favorably respond to advertisements that incorporate narratives (Tabassum, Khwaja, & Zaman, 2020). Digital platforms have ended the era of interruptive advertising associated with television and radio (Silva et al., 2020). As a result, brands are continually searching for new and distinctive ways to advertise to and engage their audiences (Mohammed, 2018). One way to do this is to take advantage of the narrative properties of memes.

A compelling and largely underexamined reason for internet memes' effectiveness in shaping digital culture—including consumer culture—is that they can function as succinct, easily digestible storytelling devices that individually contribute to a larger, overarching narrative (de Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, & Literat, 2021). Memes do not tell traditional stories with beginnings, middles, ends, and clearly defined plot points. Rather, owing to their compact nature, memes present fragments of a larger narrative and leave it to their audiences to interpret and contextualize the message (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). Given that internet memes are multimodal (i.e., they employ multiple forms of communication within a single message, most commonly the mixture of stationary images and overlaid text that comprise an image macro; Shifman, 2014) and intertextual (i.e., they draw from numerous and varied multimedia sources to

construct a single memetic message; Abdel-Raheem, 2020), one's ability to do so necessitates a certain degree of cultural literacy (Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018). However, since the average American checks their phone 96 times a day and spends approximately five to six nonconsecutive hours on the internet per day (Asurion, 2019), it follows that—especially among digital natives who consume a great deal of content and are current on SNS trends—the mental act of decoding a meme and coherently integrating it into an in-progress societal narrative is likely not a laborious one.

Humans have a propensity to structure their cognitive representations as narratives. Whether online or off, people naturally construct mental models of incoming mediated information in narrative form (e.g., Bower & Morrow, 1990). Because of this, narratives are a useful framework for structuring, making sense of, and remembering information presented within complex and dynamic environments (Wyer, 2004). Since mental models often take the form of narratives that are not only the result of information processing but also inform how future information will be processed (Bower & Morrow, 1990), and given that memes can theoretically be viewed as artifacts that themselves function in service of big-picture narratives (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021), it may conjecturally be inferred that SNS users call upon their mental models to heuristically process the content of internet memes and situate them within broader cultural narratives. As such, memes likely contribute to memetic mental models (i.e., memeplexes; see Chapter 3) while simultaneously drawing from previously constructed models that serve as representations of events depicted in media (Huntington, 2020).

In keeping with the conceptualization of memes as partial narratives that cooperatively tie into an overarching story (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021) and the notion that the memes contained within a memeplex are mutually reinforcing (Blackmore, 1999), it is possible that memetic

content has an inherent persuasive advantage that other forms of communication do not. Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong (2003) argue that "in general, narratives might be more effective than rhetoric because the former are not seen as persuasive attempts" (p. 177) and that this distinction may be especially useful for changing strong attitudes. Even while bearing in mind memes' growing prominence in SNS settings and the increased frequency with which memes appear to be meaningfully joining in the cultural conversation (e.g., Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2014), SNS users tend not to expect persuasive attempts to be embedded in memes because they are perceived as bite-sized, ephemeral content (Mina, 2019). Further, resistance is often greater when people are forewarned that a persuasion attempt will be made (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), something which the architecture of most SNS platforms conveniently yet inadvertently circumvents. Whether a meme is encountered by scrolling through an SNS newsfeed or sent by a friend through a synchronous messaging app like Facebook Messenger, users have no prior knowledge of the argument presented within the meme and are usually unable to inoculate themselves (e.g., McGuire, 1961) against the incoming persuasive content.

Accordingly, brands that take an existing meme and co-opt its overarching narrative to meet their strategic goals appear to be at an inherent advantage when it comes to forging and maintaining consumer relations among digital natives. Instead of spending time, money, and other resources telling a novel story, a shrewd brand can use information that consumers already know as a springboard to advance their own brand narrative. The underlying meaning of a meme template, the setup of the joke it is trying to tell, and details about the sociocultural landscape pertinent to the brand or product can all be presented in a compact, easily digestible format. Since internet memes commonly arise within special interest groups (e.g., Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) and digital natives are engaged with online trends and e-commerce

significantly more than older generations due to being POPC (Goldring & Azab, 2021; Klimmt et al., 2018), Generation Z consumers who correctly understand an advertising meme may perceive themselves as knowledge insiders and, in turn, hold more favorable views of both the product and the brand. This, together with the cohort's penchant for advertisements that incorporate narratives (Tabassum, Khwaja, & Zaman, 2020) and the social connectedness that meme consumption fosters (e.g., Humphreys, 2018; Marwick, 2013; Meikle, 2016; Yus, 2018), positions memes as a potentially powerful advertising vehicle among digital native consumers.

### **Summary**

Internet memes are socially driven reflectors of culture that "relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways" (Shifman, 2014, p. 2). The more that a given meme aligns with an SNS user's identity and values, the more connected it allows that individual to feel to the group and/or the other users who are sharing that meme, as well as to the topic or viewpoint that the meme is expressing (Katz et al., 2021). These social underpinnings bolster the meme's resonance and persuasiveness. The more internet memes that an SNS user attends to, the more expansive their personal memeplex becomes. The more frequently an individual accesses and updates this mental model, the easier it becomes to form associative connections between its contents and the new, incoming information (Mastro et al., 2007). Consequently, a meme template that an individual has viewed numerous times becomes linked to the template's core message and to a relevant cultural narrative (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). This dissertation argues that heuristic processing can be implicated in this linkage.

Since digital natives experience a continuous commingling of online and offline stimuli and have finite cognitive resources to spend on attending to the overabundance of information in these virtual and physical spaces (e.g., Kahneman, 2011), it can conjecturally be inferred that the

majority of internet memes are processed via the use of associative rules-of-thumb (e.g., Gigerenzer, 2001). Thus, meme creators can capitalize upon both an inherent feeling of social connectedness and an SNS user's low-effort, heuristic processing to quickly and efficiently communicate a memetic message which can be unpacked immediately and, if deployed correctly (i.e., to a receptive social group under favorable circumstances), can influence and reshape the conversation surrounding an ongoing cultural narrative. As such, internet memes are deceptively simple and yet possess the potential to significantly, and perhaps unconsciously, impact the collective mindset of the (largely generationally segmented) audiences who are most receptive to them (Anderson & Keehn, 2020; Aronson & Jaffal, 2021; Goldring & Azab, 2021). While most of the scholarly literature to date has focused on examining how political memes impact ideological expression and civic participation (e.g., Anderson & Keehn, 2020; Huntington, 2020; Mina, 2019; Nieuburt, 2021; Penney, 2020), Generation Z's strong, high-expectation relationships with brands (Goldring & Azab, 2021) may also enable advertising memes to exert an appreciable impact on the consumer landscape.

For brands, the implications are evident. A consumer's loyalty is rooted in perceived value, satisfaction, and trust. People construct their self-concepts and intergroup relations in part around the brands and material goods for which they have a certain affinity (He, Li, & Harris, 2012). A memetic advertiser therefore should seek to retain perceived value, satisfaction, and trust by carefully playing to the interests and group norms of the market segment being targeted (e.g., Enberg et al., 2021; Sassenberg, 2002) while remaining cognizant of heuristics that SNS users frequently rely upon when assessing the credibility of online content (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). A more detailed theoretical overview of information processing and of specific heuristics relevant to SNS use is provided in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5: HEURISTICS AND THE COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF MEMETICS

Numerous information processing theories in contemporary cognitive psychology fall under the wide-spanning umbrella of *dual-process* theories (e.g., Evans, 2003). The essential, unifying idea underpinning these theories is that the human mind processes incoming sensory stimuli via either a relatively automatic, unconscious, low effort "System 1" or via a relatively deliberative, conscious, and effortful "System 2" (Kahneman, 2011). By definition, System 2 processing typically yields more attentive and accurate assessments of incoming information, but at the cost of finite cognitive resources that can generally be conserved by processing the same stimulus via the less expensive System 1.

Empirical evidence suggests that social networking site (SNS) users on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram that contain high volumes of content tend to rely primarily on System 1 evaluations of incoming information unless they perceive a reason to attend more closely to a given message. The simple reason for this is that relying on System 2 evaluations would consume cognitive resources that could be allocated for other activities (Panek, 2016). It follows that the average internet user should default to *heuristic* (i.e., System 1) as opposed to *systematic* (i.e., System 2) processing when scrolling through content on SNSs unless they are specifically motivated to scrutinize a particular message or its attributes (Todorov, Chaiken, & Henderson, 2002).

Whether a piece of information is processed by System 1 or System 2 is dictated by what Chaiken et al. (1989) call the *sufficiency principle*. The sufficiency principle posits that an individual's motivation or desire to process information is a consequence of the difference between how confident they actually are about a certain topic or judgment and how confident they would like to be about it. If they deem their actual confidence sufficient in a given situation,

they are more likely to let their automatic System 1 do the work; however, if they feel that they lack sufficient knowledge to be confident in their evaluation, the controlled System 2 is likely to be activated. Overall, the sufficiency principle holds that people will engage in effortful processing only if their actual confidence is lower than their desired confidence (Todorov et al., 2002).

A critical assumption of Chaiken's (1980) Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) of social information processing is that people are capable of engaging in heuristic and systematic processing either simultaneously or serially, depending on the characteristics of the judgment task at hand. Thus, when encountering previously unfamiliar information on SNSs, users often lack sufficient confidence and will at first need to consciously contend with it (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). If similar information arises again, they might either repeat their thoughtful systematic elaboration or, if they have gained sufficient confidence through a single exposure, might downshift to heuristic processing. Through the habitual checking of SNSs, it can be assumed that individuals develop mental scripts for type of information encountered (e.g., memes) and then employ the sufficiency principle as needed to determine which of the two systems will process the specific informational message (Hofmann, Reinecke, & Meier, 2017). The more times a certain type of information is presented, the more likely people are to develop mental scripts in their long-term semantic memory (Naab & Schnauber, 2016; Strack & Deutsch, 2004), making it easier to rely on heuristics and/or heuristic processing when idly scrolling, tapping, or clicking.

### **Heuristics**

As defined by Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier (2011), heuristics are "efficient cognitive processes, conscious or unconscious, that ignore part of the information to make

decisions faster, more frugally, and/or more accurately than more complex methods" (p. 451). Heuristic processing, as described by Chaiken (1980), is the mental application of these rules of thumb to arrive at a suitable judgment or comprehension of a given message or piece of information. When SNS users process items heuristically, they attend only to the superficial qualities of these items and forgo deeper evaluation—an adaptive shortcut necessary for remaining up to date in a cluttered or content-saturated environment (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010).

Mental script-based, heuristic processing is most often activated by *cues*, which are an individual's perceptions of the typical characteristics of a given situation (in this case, the various forms of content on SNSs and the means by which that content is presented). Once a cue is perceived, an ensuing behavior related to mental representations of that situation is enacted (Wood & Neal, 2007). If this behavior occurs frequently enough, the action gradually becomes habitual (Naab & Schnauber, 2016). For instance, if an SNS user encounters an image on their newsfeed that immediately resembles an internet meme, a meme cue will be activated that will in turn lead the individual to process the content of that meme in a familiar, low-resource manner, particularly if the format or template of the meme is familiar to the individual. Only if the image contains unfamiliar, challenging, or difficult-to-interpret information will the SNS user be motivated to traverse the sufficiency threshold (Todorov, Chaiken, & Henderson, 2002) and evaluate the meme's contents in a more effortful, systematic way.

Although conceptually similar, cues and heuristics are distinct. According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, a cue is "a stimulus, event, or object that serves to guide behavior, such as a retrieval cue, or that signals the presentation of another stimulus, event, or object" (VandenBos, 2007). Cues from the external environment tend to serve as objects that draw an

individual's attention, while cues from the internal (i.e., mental) environment serve as tools that guide information processing via largely unconscious means (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Following from the above discussion, the basic aesthetic features of an image encountered on an SNS platform serve as cues. By extension, a heuristic is an "if-then" syllogism that is psychologically embedded within a given cue (Bellur & Sundar, 2014). The logo for a popular brand, for instance, serves as a cue that opens the door for the individual to use a heuristic (e.g., "if Apple, then efficient; if Microsoft, then glitchy"). Thus, perception of a cue is a necessary precondition for activation of a heuristic, which may or may not be useful to the individual depending on the circumstances. Furthermore, cues can vary in intensity (i.e., it is better to regard cues in terms of the variable degree to which they may activate a heuristic than whether they dichotomously do or do not) and the same cue can activate different heuristics in different situations.

Crucially, and somewhat counterintuitively, the activation of heuristics is not exclusive to heuristic processing. Chen and Chaiken (1999) clarify that heuristics can be used during systematic processing but are more common within the processing mode with which they share their name. This point of clarification has led some scholars to question the helpfulness of differentiating between two separate, but not mutually exclusive, modes of information processing. The *unimodel* (Kruglanski & Thompson, 1999) posits that superficial cues and developed arguments should be considered in tandem as "functionally equivalent" (p. 88) in informing how information is evaluated. This formulation is rooted in Kruglanski's (1990) *lay epistemic theory*, which holds that all people rely on subjective knowledge (i.e., what they know or think they know about various matters) and that the granular details of how they wield this knowledge to make judgments are immaterial when the evaluative endpoint is the same. In other words, in Kruglanski's view, distinguishing between heuristic and systematic processing modes

overcomplicates a cognitive activity that can be more parsimoniously understood via a single information processing pathway. To date, there has been no formal scholarly reconciliation of the unimodel and dual-process views (e.g., El Hedhli & Zourrig, 2022; Vieira et al., 2020). As Briñol & Petty (2012) comment in their review of persuasion theories, "We suspect that preference for single-process or multiprocess models will depend more on one's theoretical style (lumper or splitter) than on any currently available research evidence" (p. 309). Thus, while Kruglanski's argument is compelling, the dual-process formulation will be preferentially emphasized in this dissertation due to its longevity and continued support (e.g., Chaiken, 1987; De Neys & Pennycook, 2019; Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2011; Miles, Charron-Chénie, & Schliefer, 2019; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Sloman, 1996).

### **Heuristic Versus Systematic Processing**

Elaborating on the aforementioned distinctions, a fundamental difference between heuristic and systematic processing is the precise way each system handles information. Sloman (1996) characterizes System 1 as primarily driven by the automatic associations that people make between stimuli. Colloquially, we may speak of being reminded of something or of recalling something familiar. System 1 effectively bundles these familiar, similar stimuli together so that people can quickly and efficiently recognize patterns and form evaluative judgments based on what they have previously observed in comparable situations. Thus, when Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier (2011) specify that heuristics ignore portions of presented information in order to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, it may be inferred that this occurs because these associations or pattern recognitions are often robust enough that a thorough examination of the details of the stimulus is unnecessary. Many psychologists maintain that the myriad heuristics that people employ comprise an "adaptive toolbox" that facilitates resourceful cognitive appraisals

(Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999; Gigerenzer, 2001). The heuristics within this toolbox are conceptualized as parallel (i.e., capable of handling multiple incoming stimuli simultaneously), domain-specific (i.e., for use in particular goal-driven situations as opposed to universal applications) and are modeled on people's actual cognitive abilities rather than on the idealized and erroneous notion that humans are capable of boundless rational thought (e.g., Edwards, 1954; Simon, 1955). Furthermore, substantial evidence exists that this type of processing occurs automatically and often without conscious awareness (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

System 1 processing contrasts starkly with the sequential (i.e., capable of handling multiple stimuli in succession rather than simultaneously) and domain-general (i.e., globally applicable) properties of the slower and more analytical System 2 (Evans, 2008). Rather than being automatic and driven by associations, System 2 is controlled, rule-based, and encompasses what laypeople regard as thought. That is, when most people conceive of thinking about something, they are referring to their System 2 capabilities for logical, in-depth, and potentially abstract problem solving that System 1 does not possess (Evans, 2003). The familiar iceberg metaphor is helpful for differentiating the two: the mental activities of which humans are aware and are the province of System 2 occur above the surface, while most cognitions occur without conscious awareness and are the province of System 1 (Evans, 2008). Thus, System 1's associative, heuristic, belief-based reasoning style can be conceptualized as the brain's default mode that must be specifically overridden by the conscious, effortful, analytic reasoning of System 2 (Klaczynski & Lavalley, 2005).

System 2 activation is generally believed to be a function of intrinsic factors such as motivation to process the information at hand, personal relevance of that information, and overall amount of information to be processed (Evans, 2003). This, in turn, leads to greater and more

nuanced comprehension of a given message (e.g., Kahneman, 2011). An individual who lacks the wherewithal or desire to thoroughly process a message will simply pass over it and move on to the next message, particularly in computer-mediated environments such as SNSs that contain a high volume of content (Metzger, 2007). Todorov, Chaiken, and Henderson (2002) maintain that both systems can operate in tandem as assumptions of the HSM, whereas Petty & Cacioppo (1986) aver that only one or the other may operate at a given time. Nonetheless, there is a consensus that incoming stimuli are first processed by System 1 and only graduate to System 2 if the need for more intensive scrutiny arises.

### **Dual-Processing and the Internet**

Research has shown that people who use the internet every day (e.g., digital natives) tend not to use highly demanding approaches to evaluating information and instead base their judgments on heuristic cues (e.g., Johnson & Hong, 2020; Hong & Cameron, 2017) and superficial attributes such as ease of navigability and design aesthetics (e.g., Metzger, 2007) unless directly motivated to process information systematically. Fogg et al. (2003) report that consumers of computer-mediated information tend to base their evaluations of information credibility (defined loosely as trustworthiness and believability) on the visual design aspects of the websites they visit as opposed to in-depth examinations of the messages themselves or the sources from which the messages originate. From their findings, Fogg et al. (2003) assert that "people typically process Web information in superficial ways, that using peripheral [heuristic] cues is the rule of Web use, not the exception" (p. 12). Additional studies (e.g., Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Walther & Burkell, 2002) corroborate this claim, lending credence to the notion that a typical internet user seldom verifies or fact-checks the information they happen upon and,

in the rare instances when they do, engage in authentication approaches that require minimal time and cognitive effort to carry out.

In general, the amount of effort a web user is willing to expend depends upon given information-seeking conditions and typically varies from person to person and from situation to situation (Taraborelli, 2008). In dual-processing terms, this means that SNS users are more likely to pay attention to cues pertaining to information quality and perform more rigorous message evaluations (i.e., activate their System 2) when they regard the presented information as germane to their own experiences. If this is not the case, they will instead default to their reliance on heuristic cues (i.e., System 1). By extension, Pirolli (2005) contends that internet users choose to behave in ways that "tend to optimize the utility of information gained as a function of interaction cost" (p. 351). Although the internet has made massive quantities of information available almost instantly, thereby rendering knowledge acquisition significantly easier than at any prior point in history, there is still a sizable time cost stemming from the necessity of having to interact with so much content. Simon's (1955) notion of *bounded rationality* holds that, given such an abundance of messages, the average individual will *satisfice* (a portmanteau of "satisfy" and "suffice") to reach an adequate judgment. That is, they will scan the multitudinous information they see and evaluate it only until they are able to construct a satisfactory and sufficient evaluation of the message. In keeping with the literature reviewed so far, the most cognitively resourceful approach to satisficing on the internet and SNS platforms is to use heuristics (e.g., Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999).

### **Credibility Heuristics in Internet Settings**

Credibility, again defined loosely as the trustworthiness and believability of a content source, is crucial for brands and advertisers seeking to engage potential new consumers and

retain existing ones. The extent to which a consumer perceives a brand as credible has been found to bolster their intentions to purchase products from that brand (Baek, Kim, & Yu, 2010), to increase the likelihood that they will consider buying from that brand in the future (Erdem & Swait, 2004), and to positively impact their long-term loyalty to that brand (Sweeney & Swait, 2008). It follows that the perceived credibility of online brand communication is instrumental to the success of that brand's messaging strategies. Although heuristics have been infrequently applied to studies of marketing communication specifically (e.g., Hauser, 2011; Merlo, Lukas, & Whitwell, 2008), internet users' perceived credibility of the content they encounter online has received significant attention (e.g., Greer, 2003; Hilligoss & Riyeh, 2008; Sundar, 2008) and heuristics linked to these credibility-assessing strategies have been identified (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Brief summaries of five key heuristics related to the assessment of credibility in online settings are provided.

**Reputation.** An internet user's ability to recognize the name of an online source is often a powerful heuristic cue that allows them to make a low-effort judgment of the credibility of the information contained within that message. In general, people value familiar alternatives over unfamiliar ones (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999), and recognized sources are commonly judged to be more credible than unrecognized sources regardless of the quality of the argument or the attributes of the message itself (O'Keefe, 1990). Authority plays a key role in how this mental shortcut functions. According to Sundar (2008), "a major criterion for assigning credibility to a web site is whether the source is an official authority or not" (p. 84). In an experiment, Koh and Sundar (2010) manipulated the level of espoused authority (specialist vs. generalist) on a mock e-commerce website and found that participants uniformly rated the purportedly higher-authority interface as more trustworthy. This suggests that, especially in the presence of a perceived expert

*and* in the absence of personal knowledgeability on a given topic, internet users are likely to favor an established (i.e., ostensibly reputable) source over an unknown source that would necessitate further information search and validation. Because of this, the reputation heuristic is also a means by which an individual operating below the sufficiency threshold (e.g., Todorov et al., 2002) can circumvent having to activate their System 2. The perceived expertise of a source thus precludes the necessity for the uninformed individual to perform a more rigorous information search or to scrutinize the message at hand.

The reputation heuristic is closely related to the recognition heuristic introduced in Chapter 2's discussion of the history of memetic advertising and provides a compelling rationale for why consumers prefer familiar to unfamiliar stimuli. A point of contention among psychological researchers is whether recognition is a *non-compensatory* (i.e., employing a single cue to form judgments or make decisions) or *compensatory* (i.e., employing multiple cues) heuristic process (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 2011). Goldstein and Gigerenzer (1999) argue that individuals who use this heuristic rely on "only one piece of information, recognition" (p. 57), while other scholars stress that mere recognition is crucial, but that additional, situationally relevant information should also be implicated in how people form judgments and make decisions (e.g., Bröder & Eichler, 2006; Newell & Fernandez, 2006; Oeusoonthornwattana & Shanks, 2010). To date, this conflict remains unresolved and has not been investigated in memetic contexts.

**Endorsement.** Also called the liking/agreement heuristic (Chaiken, 1987) or the bandwagon heuristic (Sundar, 2008), the endorsement heuristic presupposes that people are more likely to believe information if (they perceive that) others do. Internet users instinctively trust aggregated opinions in the forms of reviews, ratings, and testimonials in a manner akin to the

principle of safety in numbers (Metzger et al., 2010) and, as discussed in Chapter 4, this effect is especially pronounced among digital natives (Lim & Parker, 2020; Pauliené & Sedneva, 2019). Thus, if enough other people form a consensus, the endorsement heuristic will likely lead a person to agree with that decision. This is true even for consensus evaluations by strangers, though the effect is expectedly stronger if the recommendations or suggestions come from friends or trusted others (Chaiken, 1987). This explains the popularity and widespread use of websites like Amazon, Yelp, Google Reviews, and others that grant users the ability to express their opinions about products, services, and businesses, and also extends to content evaluation on SNSs like Facebook and Instagram, where the number of "likes" and/or comments a post receives is heuristically equated with common appraisal (Sundar, 2008). The endorsement heuristic is powerful enough that it can overcome the challenges of the reputation heuristic discussed above. That is, if an unknown or unfamiliar source is recommended by a friend with sound judgment, an internet user is likely to rate that source as credible despite having no personal experience with it (Metzger et al., 2010).

**Self-confirmation.** Confirmation bias, or the "tendency for people to view information as credible if it confirms their preexisting beliefs and not credible if it counters their existing beliefs, regardless of how well-argued, duly researched, [or] appropriately sourced" (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013, p. 215), is a pernicious and powerful heuristic (Klayman & Ha, 1987). Specific to computer-mediated communication, internet users tend to combat content clutter by choosing to attend to that which is consistent with their attitudes. In Web settings, time and motivational constraints limit an individual's ability to thoughtfully examine all of the information at their disposal (think of the thousands, or even millions, of hits a typical Google search returns). As a result, these internet users gravitate toward attitudinally consistent content and selectively avoid

media that might challenge those opinions (Fischer et al., 2005). The *false consensus effect*, in which people not only accept their own opinions as true but also assume that their views are held by most others, exacerbates the bias (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977).

The scholarly assumption has traditionally been to attribute confirmatory biases to cognitive dissonance-reducing drives (e.g., Festinger, 1957). Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, and Polavin (2020) place confirmation bias within a social identity framework, suggesting that ingroups selectively attend to messages that are useful to the preservation of group identity and that reinforce collective attitudes. Furthermore, they argue that *need for cognition*—a personality variable describing an individual's predilection for engaging in complex mental activities (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo 1986)—is also negatively associated with confirmation bias. Given that "being a motivated reasoner takes effort" (Taber & Lodge, 2006, p. 757), it follows that individuals who score lower on need for cognition measures succumb to confirmatory biases more readily and use heuristics more often than those who effortfully engage with computer-mediated content (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). A more thorough discussion of need for cognition is provided in the following section.

**Persuasive intent.** Of particular interest to advertisers is the persuasive intent heuristic, which leads people to downplay or negatively evaluate messages that they perceive as trying to influence them (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). This heuristic is a function of *persuasion knowledge*, a term used to describe people's cumulative, experience-based awareness of agents' persuasive goals and tactics, as well as how to manage these persuasion attempts (for a review, see Friestad & Wright, 1994). In general, when people recognize that a media agent—be it an advertiser, influencer, or online content creator—is attempting to manipulate them or get them to do something, they instinctively push back against the agent's attempts without paying further

attention to the message itself (Metzger et al., 2010). The persuasive intent heuristic is therefore also informed by *psychological reactance*, a motivational drive to restore freedoms that individuals feel are being threatened (e.g., Brehm & Brehm, 1981). For example, if an advertiser is attempting to sell a product, a consumer who encounters the advertising message may experience reactance in the form of the persuasive intent heuristic being activated. Subsequent mistrust and dismissal of the ad message is tantamount to restoring the threatened freedom by not succumbing to the persuasion attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The authors of the persuasion knowledge model (PKM) summarize this multifaceted construct.

We propose that persuasion knowledge is a set of interrelated beliefs about (a) the psychological events that are instrumental to persuasion, (b) the causes and effects of those events, (c) the importance of the events, (d) the extent to which people can control their psychological responses, (e) the temporal course of the persuasion process, and (f) the effectiveness and appropriateness of particular persuasion tactics. At some stage of development, adults' persuasion knowledge will resemble a model or theory of a "common-sense psychology" (Heider, 1958) of persuasion (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 6).

Since the introduction of the PKM, the construct has been measured in numerous ways (Ham, Nelson, & Das, 2015), many of which emphasize advertising and marketing strategies. These scales include measures of individuals' baseline levels of skepticism toward advertising messages (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998), their understanding of retail pricing tactics (Hardesty, Bearden, & Carlson, 2007), their ability to discern persuasive motives in advertising (Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012), and their understanding and recognition of ulterior motives of salespeople (DeCarlo, 2005; Xie, Boush, & Liu, 2013). Particularly relevant to this dissertation is consumers' persuasion knowledge of sponsored content (Boerman et al., 2018). Although sponsored content—defined as "the purposeful integration of brands or branded persuasive messages in editorial media content in exchange for compensation" (Eisend et al., 2020, p. 344)—does not perfectly extend to memes intended specifically for advertising (i.e., such memes

are purposeful integrations of brands into *social* media), measurement of persuasion knowledge for sponsored content captures the phenomena of interest with regard to persuasion knowledge for branded memetic content.

Given the PKM's strong conceptual ties to advertising, it is expected that—in line with previous literature suggesting that students who are taught principles of advertising and marketing possess greater persuasion knowledge (e.g., Kendrick & Fullerton, 2019; Nelson, 2016)—*strategic communication* students (i.e., those studying advertising, public relations, and media design) should have different perspectives on memetic advertising than those from other disciplines and may be better equipped to identify selling attempts presented in a memetic format. To investigate this possibility, both types of students were consulted for this research (see Chapter 6 for a full description of method).

**Expectancy violation.** This heuristic refers to instances when internet or SNS content fails to live up to the user's expectations or disappoints them in some way. Poor design or aesthetics, difficult navigability, and rampant spelling and/or grammatical errors are common ways in which content can violate individuals' expectancies (Metzger et al., 2010). This, in turn, leads to negative evaluations and decreased attentiveness (Fogg et al., 2003). Metzger and Flanagin (2013) argue that the expectancy-violation heuristic is rooted in the *effort heuristic*, or the tendency to evaluate sources based upon how much effort appears to have been put into them (Kruger et al., 2004). Consequently, internet users frequently judge the quality and credibility of information on the basis of how professional, good-looking, and easy to use its originating website or SNS platform is, again independent of the message attributes themselves (Metzger et al., 2010).

## Need for Cognition

While some people have little motivation to perform effortful mental tasks and do so only when there is sufficient incentive or reason to, others are more motivated and consistently engage in such tasks. Among the most frequently cited constructs in the literature on persuasion is *need for cognition* (for a comprehensive review, see Cacioppo et al., 1996). Introduced by Cacioppo and Petty (1982), need for cognition (NFC) is a "stable personality trait that describes individuals' tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity" (Coelho, Hanel, & Wolf, 2018, p. 1870). Like many personality constructs, NFC can be characterized as a spectrum on which people may fall at any point between two poles (Petty et al., 2009). In general, as an individual's level of NFC increases, they are more likely to think carefully about a wider variety of items (including *metacognition*, the act of thinking about one's own thoughts and thought processes). This increased level of thought typically yields stronger and more enduring judgments about the issue at hand (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Decades of research largely agree that low-NFC individuals more commonly base their judgments on cues (Haugtvedt, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1992) and stereotypes (Carter et al., 2006), whereas high-NFC individuals are more likely to consider most or all of the available information (Petty et al., 2009). Cues and stereotypes are still recognized by high-NFC individuals, but the effect on their judgments is indirect and believed to be driven by a more effortful cognitive mechanism (Wegener, Clark, & Petty, 2006).

In keeping with the idea that NFC is associated with effortful thinking, the persuasion literature has repeatedly demonstrated that high-NFC individuals tend to base their attitudes on effortful analysis of message attributes like argument strength and quality of relevant information (e.g., Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983; Chang, 2007; Petty et al., 2009). Conversely, low-NFC

individuals typically rely on simple cues like attractiveness and face-value appearance (e.g., Haugtvedt et al., 1992; Smith & Levin, 1996), perceived credibility of the message source (Kaufman, Stasson, & Hart, 1999), and their current emotional state (Briñol, Petty, & Barden, 2007) when forming judgments and attitudes. However, in keeping with the tenets of the HSM, although low-NFC individuals tend to prefer heuristic processing of information, they can still be motivated in given situations to eschew their reliance on cues and process stimuli in a more systematic manner (Petty et al., 2009). Motivating factors to engage in systematic processing include uncertainty or confusion regarding the communication (e.g., Priester, Dholakia, & Fleming, 2004; Ziegler, Diehl, & Ruther, 2002), high personal relevance of the message (Axsom, Yates, & Chaiken, 1987), and when the message contains provocative or highly emotional contents (Vidrine, Simmons, & Brandon, 2007). As such, although NFC is conceptualized as a stable trait, it speaks only to a person's natural predisposition to engage in effortful thought and does not attempt to constrain or provide boundary conditions for their capacity for complex mental activities. In other words, low-NFC individuals are still capable of systematic processing but generally find such mental activities unfulfilling, while high-NFC individuals still regularly engage in heuristic processing but find complex mental activities relatively more fulfilling. Since people are cognitive misers by nature (Kahneman, 2011), high-NFC individuals might elect not to think deeply about a particular message if they perceive it as unchallenging (Petty et al., 2009).

These basic trends hold within the domain of advertising. Haugtvedt et al. (1992) found that, for short advertising messages for which no explicit evaluation criteria or guidelines were given to participants, high-NFC individuals based their attitudes toward the advertisement more on specific product attributes and claims, and low-NFC individuals based their attitudes more on

heuristic cues like product attractiveness and perceived ease of use. Across three studies, NFC moderated the effect of strong vs. weak argument quality on attitude toward the ad such that high-NFC individuals had significantly more favorable attitudes toward ads with strong arguments and significantly less favorable attitudes toward ads with weak arguments, while low-NFC individuals preferred the ads with weak arguments to those with strong arguments. This effect also holds for humor (Zhang, 1996) and source likability (Reinhard & Messner, 2009) insofar as low-NFC individuals tend to have more favorable attitudes toward ads perceived as humorous and as coming from a likable messenger than high-NFC individuals. Additionally, Zhang and Buda (1999) found that low-NFC individuals' attitudes were significantly lower when presented with the negative framing of an advertising message ("15% of users were dissatisfied") than when presented with a mathematically equivalent positive framing ("85% of users were satisfied"), whereas high-NFC individuals' attitudes toward both the negatively and positively framed ads were roughly equivalent. In sum, these findings speak to the overarching idea that low-NFC individuals rely on simple cues when evaluating information and forming attitudes about it, and high-NFC individuals more carefully consider the available information and are less influenced by simple cues.

### **Priming**

*Priming* is a commonly used technique in social scientific research. Whereas the use of heuristics arises from associations that an individual has made between a stimulus and past experiences (e.g., Bellur & Sundar, 2014; Gigerenzer, 1999; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013), priming is an unobtrusive method of guiding an individual's perceptions and assessments based upon the information that is most cognitively accessible to them in a given moment (e.g., Ratcliff & McKoon, 1988). Decades of cross-disciplinary research support the idea that currently active

cognitive structures influence how people interpret on-hand materials and messages (e.g., Dijksterhuis, Chartrand, & Aarts, 2007; Ilicic, Brennan, & Kulczynski, 2021; Schacter & Buckner, 1998; Schauster et al., 2021). The activation of specific cognitive knowledge structures can be manipulated via relevant stimuli such that, at the time when new information is received, the most readily accessible knowledge structures impact people's judgments of that new information (Srull & Wyer, 1980).

For example, in a classic study, Higgins, Rholes, and Jones (1977) provided participants with lists of either positive adjectives (e.g., adventurous, self-confident, independent) or negative adjectives (e.g., reckless, conceited, aloof). The authors then asked participants to read a brief, language-neutral description of a fictional character named Donald and to provide their overall impressions of him. Those who were primed with positive adjectives rated their impressions of Donald significantly more favorably than those who were primed with negative adjectives. The authors concluded that the lists of adjectives successfully activated the affective knowledge structures that informed each participant's evaluation. Elsewhere, Herr (1989) provided participants with wordsearch puzzles containing the brand names of either inexpensive or luxury cars. After completing these puzzles, participants were shown an advertisement for an ambiguous (i.e., unbranded) car and asked to estimate the car's manufacturer-suggested retail price (MSRP). Participants primed with the names of luxury car brands estimated the ambiguous car's MSRP to be significantly higher than those primed with the names of less expensive cars.

Priming effects are ephemeral and often unconscious (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Study participants typically do not realize that a priming stimulus has affected their subsequent judgments of other information or stimuli, nor do these effects last for more than a couple of days in the most extreme cases (e.g., Squire, Shimamura, & Graf, 1987). Priming is an attractive

technique for social science researchers due to its considerable versatility. If deployed properly, a priming stimulus can temporarily influence a person's goals, behaviors, cognitive processes, and/or emotions. Over time, all of these effects have been observed within consumer psychology contexts (for a review of each, see Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014). Interestingly, NFC appears to influence priming effects. Specifically, as NFC increases, priming effects become more pronounced for subtle primes but less pronounced for obvious primes (Petty et al., 2008). The purpose of priming in the present research is to determine whether providing participants with a stimulus explicitly related to the topic of reputation (i.e., an obvious prime) facilitates the use of the reputation heuristic, which in turn may affect participants' attitudes toward memetic advertising stimuli. NFC is measured as a covariate.

### **Summary, Research Questions, and Hypotheses**

Over the preceding five chapters, this dissertation has provided reviews of multiple, interconnected literatures. Chapter 1 introduced the fundamentals of memetic theory and highlighted how the biologically based field of traditional memetics introduced by Dawkins (1976) gradually fell out of favor among social scientists toward the end of the 20th century (e.g., Poulshock, 2002). Since the advent of Web 2.0 and the popularization of online interactivity, Dawkinsian/Darwinian memetics been superseded by a digital memetics grounded in participatory internet culture (e.g., Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). The key principle that unites traditional and contemporary memetics is one of imitation (e.g., Blackmore, 1999), as memes are fundamentally social-psychological units of culture that spread by being copied and imitated (Castelfranchi, 2001; Gatherer, 1998; Heylighen, 1999). In the internet age, this spread is most often achieved virally (Berger, 2013; Sohn et al., 2013; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015).

There are numerous genres and formats of memes in circulation on SNSs (e.g., image macros, videos, GIFs). An individual's cumulative knowledge of these is thought to be stored in a cognitive repository called a co-adapted meme-complex (Dawkins, 1976), or memeplex (Blackmore, 1999). This memeplex is essentially a mental model of all the memes a person is familiar with and exists as to simplify cognitive categorizing and processing of memetic material in the same way that mental models more generally exist to streamline the comprehension of everyday experiences (Abdel-Raheem, 2020; Mastro et al., 2007; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2004). Given that an individual iteration of an internet meme is, by definition, in conversation with other iterations of the same meme (Shifman, 2014), it has been argued that memes present fragments of a larger narrative and leave it to their audiences to interpret and contextualize the message (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). Humans have a natural predisposition for processing incoming mediated information as cause-and-effect narratives (e.g., Bower & Morrow, 1990) and likely draw upon the contents of their memeplexes to interpret and stay up to date with the memetic messages they encounter on SNSs.

An appealing characteristic of internet memes is that they can relate to any topic. To date, most scholarship has focused on how memes constitute cultural discourse (Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), particularly within the political sphere (Anderson & Keehn, 2020; Huntington, 2020; Mina, 2019; Niebuurt, 2021; Penney, 2020). Following a historical overview of memetic advertising in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 emphasized how brands have begun to join the conversation over the past decade and are now attempting to capitalize on the popularity of internet memes by creating memetic content specifically designed to advertise products and services (e.g., Carr, 2021; Enberg et al., 2021; Lechner, 2020; Rao, 2021; Tiffany, 2021). Although memetic advertising is not a new practice and certain elements date back

centuries, and in some cases millennia, it has become much more common in recent years due to advances in technology and increased receptiveness among younger demographics (Chuah et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2021; Song, 2020).

In the First World, Generation Z (i.e., individuals born roughly from 1997 to 2012) can informally be called the meme generation due to having been raised and socialized in a heavily computer-mediated environment during the era when memetic communication on SNSs emerged and became widely adopted (Katz et al., 2021). As a result of Generation Z's digitally native upbringing, psychologists and communication scholars believe that the cohort has become "permanently online and permanently connected" (POPC; Vorderer et al., 2018), which in turn has imbued its members with a fundamentally different view of social reality than older generations and has led them to hone divergent information processing strategies (Klimmt et al., 2018). Simultaneously coexisting in physical and digital spaces for much—if not all—of their lives has led the Generation Z cohort to train themselves to nimbly switch mental gears from one modality to another and to perceive technological affordances such as ICTs and SNSs as extensions of interpersonal communication that cannot be disentangled from real world interactions (Katz et al., 2021). These phenomena, together with the basic rationale for generational cohort theory, were discussed throughout Chapter 4.

The present research assumes that because of the information clutter endemic to virtual spaces like SNSs, internet users default to processing the computer-mediated content they encounter heuristically rather than systematically (e.g., Fogg et al., 2003). This has been the primary focus of Chapter 5. Due to natural limitations on what the human mind can fully comprehend at a given time, people superficially attend to Web stimuli rather than scrutinizing them unless there is a sufficient underlying reason to do so (e.g., Kahneman, 2011). Chief among

the heuristics that Web users rely on to assess the credibility of online information is the reputation heuristic, which holds that name recognition of a content source yields more favorable responses than unfamiliar sources due to the reputation associated with the recognized name. Additionally, Web users have been shown to make use of heuristics related to level of content endorsement, degree to which the information conforms with preexisting attitudes or beliefs, the information's perceived persuasive intent, and whether the information is conveyed in a manner that aligns with the Web user's expectations (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Within the dual-process cognitive framework, individuals' need for cognition is thought to influence the extent to which they process information heuristically or systematically (e.g., Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

While the heuristic processing of online content is not exclusive to Generation Z, the cohort's affinity for internet memes makes it an ideal population for investigating the ways in which SNS-based memetic content is processed heuristically, together with how this memetic content facilitates a sense of social connectedness. This is especially true for memes intended for advertising, to date an underrepresented topic in the scholarly literature and one that is germane to a generation that has been described as highly attached to, and critical of, the brands it follows (Goldring & Azab, 2021). By extension, Generation Z college students majoring in strategic communication (i.e., advertising and public relations) may have different perspectives on memes intended specifically for advertising than same-age college students majoring in non-strategic communication fields.

Thus, using the fundamentals of dual-process theories of cognition as its foundation and assuming that internet memes represent fragments of larger cultural narratives, this research explores the complex interrelationships between Generation Z SNS users, brand name

recognition and reputation (i.e., brand narratives within consumer culture), the social ties that internet memes both engender and necessitate within virtual spaces, and the heuristics that Web users rely upon to digest memes in a quick, low-resource manner. To this end, the following research questions and hypotheses are advanced.

For the qualitative phase of this research:

**RQ #1a:** What are the differences, if any, between how Generation Z strategic communication majors define and interpret advertising memes and how non-strategic communication majors define and interpret them?

**RQ #1b:** Do the responses of Generation Z strategic communication majors indicate greater persuasion knowledge than those of non-strategic communication majors?

**RQ #1c:** Do the responses of Generation Z strategic communication majors indicate greater need for cognition than those of non-strategic communication majors?

**RQ #2a:** How do Generation Z college students, regardless of major, use internet memes to facilitate social connections?

**RQ #2b:** How, if at all, does this extend to advertising memes specifically?

**RQ #3:** What evidence do Generation Z college students, regardless of major, provide for processing internet memes heuristically?

**RQ #4:** What are the differences, if any, between how Generation Z college students perceive and interpret advertising memes that contain a credibility heuristic cue (e.g., reputation, endorsement, expectancy violation, persuasive intent) versus how they perceive and interpret advertising memes that do not contain a credibility heuristic cue?

**RQ #4b:** What are the differences, if any, between the perceptions and interpretations of Generation Z college students who are shown advertising memes in which familiar brand names or logos are present, versus those who are shown advertising memes in which the brand name is either fictitious or a brand logo is absent?

For the quantitative phase of this research:

**H1:** Participants will self-report more favorable attitudes toward memes containing references to real brands than toward memes containing references to fictitious brands.

**H2:** Participants who are primed with a stimulus related to reputation and who view memes containing references to real brands will self-report more favorable attitudes toward the meme than participants who are primed with an irrelevant stimulus, regardless of which type of meme they view.

**H3:** Participants who are primed with a stimulus related to reputation and who view memes containing references to fictitious brands will self-report the least favorable attitudes overall.

**H4:** Participants will self-report higher levels of reputation heuristic use after viewing memes containing references to real brands than after viewing memes containing references to fictitious brands.

**H5:** Participants primed with a stimulus related to reputation will self-report higher levels of reputation heuristic use than participants primed with an irrelevant stimulus, regardless of which type of meme they view.

**H6:** Participants primed with an irrelevant stimulus who view memes with references to fictitious brands will self-report the lowest levels of reputation heuristic use overall.

**RQ #5:** Does being primed with a stimulus related to reputation moderate the relationship between brand type (real vs. fictitious) and degree of self-reported attitude?

**RQ #6:** Does being primed with a stimulus related to reputation moderate the relationship between brand type (real vs. fictitious) and degree of self-reported heuristic use?

**H7:** Self-reported use of the reputation heuristic will partially mediate the relationship between brand type and attitude toward the meme such that greater self-reported use of the heuristic yields more positive attitude toward the meme.

## CHAPTER 6: METHOD

This research seeks to gain a clearer understanding of how the oldest members of the Generation Z cohort (i.e., those who are between 18 and 25 years of age in 2022) perceive and process internet memes that are intended specifically as advertisements. Of particular interest are the ways in which these digitally native individuals display evidence of heuristic use and heuristic processing strategies to decode the memetic content they encounter, how cultural and brand narratives influence this decoding process, and how their engagement with memes facilitates social connections. Understanding the specifics of how Generation Z individuals process memetic messages is important for brands attempting to expand their market share via this up-and-coming social media advertising strategy, as well as for social scientific researchers seeking to learn how and why memes constitute a popular and effective mode of computer-mediated communication within this cohort. Owing to Generation Z's relatively young age, the recentness of the memetic advertising boom on social networking sites (SNSs), and digital memetics' emergent status as a viable scholarly pursuit, little research has been conducted along these lines. To date, there are few established theoretical positions related to memetic advertising and no widely adopted or agreed upon research techniques in place to study it. Further, there are no known studies explicitly linking internet memes and heuristic processing. As a result, the novelty of this topic necessitates that the present research lay a foundation before attempting to build off of it. To this end, an exploratory sequential mixed-method design was employed. Per Cresswell (2014):

The intent of [an exploratory sequential mixed-method design] is to develop better measurements with specific samples of populations and to see if data from a few individuals (in qualitative phase) can be generalized to a large sample of a population (in quantitative phase). ... A researcher can analyze the qualitative data to develop new variables, to identify the types of scales that might exist in current instruments or to form categories of information that will be explored further in a quantitative phase (p. 226).

Since little scholarly research on memetic advertising exists, a smaller qualitative sample of Generation Z individuals was first consulted about their attitudes and opinions toward memes, brands that use memes for advertising, and specific memetic advertising stimuli. Details about this sample are provided below. Participant responses were analyzed and used as a springboard for a larger quantitative experiment incorporating said memetic stimuli. The full methodological trajectory is outlined in the following sections.

### **Qualitative Phase: Focus Groups**

The qualitative phase of the current research consisted of a series of six semi-structured focus group sessions, each consisting of a convenience sample of between three and 10 undergraduate students currently enrolled at the University of Colorado at Boulder. These focus groups were conducted in-person on the Boulder main campus in November 2021, with the primary investigator serving as moderator. Each session lasted between 60 and 75 minutes.

Morgan (1996) defines focus group interviews as "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (p. 130). Following from this definition are three critical assumptions: one, that the end goal of a focus group session is data collection (as opposed to therapy, decision making, education, etc.); two, that the value of said data is derived from a group's interactions and synergy, above and beyond participants' individual responses; and three, that the researcher (or moderator) plays an active part in facilitating and maintaining these interactions (Morgan, 1996).

In general, researchers in the social sciences distinguish between two types of data: *emic* (i.e., data that arises freely in a naturalistic setting) and *etic* (i.e., data that arises in a structured manner in a controlled setting; Krippendorff, 2004). Focus groups effectively bridge the gap between emic and etic data, allowing participants to freely express themselves in a context where

a researcher nonetheless imposes structure (Davis, 2017). In this way, focus groups are uniquely able to provide researchers with "metacommunication about a communication phenomenon" (Davis, 2017, p. 3) as well as real-time observations of group conversations (Wilkinson, 1998). Given that internet memes are an inherently social form of communication (e.g., Shifman, 2014) that is especially popular among younger Web users (e.g., Enberg et al., 2021), a series of focus groups involving currently matriculated college students was determined to be a logical first phase for the present research.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) is a theoretical framework that describes persuasion attempts from the perspective of both the consumer (i.e., target) and the seller (i.e., agent). Specifically, "persuasion knowledge" refers to what both parties understand about the mechanics of influence and attitude change. Targets possess knowledge about the topic and the agent, while agents possess knowledge about the topic and the target. In keeping with the finding that students who are taught about advertising possess greater persuasion knowledge than those who are not (Nelson, 2016), it was anticipated that strategic communication majors whose undergraduate curriculum is in part based upon learning about digital media platforms, messaging techniques, and persuasive strategies would possess more specialized advertising persuasion knowledge than students with declared majors in other fields. However, the nature of this difference as it pertains to internet memes and to how digitally native, Generation Z internet users interpret memetic advertising had not been investigated prior to this study.

Need for cognition (NFC)—defined as a "personality trait that describes individuals' tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity" (Coelho, Hanel, & Wolf, 2018, p. 1870)—was assessed in each focus group by asking participants to estimate how long they spend

looking at a given meme and how much mental effort they are willing to expend if they do not immediately understand the content of the memetic message. It was anticipated that responses to these questions might differ from one type of student to another because, similar to the finding about persuasion knowledge mentioned above (Nelson, 2016), strategic communication students might be more predisposed to analyze and think carefully about the memetic advertising content they encounter on SNSs than students from other disciplines. In turn, this might provide an important insight into NFC as it pertains to the types of students who pursue majors in either strategic communication or outside disciplines.

To explore potentially differing perspectives between strategic communication majors and non-strategic communication majors around these concepts, three focus groups were comprised strictly of strategic communication majors, while the remaining three were comprised strictly of university students with declared majors in other fields. All groups were prompted to talk about their knowledge of (and attitudes toward) advertising memes and to relate this knowledge to their personal experiences and social lives. These responses were analyzed to answer all components of Research Questions 1 and 2.

To explore the groups' potentially differing attitudes toward various advertising memes, one focus group consisting of each type of major (i.e., strategic communication majors and non-strategic communication majors) viewed advertising memes that contain a heuristic visual cue, one focus group consisting of each type of major viewed advertising memes that do not contain a heuristic visual cue, and one focus group consisting of each type of major viewed advertising memes that both do and do not contain heuristic visual cues. Participants were given a projective construction task (see below) and asked to construct a story around each meme they saw and to provide their opinions of it. Responses to these manifest memetic advertising stimuli and the

heuristic cues therein were analyzed to answer Research Questions 3 and 4. Previous social science research (e.g., Atkinson & Kim, 2015; Gambino et al., 2016; Machín et al., 2020; Mobaraki, Rezaeian, & Colabi, 2012; Vega-Zamora et al., 2014) has demonstrated that focus groups are an appropriate and viable method for assessing heuristic use and heuristic processing due to participants' ability to articulate their thought processes in real time and to elaborate upon the snap decisions and judgments that they make.

In line with the benefits of an exploratory sequential mixed-method design as outlined by Creswell (2014), participants' responses to the memetic stimuli presented in each focus group session helped the moderator determine whether specific memes were viable for inclusion in an online experiment (detailed below). Especially relevant were participants' explanations of how a given meme's use of branding influenced their understanding and evaluations of it. Specifically, some memes contained explicit references to brands, while others contained either implicit references or no references to brands. Especially pertinent to the experimental design to be discussed, some branded memes contained references to well-known brands (e.g., Dove, McDonald's, Spotify) and others contained references to fictitious brands invented for the purposes of this research. Responses to these distinct forms of branding were assessed both by group and by meme and facilitated answering Research Question 4b. The characteristics of all six focus groups are summarized in Table 1.

Strategic communication majors were recruited from courses offered through the Department of Advertising, Public Relations and Media Design (APRD) at the University of Colorado and were compensated with extra credit. Non-strategic communication majors were recruited via fliers posted in physical locations throughout the university's main Boulder campus

and via postings on the university's online research bulletin board. These participants were compensated with gift cards for the retail chain Target.

**Table 1**

*Characteristics of the Six Focus Group Sessions*

Group	Major	Heuristic Cue
1	Strategic Communication	Present
2	Strategic Communication	Absent
3	Strategic Communication	Present & Absent
4	Other	Present
5	Other	Absent
6	Other	Present & Absent

**Procedure.** Differences in visual stimuli aside, all six focus groups followed a procedure similar to that of the focus groups conducted by Atkinson and Kim (2015) in their study of consumer perceptions of green advertisements that incorporate green heuristic cues. Namely, the focus group sessions in the present research consisted of an ice-breaker question intended to orient participants to the topic at hand and foster an initial group synergy (approximately 5 minutes), transitioned into discussion questions pertaining to memetic advertising specifically (approximately 25 minutes), and then culminated with the presentation of manifest memetic advertising stimuli (approximately 30-45 minutes).

Each session commenced with the moderator covering the basic rules for participating in the meeting. Per Kahle (2007), this introduction included comments specifically tailored to help keep the discussion equitable and honest. For example, to discourage individuals from contributing disproportionately, the moderator began with a comment along the lines of:

Everybody should talk and nobody should dominate. If you are a soft-spoken or an outspoken person, your opinion is equally important here. So, if you are the kind of person who does all the talking, I may ask others to speak up. Also, tell me honestly if you like or do not like something that I present. But please respect that others may have

differing views. From time to time, I may ask you to argue the other side of the story to make sure I gather a complete understanding (Kahle, 2007, p. 69).

The last point echoes the recommendations of Janis (1982) and McDougall and Baum (1997), who also encourage the use of devil's advocates in focus group settings to ensure that multiple perspectives are considered. In this study context, this entailed the moderator first reiterating the participant's stated position and then encouraging them to play devil's advocate via a probe such as, "Although you have indicated that your opinion is  $x$ , how might you argue for  $y$ ?"

After responding to an ice-breaker question about which SNSs each participant is currently active on (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, TikTok), the moderator asked the group a series of questions tailored to the aims of the overall study. Among these questions were, "The main topic of this focus group is internet memes. What *is* a meme? What comes to mind when you hear the word 'meme'?" and "What are your thoughts about brands that use memes to advertise on social media?" A full list of pre-written questions can be found in Appendix A.

To facilitate group synergy throughout these discussions, the moderator encouraged participants to engage one another in conversation rather than to serially answer the provided questions. This occasionally involved asking specific individuals to respond to certain comments, particularly if another participant said something relevant to the topic at hand or a noteworthy difference of opinion was expressed. Although the moderator had the same list of pre-written questions prepared for each group, the precise order of questions and the duration of each discussion varied by group as a function of how each conversation uniquely unfolded.

Following this guided discussion, the remainder of each focus group session was dedicated to the presentation of pre-selected memetic stimuli (see Appendix A). For each meme, the group was given a projective construction task (e.g., Donoghue, 2000) for which they were asked to look at the presented meme, describe what they saw in it, and construct a story around

the meme. This story could be either a literal interpretation of the meme's visual and textual contents or a contextualization of the meme in terms of consumer and/or internet culture. Both types of responses were valuable: the former because they indicated comprehension of the meme, and the latter because they encouraged participants to situate the meme within an overarching cultural narrative without being explicitly instructed to do so. Thus, participants were expected to draw from their mental models for internet memes (i.e., memeplexes) and to interpret these memes vis-à-vis how they reflect the world around them. Although projective techniques have justifiably drawn criticism within the discipline of clinical psychology where they originated, they remain useful in consumer research where stakes are lower and where researchers simply wish to understand participants' thoughts and attitudes about relevant stimuli (Steinman, 2009). Incorporating projective techniques into a focus group setting alleviates some concerns about reliability, since the combination of stimulus presentation with informal discussion has been shown to enhance their value (Gordon & Langmaid, 1988).

**Manifest memetic advertising stimuli.** Eight pairs of memetic stimuli were presented.

1. An image macro posted to the Bugles brand Instagram account in August 2021 that depicts features former NFL player and TV personality Anthony Adams rubbing his hands together. In this iteration of the meme, Adams' face has been replaced with a finger wearing a Bugle as a hat, a humorous reference to the fact that kids often put Bugles on their fingertips while they snack. To assess whether endorsement metrics influence participants' reactions and evaluations of memes, the same image macro was presented both with and without the number of likes and comments visible.
  - a. **Heuristic cue:** Endorsement metrics.

- b. **Stimuli retained for experiment:** No.
- 2. An image macro posted to the official Burger King Instagram in January 2020 that parodies @dudewithsign, an Instagram user who posts pictures of himself holding up cardboard signs containing cheeky, topical messages. In this meme, the Burger King mascot is making fun of Wendy's square-shaped beef patties. Meanwhile, other participants saw an image macro posted to the Burger King parody Instagram page @thekurgerbing. While retaining visual identifiers with the Burger King brand, the Kurger Bing image macro has conspicuous spelling errors and a questionably designed layout.
  - a. **Heuristic cue:** Expectancy violation.
  - b. **Stimuli retained for experiment:** No.
- 3. Two image macros posted to the official Totino's Instagram in August 2021. One is an intertextual pun that positions the made-up man's name Pete Zarock as complementary to "pizza roll" (i.e., rock and roll), while the other repurposes the "perfection" meme featuring film actor Michael Fassbender to suggest that the bite-sized nature of Totino's Minis is "perfect" as compared to normal-sized Totino's pizza rolls and regular pizza.
  - a. **Heuristic cue:** Persuasive intent.
  - b. **Stimuli retained for experiment:** No.
- 4. A remixing of the popular "distracted boyfriend" meme with the characters' heads replaced by gold and silver-colored aluminum foil. This was posted to Chipotle's official Instagram in July 2021, but does not contain an explicit reference to their

brand. A heuristic cue in the form of the Chipotle logo was added to a copy of the meme by the researcher.

a. **Heuristic cue:** Brand logo.

b. **Stimuli retained for experiment:** No.

5. Two image macros posted to the official McDonald's Instagram in May 2021 that are each recognizable modifications of world-famous classical paintings:

Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. However, while the girl's pearl earring has been conspicuously replaced with a Chicken McNugget, the McDonald's brand is not otherwise referenced in the image. The golden arches logo and familiar packaging of the franchise's French fries in the *Mona Lisa* modification are unequivocal.

a. **Heuristic cue:** Brand logo.

b. **Stimuli retained for experiment:** No.

6. Two image macros remixing the popular "Drakeposting" template created specifically for this research. One image features the rapper Drake promoting the popular music streaming service Spotify. The other features Drake promoting a fictitious service called Auricle, a medical term for the outer ear chosen because of its phonetic similarity to the word "oracle" (connoting wisdom) and that it could plausibly be the name of an unfamiliar music streaming platform.

a. **Heuristic cue:** Recognizable brand name.

b. **Stimuli retained for experiment:** Yes.

7. Two image macros remixing the popular "woman yells at cat" template created specifically for this research. Both images feature the woman telling the cat it

needs to go on a low-calorie diet. The meme containing the real brand name features the cat begging for Fancy Feast, while the meme containing the fictitious brand name features the cat begging for Savory Choice.

- a. **Heuristic cue:** Recognizable brand name.
  - b. **Stimuli retained for experiment:** Yes.
8. Two image macros remixing the popular "two buttons" template created specifically for this research. In one version, the sweating man must choose between being stinky or using Dove deodorant. In the other, he must choose between being stinky or using a fictitious deodorant called Affinity.
- a. **Heuristic cue:** Recognizable brand name.
  - b. **Stimuli retained for experiment:** Yes.

The characteristics of these memetic stimulus pairs are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Characteristics of Each Pair of Manifest Advertising Memes*

Real Brand	Fictitious Brand	Heuristic	Heuristic Cue
Bugles	N/A	Endorsement	Endorsement metrics
Burger King	Kurger Bing	Expectancy violation	Nonprofessional aesthetics
Totino's	N/A	Persuasive intent	Explicit selling attempt
Chipotle	N/A	Reputation	Brand logo
McDonald's	N/A	Reputation	Brand logo
Spotify	Auricle	Reputation	Real brand name
Fancy Feast	Savory Choice	Reputation	Real brand name
Dove	Affinity	Reputation	Real brand name

**Qualitative analysis.** Each focus group session was audio recorded and sent to a third-party service for transcription. The transcriptionist was instructed to remove filler words and sounds (e.g., "like," "you know," "uh") while preserving the integrity of participants' recorded responses. Upon receiving the transcripts and reviewing them, the researcher performed

additional cleaning to ensure that all responses were grammatically correct and free of pauses but were faithful to how participants expressed themselves. Thus, all verbatim quotes from focus groups presented in this dissertation have been cleaned and slightly modified, but their meanings have not been changed. All quotes are presented in way that approximates written, as opposed to strictly verbal, dialogue.

Subsequent data analysis occurred in multiple stages. First, a close reading of each transcript was conducted with a specific eye toward answering Research Questions 1 through 4. Definitions of memes in general, attitudes toward memetic advertising specifically, and implicit or explicit references to cultural narratives, persuasion knowledge, need for cognition, and the use of credibility heuristics (e.g., reputation, endorsement, expectancy violation) were pulled from each text. Additionally, as indicated above, responses to specific memetic stimulus pairs were analyzed to determine whether they were viable for inclusion in the quantitative, experimental phase of the current research. Second, each transcript was closely re-read to identify codes. Per Saldaña (2016), writing analytic memos for qualitative data assists in the identification and coding of concepts and patterns, which in turn help to identify overarching themes. Themes were identified in these focus group transcripts on the basis of related ideas that were expressed repeatedly by multiple participants both within and between focus group sessions. Eleven primary themes arose: humor, best practices for brands, explicitness, memetic context, ease of understanding versus expected payoff, social origin, generational differences, knowledge structures, endorsement and social ties, nonprofessional aesthetics and perceived effort, and familiarity versus confusion. Analytic memos were written for each theme. Third, the aforementioned themes were sorted by overarching research question (e.g., references to explicitness were analyzed for Research Question 1b about persuasion knowledge, references to

knowledge structures were analyzed for Research Question 3 about heuristic processing of memes) and specific quotes pertaining to each were highlighted both within and between each focus group. Fourth, these collections of quotes were analyzed in tandem (again, both within and between focus group sessions) to generate detailed answers to each of the overarching research questions. Finally, the findings were written up, including overall summaries and verbatim quotes from participants.

### **Quantitative Phase: Memetic Advertising Experiment**

An online experiment was designed in which participants were randomly assigned to view advertising memes that contain either explicit references to real brands or explicit references to fictitious brands. Except for the brand name manipulation, these memes were visually and textually identical. The experiment was intended to demonstrate that when presented with familiar, real-world brand names (e.g., the streaming service Spotify, Dove deodorant, Fancy Feast cat food), participants' name recognition would activate the reputation heuristic and, in turn, yield more favorable attitudes toward the meme than those of participants presented with fictitious brand names (e.g., the streaming service Auricle, Affinity deodorant, Savory Choice Cat food) within the same memetic template. Several of these memes (containing real and fictitious brands, i.e., heuristic cue present and absent, respectively) were presented as part of the focus groups in the qualitative first stage. Focus group participants' comments about these images were used to support their subsequent inclusion as experimental stimuli.

Per Bellur and Sundar (2014), in order to determine whether a participant has used a heuristic during an experiment, the researcher should separately employ both a heuristic prime and a heuristic cue. While much research involving heuristics has relied on the use of self-report measures that indicate participants' agreement with or use of the underlying heuristic after

exposure to a heuristic cue, this design augments that framework by also measuring whether heuristic use is affected by how salient the heuristic is in the mind of the participant at the time. That is, even though a given heuristic may be used by any participant in any experimental condition, the use of a priming stimulus makes the given heuristic more cognitively accessible to those who have been exposed to the heuristic prime than those who have not. Thus, employing a thematically related heuristic prime in addition to a heuristic cue strengthens the claim that the specific heuristic has been used. This logic directly informs the design proposed for this study.

In addition to measuring self-reported agreement with the rule of thumb underlying the given heuristic (M) and computing the indirect effect (i.e.,  $X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$ ), we should also examine whether this indirect effect is affected by differential accessibility of the hypothesized heuristic in the minds of the communication receiver. This accessibility can be manipulated by differentially priming the receiver; for example, some of them could be primed (unobtrusively) to think about the rule of thumb while others would not be (Bellur & Sundar, 2014, p. 127).

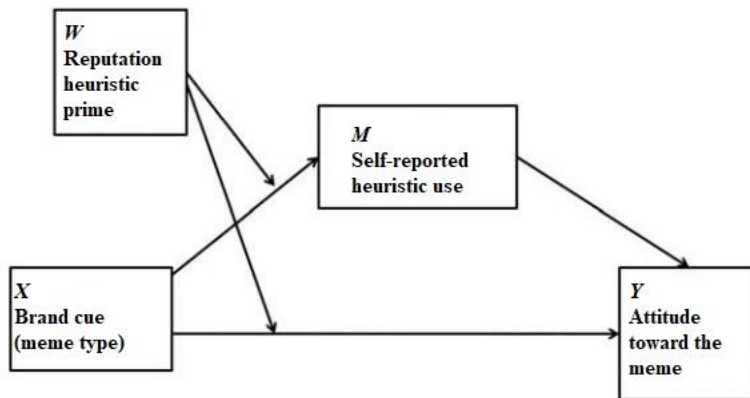
Along these lines, in addition to being presented with either heuristic cues (real brand names) or non-heuristic cues (fictitious brand names), participants were exposed to either a heuristic priming stimulus (a short essay related to reputation) or an irrelevant priming stimulus (a short essay related to travel).

This design yields the moderated mediation path model depicted in Figure 13. The independent variable X (i.e., memes containing either real or fictitious brand names) should have a relationship with the dependent variable Y (i.e., self-reported attitudes toward those memes). Conceptually, a mediating variable explains the nature of the relationship between X and Y. In this model, the mediating variable M (i.e., self-reported use of the reputation heuristic) is thought to explain differences in participants' attitudes toward the real or fictitious memes they are shown, respectively, based upon the degree to which they use the reputation heuristic to make this evaluation. Adding nuance to the model is the presence of a moderating variable W (i.e.,

whether participants are primed to think about reputation or an irrelevant topic). Conceptually, a moderating variable influences the strength and/or direction of the relationship between two other variables. In this model, the heuristic and irrelevant priming stimuli moderate both the relationship between X and Y, and the relationship between X and M. In other words, the priming stimulus presented to a participant should affect the strength and/or direction of the relationship between the type of memes they see and their subsequent attitude towards those memes, as well as the strength and/or direction of the relationship between the type of memes they see and degree to which they use the reputation heuristic.

**Figure 13**

*Path Model Depicting Moderated Mediation*



Maheswaran, Mackie, and Chaiken (1992) demonstrated that brand name functions as a heuristic cue. Thus, for the current research it was believed that individuals who saw memes that incorporate recognizable brand names would be more likely to use the reputation heuristic; furthermore, participants primed at the outset of the experiment with stimuli related to reputation would be more likely to use this heuristic, particularly if they were then presented with content containing recognizable brand names. By contrast, participants who were primed with an irrelevant stimulus (i.e., who read short essays unrelated to reputation) and were not presented

with heuristic cues (i.e., who were presented with memes containing references to fictitious brands) were expected to be less likely to use the reputation heuristic.

**Procedure and measures.** To account for the manipulations described above, a 2 (heuristic prime / irrelevant prime) x 2 (real brand meme / fictitious brand meme) between-subjects factorial experiment was designed and implemented via the online service Qualtrics. The characteristics of each experimental group are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Characteristics of Each Experimental Condition*

Group	Prime	Meme Type
1	Heuristic Prime	Real Brand Names
2	Heuristic Prime	Fictitious Brand Names
3	Irrelevant Prime	Real Brand Names
4	Irrelevant Prime	Fictitious Brand Names

Upon consenting to the experiment, all participants were automatically assigned to one of the above groups via the Qualtrics software's randomization function. The sequence for all four groups was identical. Participants were first asked to read a short essay (350-400 words) about a person's reputation (groups 1 and 2) or about international travel (groups 3 and 4). After reading this essay, they completed a series of three simple arithmetic problems as a distractor task. From there, they were presented with a series of five image macros containing either real brand names (groups 1 and 3) or fictitious brand names (groups 2 and 4) and were asked to rate their responses to each.

Attitude toward these memes was assessed via a series of ten, 7-point semantic differential-style prompts (e.g., bad/good, negative/positive, dislike/like, ineffective/effective, confusing/straightforward). Responses to these items were averaged to determine level of attitude favorability. These prompts were culled from previously validated scales designed to

measure attitudes and opinions toward advertisements (Bruner, 1998). After viewing memetic stimuli and responding to the above prompts, all participants completed the same posttest questionnaire. This posttest consisted of five distinct components, discussed individually.

***Manipulation check.*** A single item, "I am conscious of how a person's character is commonly regarded by others," was presented on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type scale. Responses to this item were averaged by experimental condition to determine if reputation was more salient at that moment for participants who had been presented with the heuristic prime than for participants who had been presented with the irrelevant prime.

***Reputation heuristic use.*** To determine whether participants made use of the reputation heuristic as they were evaluating the memetic stimuli, a series of five self-report items were presented on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type scale. Sample items included, "Purchasing products from brands I trust is important to me" and "Brand name alone is enough to convince me to purchase a product." Pilot data indicated that this five-item scale was sufficiently unidimensional with all items loading onto a single factor, and displayed satisfactory internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ). Participants' responses to these five items were averaged to generate an overall score for degree of reputation heuristic use.

***Persuasion knowledge.*** Degree of persuasion knowledge (e.g., Friestad & Wright, 1994) may impact participants' attitude toward memes, especially if they are aware that the image macros that they are shown are attempting to sell them something. Thus, a measure of persuasion knowledge was included as a covariate. The 11 items included in the posttest were culled from the Persuasion Knowledge Scales of Sponsored Content (PKS-SC; Boerman et al., 2018). The full PKS-SC instrument is multidimensional and considerably longer. This abbreviated version includes only the dimensions of "understanding of the selling and persuasive intent of sponsored

content" and "understanding of persuasive tactics in sponsored content" (p. 683). Sample items from this scale include, "The reason brands are mentioned or shown in ads is to make people think positively about the brand" and "Brands try to influence me by placing the brand in a context that I like." All items were presented on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type scale and participants' responses were averaged to generate an overall score for persuasion knowledge.

***Need for cognition.*** Similarly, NFC may impede the use of the reputation heuristic if participants are especially predisposed to engage in higher-order thought. Individuals who self-report high NFC tend to seek out and reflect on information to make sense of stimuli and events, whereas individuals who score on the lower end of the variable tend to use other means such as heuristics to make sense of the messages that they encounter (Cacioppo et al., 1996). NFC has been measured in a variety of ways in the literature, but in the interest of brevity, the aptly named, six-item Very Efficient Need for Cognition Scale (Coelho, Hanel, & Wolf, 2018) was included in this experimental posttest. Sample items included, "I prefer complex to simple problems" and the reverse-scored, "Thinking is not my idea of fun." As with the other scales in the posttest, all items were presented on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type scale and participants' responses were averaged to generate an overall score for NFC.

***Demographics.*** Finally, a battery of demographic items pertaining to participants' age, gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, and amount of time spent on social media per day was included at the end of the posttest.

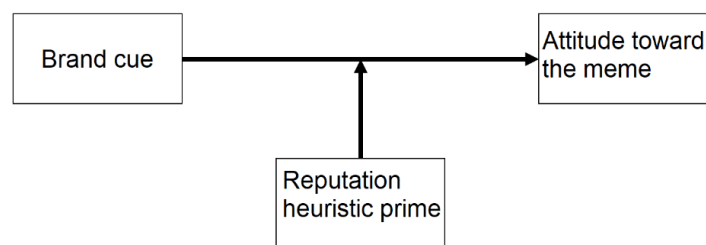
A full breakdown of experimental conditions and measures can be found in Appendix A.

**Quantitative analysis.** For the main effects in Hypotheses 1 (that participants will self-report more favorable attitudes toward memes containing references to real brands than toward

memes containing references to fictitious brands), Hypothesis 2 (that participants who are primed with a stimulus related to reputation and who view memes containing references to real brands will self-report more favorable attitudes toward the meme than participants who are primed with an irrelevant stimulus, regardless of which type of meme they view), and Hypothesis 3 (that participants who are primed with a stimulus related to reputation and who view memes containing references to fictitious brands will self-report the least favorable attitudes overall), a two-way between-subjects ANCOVA was conducted. This analysis assessed whether there was a significant difference between the means for attitude toward the meme for the groups that viewed memes containing references to real brands and the groups that viewed memes containing references to fictitious brands, controlling for NFC and persuasion knowledge. For comparison, ANOVA models were also fit without NFC and persuasion knowledge as covariates.

**Figure 14**

*Path Model Depicting the Moderating Effect of the Reputation Heuristic Prime on the Relationship Between Brand Recognition and Attitude Toward the Meme*



For the interaction effect in Research Question 5 (whether being primed with a stimulus related to reputation moderates the relationship between brand type and degree of self-reported attitude), the moderation model in Figure 14 was analyzed to determine whether the priming stimulus (heuristic vs. irrelevant) had a causal effect on the strength and/or directionality of the main effects in Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Note that Figure 14 is merely a simplification of the first

of two moderation paths depicted in Figure 13. Specifically, the moderation analysis entailed the use of the following regression equation:

$$\gamma_{Attitude} = \beta_0 + \beta_{Brand\ Cue} + \beta_{Heuristic\ Prime} + \beta_{Brand\ Cue\ x\ Heuristic\ Prime} + \beta_{Need\ for\ Cognition} + \beta_{Persuasion\ Knowledge} + \epsilon$$

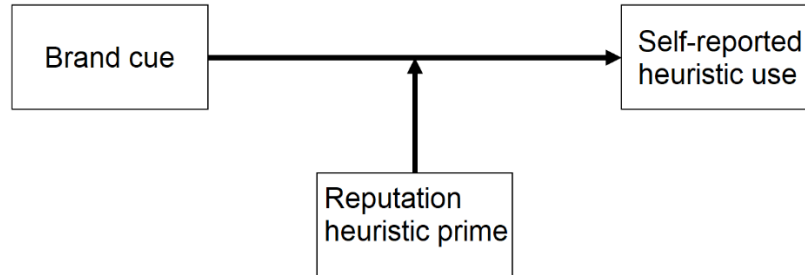
In this model, if the interaction slope for (brand cue x heuristic prime) is not equal to 0, this indicates that the priming stimulus affects the relationship between brand recognition and attitude toward the meme. That is, a statistically significant interaction slope in this equation speaks to the notion that priming participants with a short essay related to reputation in general bolsters their attitudes toward memes containing references to real brands and hampers their attitudes toward memes containing references to fictitious brands.

Analyses for Hypothesis 4 (that participants will self-report higher levels of reputation heuristic use after viewing memes containing references to real brands than after viewing memes containing references to fictitious brands), Hypothesis 5 (that participants primed with a stimulus related to reputation will self-report higher levels of reputation heuristic use than participants primed with an irrelevant stimulus, regardless of which type of meme they view), and Hypothesis 6 (that participants primed with an irrelevant stimulus who view memes with references to fictitious brands will self-report the lowest levels of reputation heuristic use overall) proceeded similarly to the procedures just described. For the main effects in Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6, a two-way between-subjects ANCOVA was conducted to assess whether there was a significant difference between the means for self-reported reputation heuristic use for the groups that viewed memes containing references to real brands and the groups that viewed memes containing references to fictitious brands (controlling for NFC and persuasion knowledge). For

comparison, ANOVA models were also fit without NFC and persuasion knowledge as covariates.

**Figure 15**

*Path Model Depicting the Moderating Effect of the Reputation Heuristic Prime on the Relationship Between Brand Recognition and Self-Reported Reputation Heuristic Use*



For the interaction effect in Research Question 6 (whether being primed with a stimulus related to reputation moderates the relationship between brand type and degree of self-reported heuristic use), the moderation model in Figure 15 was analyzed to determine whether the priming stimulus (heuristic vs. irrelevant) had a causal effect on the strength and/or directionality of the main effects in Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6. Note again that Figure 15 is merely a simplification of the second of two moderation paths depicted in Figure 13. The regression equation for Research Question 6 is as follows:

$$Y_{Heuristic Use} = \beta_0 + \beta_{Brand Cue} + \beta_{Heuristic Prime} + \beta_{Brand Cue \times Heuristic Prime} + \beta_{Need for Cognition} + \beta_{Persuasion Knowledge} + \epsilon$$

Importantly, the only aspect that has changed from the regression equation for Research Question 5 is that the dependent variable is self-reported heuristic use rather than self-reported attitudes toward the meme. Thus, the logic of the analysis remains the same. If the interaction slope for (brand cue x heuristic prime) is not equal to 0, this indicates that the priming stimulus affects the relationship between brand recognition and self-reported reputation heuristic use. In

this equation, a statistically significant interaction slope speaks to the notion that priming participants with a short essay related to reputation in general increases the level of self-reported reputation heuristic use, whereas priming participants with an irrelevant essay related to international travel lowers their level of self-reported reputation heuristic use.

To address Hypothesis 7 (that self-reported use of the reputation heuristic will partially mediate the relationship between brand type and attitude toward the meme such that greater self-reported use of the heuristic yields more positive attitude toward the meme), the moderated mediation model in Figure 13 was tested using the PROCESS macro for R (Hayes, 2012). Conceptually, this integrates the moderation models presented in Figures 14 and 15 with a mediation analysis. This moderated mediation model is consistent with the analytic framework suggested by Bellur and Sundar (2014) to determine whether a heuristic has been used in an experiment. When this model specification is analyzed using the PROCESS macro, the software calculates the regressions (i.e., moderations) described for Research Questions 5 and 6, as well as four additional regressions specific to the mediation analysis:  $(X \rightarrow M)$ ,  $(M \rightarrow Y)$ ,  $(X \rightarrow Y)$ , and the total effect  $[(X \rightarrow M)(M \rightarrow Y) + (X \rightarrow Y)]$ . From there, PROCESS constructs a 95% confidence interval for the mediation via bootstrapping (i.e., testing thousands of smaller iterations of sampled and replaced values from the dataset).

**Samples.** To validate memetic stimuli and the reputation heuristic post-test measure and to identify potential issues with the study design prior to wider administration, a pilot test of the experiment was carried out with a convenience sample of 40 Amazon Turk participants (i.e., 10 participants per experimental group). This pilot test was conducted after the completion of the qualitative focus group phase but prior to the wider administration of the experiment. Pilot data were analyzed using the procedures described in the previous section.

To determine an appropriately powered sample size for the wider administration of the experiment, an a priori power analysis was conducted with the software package G\*Power 3.1. For a four-group between-subjects experimental design employing F-tests for two-way ANCOVAs including fixed effects, main effects, and interaction effects, it was determined that a sample of 280 participants (i.e., 70 participants per experimental group) should be recruited to detect a medium effect size at an alpha level of .05 and power of .95.

To augment the external validity of the experiment, two discrete convenience samples were recruited. The rationale for recruiting two discrete samples of Generation Z participants was to first establish a baseline effect and then determine whether that effect could be replicated with an entirely different assortment of respondents. If experimental results can be replicated across discrete samples, this strengthens the inferences that can be made and provides the researcher more confidence in their conclusions than a single-sample experiment would afford. While a two-sample replication of results does not allow for generalization beyond the convenience samples recruited for this experiment, between-sample consistency provides stronger evidence that such patterns might continue to hold across other, similar samples. In turn, this suggests that the experimental manipulations are effective and potentially transportable.

The first sample, recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk throughout January 2022, consisted of 416 participants (i.e., 104 participants per experimental group). The second, a sample of University of Colorado students recruited from lower-division strategic communication courses throughout February 2022, consisted of 288 participants (i.e., 72 participants per experimental group). All participants from both samples were between the ages of 18 and 25 and resided within the United States at the time of their participation. Any

participants not meeting these basic criteria were excluded from analysis. Latecomers from both samples were excluded from analysis to retain equal sample sizes across experimental groups.

The sample of MTurk participants were all within the acceptable range for age ( $M = 22.82$ ,  $SD = 2.13$ ), were predominantly male (56.3%), and predominantly Caucasian (76.2%). By comparison, the sample of university participants was younger on average ( $M = 19.31$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), was predominantly female (72.9%), and also predominantly Caucasian (86.5%).

## CHAPTER 7: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

To date, little empirical scholarship has been produced on memetic advertising despite its increasing prevalence in professional advertising practice. In response to this, the research for this dissertation was conducted in two discrete phases. The first phase was a qualitative, exploratory series of focus groups designed to glean initial impressions of current, Generation Z college students' attitudes toward and responses to memes intended specifically as advertisements. Within these discussions of memetic advertising, participants were asked questions intended to elicit responses related to their persuasion knowledge and need for cognition. Participants were also shown a series of pre-selected, manifest memetic advertising stimuli in which a heuristic cue was either present or absent, then asked to share their thoughts about the meaning of each meme and their opinions about whether they thought each meme was effective. Overall, participants indicated that humor and social ties are inextricable from memetic communication and provided evidence that they rely on heuristic processing as a default cognitive strategy for decoding memes. Persuasion knowledge and need for cognition did not vary appreciably by group. Responses to manifest memetic stimuli varied by group depending on the specific type of meme they saw. Participants' responses to memes in which brand name was a heuristic cue informed the design of the second phase of this research, a quantitative experiment assessing the use of the reputation heuristic when viewing advertising memes that contain real versus fictitious names.

Analysis of these six focus groups was guided by the first four research questions advanced at the end of Chapter 5.

**RQ #1a:** What are the differences, if any, between how Generation Z strategic communication majors define and interpret advertising memes and how non-strategic communication majors define and interpret them?

**RQ #1b:** Do the responses of Generation Z strategic communication majors indicate greater persuasion knowledge than those of non-strategic communication majors?

**RQ #1c:** Do the responses of Generation Z strategic communication majors indicate greater need for cognition than those of non-strategic communication majors?

**RQ #2a:** How do Generation Z college students, regardless of major, use internet memes to facilitate social connections?

**RQ #2b:** How, if at all, does this extend to advertising memes specifically?

**RQ #3:** What evidence do Generation Z college students, regardless of major, provide for processing internet memes heuristically?

**RQ #4:** What are the differences, if any, between how Generation Z college students perceive and interpret advertising memes that contain a credibility heuristic cue (e.g., reputation, endorsement, expectancy violation, persuasive intent) versus how they perceive and interpret advertising memes that do not contain a credibility heuristic cue?

**RQ #4b:** What are the differences, if any, between the perceptions and interpretations of Generation Z college students who are shown advertising memes in which familiar brand names or logos are present, versus those who are shown advertising memes in which the brand name is either fictitious or a brand logo is absent?

The findings in this chapter are organized by overarching research question. Within each research question, specific themes emerged. For example, within Research Question 1a, participants discussed the importance of humor within all memes (advertising or otherwise) and

unpacked best practices for memetic advertisers to follow if they wish to be successful on social media. Findings for each research question are presented in terms of the specific themes that emerged. Within each theme, verbatim exemplar quotes culled from focus group transcripts are provided as support. In keeping with the study design (i.e., three focus groups consisting of strategic communication majors and three focus groups consisting of majors from outside disciplines), participants and groups are often referred to in this dissertation relative to their academic goals. Thus, strategic communication majors, when not referred to as such, are sometimes simply called "majors." Conversely, non-strategic communication majors are sometimes simply called "non-majors." What follows is a comprehensive account of the findings for each research question, separated by overarching theme.

### **Descriptions and Interpretations of Memetic Advertising**

The first part of Research Question 1 asked what differences there were, if any, between how Generation Z strategic communication majors describe and interpret memetic advertising and how non-strategic communication majors describe and interpret it. Overall, there was no appreciable difference between the two types of students. Although strategic communication majors' responses were more informed by their knowledge of advertising and focused more on how to achieve competitive success by connecting with audiences, students from all six focus groups evinced similar understanding of and attitudes toward memetic advertising specifically. In their respective discussions, two distinct themes arose: humor and best practices for brands. In brief, these students expressed that they expect memes will make them laugh and identified humor as vital to memetic communication. For advertisers specifically, there are certain things brands should do and not do if they wish to promote themselves using memes.

**Humor.** Near the beginning of each focus group session, all participants were prompted to weigh in on what the word "meme" means to them. The memetic element that was consistently and repeatedly emphasized across all six focus groups was humor. Relative to this study, humor refers to a content creator's use of jokes or irony within a preexisting template. Together, these elements form a memetic message that is often intended to make a specific point while simultaneously eliciting laughter or providing amusement. Participants explicitly discussed this quality of memes in general, then implicitly described the role of memetic humor in relation to cultural narratives.

When asked the first thing that comes to mind when hearing the word meme, a non-strategic communication student responded, "It's a piece of media that is for humor." Along similar lines, a strategic communication major responded, "I just think of a funny post that's like a joke or poking fun at something. Or like a relatable graphic I guess in a sense." This sentiment was articulated in comparable ways across focus group sessions. For example, a strategic communication major from another group weighed in that "a meme to me is a photo of an event or something that has happened with a small caption on it that is either making fun of it or trying to make a joke out of a situation or something like that."

While participants were unable to produce an encompassing and unifying definition of what a meme is, citing everything from image macros to videos to TikTok sounds as salient examples, they were nonetheless quickly able to articulate that memes are humorous bits of electronic media that are intended primarily for entertainment and, in some cases, satire. There was no notable contrast between strategic communication majors and non-majors in this broad characterization. Only one participant, a non-strategic communication major, spoke directly to the need for memes to be parodies or remixes. "Would you consider TikToks as memes if it's an

audio clip that's taken from somewhere else?" another student asked. "Yes," responded the participant in question, "because the patterns are repeated and I'm not sure if you guys have seen where it's the original of the video and then it's mocking the trend after that. So, I would say that if we're classifying it as the repetition of a joke, I guess then I would classify it as a meme." This comment precipitated an exchange in which a third participant agreed with the assessment, adding that "the funny part" about memes stems from one's familiarity with the patterns (i.e., meme templates and formats) and with the overall subject matter. The humor emerges, then, from how each successive meme subtly "break[s] the style" that was already familiar. In this way, the humorous potential of memes is derived from the ways in which they imitate existing memes, repeat patterns, and repurpose joke setups for different topics and contexts. Despite little explicit reference to imitation, repetition, and repurposing, several participants indicated an implicit understanding of the importance of these qualities. No one stated this more directly than the strategic communication student who said, "When you know the context, it's really funny. That's what a meme is supposed to be."

Right away, these comments situate memes within cultural narratives. Participants indicated that memes are a lighthearted and amusing way for them to reflect on what is happening in the world around them. As such, relatability—as referenced in the above quote from the first strategic communication major—is integral for memetic success insofar as a social networking site (SNS) user needs to be aware of current events and be receptive to the specific way in which a meme references those events in a humorous light. However, between focus groups, there was disagreement around the universality of memetic relatability as it pertains to humor. One student strategic communication major expressed, "I think if you want to have a good meme, you have to keep it pretty simple and funny so that it applies to such a general

audience where ... everyone could be like, 'Oh yeah, I relate to it in a sense.' I feel like that's how memes go viral." A non-major from a different focus group directly contradicted this.

If [a meme] was universal it wouldn't be that funny. I feel like when memes are weird or outlandish or something that's not typical, they're more likely to be [shared]. Maybe everyone understood [the universal meme], but I feel like it wouldn't be that funny. They're more funny when they're more tailored towards you or more relatable.

Despite this disagreement, both strategic communication majors and non-majors saw eye-to-eye with respect to humorous approaches within memetic advertisements specifically.

Unprompted, both types of students spoke to the humor inherent in brands making fun of each other on SNSs.

1: I feel like a lot of companies on Twitter kind of post memes to have a funny voice.

2: Yeah, I would agree with that. I was gonna say fast food places are always like...

1: They beef sometimes.

2: Yeah, that's funny.

This exchange between two strategic communication majors, in addition containing a humorous and apparently unintentional pun unto itself, emphasizes a receptiveness to sassy competition in memetic advertising that was echoed by non-strategic communication majors in another group.

"When [brands] are interacting with each other, that can be kind of funny. Where they're kind of competing for a customer's affection or something."

This raises an important distinction. When brands interact with each other via memes, this is perceived as humorous. However, when brands simply use memes to try to be funny, non-majors in particular voiced that they were likely to reject the attempt. As one student put it:

I automatically assume if it's clearly sponsored, then it's not actually going to be funny. Because if a meme is made to be funny, it has a higher chance of actually reaching the mark if there's no drive to have something else also presented in the meme. ... Just having brands present on social media kind of makes me ... scroll past them.

A non-major in a different group agreed with this. "My immediate reaction [to an ad meme] is, oh god, it's another advertisement that's trying to be funny. Sometimes it is kind of subversive and that makes it funny, but the majority of the time I think it's trying too hard." By contrast, strategic communication majors spoke little about memetic advertising humor in non-competitive contexts. As will be discussed in future sections, their overall perspective on memetic advertising was more tactical and less critical. Non-majors, on the other hand, were more vocal in their disapproval. "Is the company trying to be funny or are they actually nailing it?" one non-major asked rhetorically, with the implication that there is often a disconnect between trying and succeeding. "You can tell immediately."

**Best practices for brands.** There are numerous elements to successful memetic advertising in addition to the successful deployment of humor. Both strategic communication majors and non-majors talked both explicitly and implicitly about good practices that they saw as necessary for brands attempting to make their mark by using memes as an advertising tool and assigned value to judgments to this practice. Unsurprisingly, strategic communication majors had an overall more favorable opinion of brands using memes to advertise themselves on social media than non-strategic communication majors, although both groups cast a critical eye on the practice and discussed five specific practices that determine whether memetic advertising is or is not palatable to them. These practices included the brand using the generational appeal of internet memes to its advantage; capitalizing on trends; not advertising oneself through memes if the brand tone or identity is inconsistent with the humorous aims of memetic communication; striking a balance between effortfulness, quality, and quantity; and aligning the brand message with the reasons why Generation Z use SNSs in the first place. Each of these best practices is discussed in turn.

First of all, brands should use the generational appeal of internet memes to their advantage. "I think [memetic advertising] is a good marketing angle," one strategic communication student said. "I would say it's one of the best things [brands] can do, because it's a good way to catch the attention of our generation. ... It makes sense for them to try to get in our culture and relate to that to grab our attention, because if they can make us laugh, they might intrigue us more." As another major put it, "We know memes, our generation, more than anyone. Just because we kind of grew up with the start of memes." As a result, these students would not mount a memetic advertising campaign aimed at anyone over the age of 35 because, to their way of thinking, older generations may not know what memes are and would not embrace advertising messages presented in that format.

Memes are also just adapting to a new culture, like a new way of advertising. ... I'd say with the rise of technology, historically advertisements were analogue, on billboards and on walls, and now everything circulates through social media and as memes. So, to make advertisements memes, that's just appealing and adapting to a younger audience.

Second, memetic advertisers need to capitalize on trends. When introduced to the concept of a Chief Meme Officer (CMeO) and asked to speculate on what they imagine a day in the life of a CMeO might entail, students voiced that keeping abreast of what is popular in the social media sphere is very important. They also cautioned that, since internet trends are often ephemeral, this effort is akin to aiming at a moving target. "It's mostly just finding the trends early so you can hop on them and be at the top before it's already established," a strategic communication student explained. Right after, another responded, "I feel like you always have to be on your phone, so you see it and you're one of the first so you're not behind on the trend. Because I feel like once I see a trend so many times ... I'll just skip [related content] right away."

Third, certain brands should not use memes to advertise themselves. In short, there cannot be a mismatch between brand image or identity and the lighthearted nature of memetic

communication. The brands that strategic communication students identified as the most successful memetic advertisers are those with a nonserious reputation. One student unpacked this distinction by contrasting serious and nonserious brands: "A bank trying to advertise through memes wouldn't go well. ... I have to have full trust in my bank not to lose my money. With Wendy's I just have to trust there's not going to be a bug in my food." A moment later he added, "[Memes are] good for advertising, but not necessarily on a professional level. If I'm seeing a brand that does memes, I'm thinking they're more casual." Thus, the degree to which a brand wishes to present as professional, formal, and serious dictates how a potential memetic advertising campaign launched by that brand might be perceived by Generation Z audiences. Along these lines, pharmaceuticals, baby brands, luxury brands, and funeral homes were all singled out by strategic communication students as brands for which it would be unsuitable—if not outright offensive—to adopt an intentionally humorous memetic campaign. By contrast, quick-service restaurants like Wendy's, Burger King, and McDonald's, alongside snack brands like Slim Jim and the language-learning app DuoLingo, were commonly cited as salient brands for which humorous memetic campaigns have previously been successful.

Related to the topic of which brands should and should not engage in memetic advertising, strategic communication students also referenced how doing so might be useful for startup brands that are trying to make names for themselves in the crowded social media marketplace. "If you have a good social media team and you make a good TikTok that goes viral, people are going to see what you're selling or what you're trying to promote. For a startup, advertising through memes is huge," one major said. "If you're starting off fresh and you want to establish your brand like that, you have nothing really to lose," agreed another participant in the same group. However, a response from a non-strategic communication major contradicted those

of strategic communication majors regarding startup brands. "A meme isn't enough to market. We need to know more about the brand," he stated.

Fourth, non-majors discussed how brands need to balance effortfulness, quality, and quantity if they are going to use memes to advertise through social media. Specifically, a brand needs to be mindful of how it is using memes to position itself in the social media marketplace. Simply taking an existing meme template and repurposing it as an advertisement is regarded as a sterile attempt at shoehorning one's brand name into meme culture. "I just feel like [brands] don't understand a lot of the context of where these memes come from," one non-major explained. "Don't just take a random meme and be like, 'This works for Taco Bell.'" There was also a sense that brands that try too hard to push memetic advertising are viewed as interlopers who devalue memes as a form of humorous communication. In this way, advertisers are on an even keel with politicians. "If a politician were to campaign with memes, I probably would not take them seriously at all," another non-major explained, echoing the majors' discussions of why serious brands should not rely on memes.

Clearly, we've had some experiences with brand-produced memes that we think are funny and that we can just [remember] off the top of our head. But at the same time, I think—and I probably cannot speak for everyone—there's definitely this notion of getting tired of brands trying to seem very in with the media culture. Because a lot of them do it poorly, it can seem tiring to see over and over again. So, a concern of mine would be oversaturation, because then it just becomes a chore to see.

Fifth, the brand's memetic message needs to align with the reasons why Generation Z use SNSs and why memes are appealing to them. As one student bluntly put it, "I think there's a time and a place for memes, like when you're trying to relax. ... Having advertisements as memes taints the individuality of them. Kind of ruins it a bit." Later in the session, another student referred back to this comment and agreed with it: "Like you mentioned earlier, memes are more of an escape. We don't want to see [ads] when we're online sitting in bed after a long day of

classes." One way in which brands can circumvent this is to downplay overt product placement or explicit selling attempts and instead focus on simply being present in the online marketplace, much like Wendy's has done for the past several years. "Just being a company on Twitter and being funny is advertising enough [sic]. Like Wendy's Twitter does not have to say, 'You should buy our food.' They just have to show up in your feed roasting some other company and that's good enough," a non-major said, reflecting previous comments about how these students believe that the Wendy's brand has successfully adopted a humorous tone in its memetic communications.

This is the bottom line that united strategic communication majors' and non-majors' attitudes toward memetic advertising overall. Both types of students expressed the need for brands to integrate themselves into meme culture rather than merely creating memes and expecting their messages to be persuasive among Generation Z consumers. To these students, seamless integration constitutes being a regular presence on various SNSs without directly trying to sell a product or service. "[Advertising memes] popping up where they're relevant is a good way to do it, because it's less that [brands] see it as an opportunity to sell you something and more that they just want to remind you that they're there." This quote from a strategic communication major illustrates the reason they think brands are using memes to advertise in the first place. When explicitly asked why they think brands are joining the memetic advertising game, strategic communication majors agreed that it is an awareness-raising effort.

Moderator: Why do you think brands would post memes on social media?

1: For recognition.

2: Yeah. Publicity.

3: A way to stand out.

"When I see a meme or a significant social media presence from a company, that's actually more effective in my knowledge of that company existing," a non-major commented, reinforcing the majors' comments about standing out in a cluttered virtual space. "Sometimes you forget about a certain brand or you forget that certain things exist. Because of these memes, they're making us remember that [they] exist."

### **Persuasion Knowledge**

Research Question 1b asked whether Generation Z strategic communication majors indicated greater persuasion knowledge in their discussions of memetic advertising than non-strategic communication majors. Consistent with their comments about memetic advertising in general, strategic communication majors' persuasion knowledge was more technical and geared toward the inner workings of advertising practice than that of non-majors; however, both types of students demonstrated comparable aptitude when it came to identifying whether a meme was an advertisement. In assessing the differences in persuasion knowledge between these samples, two key themes emerged: the explicitness of a memetic selling attempt (i.e., how direct a brand or advertiser is about the fact that the meme is also an advertisement), and memetic context (i.e., where and under what circumstances a meme is encountered online by an SNS user).

Explicitness of a selling attempt almost always corresponds to the activation of persuasion knowledge, while memetic context provides important clues as to whether a persuasive agent is targeting an SNS user or not.

**Explicitness.** If a meme contains a direct reference to a brand or a product, or explicitly states that a person ought to make a purchase or behave in a certain way, this immediately triggers persuasion knowledge. Students' academic foci did not appear to influence this knowledge. One strategic communication student put this phenomenon in a nutshell: "The

incorporation of the brand name automatically makes it an ad, because I don't know who else would be making a meme about [that brand]." Echoing this, a major in a different group used similar language to convey the sentiment: "I think the name of the brand just strikes as an advertisement [sic]." Likewise, a non-strategic communication major described her "immediate pushback because, oh, brand [name]." In other words, when this participant sees a brand name in a meme, she immediately rejects what she perceives as an explicit selling attempt because she understands that the content is sponsored. Her rationale for this accords with the logic in the above comment made by the strategic communication major. Although memetic advertising is becoming more common on SNS, branded memes stand in contrast with the established humorous aims of memetic communication in general. Further, most memes are user-generated, so when these participants encounter a meme that is explicit about its brand or corporate origins, this triggers their persuasion knowledge.

Moderator: How do you know the meme is an advertisement?

1: The tacky brand placement.

Moderator: Can you expand on that?

1: It's so blatant that they're marketing their company, and I think when brands use memes to try to connect with an audience in terms of an advertisement, it's funnier when they just have the humor and then at the end it's like "Budweiser."

This comment from a strategic communication major reiterates the central role that humor plays in memes and ties it to her awareness of brands co-opting memetic expression for monetary gain. Her assessment of explicit brand name placement as "tacky" speaks to her distaste for being sold to in this manner. This affirms the best practice advanced in the previous section of brands tailoring their memetic messages so that they align with the reasons why Generation Z uses SNSs and seeks out memes in the first place. They want to laugh. They don't

want to be sold to, at least not directly. A non-major also expressed this sentiment: "It's just not easy to market in the form of memes to people our age, because we don't look for memes to buy something. We look for memes for comedy." Again, the non-major's comment presented in the previous section comes to mind: "I automatically assume if it's clearly sponsored, then it's not actually going to be funny." Persuasion knowledge thus appears to hamper students' receptiveness to (attempts at) memetic humor.

A strategic communication major discussed how to mitigate this concern. By way of advice for brands attempting to use memetic advertising to reach out to Generation Z consumers, she said, bluntly, "Kind of don't. Don't reach out." The best way to avoid triggering SNS users' persuasion knowledge in memetic advertising is to "do it in a cool way where I don't seek out [the brand] and they don't seek me out." That is, the brand should maintain a visible, but unobtrusive SNS presence that invites commenting and participation among users but does not inundate them with overt selling attempts. This highlights the importance of a brand meeting Generation Z consumers on their own terms where memes are concerned. "If they're obviously trying to sell a specific product, that feels very different than just trying to build goodwill," a non-major explained. Another group member concurred:

1: Part of the reason it bothers me [when brands are] very much blatantly trying to get your money and push whatever product they're [selling] is that memes do feel like a safe space kind of separate from everything else. So, when you can tell that they're specifically wielding [memes] to try and get you to participate in consumer culture it just feels like [the safe space is] being tainted somehow. I don't know if it's just me.

2: I agree with that.

3: No, I think we all agree.

In discussing explicit branding in memes, this non-major and the major above both used the word "blatant." The negative connotation of the word—together with the context in which they

used it—suggests a shared disapproval of this approach, while the other non-major's comment about building goodwill hints that explicit selling attempts are something of a deal-breaker.

Not every participant indicated this, however. In talking more about Wendy's (these groups' most frequently referenced memetic brand), a different non-major admitted, "I'm okay with being manipulated by brands. Honestly, if they put that much work into making me think about a cheeseburger and I went and got the cheeseburger, good for them." Her words indicate a clear awareness of persuasive attempts being leveled against her, but that she does not mind. "I don't have any concerns about brands advertising their products because it's their job," she said.

**Memetic context.** To a lesser extent, both majors and non-majors spoke of memetic context as a trigger for persuasion knowledge. Specifically, where and under what circumstances a meme is encountered on SNSs or elsewhere on the internet provides these students with additional information that they can use to assess the intent of a memetic message. A non-major talked about this directly: "If it's obviously marketing or not depends on where it is. If [an advertising meme] was on the brand's Twitter feed and I saw it I'd be like, yeah, that totally fits in. That's fine. But then if I saw it somewhere else I'd be like, that's weird." The above comment about how Generation Z looks to memes for comedy and not for advertising complements this statement. One expects a brand's official social media profile to be rife with promotional material. Once a meme is freed from that context and appears elsewhere, though, this indicates to the audience that something is "weird" and activates persuasion knowledge. A non-major in a different focus group expanded on this by saying, "If I saw [an ad] on a meme page, I would assume they were sponsored [by that advertiser]." This participant spoke in reference to pages on social media exclusively dedicated to sharing and reposting memes. These meme pages often appeal to specific groups or types of people and are, in keeping with the core element of memetic

communication, predominantly humorous in nature. If an ad creeps into an otherwise humorous context, it becomes easy to identify and the audience's persuasion knowledge is triggered. A strategic communication major also made a comment consistent with this. When shown a manifest memetic advertising stimulus, he responded, "Some[one] would post this as a sponsored post." This comment indicates that he was able to identify the meme as an ad, and also suggests an understanding of how brands use the "sponsored" label in non-official brand page SNS contexts to be transparent about their selling attempts.

It is important to note as a caveat that participants in all groups were told upfront that memetic advertising was the topic of discussion. It is therefore likely that participating in a roundtable conversation alerted them such that, when it came time to view manifest memetic advertising stimuli, they were apt to look for evidence that an agent was attempting to target them. As such, it was illuminating to hear the groups' responses to the Kurger Bing meme (see Appendix A), as it was specifically included in the lineup because it contains a transposition of an immediately identifiable brand name but was posted by a parody account and was never intended to represent the Burger King brand. Both strategic communication majors and non-majors tapped into this right away. "I don't think it's an advertisement," one confused major surmised. "I don't know what it is, but it's just not an advertisement." A non-major in a different focus group was on the same page. "This seems like an individual's meme," he said, alluding to his instinct that this meme would likely be presented in a noncommercial SNS context. "I would never expect Burger King to post this." Thus, both majors and non-majors displayed an equivalent ability to differentiate between intentional selling attempts and—in the case of the Kurger Bing meme—an image macro that shared superficial qualities with legitimate advertising

memes (e.g., brand name placement) but whose oddball, nonprofessional presentation signaled that it was not a real advertisement.

### **Need for Cognition**

Research Question 1c asked whether Generation Z strategic communication majors indicate greater need for cognition (NFC) than non-strategic communication majors. Overall, responses across focus groups were fairly uniform, indicating that academic track does not have substantial bearing on how much they enjoy effortful cognitive activity. While individual students within groups displayed differing preferences along these lines, these differences did not extend to the overarching distinction between majors and non-majors. The salient theme that emerged surrounding NFC was the ease of understanding a meme versus the expected payoff that results from figuring it out. Couched within this theme were considerations of social influence and how much time one spends looking at a meme in order to glean its meaning.

**Ease of understanding vs. expected payoff.** To get a sense of how much mental effort these students are willing to expend on a meme, each group was asked to estimate how long they spend looking at an image macro before scrolling to the next item in their newsfeed. On average, participants stated that they take no more than a few seconds to decode a memetic message and that their motivation to pay closer attention is socially influenced. "Subconsciously we like to be informed," a non-major explained, "so when other people like stuff, we're more inclined to be like, why?" A strategic communication major from another group agreed: "If someone sent [a meme] to me, I would definitely try to figure it out, but if I'm just aimlessly scrolling then I really don't care."

Within these socially influenced parameters was an expected amount of variability in NFC. Some participants stated that they enjoy the thrill of the chase and that there is a certain

satisfaction that comes with engaging with memes and peeling back the layers. "[It's] the feeling of winning," said one non-major. "It took effort to get the joke and then once you do get the joke, you're like, oh heck yeah." Thus, feeling both socially connected and informed about the on-hand topic or joke might inspire an SNS user to attend to a meme more closely. And then, of course, there is the simple predisposition to enjoy complex mental activities that defines the construct of NFC. "I like something that makes me think a little bit," a strategic communication major said. "I feel like I always try to figure [the meme] out, whether I'm interested in it or not. I just am bothered by not knowing."

Just as common across groups, however, was the opposite predisposition. "I feel like I never try to figure [the meme] out if it doesn't come within the first glimpse," another major added, hinting at heuristic processing. A different strategic communication major took a more pragmatic approach: "If you're not going to understand the meme, then there's not anything worth diving into." By and large, these digital natives showed confidence in their ability to decode a meme almost instantaneously, including whether or not they possess the necessary knowledge to put the pieces together. Understandably, those who infer that their efforts will not be sufficiently rewarded prefer to move on and focus on content more closely tailored to their interests and social ties; only those who prefer effortful cognitive activity are gratified by the mental maneuvering it takes to apprehend a meme that does not fall into place right away. It all comes down to, as a non-major put it, "whether you think the payoff will be worth it."

When it comes to using memes for advertising, brands face a challenge if their content is not being shared among SNS users or viewed by someone who is already invested in the brand. Asked whether they are less likely to spend time looking at content that is obviously sponsored or branded, both strategic communication majors and non-majors answered in the affirmative. "If

I know it's an ad, I'm not going to pay attention for longer than I have to," one major chimed in. A non-major in a different focus group agreed with this point by asking the rhetorical question, "Why waste my time [looking at sponsored content]?" Both statements suggest that these participants do not feel that the payoff they expect from decoding an advertising meme is sufficient to expend the cognitive energy necessary to do so.

### **Social Connectedness Through Memes**

The second research question asked how Generation Z college students regardless of major use memes to facilitate social connections and how, if at all, this extends to advertising memes specifically. As students were discussing their experiences, it became clear that—both in general and specific to advertising—social ties are inextricable from memetic communication and constitute the primary reasons why people engage with memes in the first place. To this end, two overarching themes emerged: that the social origin of memes (i.e., the person from whom, or group from which, an SNS user receives a meme) influences how they are regarded and, relatedly, that meme culture is generational.

**Social origin.** For clarity, social origin here refers to the interpersonal connections through which a person becomes aware of and engages with a meme. Although similar, this is distinct from memetic context discussed in the section on persuasion knowledge, which is concerned with where a meme is located in cyberspace and how it is presented there. From creation to retransmission, memes are an inherently social phenomenon. Focus group participants spoke to interpersonal ties as elemental to the sharing of memes. A strategic communication major provided a summary of how memes bring people together.

[Memes are] a way to express a feeling when there aren't words, especially with a close friend when you're taking about something and you know they will understand it. It's a way to establish a close relationship and communicate in a way that's not just saying, "That was funny." There's a sense of community.

These social relationships can vary in terms of group size and level of intimacy. Memes can be shared with close friends, as the above quote indicates, but also with common bond or common identity groups that may extend beyond one's real-life acquaintances. "[A meme] can be focused towards different, smaller groups as well as being a big meme that everyone is going to understand," another major said. As if in conversation with this point, a non-major described memes as "an inside joke but shared with everyone on that [SNS] platform." As with any inside joke, there is an entailing feeling of inclusiveness that comes with understanding the meme. One non-major said of her core friend group, "They kept talking in this code that I didn't understand, so I had them start explaining and sharing [memes] with me so that I could feel like I was part of the group and the conversation. And then I really started enjoying [the memes]."

Other participants made similar comments. "I have friends that are just all about memes. Like ... that's all they talk about, that's all they're direct messaging me," a strategic communication major said. Of course, this memetic messaging is a two-way street. Not only do these students receive memes from their friends, but often reciprocate. "[I have] an old buddy I've known for years. ... Whenever I see a funny meme, I'll just send it to him on Instagram," a non-major explained. There is also a sense that multiple heads are better than one. Multiple SNS users can cover more ground and expose themselves to a greater volume of content and, in turn, can individually contribute to a richer and more varied memetic conversation.

I feel like a lot of the meme culture is that you know you can't find all the memes on your own. Half of that is sharing the memes, because there's some that I would never have seen if it weren't for my friends sending them to me. Just because of the way algorithms work.

Further, as discussed in the section on NFC, the social origin of a meme plays a substantial role in how much attention a digital native is willing to pay to it. If they receive a meme via a direct

message from a friend or group of friends, they are substantially more likely to parse the content than they would be if they encounter the meme on their own. "If my friend sends me a meme and I don't get it, then I'll try to figure it out. I feel like that's the only time I actually try to invest in it," a major explained. When asked if they agree, two other participants at the table indicated that they also engage with memes in this way.

Moderator: Does anyone else agree with that? That if a friend sends you something, you'll put in the time?

1: I agree.

2: Yeah, I agree.

A major in a different focus group expressed an almost identical sentiment. "I feel like if someone sent it to me, I'll take more time [to understand the message], because they understood it and, if I don't, I'll be like wait, what is this supposed to mean?"

A qualification to this statement arises when considering memes that are posted to an SNS account rather than shared via direct messaging or text. In these cases, the comments section provides an additional sense of social connectedness and often helps alleviate confusion when the meaning of the meme is not gleaned immediately. "The comments make it more relatable [because] other people are seeing [the meme] and putting their own twist on it," a non-major disclosed. A strategic communication student in another focus group agreed with this. "I go to the comments on every social media site. I think they're really funny and make me feel like I'm not being a loser looking at memes alone and just kind of laughing along with other people."

The strong connection between social ties and memetic communication transfers directly to memes intended specifically for advertising. Participants agreed that they could take or leave most branded memes that they discover in the virtual wild. As one major put it, "If it's a product or a brand I'm interested in then I'll go to the comments and try to get the backstory and figure

out the meme, but if it's something I could really care less about, then I'll just scroll past it." Thus, prior interest in what is being advertised plays an important role; however, the social component is also key in augmenting a meme's persuasiveness or appeal. "I'll be more encouraged to pursue actually shopping if [a meme is liked or shared by] one of my friends," another major said. "Since a huge percentage of our communication with each other is on the internet, I think sharing memes—especially brand-related ones—[depends on] word-of-mouth," a non-major noted.

Friends' and acquaintances' relationships with brands and products, and the ways in which they convey this interest through SNS or direct messages, also influence how others perceive memetic advertisements. "Sometimes your friends are almost brand ambassadors for certain things," a strategic communication major explained. "You just know they love some products so much." Whereas most SNS users may be unwilling to share a branded meme with their friends, the story is different for a brand loyalist. Therefore, memetic advertising is likely to be successful if the message first reaches ambassadors, who then forward the meme to those in their social circles who they know will laugh at it, relate to it, or react positively. A non-major succinctly summarized memetic advertising success in social terms.

It's all a matter of just trying to get you to associate their product with something good, right? And if they make you laugh and you find it funny, then you will talk about it with other people. If you share that meme, that means your associations with that [brand or product] are positive.

**Generational differences.** A key element of the social connectedness that memetic communication fosters is that it is largely generational. "Every single generation has a different sense of humor. My dad's a Baby Boomer. He really doesn't understand jack crap," a facetious major commented. Along these lines, another major stated, "If I said I think my parents know what memes are, I'd be lying. They just don't know." Memes tend to be siloed by generation

because it is assumed that older (or younger) people may not relate as much to the humor or understand the joke. "It was just kind of a shock to see how different of online experiences we have," a non-major said when talking about a conversation she had had with her mom about what social media content they each find interesting. "Probably 80% of the time I get [memes] because they're referencing cultural or generational references," another non-major estimated.

Since humor is the dominant factor cited for why students like memes, it follows that the intergenerational sharing of memes is less common than intragenerational sharing of memes. A non-major provided an effective summation of this. "I think part of that, there's a cutesy aspect to older memes or memes for older people. Because they're like, oh look how cute it is, and then it also has a funny joke in it. Then while for [people our age], I don't know ... it's a little bit dark and it doesn't have to be as cutesy." Participants also referred to "2010 memes" (i.e., memes and meme templates from the year 2010, eleven years prior at the time of the focus groups) appealing more to older internet users, with newer and fresher formats faring better among digital natives.

A group of non-majors had the following amusing dialogue:

1: I'm thinking of all the Boomer memes on Facebook. [Older people] are very receptive to those. Meanwhile younger people are not at all receptive to those.

Moderator: What are some Boomer memes that don't translate well to Gen-Z?

1: I'll say what we're all thinking. It's Minions.

2: Thank you!

3: It's definitely the Minion meme. Oh my goodness.

Generational differences and the entailing issues of cuteness and humorous tone are important considerations for memetic advertisers, particularly if a CMeO or memetic content creator is meaningfully older than the audience they are trying to reach. A skeptical non-major voiced the following concern about CMeO's and memetic advertising in general.

[A CMeO] is probably someone [the brand] tried to hire that was young and relatable, but they're not quite hitting the mark because [the brand consists of] older people hiring to reach out to our demographic. Versus if I was picking someone to make a meme, I'd [choose] one of us, because we're within our own pop culture. We have the ability to understand [each other].

Strategic communication students echoed this concern. "A young twentysomething running the [brand] social media account ... is more relatable than if a 50-year-old person was trying to post to TikTok." Later in the same group, another major talked prescriptively about how brands should navigate these generational waters.

I feel like you just kind of need to see the target demographic. ... Stockholders are going to be older than the people who are seeing and reading these memes. You kind of just need to test it out, test it on different ages, and see how a bunch of different people react. Because one age group, one generation, could act differently than another.

A major in a different group tied this sentiment directly to one of the manifest memetic advertising stimuli that was presented. "I feel like my mom would see this and think it's funny. ... But not us because we've seen it so many times," she explained, referencing her group's consensus that the meme (a memetic McDonald's ad depicting da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* eating French fries) was stale from overuse. Collectively, these quotes underscore the importance of matching audience and message. "You just have to be mindful of the content and who you're sharing it with," a major said, "because the stuff that I send to [my college friends in] Boulder I would not remotely show my parents." A non-major in another group agreed, prompting an exchange that neatly encapsulates both themes of generational differences and social origin:

1: [What memes I send] depends on the kind of conversations I'm having with people. Like my best friend, the kind of conversations and the topics we talk about are completely different from people who are just friends. Which is again different from my family. Certain memes I send to my best friend, certain memes to my family.

2: It also depends on that person, what they're into, what they find funny. I'll send this science meme to all my science friends or I'll send this video game meme to my friends who like video games or whatever, depending on their interests and such.

3: Yeah, I think [sending memes] is a really good way to show people around you that you're putting effort into relating to them.

Consequently, memes function not only as a convenient way for Generation Z individuals to share laughs with friends, but also as a conduit for forging and maintaining deeper, more meaningful interpersonal relationships.

### **Heuristic Processing of Memes**

Research Question 3 asked what evidence Generation Z college students, regardless of major, provide for processing internet memes heuristically. In keeping with the broad definition of cognitive heuristics, focus group participants' responses were assessed in terms of the ways in which they spoke of making fast, low-effort evaluations when encountering memes on SNSs. These included references to their ease of understanding a meme and to the knowledge structures that facilitate these snap judgments. Participants indicated implicitly that heuristic processing is their default mode for apprehending memetic content and that more effortful systematic processing runs counter to the aims of memetic communication.

**Ease of understanding.** Throughout the focus group sessions, participants made indirect reference to low-effort cognitive processing when viewing memes on SNSs. One student's description of memes as "anything that you don't really have to think about" underscores the consensus that SNS users do not expect this form of communication to impose large attentional demands on them. "A lot of memes that come out are very easy to understand," another participant added. "When we look at a meme, it's so easily understandable and it makes us laugh instantly," a third student chimed in, repeating almost verbatim the features of ease and understandability. "One that takes too long to figure it out ... loses its magic." While this last opinion may not necessarily transfer to someone who enjoys effortful thinking and who might score higher on a measure of NFC, it nonetheless advances a widespread expectation for

memetic content to be readily interpretable. Talking about memes in general, a fourth student related this opinion back to humor: "Nothing that takes too long to understand. It's just a quick little funny haha, then move on. It's not a joke that you need to fully think about and understand ... in depth. It's just a little joke, I guess."

Participants also discussed factors that impede how easily they understand a meme. "Sometimes there's just too much text and it becomes clumped up and confusing to read," a strategic communication major revealed. A non-major stated obstacles in more abstract terms: "Anything too busy would ruin what we're looking for." In other words, too much text, or an overabundance of visuals, or anything that would noticeably slow the speed with which a meme is processed defeats the purpose of "a quick little funny haha." As one major put it, "our attention spans are so little" that undue mental activity is unwelcome, particularly in a virtual space where the expectation is one of humor and laughing. "You laugh immediately," another participant stated, hinting at how the reflexive nature of laughter is often at odds with deeper processing.

These quotes recall the ideas advanced in the section on NFC about ease of understanding and how this relates to participants' evaluations of whether a meme is worth engaging with. "I immediately look at [a meme] and am like, no, it's not going to be funny even if I do decipher what it is," a non-major explained. A moment later another group member added, "Right away I feel like you can be like okay, I'm scrolling or I'm going to keep looking at this." Here, through both explicit and implicit references to immediacy, participants are addressing the automatic nature of heuristic processing. Their language indicates snap decisions that they may be making multiple times per minute as they scroll through their SNS feeds. Perhaps the most honest and transparent support for this was stated in casual terms by a non-major: "You know how you look at an image and you're like, 'nah,' and you just kind of scroll?"

**Knowledge structures.** Regarding knowledge structures being activated in the heuristic processing of memes, participants implicitly discussed using their personal memeplexes (i.e., mental models of mutually reinforcing memetic content) to guide the heuristic processing of memetic content. "I might've seen the meme format weeks ago, and I got the joke set up, and now I can just enjoy all the punchlines people give later. It's this weird cultural inside joke thing," a non-major stated, adroitly tying together the overarching concepts of mental models, cultural narratives, heuristics, and humor emphasized throughout this dissertation. Without hearing these words, a participant from another group effectively built off of this comment. "Meme culture and [understanding] the reference come in handy. You've seen the meme [template] a million times before, so you understand it even though it doesn't show the whole picture." This speaks directly to heuristic processing, as well as to memes functioning as partial narratives. While each individual image macro contributes its own punchline or additional story beat to the overall narrative, the cognitive knowledge structure is implicated in fitting these disparate pieces together. While being shown manifest memetic stimuli, one non-major admitted that "a lot of my feelings toward these memes are going to be about whether I like the template or not." Her words suggest that cognitive accessibility and pattern recognition influence her evaluations of memes before she pays attention to those memes' specific messages. The activation of memeplexes plays an important role in the familiarity or confusion surrounding the memes that a person encounters. This theme of familiarity versus confusion arises later in this chapter with regard to participants' responses to branded vs. unbranded (or fictitiously branded) manifest memetic advertising content.

## **Advertising Memes and Heuristic Cues**

The first part of Research Question 4 asked what differences there were, if any, between the perceptions and interpretations of Generation Z college students who were shown advertising memes containing a credibility heuristic cue versus how they perceive advertising memes that do not contain a credibility heuristic cue. The main themes that emerged when analyzing participants' responses to the first three memetic pairs (related to endorsement, expectancy violation, and persuasive intent, respectively) were social ties and perceived effort. Specifically, participants indicated that their responses to endorsement metrics were often unconscious and driven by either real or imagined social ties. Meanwhile, their responses to expectancy-violating stimuli and the persuasive intent of one Totino's Pizza Roll meme (but not the other) were driven by the amount of effort that they perceived the content creator(s) had put into making the meme. These, in turn, influenced how favorably participants felt about the memes that they saw.

As a reminder, and as discussed in Chapter 5, there are numerous heuristics that are thought to guide internet users' evaluations of the credibility (loosely defined as trustworthiness and believability) of the content they encounter online. These heuristics include reputation, endorsement, expectancy violation, persuasive intent, and others beyond the scope of these findings. An aim of these focus groups was to relate these credibility heuristics to memes specifically and to see how cues present in (or absent from) manifest memetic advertising stimuli impacted how Generation Z college students interpreted or responded to each message. Eight pairs of memetic stimuli were presented. Each of these pairs was described in Chapter 6 and can be viewed in Appendix A. For convenience, Table 1 (denoting which focus groups saw which stimuli) and Table 2 (summarizing the brands, heuristics, and corresponding heuristic cues pertinent to each pair of manifest advertising memes) are reproduced below.

**Table 1***Characteristics of the Six Focus Group Sessions*

Group	Major	Heuristic Cue
1	Strategic Communication	Present
2	Strategic Communication	Absent
3	Strategic Communication	Present & Absent
4	Other	Present
5	Other	Absent
6	Other	Present & Absent

**Table 2***Characteristics of Each Pair of Manifest Advertising Memes*

Real Brand	Fictitious Brand	Heuristic	Heuristic Cue
Bugles	N/A	Endorsement	Endorsement metrics
Burger King	Kurger Bing	Expectancy violation	Nonprofessional aesthetics
Totino's	N/A	Persuasive intent	Explicit selling attempt
Chipotle	N/A	Reputation	Brand logo
McDonald's	N/A	Reputation	Brand logo
Spotify	Auricle	Reputation	Real brand name
Fancy Feast	Savory Choice	Reputation	Real brand name
Dove	Affinity	Reputation	Real brand name

**Endorsement and social ties.** The endorsement heuristic was periodically implicated in the processing of memetic content. The sufficiency threshold in memetic communication (i.e., the point at which the individual's actual confidence in what they know or understand becomes lower than their desired confidence and they are compelled to switch to systematic processing to decode a message) appears to be primarily defined by interpersonal relationships. These social ties can be either real or imaginary and appear to be influenced by the endorsement metrics (e.g., the number of likes or comments on SNS content). Per one strategic communication major:

I definitely feel like if a meme has more likes, I'm going to tend to look at it longer. Sometimes when I'm scrolling, I'll glance at the likes first, not on purpose, but then I'll see that it has two likes. I'm not generally inclined to look at a meme that has two likes. But if it's got a thousand, I feel like more people like it, so I'm more likely to enjoy it. It's more worth my time.

After the participant said this, another major at the table spoke up. "I've actually noticed myself doing this, too. ... I've started catching myself looking at likes and comments on [memes] more often and I feel like that'll kind of gauge how interested I am in it." Thus, endorsement heuristic cues such as number of likes or comments unconsciously influence how much attention these students will pay a given meme. In the first quote, the major suggests that looking at these metrics is a habitual behavior. He does not do it intentionally; rather, it is part of his ingrained SNS-scrolling routine. Yet this habit serves as a springboard for a host of subsequent judgments about the characteristics of the meme, not the least of which is whether the meme is even worth the time of day. Participants also voiced concerns about brands potentially exploiting this heuristic by purchasing fake followers and likes, thereby proffering illusory endorsement. In this hypothetical case, endorsement by friends and family would override the total number of likes and comments that a post has. "If they're persuaded, at least, it's probably fine," one major said. "Or they'll get scammed, too," a witty group member retorted.

Regarding the Bugles meme specifically, participants who saw the version of the meme with the endorsement metrics visible responded more favorably than those who saw the version of the meme without the metrics visible. "I feel like I have mixed feelings about this [meme]. I feel like it's good because they tied the product into it, but at the same time I feel like it could've been executed in a way better fashion," explained a student who saw the meme without the metrics. By comparison, a different group of students who saw the meme with the metrics had an immediate, positive response to it.

- 1: This one's good.
2. Yeah, this one's good.
3. It's just funny.

Although the difference in responses between one group and the other cannot be attributed directly to the number of likes and comments attached to it and may have been influenced by personal taste, group dynamics, or other factors, it is worth noting that these opinions differed even though the meme itself remained unchanged. In other words, the endorsement metrics were supplemental to the meme and did not constitute an alteration of the image macro itself. In the two groups that were shown both versions of the image, evaluations did not explicitly improve when the endorsement metrics were added, likely because they were instructed to voice their opinions before the metrics were presented.

**Nonprofessional aesthetics and perceived effort.** Questionable design attributes and apparent lack of effortfulness contributed to participants' opinions toward the Burger King/Kurger Bing and Totino's Pizza Rolls memes that they viewed. In general, low-effort memes and odd stylistic choices corresponded to less favorable responses toward the stimuli overall. Participants' responses to the Kurger Bing meme (with the expectancy violation heuristic cues) were discussed in the section on persuasion knowledge. Because of the odd nature of the meme's design and the transposed spelling of an otherwise familiar brand name, students correctly identified the image macro as a nonprofessional meme posted to a parody account. "I don't know if effort is the right word, because look at it. But there's definitely something that's weird about it," a strategic communication major commented. "I don't even know if this Kurger Bing is an actual place, but I'm thinking it's not. I don't find it in any relation towards even Burger King, because I don't understand it," another major from a different group added. Non-majors also felt that the Kurger Bing macro was unsuccessful. "This [meme] gets into the absurdist thing. I can't do it. I don't like it," a non-major explained, recalling an earlier exchange

about how some memes rely on outlandish (i.e., unconventional and, by extension, nonprofessional) approaches in order to get their message across.

On the other hand, responses to the official Burger King meme in which the King mascot is depicted holding up a sassy sign in front of a Wendy's location, garnered more positive responses. Per an exchange among strategic communication students:

1: I've seen the sign guy who holds up the signs on Instagram.

2: Oh, I wasn't even thinking of that.

3: Why is the Burger King in front of Wendy's?

2: It's because Wendy's burgers are square, and so he's saying, "Don't go to Wendy's. Patties are supposed to be round, not square." So he's protesting.

4: I think this is a really good way of advertising and competition.

2: Yeah, I think this one is pretty good. It's funny and easy to look at.

The comment about the meme being easy to look at suggests appealing design aesthetics, which were absent from the meme's Kurger Bing counterpart. This exchange also incorporates meme knowledge and brand knowledge. These participants speak directly to their awareness of @guywithsign, "the sign guy who holds up the signs on Instagram" who this memetic ad is referencing. They also discussed the meaning of the "Roses are red, violets are blue, patties are round" text on the mascot's cardboard sign in relation to both Burger King and Wendy's brand narratives. "Everybody knows the 'Roses are red, violets are blue' saying. So that just automatically makes sense," another student added a moment later. Again, "automatically" implies an association that activates a knowledge structure, which in turn allows for heuristic processing to occur.

Effortfulness was also a consideration with regard to the Totino's Pizza Rolls meme with an explicit selling attempt. "This is pretty low-effort, like I could have done it in five minutes," a

strategic communication major said. A non-major concurred with this, first stating that it didn't speak to her. When asked to clarify she responded, "I think effort. This [meme] format, I don't like as much. If [Totino's] were to post that, I wouldn't like it as much. I think it goes back to my whole deal of being hung up on how much effort they put into it. Because I could make this." Her comments about effortfulness are also reflective of her perceiving the meme as nonprofessional. Commenting that she, a non-strategic communication major who is not studying to go into the advertising industry, could make the meme implies that its design is amateurish and did not necessitate much skill.

However, unlike the Burger King/Kurger Bing memes, responses toward the Totino's meme without the explicit selling attempt were also unfavorable. Foreshadowing the next section on branding, participants commented that the poor aesthetics of the meme contributed to a lack of certainty about the specific brand or product being depicted, which resulted in confusion. The following excerpt illustrates the thought process of a group of non-majors.

1: Pizza bites. I mean, what are those called? Totino's Pizza Rolls or something. Is that what you guys think this is for, too?

2: I think so, yeah.

3: I think Pete Zarock is supposed to be Pizza Rock. So it's like a pizza roll wearing rock outfits.

1: Thanks for explaining that. I don't think I actually would've gotten that.

3: But then I don't know who Pete is.

1: I was like, who's Pete?

3: Yeah, who's Pete? Because that makes me feel like that's the person it's a picture of, but then I know this is a template, so I don't think that his name is Pete Zarock.

1: I don't think [the meme is] that good, either.

3: Because it also covers up the test tube too much, so it doesn't look like he's holding it. I don't know.

4: Yeah, it does just kind of look like it's hanging off his hand.

2: Poorly made.

3: You don't even really recognize what it is. It doesn't have Totino's in it or anywhere. It doesn't have pizza rolls.

5: I mean, we all took a minute to be like, is that a pizza roll?

4: Yeah, I thought it was one of the cinnamon cereals.

5: That's what I thought, too. I was like, why is it so huge?

3: I was thinking Krave. Cinnamon Toast Crunch or Krave.

Through a pointed dissection of what, specifically, constituted questionable aesthetics and unsuccessful execution to them, these participants were eventually able to identify why the meme did not work. The participant who begins the exchange correctly identifies the brand, but even this is called into question when two others comment that they thought the item that is supposed to be a pizza roll looked more like a piece of cinnamon cereal. This exchange also exemplifies the social nature of memetic communication. Individually, these students may have struggled to identify that it was the meme's poor design that instigated their puzzlement. As a group, they were able to build off of each other's thoughts and arrive at a suitable consensus. This consensus was voiced in other focus groups as well, right down to the pizza roll's resemblance to cereal. Asked what they would do if they saw a meme like Pete Zarock in their feed, one participant responded, "I would probably read it, think it's cereal, think that person [in the meme] is famous, and move on." This quote once again emphasizes the use of heuristics in processing memetic messages. By definition, heuristics yield quick judgments that can sometimes be prone to error. This student's snap judgment of the Pete Zarock meme, while

immediate, is also incorrect. However, the lack of investment suggested by this comment implies that an incorrect judgment is not worrisome in this case.

### **Advertising Memes and Branding**

The second part of Research Question 4 asked what differences there were, if any, between how Generation Z college students perceive and interpret advertising memes in which real brand names or logos are present versus advertising memes in which the brand name or logo is either fictitious or absent. The primary theme that emerged regarding the branding of manifest stimuli was familiarity vs. confusion. Specifically, two types of familiarity impacted how participants responded: their familiarity with the brand itself and their familiarity with the meme template. In general, familiarity with the brand (including its reputation and the cultural narrative surrounding it) was necessary for the groups to fully parse a given meme, but familiarity with a meme template allowed for partial understanding in some cases. However, there was an overarching sense that the inclusion of a brand name provides needed context and that previous familiarity with that brand also substantially improves the chances that the memetic message will be properly decoded.

**Familiarity vs. confusion.** The importance of the reputation heuristic factors heavily into the ensuing discussion of brand names as heuristic cues. Participants consistently expressed that memes containing brand names they were familiar with were clear and understandable, whereas memes containing brand names they were not familiar with were confusing and difficult to interpret. One student put the relationship between familiarity with a brand narrative and receptiveness to memetic advertising content in a nutshell. Commenting on a meme she had seen advertising Burger King's ghost pepper nuggets, she said:

Because I was already familiar with the brand because of their memes, when they actually came out with [a new menu item], it inclined me to be more interested in it.

Versus if I had never heard of Burger King before and they were like, 'We have ghost pepper nuggets,' I'd be like, 'I don't trust you. You've got a weird mascot.'

Although it is clear from her tongue-in-cheek reference to Burger King's uncanny mascot that she knew about the brand prior to viewing their memes online (i.e., she is not familiar with the brand *because* of their memes; more likely, Burger King's memetic content successfully boosted her awareness of the brand), her point is clear. Her use of the reputation heuristic enabled her to make a snap judgment about the credibility and trustworthiness of the Burger King brand which, together with an effective memetic advertisement, persuaded her to try this new item.

Regarding the presence or absence of a reputation heuristic cue in the manifest advertising stimuli presented during the focus groups sessions, the clearest dichotomy between familiarity and confusion emerged from the groups of strategic communication majors who viewed the Savory Choice (fictitious brand name) and Fancy Feast (real brand name) memes, respectively. The former expressed total confusion, while the latter had no apparent difficulty decoding the meme.

1: I'm honestly confused. Savory Choice. Is she screaming "low calorie diet" or "savory"...I don't know how those relate. I get that savory is food. Low calorie diet is food. Do you guys understand this one?

2: Yeah, honestly I don't know. I just know this meme [template].

3: Same. Real Housewives.

2: Yeah, I'm confused.

Moderator: So we're just having a little trouble putting the two images together here?

4: It just doesn't make any sense.

3: Because savory means sweet...

2: Salty.

3: Salty?

2: Yup.

Moderator: If the cat was responding something like "Fancy Feast," for instance, would it make more sense?

2: Yeah.

1: Yeah. Because that would mean he is asking for food. Savory Choice? Salty choice? I don't know what that is.

The fictitious brand name Savory Choice obviously perplexes this group. They are familiar with the meme template all the way down to the television show from which one of its photographs originated (i.e., *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*), but without a recognizable brand name to serve as a heuristic cue, they find the meme incoherent and frustrating. This exchange can be contrasted directly with one from the group of strategic communication majors that saw the meme with the real brand name Fancy Feast present.

1: I love these memes. I love that cat. I think it's good [as a memetic advertisement] because the product relates to the meme itself. ... Fancy Feast is a cat food and then you have a cat. I just think having that relatability makes it better.

Moderator: It's just that simple?

2: Yeah. The cat wants Fancy Feast. The owner says no, you're going on a diet.

Moderator: With the brand name in there, it makes sense?

3: Yeah.

1: Yeah. I mean, if you took away the words, it would just make no sense. Having the context ties it all together.

Not only did this group understand the meme well enough to summarize the scenario it depicts succinctly and correctly, but they also affirmed that it was a functional advertisement due to the congruity of brand and template. Thus, memetic knowledge (i.e., drawing from personal memeplexes and past exposures to the "woman yells at cat" template) and brand knowledge (i.e., ability to identify Fancy Feast as a high-calorie, non-diet cat food) appear instrumental for full

message comprehension. This idea also came across in an exchange between non-majors who viewed the conspicuously branded Chipotle meme.

1: I think this would be a bad meme since people that don't go to Chipotle can't understand it.

Moderator: If the Chipotle logo wasn't on there at all, would you have any idea what was going on?

1: No.

2: No.

1: But then it would be funnier because it would be more random.

2: It'd be funnier because it wouldn't make sense.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of a brand name to contextualize a memetic advertising message and imbue it with meaning, this excerpt also suggests a complex relationship between recognition and humor. The opinion that the meme would be funnier if it was not conspicuously branded recalls the earlier quote, "I automatically assume if it's clearly sponsored, then it's not actually going to be funny." Striking an appropriate balance between clarity and amusement thus appears to be a challenge for memetic advertisers, particularly since some ads also require audiences to possess some degree of brand knowledge. In this particular case, the Chipotle brand expected SNS users to know the symbolic difference between silver and gold aluminum foil. As one participant correctly observed, "People that don't go to Chipotle can't understand [that distinction]." Nonetheless, failing to grasp this does not completely undermine the meme's meaning as long as the template is familiar. Per the group of strategic communication majors that saw the unbranded Chipotle meme:

1: Well you already know what it is, like the human meme [the one with human heads instead of colored aluminum foil], so it makes more sense. Like if you just saw this and you didn't see the other meme, I think you'd be more confused.

2: Yeah, so that goes back to the context.

3: Right, like he's with his girl, but he's looking back at somebody else that's golden.

Moderator: So with no context at all, this would be totally confusing?

4: Yeah.

2: Yeah, if we didn't know the original [template].

Participants explicitly state here that their knowledge of the meme template enables them to extract some meaning from the image, even if the brand-specific details do not fall into place.

Once again, familiarity allays confusion. Importantly, though, familiarity and the corresponding absence of confusion do not necessarily translate to a positive evaluation of the meme. For example, the following exchange regarding the Dove deodorant meme is more critical.

1: It feels like they wanted to do the meme advertisement so they were like, oh, what's a good meme format? We'll just scroll through all the different pictures until [we find] one. Yeah, let's do that.

2: I definitely feel like there is a different way this could have been used that still could have [advertised] Dove.

3: Yeah, I just think the meme format and the text don't work together. Because first of all that's not a hard choice. If [the choice] was [being sweaty and stinky all day] versus any deodorant you would pick any deodorant.

These students do not express confusion. Their words indicate that they are familiar with both the Dove brand and the meme template. Rather, their unfavorable response is attributable to the fact that the specific meme does not align with their understanding of how its template should be utilized. Implicitly, they are activating their personal and collective memeplexes and then clearly stating why this particular image macro does not reinforce the others within the "choosing between two buttons" family. Whereas the Fancy Feast-branded "woman yells at cat" meme was deemed effective by one focus group due to a perceived congruity between brand and template, the relationship between brand and meme falters in this instance.

A valuable comparison between implicit versus explicit branding in advertising memes arose in a conversation with strategic communication majors regarding McDonald's use of repurposed classical paintings. One image macro, a parody of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, contains implicit branding in the form of the girl's earring being substituted for a Chicken McNugget. The other, a parody of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, features the iconic woman noshing on a clearly branded box of French fries. The students who saw both of these images in succession said the following:

1: I think without any logo or anything, [*Girl with a McNugget Earring*] is pretty ineffective because there's just so many brands that [sell chicken nuggets]. It could be Tyson for all I know. But [the meme] needs to connect with a brand and it's not doing that right now.

Moderator: So if we take [*Girl with a McNugget Earring*] and compare it side-by-side with [the *Mona Lisa* French fries meme], what changes?

1: Everybody knows that box, their fries. Those little golden arches. So it's more identifiable. Everybody knows it's McDonald's.

Moderator: Which goes back to what you're saying about the logo.

1: Exactly.

2: Yeah, I agree. It's like the kids won't eat the food unless it's in a McDonald's package, so they'll make their own chicken nuggets at home and have to put it in a McDonald's box, and that's what makes it appealing. So I feel like it's the packaging that's recognizable that makes it appealing.

The corpus of these exchanges suggests that an advertising meme that contains clear, familiar branding is more easily understandable than a meme that contains unfamiliar branding. While this clear, familiar branding does not necessarily yield humor (e.g., the Chipotle meme) or favorable evaluations (e.g., the Dove meme), it does appear to effectively mitigate confusion surrounding the source and aim of the memetic message.

One final excerpt neatly summarizes the relationship between familiarity and confusion.

1: I would say this is a good meme to use to market, not necessarily in the sense that it has a lot to say, but in the way it's divided by saying the one they don't want you to do has the negative portrayal next to it, while the one they want you to do has the positive one. That's a simple, easy marketing technique to understand. Anyone's going to understand this as, oh they want me to stream music on Auricle instead of listening to the radio.

2: I do think it also fits well, because isn't that Drake who makes music, and then it also ties into streaming music.

1: Yeah.

2: So at least that's a nice tie in. But I think also not knowing what Auricle is at all, I think I'd prefer a different format to just know who they are first.

1: I would agree.

Moderator: So brand recognition comes into it?

3: Like if it was Spotify, it'd make sense immediately.

In this conversation between strategic communication majors who saw only the fictitious brand version of the meme in which Drake is promoting online music streaming services, the brand-template congruity is validated, the meme is favorably evaluated as an advertisement, and one participant—unaware that other focus groups were shown an alternate version of the meme that actually did feature the name Spotify in it—explicitly suggests a crucial alteration that would make the meme "make sense immediately." The prevailing take-away, expressed by this participant and others, is that branding (or other heuristic cue that contextualizes a meme within the digital marketplace) is linked to an immediate sense of familiarity, which subsequently bears on how a memetic advertisement is perceived and evaluated.

**Summary.** With regard to memes in general and in response to manifest memetic advertising stimuli, both strategic communication majors and non-majors provided evidence that heuristic processing is their default cognitive strategy for apprehending memes. Systematic processing is regarded as contrary to the aim of memetic communication, as evidenced by the

student who described memes as "anything that you don't really have to think about." However, students indicated that systematic processing of memes is still possible and likelier when the meme (whether an advertisement or otherwise) comes from a meaningful social connection. In this way, interpersonal relationships are more important for memetic elaboration than NFC or other related constructs. Nonetheless, a meme that is easy to understand and is thus capable of being processed heuristically is perceived more favorably than one that demands additional scrutiny. Along these lines, participants detailed how the use of specific heuristics like reputation, endorsement, expectancy violation, and persuasive intent contributed (individually and in tandem) to their automatic responses to the memetic advertising content they saw.

## CHAPTER 8: QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

### Pilot Sample

Following data collection and preliminary analyses for the qualitative phase, a pilot sample of 40 participants between the ages of 18 and 25 ( $M = 23.12$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) was recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete the full Qualtrics experiment. Pilot results indicated that the experiment could proceed as designed with larger samples of participants. No changes were made to either the visual stimuli or to the measures.

Of specific interest in this pilot test was the validation of the attitude scale to which participants responded after viewing each meme, and the reputation heuristic use scale to which participants responded after viewing all experimental stimuli. The attitude scale has two components: feelings of favorability (e.g., bad/good, negative/positive, dislike/like) and opinions of meme characteristics (e.g., ineffective/effective, not persuasive/persuasive, confusing/straightforward). These two components were assessed separately and together. Feelings of favorability displayed a high degree of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) and unidimensionality (i.e., one factor with Eigenvalue  $> 1$ ). Opinions of meme characteristics also displayed a high degree of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and unidimensionality. Considered as a single 10-item scale of attitude toward the meme, feelings of favorability and opinions of meme characteristics together displayed an even higher degree of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ) and unidimensionality (first factor with Eigenvalue  $> 6$ , second factor with Eigenvalue  $< 1$ ). Based upon this additive strengthening effect, it was determined that feelings of favorability toward the meme and opinions of meme characteristics merited inclusion in the same scale. No individual scale items stood out as problematic, nor were any participants conspicuous outliers. Thus, the 10-item attitude scale was retained for use with the larger samples.

The reputation heuristic use scale also demonstrated viability. The five items displayed an acceptable degree of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ) and unidimensionality (first factor with Eigenvalue  $> 2.5$ , second factor with Eigenvalue  $< 1$ ). As with the analyses for the attitude scale, no individual items nor outlier responses stood out as problematic. No items were added, omitted, or changed before recruiting larger experimental samples. Item reliabilities, fit statistics, and scree plots for the attitude and reputation heuristic use scales are presented in Appendix B.

Preliminary hypothesis tests were also promising. One-way ANOVAs revealed statistically significant between-group differences on average attitudes toward the meme,  $F(3,36) = 3.00, p < .05, \eta^2 = .14$ ) and significant between-group differences on self-reported reputation heuristic use,  $F(3,36) = 3.28, p < .01, \eta^2 = .16$ . The manipulation check also revealed significant between-group differences,  $F(3,36) = 3.39, p < .01, \eta^2 = .14$ . However, with only ten observations per cell, these analyses are notably underpowered and preclude substantive inferences beyond providing baseline evidence that the experimental manipulations and measures were successful.

## Main Experiment

For convenience, the characteristics of each experimental condition are reproduced in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Characteristics of Each Experimental Condition*

Group	Prime	Meme Type
1	Heuristic Prime	Real Brand Names
2	Heuristic Prime	Fictitious Brand Names
3	Irrelevant Prime	Real Brand Names
4	Irrelevant Prime	Fictitious Brand Names

To assess whether the manipulation check had the desired effect, participants' responses to the question, "I am conscious of how a person's character is commonly regarded by others"

were entered into a one-way ANOVA. The overall model was significant for both the sample of MTurk participants ( $F(3, 412) = 8.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ ) and the sample of university students ( $F(3, 284) = 8.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ ). Means and standard deviations for each group are presented in Table 4 and Table 5, respectively. Multiple comparisons between experimental groups for both samples yielded identical results: the means for groups 1 and 2 were not significantly different, nor were those for groups 3 and 4. This is as expected, since groups 1 and 2 both viewed the heuristic prime, while groups 3 and 4 both viewed the irrelevant prime. However, the mean differences for all other between-group comparisons were statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  value or higher, indicating that the experimental prime did augment participants' immediate feelings about reputation significantly more than the irrelevant prime.

**Table 4**

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Manipulation Check for MTurk Participants*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
1	5.50 <sup>cd</sup>	1.14	104
2	5.34 <sup>cd</sup>	1.17	104
3	4.81 <sup>ab</sup>	1.25	104
4	4.82 <sup>ab</sup>	1.25	104

**Table 5**

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Manipulation Check for University Participants*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
1	5.58 <sup>cd</sup>	1.12	72
2	5.62 <sup>cd</sup>	1.13	72
3	4.86 <sup>ab</sup>	1.28	72
4	4.97 <sup>ab</sup>	1.19	72

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 1, <sup>b</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 2, <sup>c</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 3, <sup>d</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 4,  $p < .05$ .

Hypothesis 1, that participants would self-report more favorable attitudes toward memes containing references to real brands than toward memes containing references to fictitious brands, was assessed via a 2 (real brand/fictitious brand) x 2 (heuristic prime/irrelevant prime) between-subjects ANCOVA. For the sample of MTurk participants, the overall ANCOVA model was significant,  $F(5, 410) = 12.20, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$ . There was a significant main effect of meme type assignment on attitudes,  $F(1, 410) = 21.19, p < .001$ , but there was not a significant main effect prime type on attitudes,  $F(1, 410) = 0.28, p = .59$ . There was, however, a significant interaction between meme type and prime type,  $F(1, 410) = 10.70, p < .01$ . NFC was a statistically significant covariate,  $F(1, 410) = 15.10, p < .001$ . PK was also statistically significant,  $F(1, 410) = 9.17, p < .01$ . Estimated marginal means and standard errors for each group are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Estimated Marginal Means and Standard Errors for Self-Reported Attitudes Toward the Meme for MTurk Participants in the ANCOVA*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>N</i>
1	5.20 <sup>bcd</sup>	0.12	104
2	4.28 <sup>ac</sup>	0.12	104
3	4.76 <sup>ab</sup>	0.12	104
4	4.60 <sup>a</sup>	0.12	104

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 1, <sup>b</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 2, <sup>c</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 3, <sup>d</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 4,  $p < .05$ .

For comparison, a two-way ANOVA was run without NFC or PK as covariates. This overall ANOVA model was significant,  $F(3, 412) = 8.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ . As in the ANCOVA model, there was a significant main effect of meme type on attitudes,  $F(1, 412) = 15.87, p < .001$ , but no significant main effect of prime type on attitudes,  $F(1, 412) = 0.09, p = .77$ . The

significant interaction term held for this model,  $F(1, 412) = 10.74, p < .01$ . The means and standard deviations for each group are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Reported Attitudes Toward the Meme for MTurk Participants in the ANOVA*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
1	5.17 <sup>bcd</sup>	1.24	104
2	4.29 <sup>ac</sup>	1.24	104
3	4.74 <sup>ab</sup>	1.23	104
4	4.65 <sup>a</sup>	1.20	104

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 1, <sup>b</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 2, <sup>c</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 3, <sup>d</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 4,  $p < .05$ .

The same analysis was performed on the sample of university students. Again, the overall ANCOVA was significant,  $F(5, 282) = 11.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ . There was a significant main effect of meme type on attitudes,  $F(1, 282) = 15.24, p < .001$ , but there was not a significant main effect of prime type on attitudes,  $F(1, 282) = 0.17, p = .68$ . The interaction between meme type and prime failed to reach significance for this sample,  $F(1, 282) = 1.21, p = .27$ . Consistent with the results from the MTurk sample, NFC was a statistically significant covariate,  $F(1, 282) = 24.78, p < .001$ . PK also attained statistical significance in this model,  $F(1, 282) = 12.91, p < .001$ . Estimated marginal means and standard errors for each group from the university sample are presented in Table 8.

For comparison, a two-way ANOVA was run without NFC or PK as covariates. This overall ANOVA model was significant,  $F(3, 284) = 6.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ . As in the ANCOVA model, there was a significant main effect of meme type on attitudes,  $F(1, 284) = 17.59, p < .001$ , but no significant main effect of prime type on attitudes,  $F(1, 284) = 0.11, p = .74$ . There was no interaction effect in this model,  $F(1, 284) = 2.03, p = .16$ . The means and standard

deviations for each group are presented in Table 9. Importantly, the means for self-reported attitude were greatest for groups 1 and 3 in both models (i.e., groups that viewed memes containing references to real brands) and lowest for groups 2 and 4 in both models (i.e., groups that viewed memes containing references to fictitious brands). However, the means for groups 3 and 4 were not significantly different from one another in either sample, indicating only partial support for Hypothesis 1.

**Table 8**

*Estimated Marginal Means and Standard Errors for Self-Reported Attitudes Toward the Meme for University Participants in the ANCOVA*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>N</i>
1	4.67 <sup>bd</sup>	0.13	72
2	4.05 <sup>ac</sup>	0.13	72
3	4.49 <sup>b</sup>	0.13	72
4	4.14 <sup>a</sup>	0.13	72

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 1, <sup>b</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 2, <sup>c</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 3, <sup>d</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 4,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 9**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Reported Attitudes Toward the Meme for University Participants in the ANOVA*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
1	4.73 <sup>bd</sup>	1.18	72
2	4.01 <sup>ac</sup>	1.14	72
3	4.50 <sup>b</sup>	1.00	72
4	4.13 <sup>a</sup>	1.18	72

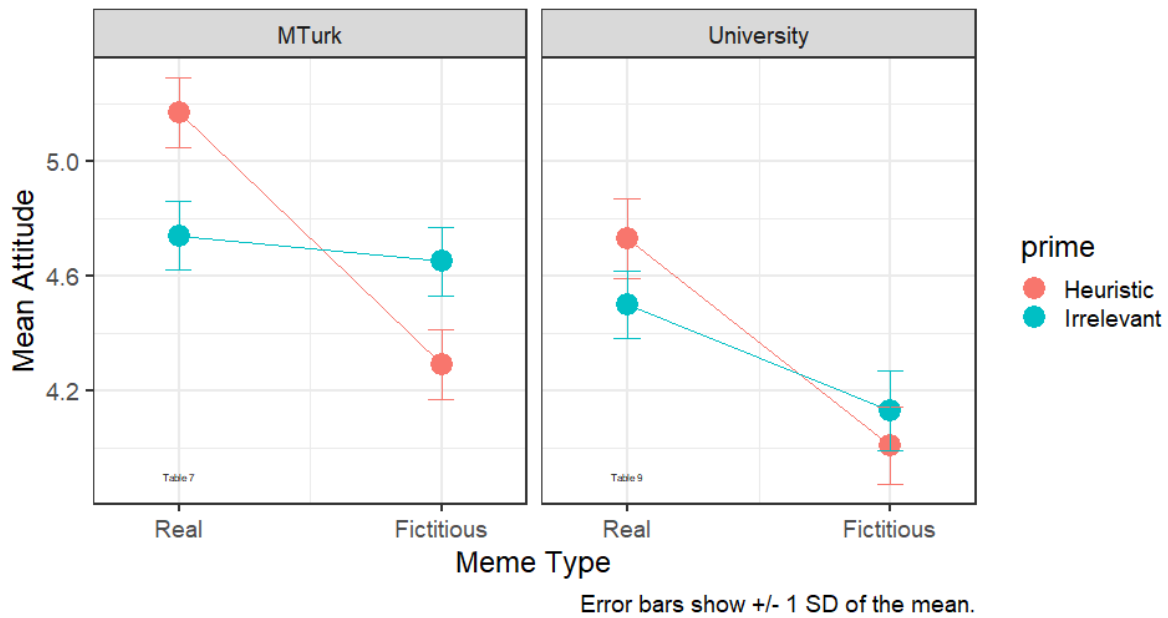
*Note.* <sup>a</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 1, <sup>b</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 2, <sup>c</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 3, <sup>d</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 4,  $p < .05$ .

Comparison plots for the unadjusted means for self-reported attitude toward the meme by experimental group for both samples are provided in Figure 16. Additionally, the means,

standard deviations, and correlations with self-reported attitude toward the meme by experimental group for NFC and PK, respectively, are presented for the MTurk sample in Table 10 and for the university sample in Table 11.

**Figure 16**

*Plots of Unadjusted Means for Attitude Toward the Meme by Experimental Group for Both Samples*



**Table 10**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with Self-Reported Attitudes Toward the Meme for NFC and PK for MTurk Participants*

Group	$M^{NFC}$	$SD^{NFC}$	$r^{NFC}$	$M^{PK}$	$SD^{PK}$	$r^{PK}$
1	4.50	1.06	0.18	5.04	1.01	0.21
2	4.56	0.87	0.24	5.20	0.94	0.26
3	4.44	0.97	0.20	5.19	1.17	0.16
4	4.61	0.77	0.32	5.36	1.00	0.17

**Table 11**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with Self-Reported Attitudes Toward the Meme for NFC and PK for University Participants*

Group	$M^{NFC}$	$SD^{NFC}$	$r^{NFC}$	$M^{PK}$	$SD^{PK}$	$r^{PK}$
1	4.37	0.69	0.22	5.63	0.92	0.16
2	4.16	0.74	0.28	5.55	0.80	0.19
3	4.31	0.75	0.24	5.57	0.76	0.21
4	4.21	0.72	0.23	5.68	0.67	0.23

Hypothesis 2, that participants primed with a stimulus related to reputation and who viewed memes containing references to real brands (group 1) would self-report more favorable attitudes toward the meme than participants primed with an irrelevant stimulus regardless of meme type (groups 2 and 4), was supported for both samples. However, hypothesis 3, that participants primed with a stimulus related to reputation and who viewed memes containing references to fictitious brands (group 2) would self-report the least favorable attitudes overall, was not supported for either sample. Although the means for group 2 were significantly lower than the means for groups 1 and 3, they were not significantly lower than the means for group 4; therefore, hypothesis 3 cannot be accepted even though the means for group 2 were the lowest overall in both samples.

Research Question 5 asked whether being primed with a stimulus related to reputation moderates the relationship between meme type (real vs. fictitious brand name) and degree of self-reported favorable attitude. To test this, a moderation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for R. This package performed a multiple regression analysis with prime type, meme type, and (prime type x meme type) interaction as predictors of self-reported attitudes, controlling for NFC and PK. For the MTurk sample, meme type ( $\beta = -1.68, SE = 0.37, p < .001$ ) and prime type ( $\beta = -1.20, SE = 0.37, p < .01$ ) were both significant, as was their interaction ( $\beta = 0.76, SE = 0.23, p < .01$ ), indicating that the prime manipulation did moderate the relationship

between meme type and self-reported attitudes for this sample. As in the ANCOVA reported above, NFC ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and PK ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were statistically significant covariates. Model residuals were normally skewed, mesokurtic, and homoscedastic,  $\chi^2(20, N = 416) = 11.21$ ,  $p = .59$ .

The moderation effect did not hold for the sample of university students. In this model, meme type was also significant ( $\beta = -0.91$ ,  $SE = 0.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but neither prime type ( $\beta = -0.47$ ,  $SE = 0.40$ ,  $p = .24$ ) nor the interaction term ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $SE = 0.25$ ,  $p = .27$ ) reached significance, indicating that the prime manipulation did not moderate the relationship for this sample. NFC ( $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and PK ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were both statistically significant covariates. Model residuals were normally skewed, mesokurtic, and homoscedastic,  $\chi^2(20, N = 288) = 15.29$ ,  $p = .26$ . Thus, meme type was a robust predictor of attitudes across both samples, but the moderating effect of prime type was more equivocal. Prime (heuristic vs. irrelevant) only moderated the relationship between meme type (real vs. fictitious brand name) and degree of self-reported attitude for the sample of MTurk participants.

Importantly, these regression analyses are statistically equivalent to the ANCOVAs reported above. The ANCOVAs and regressions are both presented in this chapter for conceptual clarity. For hypotheses related to mean differences between groups, ANCOVAs and ANOVAs are reported because they emphasize the mean values for the dependent variable (i.e., self-reported attitudes) within each group. In turn, this allows for easier assessment and interpretation of the ways in which each experimental group differed (or did not differ) from the others on these measures. For research questions related to moderation effects, regressions are reported because they emphasize slopes for each variable. Since moderation pertains to the strength and direction of a variable, the sign and magnitude of its beta coefficient are more directly

interpretable than ANCOVA or ANOVA output. Nonetheless, it should be made clear that the results presented in this chapter can be obtained via either analytic approach. This logic holds for the remainder of the chapter.

Hypothesis 4, that participants would self-report higher levels of reputation heuristic use after viewing memes containing references to real brands than after viewing memes containing references to fictitious brands, was assessed via a 2 (real brand/fictitious brand) x 2 (heuristic prime/irrelevant prime) between-subjects ANCOVA. For the sample of MTurk participants, the overall ANCOVA model was significant,  $F(5, 410) = 10.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ . There was not a significant main effect of meme type on self-reported heuristic use,  $F(1, 410) = 0.56, p = .45$ . However, there was a significant main effect of prime type on heuristic use,  $F(1, 410) = 22.97, p < .001$ . The interaction term failed to reach significance in this model,  $F(1, 410) = 0.34, p = .56$ . PK was a statistically significant covariate,  $F(1, 410) = 16.20, p < .001$ , as was NFC,  $F(1, 410) = 7.03, p < .001$ . Estimated marginal means and standard errors for each group are presented in Table 12.

**Table 12**

*Estimated Marginal Means and Standard Errors for Self-Reported Heuristic Use for MTurk Participants in the ANCOVA*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>N</i>
1	5.35 <sup>cd</sup>	0.09	104
2	5.34 <sup>cd</sup>	0.09	104
3	4.95 <sup>ab</sup>	0.09	104
4	4.82 <sup>ab</sup>	0.09	104

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 1, <sup>b</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 2, <sup>c</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 3, <sup>d</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 4,  $p < .05$ .

For comparison, a two-way ANOVA was run without NFC or PK as covariates. This overall ANOVA model was significant,  $F(3, 412) = 6.40, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ . As in the ANCOVA

model, there was a significant main effect of prime type on self-reported heuristic use,  $F(1, 412) = 18.91, p < .001$ , but no significant main effect of meme type on self-reported heuristic use,  $F(1, 412) = 0.06, p = .81$ . The interaction term was also nonsignificant for this model,  $F(1, 412) = 0.23, p = 0.63$ . The means and standard deviations for each group are presented in Table 13.

**Table 13**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Reported Heuristic Use for MTurk Participants in the ANOVA*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
1	5.34 <sup>cd</sup>	1.05	104
2	5.32 <sup>cd</sup>	1.01	104
3	4.94 <sup>ab</sup>	1.08	104
4	4.87 <sup>ab</sup>	1.03	104

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 1, <sup>b</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 2, <sup>c</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 3, <sup>d</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 4,  $p < .05$ .

The same analysis was again performed on the sample of university students, yielding similar results. The overall ANCOVA model was significant,  $F(5, 282) = 8.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$ . Again, there was not a significant main effect of meme type on self-reported heuristic use,  $F(1, 282) = 0.56, p = .45$ , but there was a significant main effect of prime type on self-reported heuristic use,  $F(1, 282) = 24.36, p < .001$ . The interaction term also failed to reach significance in this model,  $F(1, 282) = 0.33, p = .57$ . PK was again a statistically significant covariate,  $F(1, 282) = 19.24, p < .001$ , while NFC failed to reach significance in this model,  $F(1, 282) = 0.59, p = .45$ . Estimated marginal means and standard errors for each group are presented in Table 14.

For comparison, a two-way ANOVA was run without NFC or PK as covariates. This overall ANOVA model was significant,  $F(3, 284) = 7.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ . As in the ANCOVA model, there was a significant main effect of prime type on self-reported heuristic use,  $F(1, 284) = 22.14, p < .001$ , but no significant main effect of meme type on self-reported heuristic use,  $F(1,$

284) = 0.06,  $p = .43$ . The interaction term was also nonsignificant for this model,  $F(1, 284) = 0.73, p = 0.39$ . The means and standard deviations for each group are presented in Table 15.

Overall, neither the MTurk nor the university model provided support for Hypothesis 4.

**Table 14**

*Estimated Marginal Means and Standard Errors for Self-Reported Heuristic Use for University Participants in the ANCOVA*

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>N</i>
1	5.56 <sup>cd</sup>	0.12	72
2	5.40 <sup>cd</sup>	0.12	72
3	4.91 <sup>ab</sup>	0.12	72
4	4.89 <sup>ab</sup>	0.12	72

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 1, <sup>b</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 2, <sup>c</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 3, <sup>d</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 4,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 15**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Reported Heuristic Use for University Participants in the ANOVA*

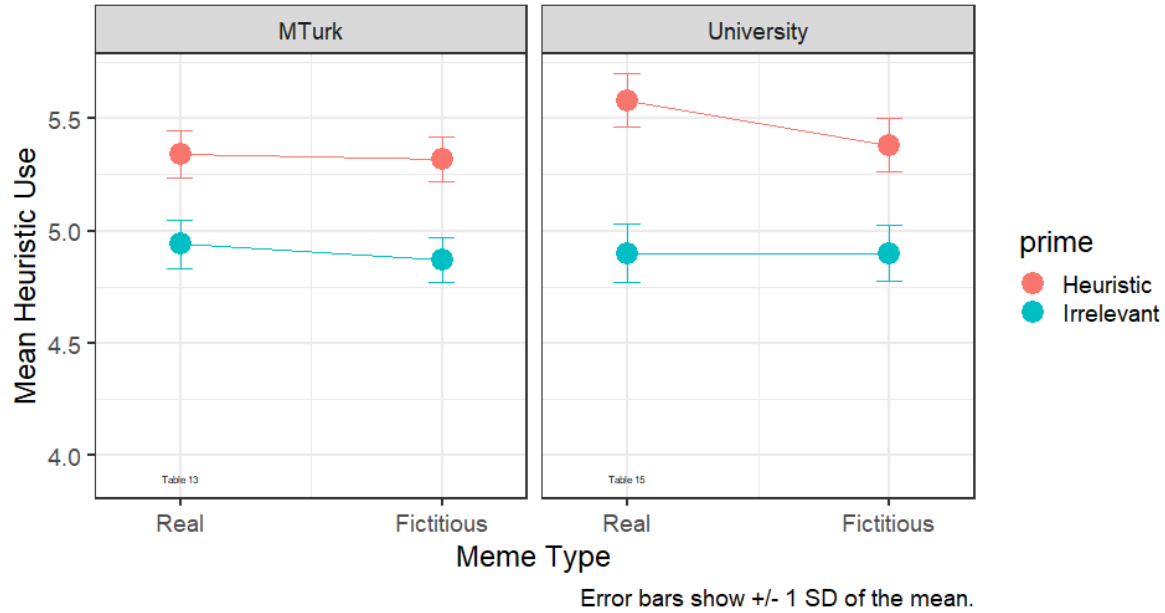
Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
1	5.58 <sup>cd</sup>	1.02	72
2	5.38 <sup>cd</sup>	1.00	72
3	4.90 <sup>ab</sup>	1.09	72
4	4.90 <sup>ab</sup>	1.04	72

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 1, <sup>b</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 2, <sup>c</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 3, <sup>d</sup> indicates a statistically significant difference from group 4,  $p < .05$ .

Comparison plots for the unadjusted means for self-reported heuristic use by experimental group for both samples are provided in Figure 17. Additionally, means, standard deviations, and correlations with self-reported heuristic use by experimental group for NFC and PK, respectively, are presented for the MTurk sample in Table 16 and for the university sample in Table 17.

**Figure 17**

*Plots of Unadjusted Means for Self-Reported Heuristic Use by Experimental Group for Both Samples*



**Table 16**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with Self-Reported Heuristic Use for NFC and PK for MTurk Participants*

Group	$M^{NFC}$	$SD^{NFC}$	$r^{NFC}$	$M^{PK}$	$SD^{PK}$	$r^{PK}$
1	4.50	1.06	0.13	5.04	1.01	0.27
2	4.56	0.87	0.24	5.20	0.94	0.22
3	4.44	0.97	0.20	5.19	1.17	0.23
4	4.61	0.77	0.18	5.36	1.00	0.21

**Table 17**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with Self-Reported Heuristic Use for NFC and PK for University Participants*

Group	$M^{NFC}$	$SD^{NFC}$	$r^{NFC}$	$M^{PK}$	$SD^{PK}$	$r^{PK}$
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1	4.37	0.69	0.07	5.63	0.92	0.27
2	4.16	0.74	0.10	5.55	0.80	0.22
3	4.31	0.75	0.12	5.57	0.76	0.26
4	4.21	0.72	0.09	5.68	0.67	0.27

Hypothesis 5, that participants primed with a stimulus related to reputation would self-report higher levels of reputation heuristic use than participants primed with an irrelevant stimulus, regardless of which type of meme they view, was supported by both samples. The means for groups 1 and 2 were greater than those for groups 3 and 4 in for both the MTurk and university models. Hypothesis 6, that participants primed with an irrelevant stimulus and who viewed memes with references to fictitious brands (group 4) would self-report the lowest levels of reputation heuristic use overall was not supported. In both samples, the mean for group 4 was not significantly lower than the mean for group 3.

Further, in response to Research Question 6 (which asked whether being primed with a stimulus related to reputation moderates the relationship between brand type and degree of self-reported heuristic use), prime type did not act as a significant moderator between meme type and self-reported heuristic use in either the MTurk sample or the university sample. Although prime type by itself was a significant predictor of self-reported heuristic use in both samples ( $\beta = -0.42$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $p < .001$  for the MTurk sample;  $\beta = -0.57$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $p < .001$  for the university sample), entering the variable as a moderator in the PROCESS macro for R rendered numerous predictors nonsignificant. Specifically, meme type ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.30$ ,  $p = .75$ ), prime type ( $\beta = -0.29$ ,  $SE = 0.30$ ,  $p = .3$ ), and the interaction term ( $\beta = -0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $p = .56$ ) all failed to significantly predict heuristic use in the MTurk sample. NFC ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and PK ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ) remained statistically significant covariates. Model residuals were normally skewed, mesokurtic, and homoscedastic,  $\chi^2(20, N = 416) = 16.54$ ,  $p = .41$ .

In the university sample, prime type significantly predicted heuristic use ( $\beta = -0.79$ ,  $SE = 0.37$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while meme type ( $\beta = -0.29$ ,  $SE = 0.38$ ,  $p = .44$ ) and the interaction term ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.24$ ,  $p = .57$ ) did not reach significance. In this model, PK was a statistically significant covariate ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but NFC was not ( $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.45$ ). Model residuals were normally skewed, mesokurtic, and homoscedastic,  $\chi^2(20, N = 288) = 28.85$ ,  $p = .09$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that prime type did not moderate the relationship between meme type and self-reported heuristic use, although prime type by itself significantly predicted heuristic use.

Finally, to test Hypothesis 7 (that self-reported use of the reputation heuristic would partially mediate the relationship between meme type and self-reported attitude toward the meme such that greater self-reported use of the heuristic would yield more positive attitudes), self-reported heuristic use was entered into the PROCESS macro for R as a mediating variable between meme type and self-reported attitudes. For theoretical consistency of model specification, prime type was retained as a moderator between meme type and self-reported attitudes, and as a moderator between meme type and self-reported heuristic use. NFC and PK were entered into the model as covariates. For the sample of MTurk participants, there was a significant direct effect of meme type on self-reported attitudes ( $\beta = -1.72$ ,  $SE = 0.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as a significant relationship between self-reported heuristic use and attitude ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, there was not a significant indirect effect of meme type on self-reported attitude ( $\beta = -0.05$ , 95% Bootstrapped CI [-0.24, 0.11]).

The same patterns emerged for the sample of university students. There was again a significant direct effect of meme type on self-reported attitudes ( $\beta = -0.80$ ,  $SE = 0.38$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and a significant relationship between self-reported heuristic use and attitude ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $SE =$

0.06,  $p < .001$ ), but no significant indirect effect of meme type on self-reported attitude ( $\beta = 0.04$ , 95% Bootstrapped CI [-0.13, 0.21]). Although there were strong relationships between key variables in these models, self-reported use of the reputation heuristic did not mediate the relationship between meme type and self-reported attitude toward the meme. Hypothesis 7 was not supported in either sample.

Correlations between key variables for MTurk participants are presented in Table 18, while means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum reported values for key variables for that sample are presented in Table 19. Likewise, correlations between key variables for university participants are presented in Table 20, while means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum reported values for key variables for that sample are presented in Table 21. A summary of hypotheses and research questions by sample is presented in Table 22.

**Summary.** With only one discrepancy (a statistically significant moderation effect for the MTurk sample that was not replicated in the university sample), analyses of both MTurk and university samples yielded consistent and comparable results. Overall, participants showed a clear preference for memes containing references to real-world brands over memes containing references to fictitious brands. Participants also indicated that the heuristic priming stimulus worked as intended to increase their on-hand considerations of reputation. Although neither the moderation nor moderated mediation analyses achieved statistical significance across both samples, these results provide exploratory evidence for the use of the reputation heuristic when viewing memetic advertisements. This and other conclusions will be discussed in Chapter 9.

**Table 18**

*Correlations Between Key Variables for MTurk Participants*

	Attitude	Heuristic Use	NFC	PK	Social Media Use
Heuristic Use	0.39***	—			

NFC	0.21***	0.21***	—		
PK	0.17***	0.18***	0.26***	—	
Social Media Use	0.09	0.16**	-0.03	0.01	—
Age	0.02	0.12*	-0.02	-0.03	0.02

Note. \*\*\* is significant at  $p < .001$ , \*\* is significant at  $p < .01$ , \* is significant at  $p < .05$ .

**Table 19**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Minimum and Maximum Reported Values for Key Variables for MTurk Participants*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Attitude	4.71	1.26	1	7
Heuristic Use	5.11	1.01	1	7
NFC	4.52	0.92	1	7
PK	5.19	1.03	2	7
Social Media Use	4.37	1.54	1	7
Age	23.82	2.13	19	25

**Table 20**

*Correlations Between Key Variables for University Participants*

	Attitude	Heuristic Use	NFC	PK	Social Media Use
Heuristic Use	0.36***	—			
NFC	0.29***	0.09	—		
PK	0.19***	0.25***	-0.03	—	
Social Media Use	0.15*	0.13*	-0.01	0.15*	—
Age	-0.04	0.01	0.05	0.12**	-0.24***

Note. \*\*\* is significant at  $p < .001$ , \*\* is significant at  $p < .01$ , \* is significant at  $p < .05$ .

**Table 21**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Minimum and Maximum Reported Values for Key Variables for University Participants*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
----------	----------	-----------	------------	------------

Attitude	4.34	1.16	1	7
Heuristic Use	5.19	1.07	1	7
NFC	4.26	0.72	1	7
PK	5.61	0.79	2.45	7
Social Media Use	5.13	1.23	1	7
Age	19.31	1.05	18	25

**Table 22**

*Summary of Hypotheses and Research Questions by Experimental Sample*

Hypothesis or Research Question	MTurk Sample	University Sample
<b>H1:</b> Participants will self-report more favorable attitudes toward memes containing references to real brands than toward memes containing references to fictitious brands.	Partially Supported	Partially Supported
<b>H2:</b> Participants who are primed with a stimulus related to reputation and who view memes containing references to real brands will self-report more favorable attitudes toward the meme than participants who are primed with an irrelevant stimulus, regardless of which type of meme they view.	Supported	Supported
<b>H3:</b> Participants who are primed with a stimulus related to reputation and who view memes containing references to fictitious brands will self-report the least favorable attitudes overall.	Not Supported	Not Supported
<b>H4:</b> Participants will self-report higher levels of reputation heuristic use after viewing memes containing references to real brands than after viewing memes containing references to fictitious brands.	Not Supported	Not Supported
<b>H5:</b> Participants primed with a stimulus related to reputation will self-report higher levels of reputation heuristic use than participants primed with an irrelevant stimulus, regardless of which	Supported	Supported

type of meme they view.

**H6:** Participants primed with an irrelevant stimulus who view memes with references to fictitious brands will self-report the lowest levels of reputation heuristic use overall.

Not Supported

Not Supported

**RQ5:** Does being primed with a stimulus related to reputation moderate the relationship between brand type (real vs. fictitious) and degree of self-reported attitude?

Yes

No

**RQ6:** Does being primed with a stimulus related to reputation moderate the relationship between brand type (real vs. fictitious) and degree of self-reported heuristic use?

No

No

**H7:** Self-reported use of the reputation heuristic will partially mediate the relationship between brand type and attitude toward the meme such that greater self-reported use of the heuristic yields more positive attitude toward the meme.

Not Supported

Not Supported

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## CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to investigate how digital natives from Generation Z perceive and process internet memes intended specifically as advertisements. Motivating this investigation was an examination of how these digital natives employ heuristics (i.e., cognitive rules-of-thumb that enable quick, low-resource information processing, e.g., Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999) as a means of comprehending the content they encounter on social networking sites (SNSs). This focus was informed by an understanding that SNSs, and the internet in general, are so overrun with content that close scrutiny of all information a person encounters online is impossible. Generation Z constituted the population of interest for this research because memes are a "ubiquitous form of communication, especially for younger generations" (Anderson & Keehn, 2020, p. 57). Additionally, brands and advertisers have begun to earnestly explore advertising through memes and are creating new in-house marketing positions in an attempt to connect with prospective consumers memetically (e.g., Enberg, 2021; Lemée, 2021, Song, 2020). Despite these considerations, few studies have been conducted on memetic advertising to date (e.g., Chuah et al., 2020; Kao et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Sharma, 2018), none of which have used cognitive heuristics as a theoretical framework.

This chapter begins with a theoretical discussion of heuristic use and heuristic processing germane to internet memes and memetic advertisements. Evidence of heuristic use from both qualitative and quantitative phases of the present research is cited to argue for the presence of memetic knowledge structures within the minds of SNS users. These structures are believed to be adaptive and especially helpful in aiding a hyperconnected generation's understanding and contextualization of sociocultural phenomena. This evidence also informs the refutation of a long-standing belief that certain heuristics rely on only one piece of information in order to reach

a suitable decision or judgment. Following from this, the individual credibility heuristics examined in this research (i.e., reputation, endorsement, expectancy violation, persuasive intent) are discussed in turn. Need for cognition (NFC) is then discussed in its own section, as are humor and social connections. Imitative humor is the reason Generation Z SNS users are drawn to memes in the first place, while social connections appear to play a substantial role in whether a meme is processed heuristically or systematically. With these conclusions in mind, implications for advertisers are considered. Finally, strengths and limitations of the present research are described and directions for future research are mapped out.

### **Heuristic Processing and Cognitive Storage of Memes**

Generation Z participants in the present research appear to perceive and process memetic advertisements heuristically by default. The processing of memes only traverses the sufficiency threshold from heuristic to systematic (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; 1987) when the individual has a specific motivation to scrutinize the meme's contents more carefully. Although past persuasion research has implicated personality constructs like NFC in the motivation to switch to systematic processing (e.g., Petty, 2009; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Priester, Dholakia, & Fleming, 2004; Vidrine, Simmons, & Brandon, 2007; Ziegler, Diehl, & Ruther, 2002), this research suggests that systematic processing of memes occurs as a function of social connectedness and that NFC plays a less impactful role in this relationship. This is not to imply that every meme that an SNS user receives from relevant social ties or ingroup members will be processed systematically, but to clarify that if the memetic message is not instantly comprehensible to the recipient, they are more likely to spend time decoding the message if they have a personal connection to its source.

Further, it appears that SNS users from Generation Z employ multiple heuristics when processing and evaluating memetic content, and that these heuristics are used either individually

or simultaneously depending on the specific circumstances surrounding the SNS user's exposure to a given meme. It has long been held that individuals are capable of using multiple heuristics either discretely or in tandem (e.g., Chaiken, 1987; Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999; Kahneman, 2011). Both qualitative and quantitative phases of this dissertation provide exploratory evidence of this phenomenon, thereby extending this understanding of heuristic use to digital natives' processing of internet memes in general and to their processing of advertising memes more specifically.

This research also substantiates Anderson and Keehn's (2020) assertion that memes are "consciousness building" (p. 57) for Generation Z and links this contention to memetic advertising. In line with how Evnine (2018) regards internet memes generally, the present research argues that memetic advertisements connect digital natives' affects to cultural and brand narratives via cognitive knowledge structures and mental models. All knowledge structures are essentially black box metaphors for electrochemical reactions (e.g., Rouse & Morris, 1986); however, participants' responses suggested that they have a mental repository for memetic content and that this cognitive knowledge structure facilitates both heuristic use and heuristic processing.

Dawkins (1976) referred to a bundle of mutually reinforcing memes as a co-adapted meme-complex, which Blackmore (1999) abbreviated to memplex. Memplexes are tantamount to mental models of thematically related memetic material (Abdel-Raheem, 2020). This dissertation argues that these mental models make up the cognitive knowledge structure that enables individuals to recognize and interpret memetic content on the basis of related memes already encoded in long-term memory. Thus, familiarity with an incoming meme that adheres to a recognized memetic template enables the new meme to readily join an existing memplex. In some cases, familiarity with the template may be sufficient for an SNS user to form an attitude

about the incoming meme. The focus group participant who stated that, "a lot of my feelings toward [the manifest stimuli presented during the session] are going to be about whether I like the template or not" put this specific application of cognitive knowledge structure activation and subsequent heuristic processing in a nutshell.

Heuristic processing is often automatic (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Both implicitly and explicitly, focus group participants addressed their automatic responses to memes and implicated memplexes in these reactions. Numerous excerpts in Chapter 7 begin with a baseline recognition of the memetic template, then transition into a socially driven construction of meaning based on the knowledge of what the template signifies. This construction of meaning involved systematic processing because the participants consciously and deliberately interacted with one another, built off of one another's thoughts, and eventually arrived at a suitable conclusion about the meme. However, the memplex activation that initiated the subsequent exchanges was a product of heuristic processing. "I love these memes. I love that cat," one participant said immediately after the Fancy Feast meme appeared on the monitor, indicating that her memetic knowledge structure had already done an appreciable amount of work to contextualize the new, incoming message before she began discussing it with her peers.

As it pertains to Generation Z SNS users, this conclusion should not come as a surprise. Scholars in communication and psychology (e.g., Klimmt et al., 2018; Vorderer et al., 2018) argue that perpetually being connected to the internet is altering digital natives' perceptions of social reality, identity processes, and motivations via changes to their cognitive structures. The social nature of memes, together with memes' implications for individual and collective identity, suggests that a cognitive structure dedicated to memetic content would benefit a hyperconnected

generation for whom memes are a "ubiquitous form of communication" (Anderson & Keehn, 2020, p. 57).

This extends to memes intended as advertisements. As a result of being exposed to massive amounts of branded and commercialized computer-mediated content from a young age, digital natives have considerable brand knowledge, well defined brand preferences, and often link their self-concepts to brand engagement (Spratt, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). Memetic advertising may therefore be assumed to contribute in a small way to the alteration of Generation Z's perceptions of social reality and identity processes, likely through memeplexes and associated knowledge structures that have developed among this cohort and are constantly being refined. The partial-narrative nature of memes (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021), together with mental models' propensity for being structured around narratives (Bower & Morrow, 1990) and Generation Z's preference for advertisements that incorporate narratives (Tabassum, Khwaja, & Zaman, 2020), are thought to play important roles in how digital natives perceive and process memetic advertisements and how these memes, in turn, can be validly regarded as "consciousness building." Generation Z's considerable brand knowledge likely also contributes to a heuristic preference for reputable brand names.

Consequently, it can be argued that familiarity is paramount in the cognitive processing of memetic content. Mere recognition is among the simplest and most robust heuristic cues (e.g., Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 2011; Pachur & Hertwig, 2006), a finding that extends to consumer evaluations and decisions (e.g., Hauser, 2011; Thoma & Williams, 2013). The present research suggests by extension that an SNS user's familiarity with brands, familiarity with those brands' ongoing cultural narratives (which encompass considerations of credibility such as reputation), and familiarity with a diverse array of memetic templates commingle to yield fast, low-effort

evaluations of advertising messages when presented in SNS contexts where memes and memetic communication are normative. Conversely, lack of familiarity with these elements yields confusion, which in turn results in ambivalence and disinterest.

In the psychology literature, recognition has historically been treated as *non-compensatory*. That is, it has been assumed that people make use of "only one piece of information, recognition" (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 1999, p. 57) when employing the recognition heuristic. More recent studies have questioned the assumption that a single recognition cue is sufficient for an individual to make decisions using this heuristic (e.g., Bröder & Eichler, 2006; Newell & Fernandez, 2006; Richter & Späth, 2006). Oeusoonthornwattana and Shanks (2010) argue that additional information about brands and products influences consumer responses above and beyond the mere recognition of brand names, but maintain that recognition is integral to the decision-making process. Metzger and Flanagin (2013) contend that the reputation heuristic is directly linked to the recognition heuristic via entailing considerations that people make regarding a recognized source's integrity and sociocultural standing. Therefore, although the point is not explicitly addressed by these authors, this understanding of the reputation heuristic necessarily frames it as compensatory. In other words, recognition may kickstart the heuristic process, but other information (e.g., brand knowledge, cultural literacy) aids in judgment and evaluation (Hilbig, Pohl, & Bröder, 2009).

The present research joins these more recent studies in arguing that the credibility heuristics employed by Generation Z participants when processing memetic advertisements are necessarily compensatory. Lending credence to this argument is the fact that memes in a memeplex are mutually reinforcing (Blackmore, 1999; Dawkins, 1976) and therefore do not function in isolation. A single image macro is just an image with overlaid text. It only becomes

memetic alongside its various imitations and permutations (Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Thus, when SNS users activate their memetic knowledge structures to decode a meme, they inevitably draw from what they know about the memetic template or format in addition to what they know about the image macro's specific message. In this way, internet memes require a degree of scaffolding in order to be understood and interpreted, and this—at least in a memetic context—runs counter to the assumption that recognition is non-compensatory.

The clearest evidence of this in the present research was focus group participants' expeditious bundling of cognitively accessible information about brand name, brand narrative, memetic template, persuasive intent, and other applicable considerations to arrive at a suitable judgment about the stimuli they were shown. Although individuals can be pressured to use the recognition heuristic and others in a non-compensatory fashion by imposing artificial constraints like cognitive load and time limitations (e.g., Pachur & Hartwig, 2006), it appears that they tend not to default to single-cue evaluations when processing internet memes. Thus, while the parsimoniousness of a non-compensatory heuristic is theoretically appealing in a cluttered virtual environment, the human mind's associative networks are very complex, and people most likely draw automatically from a larger pool of knowledge when browsing SNSs. Given that the resulting consolidation of this knowledge to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion appears to occur rapidly and without much conscious deliberation, however, this processing strategy can still be identified as heuristic (e.g., Chaiken, 1987; Todorov et al., 2002).

Regarding the heuristic processing of memes as a default cognitive strategy, the participant who described memes as "anything you don't really have to think about" implied a mild aversion to systematic processing when scrolling through SNS feeds. This was supported by similar comments about how memes are perceived as ineffective and "lose [their] magic" if they

demand systematic processing to an inordinate degree. Anything that might necessitate systematic processing, whether it be too much text in an image macro or an overly involved visual style, is met with disapproval among these SNS users. Even the decision of whether or not to attend to a meme appears to be heuristic. In the words of one participant, "You know how you look at an image and you're like, 'nah,' and you just kind of scroll?" This statement may summarize what is happening inside the heads of average Generation Z internet users as they view their SNS feeds. Their mental gears might be turning, but only slightly, and are unlikely to speed up unless a relevant social connection or other meaningful incentive to engage in systematic processing instigates an acceleration.

### **Credibility Heuristics in Memetic Processing**

With this evidence for heuristic processing of memes in mind, this section focuses on participants' applications of specific credibility heuristics (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013) in the processing of memetic advertisements. Perceived credibility, which has been loosely defined throughout this dissertation as trustworthiness and believability, is crucial when considering brand messaging of any sort because of its noted associations with consumers' loyalty to a given brand (Sweeney & Swait, 2008), intentions to purchase that brand (Baek, Kim, & Yu, 2010), and likelihood of retaining that brand in one's consideration set (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Therefore, these credibility heuristics are especially important when considering how digital natives perceive and process memetic advertisements.

**Reputation.** The present research suggests that when digitally native participants see a brand name in a meme, they heuristically evaluate that name on the basis of whether or not they are familiar with it. They then assign judgments to the memetic message based upon what they know (or do not know) about the brand. Since brand name is a heuristic cue (Maheswaran,

Mackie, & Chaiken, 1992) that makes the cultural narrative surrounding a given brand's reputation more cognitively accessible, this suggests that memetic advertisers with established reputations and familiar narratives naturally fare better among Generation Z SNS users due to the automatic responses that this recognition can foment. This accords with previous beliefs about the recognition heuristic (e.g., Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 2011; Thoma & Williams, 2013) and its more specific reputational offshoot (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013), while extending the understanding to memetic advertising and Generation Z. Both the qualitative and quantitative phases of this research support this conclusion and are discussed in turn.

When shown manifest stimuli, focus group participants consistently expressed more favorable responses to memes containing real brand names than memes containing fictitious brand names. Fictitious brand names evoked confusion and forced participants to slow down and scrutinize the meme (i.e., engage in systematic processing) for clues about what it was trying to communicate. Among the most notable discrepancies between the focus group responses of strategic communication majors and non-majors was that memetic advertising provides startup brands an opportunity to gain recognition in an increasingly crowded digital marketplace. Strategic communication majors agreed that "advertising through memes is huge" as long as the startup brand has a savvy marketing team that understands social media and can use that knowledge to connect with a desired audience. Conversely, non-majors expressed that memes, due to their compact nature and ability to only deliver one story beat in an overall narrative (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021), are better used in service of familiar brands with a pre-established reputation. Given that most digital natives are not advertising students, this disagreement suggests that the opinions of the average Generation Z consumer may align more closely with those of the non-majors.

Experimental results support the conclusion that brands with a pre-established reputation yield more favorable evaluations when presented in a memetic context. That this result was replicated across MTurk and university samples suggests that brand name familiarity plays a substantial role in evaluations of memetic advertisements regardless of academic discipline. Further, being primed with a stimulus related to reputation appears to yield significantly higher self-reported reputation heuristic use and was also replicated across samples.

The present experimental design was based on a recommendation by Bellur and Sundar (2014) to determine whether participants use a heuristic when engaging with computer-mediated stimuli. Per their suggestion, a significant moderated mediation analysis is evidence that heuristic use has occurred. However, in this experiment, neither the moderation nor the mediation components were unequivocally supported. The question thus arises, is it certain that participants in the current experiment used the reputation heuristic? Despite the interaction effect only achieving statistical significance for the MTurk sample, Figure 16 illustrates the same approximate pattern of results for both samples. Namely, participants who were primed with a stimulus related to reputation and then shown memes containing real brand names self-reported the most favorable attitudes overall, while those primed with a stimulus related to reputation and then shown memes containing fictitious brand names self-reported the least favorable evaluations overall. These mean differences were uniformly significant. Meanwhile, as expected, those who were primed with an irrelevant stimulus and then shown memes containing real brand names still self-reported more favorable attitudes than those who were shown memes containing fictitious brand names after viewing the irrelevant priming stimulus. However, these mean differences were not always significant. Thus, while the absence of statistical significance in some cases makes unambiguous conclusions about this interaction difficult, the self-reported

mean attitudes by experimental group are nonetheless reflective of the trend that Bellur and Sundar (2014) anticipate if a heuristic has been used. Therefore, the present data still suggest that the reputation heuristic played a role in how participants responded to memetic stimuli. Had these group means trended in different directions or not been significantly different from one another in any pairwise comparison, this claim would not hold. As it stands, however, it is believed that these data provide exploratory evidence that considerations of brand reputation (facilitated in a compensatory manner by name recognition and familiarity with a given sociocultural narrative, as discussed above) influenced self-reported attitudes toward memetic advertisements.

Additionally, as seen in Figure 17, participants who viewed the heuristic prime related to reputation (groups 1 and 2) self-reported significantly higher reputation heuristic use than participants who viewed the irrelevant prime related to international travel (groups 3 and 4). Given that group 1 self-reported significantly higher mean attitudes than either group that saw advertising memes with fictitious brand names (groups 2 and 4), and that group 2 self-reported significantly lower mean attitudes than either group that saw advertising memes with real brand names (groups 1 and 3), this suggests that the heuristic prime facilitated significant mean differences in self-reported attitudes, but that the irrelevant prime did not. Therefore, it can be concluded that the reputation heuristic impacted participants' self-reported attitudes in the heuristic priming condition.

The present findings question the necessity of Bellur and Sundar's (2014) moderated mediation approach to determine heuristic use. Their suggested model may lend a greater degree of confidence that a heuristic has been used, but its specifications necessitate mean differences in attitudes between groups that view an irrelevant prime when these groups are not as focal to the

effect of heuristic use as those who view a heuristic prime. Further, it should be noted that the moderated mediation approach is merely the suggestion of one pair of authors and that there have been numerous experimental studies relying on self-report that validly concluded that heuristics were used without employing this particular statistical modeling technique (e.g., Bröder, 2000; Grether, 1980; Koh & Sundar, 2010; Kruger et al., 2004; Metcalfe, Schwartz, & Joaquim, 1993; Rothman & Hardin, 1997). It is believed that this experiment can join these previous studies and that it provides a promising first step toward demonstrating that use of the reputation heuristic influences digital natives' attitudes toward memetic advertisements.

**Endorsement.** The endorsement heuristic is closely related to social connectedness and belonging and appears to influence how Generation Z SNS users perceive and process memetic messages. Any meme—whether an advertisement or otherwise—that is sent by a friend is considerably more likely to garner the attention of its recipient than a meme that is incidentally encountered on SNSs or elsewhere. This form of direct memetic transmission can be viewed as a single-person endorsement. If the sender has a strong enough social tie with the recipient, the power of this endorsement may be stronger than the aggregated opinions of thousands, or even millions, of users on SNSs. The sender's close relationship with the recipient serves as validation of that memetic message such that the recipient is compelled to look at it, regardless of its content. Whether the recipient then processes the message heuristically or systematically (e.g., Chaiken, 1980) depends on the message itself; however, the endorsement heuristic should be implicated in whether the meme is attended to in the first place.

More commonly associated with the endorsement heuristic are SNS metrics such as likes and comments that users view to gauge the popularity of a particular post or message. As a result of being perpetually connected to the internet via mobile devices and having grown up constantly

switching between online and offline environments (e.g., Klimmt et al., 2018; Vorderer et al., 2018), digital natives in Generation Z appear to rely on these metrics more readily than members of previous generations (Lim & Parker, 2020)—a finding that extends to brand communications (Goldring & Azab, 2021). This was discussed by focus group participants, who explained that the number of likes and comments that a meme has received on an SNS page unconsciously influences their motivation to pay attention to it and affects how long they spend looking at that meme. The unconscious nature of this decision speaks directly to the use of the endorsement heuristic, as this determination is necessarily a snap judgment that the SNS user makes in the amount of time it would take to either pause or scroll past the meme in question. In this way, the endorsement heuristic appears to be a go-to processing strategy for internet memes, particularly in the absence of a direct endorsement from a friend or acquaintance. Although the endorsement heuristic was not a primary focus of this dissertation, evidence nonetheless points to its frequent use in the cognitive processing of internet memes.

For brands seeking to advertise through memes on SNSs, this may be a steep hill to climb. Focus group participants indicated that clearly sponsored posts automatically receive less attention from them. They were also wary of memetic advertisements containing either too many or too few likes and comments. Too many endorsements arouse suspicion that the brand has unethically purchased followers, while too few endorsements signify unpopularity. Again, it may be inferred that both extremes are heuristically linked to ambivalence or disinterest in the minds of Generation Z SNS users. For memetic advertisements that appear on meme pages or elsewhere on SNSs (i.e., those not sent by friends and/or brand ambassadors), it appears crucial for the post to contain a happy medium of both likes and comments. What that happy medium is, numerically speaking, may depend on the particular brand and the particular context.

Nonetheless, the evidence from these focus groups suggests that these digital natives can determine appropriate versus inappropriate levels of endorsement heuristically and immediately.

**Expectancy violation.** The expectancy violation heuristic is used when SNS content fails to live up to a user's expectations or disappoints them in some way (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). This heuristic is linked directly to nonprofessional aesthetics and low degree of perceived effort, both of which emerged as a theme in focus group responses to manifest stimuli. Although this heuristic was not emphasized in the present research to the same degree as reputation, endorsement, and persuasive intent (to be discussed next), participants indicated having their expectations violated by certain stimuli, which in turn led to expressed devaluation of the meme.

The discussion of the Totino's Pete Zarock meme was the clearest example in the present data of how poor memetic design can negatively influence prospective consumers. Participants in multiple focus group sessions were not able to discern what the advertised product was. They knew the meme was intended as an advertisement, but the execution of the meme perplexed them. This highlights the importance of clarity in advertising insofar as audiences need to be able to identify what, exactly, is being advertised. Likewise, there needs to be a detectable degree of effort funneled into the creation of a memetic advertisement. While memes in general are not high-effort affairs, per se, focus group participants nonetheless discredited stimuli they perceived as conspicuously low-effort. Due to the potential for the expectancy violation heuristic to be activated, a brand seeking to advertise through memes should not assume that a lazy meme is going to pass muster with Generation Z consumers on SNS. If a digital native believes that they could quickly produce a comparable meme, chances are the selling attempt will not be a success for the brand.

The memetic stimulus specifically selected to activate the expectancy violation heuristic via nonprofessional aesthetics was the Kurger Bing meme. However, expectancy violation gave way to persuasion knowledge in this particular case. Therefore, responses to the Kurger Bing meme will be discussed in the next section. Nonetheless, both the Kurger Bing meme and the Totino's meme stand as evidence that multiple heuristics (e.g., expectancy violation and persuasive intent) can be used simultaneously (e.g., Bellur & Sundar, 2014; Chaiken, 1987) when viewing and assessing memetic advertisements.

**Persuasive intent and persuasion knowledge.** The present research suggests that persuasion knowledge (PK) differs by generation, but that PK does not determine whether an advertising meme is evaluated positively or negatively. This is good news for advertisers, since both qualitative and quantitative data suggest that PK is unavoidable in memetic advertising. Focus group participants were nearly unanimous in expressing that their PK is triggered by the mere presence of a brand name or logo in a meme. The reason given was simple: until recently, internet memes were not a common venue for advertising. Digital natives who grew up with internet memes throughout the 2000s and 2010s became accustomed to memes that did not have—as one skeptical student put it—"ulterior motives." After years of participating in memetic conversations geared toward humor and satire, the introduction of selling attempts into the memetic landscape would logically activate PK among this cohort of SNS users.

Persuasion knowledge (e.g., Friestad & Wright, 1994) and the persuasive intent heuristic (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013) are conceptually linked such that persuasive intent heuristic cues give rise to PK. The same cue can activate different heuristics in different situations (Bellur & Sundar, 2014). Brand names are heuristic cues (Maheswaran et al., 1992) that, in this research, appeared to activate both the reputation and persuasive intent heuristics. Even memetic stimuli

containing fictitious brand names activated participants' PK. However, although PK appears to be a given if an advertising meme is branded or contains product placement, being aware of the persuasive attempt cannot be equated with either accepting or resisting it. As one non-major stated, "If [Wendy's] put that much work into making me think about a cheeseburger and I went and got the cheeseburger, good for them." This comment suggests that PK alone is not a sufficient predictor of how a digital native will respond to a memetic advertisement. Instead, their responses appear to be driven by how well a brand has integrated its own ongoing narrative into the larger cultural narrative surrounding memes on SNSs. Unprompted, five out of six focus groups spotlighted Wendy's as the brand that has been most successful at memetic advertising. These students believe that Wendy's has done an especially good job because their brand memes are rarely direct about getting people to buy their products. Rather, Wendy's banters with competitors like Burger King (e.g., Kao et al., 2020) and encourages comments and discussions on its memetic posts. This approach, while still conspicuously branded and activating PK, is perceived by these young SNS users as fun, interactive, and nonmanipulative.

Related to this point is the specific context in which a memetic advertisement is encountered. Participants indicated that they are likely to ignore a sponsored meme that incidentally appears in their newsfeed. Just like brand name, this research argues that the "sponsored" tag is a heuristic cue for persuasive intent. It appears, then, that an advertising meme may be most effective on its home base. A brand that cultivates an SNS page capable of attracting and retaining digital native audiences is likely to fare better than a brand that attempts to sprinkle its advertising memes around various platforms in the hope of garnering attention. To paraphrase one focus group participant, an advertising meme on a brand page is expected and may activate PK in a way that benefits the brand, whereas a sponsored advertising meme

elsewhere is more likely to activate PK in a way that—to the extent that the meme itself is attended to at all—may even diminish the SNS user's opinion of that brand.

Experimental results related to PK are consistent with the belief that brand names, whether real or fictitious, are heuristic cues for persuasive intent. Regardless of random assignment, participants across both MTurk and university samples self-reported high levels of PK. Irrespective of which type of meme they viewed, their PK was likely activated to similar degrees because of an awareness that both real and fictitious brand names, as presented in these stimuli, indicate selling attempts. As discussed earlier, this is likely also a function of participants' familiarity with the memetic template and their ability to heuristically link a conceptually congruent template with the advertised brand (e.g., Drake is a musician, therefore his presence in an ad for a music streaming service is logical whether the brand name is familiar or not). However, it is worth noting that mean levels of PK for university participants (i.e., strategic communication majors;  $M = 5.61$ ) were notably higher than those for MTurk participants ( $M = 5.19$ ). This lends support to the validity of the measurement of PK in this experiment (Boerman et al., 2018), as it has been shown in previous studies that students who are taught advertising strategy have higher PK than those who are not (e.g., Nelson, 2016).

### **Need for Cognition**

Although past persuasion research has implicated NFC in how an individual evaluates a message (e.g., Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983; Chang, 2007), the present research suggests that NFC does not meaningfully factor into how Generation Z SNS users process memetic advertisements. A digital native's social connections appear to exert substantially more influence on whether they will decode a memetic message than NFC does. These social connections likewise appear to determine whether the digital native will engage in heuristic or systematic

processing of that meme. Stated differently, a digital native's NFC might influence how much attention they pay to incidental memes that appear as they idly scroll through their newsfeed, but if they receive a meme from an acquaintance or view a meme on an SNS that originated from a common bond or common identity group (e.g., Sassenberg, 2002), they are likelier to scrutinize it because understanding the message yields a sense of inclusion and belonging within a relevant ingroup and fosters social connections. This accords with the assertion that high personal relevance of a given message facilitates systematic processing (Axsom, Yates, & Chaiken, 1987). This is also consistent with the finding that, even though relatively low-NFC individuals prefer to rely on cues and tend to engage in heuristic processing more frequently than relatively high-NFC individuals, the average individual is capable of both heuristic and systematic processing (Petty et al., 2009).

In focus groups, participants indicated varying NFC when discussing how much time they spend looking at and trying to decipher a given meme. The prevailing theme across focus groups regarding NFC was the ease of understanding a memetic message versus the payoff an individual expected to receive from successfully decoding it. By and large, participants indicated that they can often decode a memetic message almost instantaneously (again lending support for heuristic processing as the default mode for engaging with memes) but will typically not attempt to decode a more challenging meme unless there is a specific interpersonal motivation to do so. Whereas memes are generally thought of as low-effort, bite-size pieces of content, certain memes are more demanding than others. For these memes, the sufficiency threshold (i.e., the point at which the expected payoff is deemed to be worth the additional cognitive effort, Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Chaiken, 1987) appears to be determined by the relational circumstances surrounding an SNS user's exposure to them.

With regard to the above, the experimental phase of this research is a compelling complement to the focus groups because it eliminated the interpersonal component and asked participants to individually evaluate advertising memes in a social vacuum. Since NFC is characterized as a stable, preexisting personality trait (Coelho, Hanel, & Wolf, 2018; Petty et al., 2009), it is logical that random assignment would not—and should not—affect individual levels of NFC. Experimental data support this. Although NFC was a statistically significant covariate in the relationship between experimental group and self-reported attitudes toward memes, between-group differences were likely due to chance and would theoretically even out in a larger, probabilistic sample.

Interestingly, there was a moderately positive correlation between NFC and self-reported attitudes overall, meaning that participants who reported preferring effortful cognitive activities also reported more favorable feelings toward the stimuli they saw. Ostensibly, this runs counter to beliefs about heuristic processing. However, it should be remembered that high-NFC individuals still consistently engage in heuristic processing (e.g., Priester, Dholakia, & Fleming, 2004; Ziegler, Diehl, & Ruther, 2002). Given that the reputation heuristic is implicated in the relationship between meme type and attitudes for participants who viewed the heuristic priming stimulus, it may be inferred that participants in these two samples were relatively high-NFC individuals who were nonetheless using a heuristic during this experiment. Participants in the present research fundamentally regard internet memes as "anything you don't really have to think about." Because high-NFC individuals might elect not to think deeply about a particular message if they perceive it as unchallenging (Petty et al., 2009), and because digital natives generally regard memetic messages as easily digestible, it is possible that experimental participants used the reputation heuristic independent of their position on the NFC spectrum.

## **Humor**

By and large, internet memes are regarded as a humorous form of communication (e.g., Aronson & Jaffal, 2021; Kanai, 2016; Katz et al., 2021; Penney, 2020). Memetic humor arises from practices of imitation (e.g., Blackmore, 1999; Dawkins, 1976) and, as the present research suggests, is engendered by the convergence of interpersonal relationships and cultural narratives. Discussions of the often topical, satirical, and/or ironic jokes embedded in memes led one strategic communication major to describe the internet meme phenomenon as a "very cultural experience." This echoes Dawkins' (1976) original definition of a meme as a "unit of cultural transmission" (p. 249). A successful internet meme therefore rests at the crossroads of amusement and relatability and is "very cultural" in its ability to speak to happenings in society while simultaneously appealing to a relevant audience of likeminded individuals. Thus, the humor of a meme together with the specific, ongoing cultural narrative to which it speaks are what fuel its spread and fecundity (e.g., Dawkins, 1976; Murray et al., 2014). As with any joke, there is an entailing feeling of sociocultural connectedness that comes with understanding a meme, which will be elaborated upon shortly. This sense of inclusion in turn bolsters SNS users' overall appreciation for communicating memetically.

Implicit in focus group participants' discussions of humor was an understanding that memetic imitation provides necessary context for the joke. Seeing a familiar template triggers a heuristic association between the on-hand topic and the type of joke or message typically delivered by that template. This was best articulated by the participant who stated, "I might've seen the meme format weeks ago, and I got the joke set up, and now I can just enjoy all the punchlines people give later. It's this weird cultural inside joke thing." This is a clear, concrete substantiation of memes as partial narratives (de Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, & Literat, 2021) that

maintains a focus on sociocultural connections and humor. The student's words also reinforce the conclusion that template familiarity promotes heuristic processing, and that generational differences in humor and age-specific preferences for certain cultural narratives can silo memetic audiences.

For brands trying to promote themselves on SNSs, the key take-away from this is that a memetic advertising campaign needs to be predicated on audience-specific humor that accords with brand identity and the brand's own ongoing narrative in consumer culture. A brand associated with professionalism, propriety, or prestige that attempts to tell memetic jokes will likely be perceived by digital natives as awkward and unbecoming. By contrast, brands whose identities are not rooted in professionalism, propriety, or prestige are likelier to be embraced (or at least accepted) in memetic contexts because a humorous, lighthearted tone is perceived as more appropriate for their brand identity and narrative. This is why focus group participants singled out Wendy's, Burger King, Slim Jim, and DuoLingo as successful memetic advertisers. Consumers do not necessarily expect these brands to make jokes, but it is acceptable and enjoyable when they do because the brand narratives they have cultivated are consistent with the humorous aims of memetic communication in general.

Humorous memetic advertising also requires balancing message accessibility with audience specificity. Universality ensures that everyone who encounters the meme will understand its message, but at the expense of the impact of its humor. On the other hand, esotericism may amplify the feeling of understanding an inside joke for some people but runs the risk of confusing or alienating part of the target audience. Disagreements among focus group participants highlight why finding a happy medium may be a challenge for memetic advertisers. Per one participant, "If [the joke] was universal, it wouldn't be that funny. I feel like when

memes are weird or outlandish or something that's not typical, they're more likely to be [shared]." By contrast, another participant opined that they "like to see a brand engage with ... normal people." Targeting so-called "normal people" with outlandish content is easier said than done, particularly when digital natives appear to automatically (i.e., heuristically) associate sponsored content on SNSs with feeble attempts at humor. As with any form of advertising, there is no formula or recipe to guarantee that a meme will reach its target audience or have its desired effect. The bottom line is that a brand must understand the sense of humor of its target demographic and create memetic content to amuse that particular type of consumer.

### **Social Connections**

In addition to humor, memes require a social substrate. The present research suggests that a relevant social connection determines if a memetic message has an impact in a content-cluttered virtual environment. Focus group participants indicated that the social context in which they receive a meme is crucial for whether they prioritize it. Wanting to belong can explain this. The focus group participant who described how her friend group kept talking in a code that she did not understand and who subsequently started appreciating memes on the basis of better grasping that code speaks to a desire to fit in. This participant implied that the code was lighthearted and humorous. However, the sharing of memes can also be more intimate in certain interpersonal relationships. The student who suggested that memetic communication is "a really good way to show people around you that you're putting effort into relating to them" exemplifies that, although memes are predominantly centered around jokes or amusing takes on cultural narratives, *how* people share them with one another can be serious and meaningful. Marwick (2013) posits that memes thrive on a "social, affective bond" (p. 13), and in their own language, participants substantiated both the social and affective aspects of this claim.

Focus group participants also corroborated Meikle's (2016) assertion that "an internet meme is a shared representation of online interaction" (p. 55). The student who stated that "there is a sense of community" around memes succinctly encapsulated this. Whether these memetic communities are formed around common bond or common identity groups (Sassenberg, 2002) there is an unstated but understood sense of camaraderie that binds memetic audiences together. Ingroup homophily (e.g., Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954) therefore arises in part from this shared enthusiasm for the thematic content of memes. This emphasizes SNSs' role as "an imagined shared social space" (Panek et al., 2015, p. 385) where likeminded people engage in relevant discourse. Importantly, the size of these virtual groups is variable. A meme can be shared directly between two people, or it can be directed toward every member of a larger body. The appeal of a given meme might be either highly specific or more general, depending on its aesthetic features, embedded message, and the particular cultural narrative in which it is situated.

Specific to memetic advertising, it appears that this form of brand messaging may be most persuasive when an SNS user receives an advertising meme from a friend or social connection who is a brand ambassador or who is known for having an affinity for that brand. All focus groups expressed a certain ambivalence toward being sold to via memes, but strategic communication majors in particular acquiesced that receiving a meme from someone with a passion for a certain brand or product might help them to overcome their ambivalence. In turn, they might also develop a more favorable opinion of the brand being advertised and associate that brand's products and services with the social connection who sent the meme. Without a relevant interpersonal linkage, however, a memetic advertisement encountered on SNS may not be attended to at all. Arguably worse than a negative evaluation by a prospective consumer, these messages may just be discarded and forgotten entirely.

**Generational differences.** While this dissertation preferentially examined Generation Z's perceptions of memetic advertisements, digital natives are not the only SNS users who appreciate memes. Although memes are most popular among Generation Z and Millennials, some Baby Boomers and members of Generation X also view memes on a daily basis (Enberg et al., 2021). However, as expressed by focus group participants, different types of memes appeal to people of different ages. For example, in response to the *Mona Lisa* French fries meme (a clear attempt by the McDonald's brand to use the art infusion effect to its advantage, e.g., Peluso et al., 2016), one student said, "I feel like my mom would see this and think it's funny. ... But not us." While this appraisal may seem overly critical, it is true that older generations naturally have preferences that vary from those of younger generations. This applies not only to consumer preferences and purchasing behaviors (e.g., Parment, 2013; Rentz & Reynolds, 1991), but also to sense of humor (Howe & Strauss, 2007), media use (Holbrook & Schindler, 1994), and beliefs about topical issues and social factors (Schewe & Noble, 2000). This carries a great deal of significance for brands attempting to advertise through memes, because the content of the meme necessarily needs to resonate among its target demographics.

When introduced to the concept of a Chief Meme Officer (CMeO), focus group participants voiced a concern about these newly minted officers trying too hard to be relatable and "not quite hitting the mark" because they may not fully understand the generational differences inherent among different segments of the SNS marketplace. It follows that a brand CMeO needs to be representative of their target market, or at the very least have a strong working knowledge of the types of messages and advertising strategies that the target market is going to respond to. This does not preclude an older CMeO being good at their job, but the brand that they work for should ideally be trying to connect with an older demographic. Given that

memes are predominantly viewed and appreciated by Generation Z, however, it may be advisable for brands to hire younger CMeOs rather than older ones. Given focus groups participants' harsh (if innocuous) criticism of what they termed "Boomer memes," it appears that onboarding a young CMeO might represent a smaller risk for a brand than putting blind trust in an older content creator with more professional experience.

### **Implications for Advertisers**

This research has numerous implications for brands trying to promote themselves using internet memes and yields several pieces of prescriptive advice for how they can structure memetic advertisements for optimal impact and positive attitudes among target audiences. Perhaps the most important of these implications is that memetic advertising is not a "one size fits all" proposition. Brand image and identity need to correspond with the playful nature of memetic communication. In order for advertising memes to be embraced by Generation Z consumers, memetic messages need to be humorous and need to come from humor-appropriate sources. Any brands whose products or services have life-or-death consequences associated with them (e.g., pharmaceuticals) should never mount a memetic advertising campaign because consumers would heuristically push back against that form of messaging. Similarly, luxury brands with a prestigious reputation should also seek to advertise via more traditional means, since memes are inherently casual and convey a laidback, easygoing personality that runs counter to the aims of high-end designers. Memetic advertising appears most appropriate for brands that wish to communicate a cool, fun, informal disposition and are not overly concerned with being taken seriously. This is why quick service restaurants, snacks, and educational apps fare well in memetic advertising contexts. By virtue of not trying to uphold a serious or strictly professional image, they are naturally better able to crack jokes, make fun of themselves and

similar others, and to fashion an image of themselves that is consistent with the humorous nature of memetic communication overall.

Following from this is the necessity for a brand to understand who their advertising memes are intended to reach. The simplest way to accomplish this is to hire a CMeO or memetic content creator who possesses extensive knowledge of the target audience's demographic and psychographic features. As expressed by focus group participants, this person also needs to be able to keep up with trends and know what is happening in the world. Individual iterations of memes are ephemeral and typically appear on SNSs in response to current trends and events—or, in the parlance of this dissertation, in response to ongoing cultural narratives. It is therefore incumbent upon a CMeO to create memes that combine brand-appropriate references to topical affairs with the specific type of humor that best resonates among brand loyalists and repeat consumers. Doing this successfully is a challenge and may warrant the six-figure salary that some brands are willing to pay CMeOs (e.g., Eliason, 2021).

Memes are imitative by definition (Dawkins, 1976; Blackmore, 1999) and the present data indicate that digital natives' familiarity with popular memetic templates activates cognitive knowledge structures that facilitate low-effort heuristic processing of memes. However, focus group participants were divided about brands using preexisting templates to advertise themselves. On one side of the argument was the participant who said that a brand should not "just take a random meme and be like, 'This works for Taco Bell.'" On the other side of the argument were the participants who praised certain stimuli because their memetic templates were congruous with their advertised brands (e.g., the woman yelling at the cat is successful because Fancy Feast is a brand of cat food; the cartoon man sweating the choice of which red button to press is successful for a brand of deodorant because he is perspiring). Ultimately, a CMeO's

decisions about which templates to use and how to use them need to be in service of the brand's intended audience and—to satisfy evaluations instigated by the expectancy violation heuristic—need to appear suitably effortful and sufficiently well designed. This echoes the above assertion that memetic advertising is not a "one size fits all" proposition. The degree to which an advertising meme appears effortful and aesthetically pleasing needs to also be a direct reflection of the individual brand, its personality, and how it wishes to advance its own cultural narrative. The entailing tensions between audience expectancies and their (lack of) familiarity with a brand must therefore also be reconciled on a case-by-case basis.

One way for a memetic advertiser to leverage the power of brand loyalty is to incentivize the sharing of advertising memes and participation in the conversation surrounding the brand. Given that memes received from social connections are more likely to be attended to than other, more incidental memes, and that digital natives appear to heuristically associate sponsored content with unsuccessful attempts at humor, a brand might circumvent these obstacles by offering rewards to individuals who are willing to share advertising memes with their friends and ideally bring those prospective consumers into the fold. This strategy could also extend to influencers with whom digital natives identify in a parasocial relationship. This approach could foster the sort of participatory SNS presence that has worked so well for Wendy's and others. At the same time, the brand needs to be careful not to push too hard or make their selling attempts too explicit. This underscores the importance of a brand maintaining a consistent but undemanding social media presence wherein the brand's laidback, easygoing personality is allowed to shine through, but it does not directly attempt to elicit specific thoughts or behaviors. A brand engaging SNS users with offbeat, ironic humor is perceived by Generation Z as endearing and fun; a brand attempting to make sales with memetic messages tantamount to,

"Purchase our product!" is perceived as irritating and manipulative. Therefore, encouraging participation and interactivity among Generation Z SNS users while simultaneously refraining from overt plugs appears necessary for success in memetic advertising. This, in turn, could promote engagement that would make endorsement heuristic cues (e.g., number of likes and comments) work to a brand's advantage.

Finally, there is the unresolved issue of whether memetic advertising is suitable for startup brands. Both phases of this research raise the question of whether established brand reputability is necessary for successful memetic advertising. Familiar brands that advertise memetically appear to have an appreciable advantage over unfamiliar ones. Therefore, startups may do better to establish themselves in the virtual marketplace by more traditional means and then circle back to memetic advertising once they have built a reputation. To reach its target audience through memes alone, a startup brand likely needs to be much more judicious and creative in its messaging than other brands that are already prospering on SNSs. A fine-tuned mixture of judiciousness and creativity might, in turn, establish a good reputation that opens the door to successful memetic advertising via heuristic associations with that reputation. Thus, a startup brand attempting to reach new consumers through internet memes needs to hit the ground running with its creativity and humorous appeals. Any memetic message that does not cut through the SNS clutter is likely to be unsuccessful in persuading digital natives or in establishing a favorable reputation for its fledgling brand. Since brand name is a heuristic cue linked to its brand's reputation and cultural narrative, it makes sense that a brand playing a strong meme game and continually asserting itself as a consistent, humorous SNS presence that welcomes participation and interaction should bolster attitudes toward its advertising memes and toward itself. Importantly, this should hold true even when its audience has no concrete purchase

intention. If a brand accomplishes this, memetic advertising has potential to be—as one enthusiastic strategic communication major put it—“super effective.”

### **Limitations and Strengths**

Like all scholarly research, the present studies had multiple strengths and limitations. Among the greatest strengths of this dissertation was its exploratory, sequential mixed-method design. Since empirical work on memetic advertising is still in its infancy, collecting a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data contributes to a fuller, more well-rounded foundation on which future research can be conducted. Specific to this dissertation, focus group participants' preferences for familiar brand names and evident heuristic processing of popular memetic templates provided a valuable starting point from which the reputation heuristic could be investigated in a controlled, experimental setting. The experiment made use of some of the same memetic stimuli that were presented in focus groups and yielded comparable data. The focus group data also provided exploratory insights into other cognitive heuristics that can be implicated in memetic processing (i.e., endorsement, expectancy violation, persuasive intent).

A strength of the focus groups specifically was their purposive sampling. Both strategic communication majors and non-majors were recruited to participate in an hourlong discussion about memes. Therefore, all interested parties were interested in and knowledgeable about memes and were able to make meaningful contributions to a conversation about memetic advertising. Further, focus groups promote group synergy (Morgan, 1996) in a way that approximates the social nature of meme sharing on SNSs. In this way, focus groups were a more viable qualitative method than, for instance, one-on-one interviews because they enabled participants to talk amongst themselves, cooperatively derive meaning from manifest stimuli, and to build off of one another's responses. Nonetheless, even though these focus groups

attempted to capture the viewpoints of a wide swath of Generation Z college students by recruiting both strategic communication majors and majors from other disciplines, these focus groups were limited by their sample sizes (i.e., between three and 10 per group). Further, it should be noted that the opinions expressed in these sessions were limited to those of students attending the same large, public, Western university. Thus, the data are not generalizable beyond this population.

Issues of generalizability also apply to the experimental phase of this research. Neither the MTurk nor the university sample was probabilistic. Consequently, these convenience samples provide valuable baseline information about familiar versus unfamiliar brand names in memetic advertising and the possible use of the reputation heuristic to influence attitudes toward memes, but these conclusions cannot be applied to Generation Z digital natives at large. However, a primary advantage of experimental research is that it enables causal inference. Although the results of this experiment were equivocal, they provide evidence that memetic stimuli with familiar brand names caused participants to evaluate those stimuli more favorably. Likewise, it appears that a heuristic prime related to reputation does temporarily cause increased levels of reputation heuristic use. Both of these conclusions will be valuable moving forward.

Additionally, although humor and social connections are of crucial importance to memetic communication on SNSs, this experiment controlled for both by not attempting to produce deliberately funny memetic stimuli and by requiring participants to complete the procedure individually. While this may raise concerns about ecological validity, it ensured that participants were responding only to the characteristics of the memetic stimuli and not to confounding factors that might have been introduced by inside jokes and interpersonal communication. One might also question the inclusion of covariates in an experiment that are

measured after treatment (i.e., PK and NFC). While this is a valid critique of experimental design and statistical analysis in general, the covariates measured in the present experiment were exploratory in nature and ultimately not instrumental to the main findings. The inclusion of complementary ANOVAs that illustrate the same effects as the ANCOVAs should ameliorate this concern.

Finally, this research was limited by an inability to measure heuristic processes via established psychological methods designed to detect unconscious mental activities (e.g., an Implicit Association Test). However, Chaiken (1980; 1987) specifies in her description of the Heuristic-Systematic Model that heuristic processing—while predominantly automatic and unconscious—nonetheless contains a conscious component. In other words, aspects of heuristic processing are cognitively accessible to the individual and are therefore capable of being reflected upon in ways that are consistent with how the phenomenon has been captured in the present research. Further, Implicit Association Tests and other means for measuring unconscious mental activities have also been met with criticism (e.g., Gawronski, 2019) and should therefore not be assumed to be problem-free alternatives to the present research design.

Overall, it is believed that—together with the novelty of both qualitative and quantitative phases—the strengths of this research outweigh its weaknesses and that the conclusions discussed throughout this chapter contribute meaningfully to the burgeoning body of scholarly work on memetic advertising.

### **Future Research**

Future research can add to this burgeoning body of work in several ways. The present experiment was designed such that it was only capable of addressing one heuristic. Therefore, similar experiments focusing on the other heuristics that this dissertation has implicated in the

processing of memetic advertisements (i.e., endorsement, expectancy violation, persuasive intent) would allow for additional causal inference with regard to how credibility heuristics influence digital natives' attitudes toward advertising memes. Also, given the present experiment's promising but equivocal results, future work on the reputation heuristic as a major processing linkage between perceiving an advertising meme and evaluating it will go a long way toward substantiating the relationship suggested by these experimental data.

Future research might also extend the present findings to investigate how memetic advertisements influence attitudes toward the brand itself and how they influence self-reported intentions to purchase from the brand. In keeping with this dissertation's key findings related to familiarity, heuristic cues concerning participants' familiarity with specific products, brands, and memetic templates can also be investigated. Additionally, the social nature of memes can be further explored by probing the ways in which memetic advertisements are shared by friends, family members, and other relevant interpersonal connections. Beyond the relationships that consumers have with one another, future studies can also investigate the effectiveness of memetic advertisements when consumers have (or do not have) personal relationships with the advertised brands.

Outside the domain of heuristics, a series of qualitative interviews with current CMOs would provide valuable insider knowledge into how a memetic advertising campaign is conceived and executed. Likewise, quantitative content analyses of extant advertising memes focusing on endorsement metrics, user comments, and design aesthetics could be helpful for identifying patterns around successful versus relatively unsuccessful advertising memes and for providing prescriptive advice to brands beyond what was presented in the previous section. In a similar vein, constructing an opinion-based questionnaire about memetic advertising and

administering it to a probabilistic sample of Generation Z SNS users would be important for gauging collective attitudes toward this practice overall. This, in turn, would help advertisers emphasize the aspects of memetic communication that digitally native SNS users appreciate while downplaying those to which they respond unfavorably. An inherent advantage of conducting research in a fairly novel area is the abundance of untapped research questions that can be asked and the variety of methods that can be employed in service of those questions. Memetic advertising scholarship contains fertile ground from which a distinctive, long-term research program can be cultivated. This dissertation represents an important first step in that direction.

## CONCLUSION

Memetic communication will continue to evolve. Internet memes are very different in 2022 than they were 10 to 15 years ago (e.g., Marwick, 2013; Milner, 2013; Sax, 2012; Shifman, 2014), and even farther removed from the pseudo-biological concept of a meme (Poulshock, 2002) that was central to traditional memetics in the last quarter of the 20th century (e.g., Blackmore, 1999; Dawkins, 1976; Dennett, 1995; Hofstadter, 1983). Regardless of how different internet memes may look in the year 2032, memetic communication is likely to remain a mainstay among social networking site (SNS) users as long as they continue to value humor and social connectedness as ways of negotiating their understanding of cultural narratives and happenings in society. Because of this, it is anticipated that the scholarly investigation of memes will continue to be a fruitful endeavor for years to come.

This research is also in meaningful conversation with the past. Chapter 2 of this dissertation represents an original scholarly account of the history of memetic advertising. No other such account existed previously. It is hoped that Chapter 2, along with the myriad other concepts considered throughout this dissertation, will benefit memetic advertising researchers and practitioners who seek to know more historical details about where the practice came from and the ways in which it has developed over the course of many decades, centuries, and indeed millennia. This, in turn, may inform how it continues to evolve.

Regarding memetic advertising as it currently stands, the conclusions discussed throughout Chapter 9 appear to be typical patterns for online information processing among digital natives. Therefore, many considerations regarding digital natives' heuristic processing of memetic advertisements may extend to how they process content on SNSs as a whole. As such, these foundational insights may be relevant beyond the scope of memetic advertising inquiry.

Thus, as this dissertation joins the small number of studies related to memetic advertising (e.g., Chuah et al., 2020; Kao et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Sharma, 2018) and stands among the first conducted among Generation Z residents within the United States, it is expected that its value for advertisers, memetic scholars, and digital natives will not be limited to this moment in time. Particularly as Generation Z reaches reproductive age and begets a new generation of digital natives who in time will construct their own memetic language distinct from their parents', it remains important to understand the fundamentals of how internet memes are cognitively processed and how these processing strategies relate to perceptions of—and attitudes toward—burgeoning forms of digital advertising.

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## APPENDIX A: STIMULI AND MEASURES

### Qualitative Phase: Focus Groups

#### Ice-Breaker Question

1. What social media platforms are you active on? For instance, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook?

#### Memetic Advertising Questions

2. The main topic of this focus group is internet memes. What *is* a meme? What comes to mind when you hear the word "meme"?
3. Do you share memes on social media, or via direct messages? Why or why not?
  - a. When you share memes, who do you share them with? How do you decide which memes to share and with whom?
  - b. What was the last meme you shared who did you share it with? Do you often share memes with that person/group?
4. There are many different types of memes, as well as different reasons for making memes. Thinking now in terms of businesses rather than individual meme creators, are there any *brands* that stand out to you as having a "strong meme game" on social media? What appeals to you?
  - a. What do you know about memes that are created by brands and posted on their social media?
5. What are your thoughts about brands that use memes on social media?
  - a. What do you like about brands using memes on social media? What do you dislike?
6. Above and beyond trying to sell something, why do you think brands post memes on social media?
7. In addition to what you have already noted about likes and dislikes, do you have any other concerns about brands using memes for marketing? What concerns do you have?
8. Before wrapping up, I'd like to ask a couple more questions about memes in general. How much thought do you give to a meme?
  - a. How long do you spend looking at one? If you don't "get it," do you keep scrolling or try to figure it out? Does it depend on the subject and how interested you are? Does the account that posted or shared the meme factor into the time spent?
9. What long-term trends do you foresee involving memes? Are they here to stay?
  - a. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about memes in general or brands that use memes on social media?

### Focus Group Projective Construction Task

Prompt (for all stimuli): Please spend a moment looking at this meme. What stands out to you about it? If possible, provide a quick summary or tell a story that explains the meme or makes it meaningful to you.

**Figure 18**

*Memetic Stimulus Pairs for Focus Group Sessions*





imgflip.com

JAKE-CLARK-TUMBLR

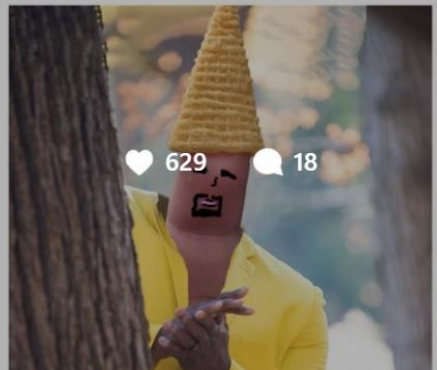
imgflip.com

JAKE-CLARK-TUMBLR

Looking at the Bugles in my pantry 5 minutes before dinner



Looking at the Bugles in my pantry 5 minutes before dinner





## Quantitative Phase: Meme Advertising Experiment

### Procedure

#### 1. Heuristic/irrelevant prime presentation

- *Groups 1 and 3:* Read and evaluate short essay related to reputation (heuristic prime)
  - Respond to brief distractor task after reading the essay
- *Groups 2 and 4:* Read and evaluate short essay related to travel (irrelevant prime)
  - Respond to brief distractor task after reading the essay

#### 2. Heuristic cue/no heuristic cue presentation

- *Groups 1 and 2:* View meme advertisements depicting prominent, recognizable brands (heuristic cue present)
  - Respond to attitudinal self-report measures after each meme is presented
- *Groups 3 and 4:* View meme advertisements depicting fictitious, unrecognizable brands (heuristic cue absent)
  - Respond to attitudinal self-report measures after each meme is presented

#### 3. Posttest

- All four groups complete the same posttest

## Measures and Stimuli

### Heuristic Prime

What others think of you is a very real, external part of you. It represents the collective mental impression everyone *but* you shares *about* you, a construct based partially on your own actions but also on the perceptions others have about others' perceptions of your actions. We only ever have influence over this—never control—as is the case with all things external to us, but it remains one of our most precious assets (far more important than any one job, house, car, or even, some would argue, money).

You can't stop others from maligning you but being in good standing can come to your rescue when people rise to your defense without your even knowing it. We are, in fact, all caretakers of one another. In a society in which simply being accused is enough to render a conviction in the court of public opinion, we would all do well to presume not only innocence but goodness until the facts prove otherwise. We all need to be kinder and gentler with one another.

Good standing provides you a target at which to keep aiming. Sometimes you may not feel like you deserve it, or that's it's better than you are. Rather than lament your weaknesses, let your standing serve as motivation for you to try to improve yourself. Being good inspires others. We all need positive role models, even the best and brightest among us.

Some may think this doesn't matter or shouldn't matter, that we should all focus on doing our best, on being our best, and let others think what they may. Certainly, we should never seek to manipulate what others think about us (it never works in the long run anyway), but to ignore the practical importance of what others think cheats us of many opportunities we might otherwise enjoy. Caring about this doesn't mean we need others to like us. It means recognizing that as human beings we often can't help judging a book by its cover and that as long as the book itself is good, there's nothing wrong with caring about having an attractive cover around it.

Distractor Task—*True or false?*

- $5+4-7 = 2$
- $9-3+5 = 8$
- $10+5+5-3-8 = 15$

### Irrelevant Prime

One of the most amazing aspects of traveling to Europe is how different everything looks. Cobblestone streets, narrow roads, and tiny apartment buildings are all so different from what we have here in the U.S. Especially in New York City where the roads are long and wide, it was amazing to see streets where barely one car can pass through. The cars themselves were so much smaller. In the U.S., it's quite common to see big SUV's or minivans...not in Europe. Even the cities themselves were so much different. In the U.S. when we think of a city, we think of something like New York City, huge skyscrapers, and buildings made of glass.

This is what I expected to see when I traveled to Europe for the first time. Rome and Athens were nothing like that. There wasn't a skyscraper in sight, and most of the buildings were extremely old. Here in the United States, everything seems so new compared to Europe. There

was a piazza in Rome literally sitting on top of an ancient stadium. Our tour guide took us into one home in Athens where a man redid his basement to find a huge pot which was over 2,000 years old. The mountain ranges were also beautiful. Coming from Long Island, I have only seen a few mountains in my lifetime. Being in Delphi, a city in the mountains of Greece, was breathtaking. The mountains and valleys looked like they went on forever. They made the 4-hour bus journeys more enjoyable.

If there is one thing I will never forget from my trip, it's something the tour guide said to us. On our last day in Rome when saying goodbye, she began to talk about how important traveling is and how she hopes this trip has given us an urge to want to explore the world more. At the end of her farewell, she said, "Even if you decide that you never want to travel again, remember what you saw and that you are all so fortunate."

Traveling is truly an amazing experience. I have learned a lot from the European countries I have traveled to and will continue to learn more as I further explore the world. As Ibn Battuta once said, "Traveling: It leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller."

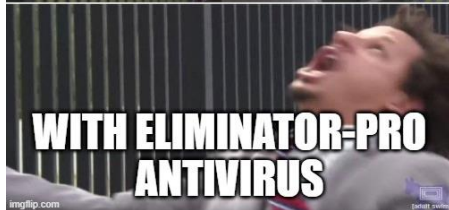
Distractor Task—*True or false?*

- $5+4-7 = 2$
- $9-3+5 = 8$
- $10+5+5-3-8 = 15$

**Figure 19**

*Memetic Stimulus Pairs for Online Experiment*







For each individual meme:

**Attitude Toward the Meme** — 7-point semantic differential items

Please indicate how you feel about the meme you just saw:

1. Bad  $\leftrightarrow$  Good
2. Negative  $\leftrightarrow$  Positive
3. Unfavorable  $\leftrightarrow$  Favorable
4. Dislike  $\leftrightarrow$  Like
5. Ineffective  $\leftrightarrow$  Effective
6. Not persuasive  $\leftrightarrow$  Persuasive
7. Not convincing  $\leftrightarrow$  Convincing
8. Confusing  $\leftrightarrow$  Straightforward
9. Stale  $\leftrightarrow$  Fresh
10. Not relevant to me  $\leftrightarrow$  Relevant to me

**Posttest**

**Reputation Heuristic Use** — 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type items

1. Purchasing products from brands I trust is important to me
2. Purchasing products from brands whose names I recognize is important to me
3. I prefer brand name products to off-brand products
4. Brand name alone is enough to convince me to purchase a product
5. All else equal, I prefer familiar products over unfamiliar ones

**Persuasion Knowledge**—1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type items

Persuasion Knowledge Scales of Sponsored Content (Boerman et al., 2018)

The reason brands are mentioned or shown in internet memes is to...

1. Stimulate people to want the advertised brand
2. Encourage people to buy the brand
3. Sell products
4. Make people think positively about the brand
5. Attract attention to the brand
6. Make people remember the brand

Brands sometimes pay content creators to show their brand in internet memes. How do you think they are trying to influence you with this? Please complete the following statement and indicate the extent to which you agree disagree: Brands try to influence me by...

7. Hiding the commercial purpose of showing the brand
8. Making sure it does not look like advertising
9. Making sure I am exposed to the brand
10. Placing the brand in a context that I like
11. Placing the brand in a context that people trust

**Need for Cognition** — 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type items.

Very Efficient Need for Cognition Scale (Coelho, Hanel, & Wolf, 2018)

\* denotes a reverse-scored item.

1. I prefer complex to simple problems.
2. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.
3. Thinking is not my idea of fun.\*
4. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.\*
5. I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.
6. I prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult, and important to one that is somewhat important but does not require much thought.

### **Demographics**

1. Age  
[drop-down menu 18-25]
2. Gender  
[male, female, other, prefer not to answer]
3. Ethnicity  
[White/Caucasian, Hispanic or Latino/a, African American, Native American, Asian American, Middle Eastern, other, prefer not to answer]
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?  
[Some high school/GED, high school diploma, some college, Bachelor's degree, graduate degree]
5. How much time do you spend on social media each day?  
[Less than 10 minutes, 10-30 minutes, 30-60 minutes, 1-2 hours, 2-3 hours, 3-4 hours, more than 4 hours]

## APPENDIX B: PSYCHOMETRIC ANALYSES

**Table 23**

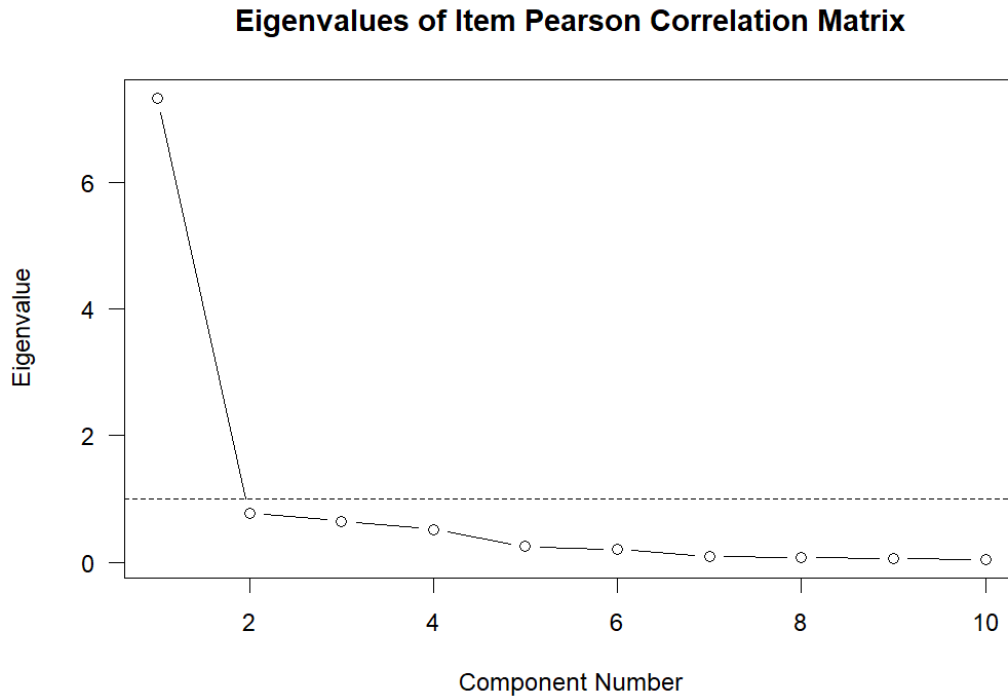
*Item Reliabilities and Fit Statistics for the Attitude Toward the Meme Scale for the Pilot Sample*

Item	<i>M</i>	$\alpha$ if Item Deleted	Infit Mean Square	Outfit Mean Square
1	3.25	0.95	1.14	0.90
2	3.43	0.95	0.83	0.84
3	3.57	0.94	0.72	0.51
4	3.90	0.94	1.15	1.08
5	3.49	0.95	0.69	1.27
6	5.07	0.95	0.90	1.02
7	4.19	0.95	0.93	0.71
8	4.58	0.94	1.06	0.76
9	5.00	0.94	0.81	0.93
10	4.49	0.95	0.73	0.86

*Note.* Item numbers correspond to those presented in Appendix A. Overall scale  $\alpha = 0.95$ . By [Rasch convention](#), infit and outfit mean squares are productive for measurement between 0.5-1.5.

**Figure 20**

*Scree Plot Depicting Unidimensionality for the Attitude Toward the Meme Scale for the Pilot Sample*



**Table 24**

*Item Reliabilities and Fit Statistics for the Reputation Heuristic Use Scale for the Pilot Sample*

Item	<i>M</i>	$\alpha$ if Item Deleted	Infit Mean Square	Outfit Mean Square
1	5.28	0.75	0.79	0.75
2	4.92	0.70	0.77	0.75
3	4.92	0.76	1.19	1.21
4	4.67	0.78	1.02	1.02
5	5.33	0.77	0.88	0.97

*Note.* Item numbers correspond to those presented in Appendix A. Overall scale  $\alpha = 0.79$ . By [Rasch convention](#), infit and outfit mean squares are productive for measurement between 0.5-1.5.

**Figure 21**

*Scree Plot Depicting Unidimensionality for the Reputation Heuristic Scale for the Pilot Sample*

