

HOW EMERGING INDIAN STARTUP BRANDS LEVERAGE MEMES FOR VISIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

In India's highly competitive industry, startups have major hurdles in building a brand identity, particularly with limited marketing resources. To solve these challenges, many new Indian companies are turning to digital media, specifically memes, as a low cost and effective technique. Brands may attract younger audiences while separating themselves from established competitors by using memes, which are noted for their humor, relatability, and virality. This study looks at how Indian Businesses intentionally use memes to generate popularity, drive consumer interaction, and shape brand identity. The study investigates the visual culture of memes, their function in digital marketing, and the power of humor in establishing emotional and social relationships using case studies of notable Indian startup.

Keywords: Indian startups, memes, brand identity, digital marketing, visual culture, social media.

Introduction

Background of Study

Over the last decade, India's startup ecosystem has grown at an unbeatable rate, driven by rapid technology breakthroughs, universal internet access, and a developing entrepreneurial mindset. The growth of social media platforms and the availability of affordable smartphones has played a crucial role in expanding access to online spaces, thereby giving startups with fresh avenues for reaching their target consumers. Despite this expansion, startups frequently face hurdles such as limited financial resources, strong competition, and the need to establish their own unique identity in an overcrowded market dominated by well-established firms.

The Indian market is distinguished by its diversity, cultural richness, and fast-paced consumer behavior, which presents both an opportunity and a challenge for new firms. Startups must negotiate these complications as they strive to grow a devoted customer base and establish a distinct brand presence. Traditional marketing tactics, which sometimes need significant financial inputs, are not necessarily viable for these new businesses. As a result, digital marketing has emerged as an appealing option, providing cost-effective ways to reach a larger audience. In today's digital marketing world, memes have emerged as particularly effective communication and engagement tools.

The Role of Memes in Contemporary Marketing

Memes, a type of visual digital material, use humor, cultural relevance, and relatability to express concepts in a simple and engaging way. Memes, which originated in internet culture, have grown into a popular form of expression that connects well with digitally active audiences. Memes are an appealing marketing strategy because of their natural virality, allowing firms to quickly spread their messaging across social media platforms. Unlike traditional commercials, which can need large costs in production and distribution, memes can be generated and spread with minimum resources, making them ideal for companies with tight budgets.

Memes serve as vehicles for brand narrative, customer involvement, and community building in modern marketing, in addition to providing hilarious content. By tapping into popular subjects, cultural references, and shared experiences, brands can generate memes that not only entertain but develop a

sense of connection with their audience. This degree of interaction is critical for companies looking to develop their brand identity and stand out in a competitive market.

The Underdog Advantage

Startups are frequently viewed as underdogs in the business world—small, ambitious players attempting to carve out a position among industry titans. This underdog status, while hard, also provides a distinct edge when used effectively. Memes allow entrepreneurs to embrace and promote their underdog story, positioning themselves as empathetic, innovative, and approachable entities. Startups can use comedy and satire to emphasize their journey, problems, and goals, connecting with audiences who value authenticity and originality.

The smart use of memes allows entrepreneurs to humanize their brand, making it more approachable and appealing to younger, technologically aware customers. Memes encourage organic interactions, building a sense of community and devotion among followers. This paper investigates how Indian businesses use memes to not just survive but thrive in a competitive climate by increasing recognition, engaging customers, and eventually establishing their brand identity.

The Impact of Social Media on Startup Marketing

The exponential rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, as well as newer sites like TikTok and Threads, has fundamentally transformed the marketing environment. Social media offers companies with a level playing field in which creativity and content quality frequently exceed cost restrictions. For Indian entrepreneurs, which sometimes operate with minimal marketing resources, social media provides a vital venue for brand promotion.

Memes, with their rapid humor, comedy, and cultural relevance, have evolved into a worldwide language on these sites. They provide an opportunity for companies to break through the digital clutter and attract the attention of their target audience. The virality of memes assures that a well-crafted meme may reach hundreds, if not millions, of users in a short period of time, giving firms outstanding attention.

This study will look into how Indian companies use meme marketing as a strategic tool to increase brand visibility. It investigates the visual and cultural characteristics of memes, the creative processes that underpin successful meme marketing, and the role of humor in establishing emotional and social relationships with customers. This study examines case studies of significant Indian startups to show the importance of memes in current digital marketing and their influence in establishing the brand identity of rising businesses in India.

Literature Review

“Social media as A Global Platform for Business and Branding: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges”, **Halliyavar and Shruthi (2017)** analyze how social media affects company branding in accordance with earlier studies on the transition of digital marketing from traditional advertising (**Aaker, 1991; Ogilvy, 1985**). Although social media is a cost-effective tool, their study points out drawbacks, such as the absence of defined tactics (**Braude, 2009**). Facebook is the most popular platform, which supports findings from studies on digital marketing (**Kelley & Jugenheimer, 2008**). The study emphasizes the importance of strategic execution for success, even while social media increases potential for worldwide branding.

“Meme Frameworks, A Semiotic Perspective on Internet Memes”, **Kearney (2019)** addresses internet memes using a semiotic lens to investigate their role in participatory culture and online communication. Drawing on Peirce's semiotic theory, the study examines how memes evolve as symbols influenced by

intertextuality and habit formation. The research also analyzes how memes influence political discourse, particularly online radicalization. In line with earlier research (Nagle, 2017; Metahaven, 2013), Kearney emphasizes memes' power to shape ideas and reinforce group identities. This work contributes to the greater discussion on the role of digital media in modern sociopolitical interactions.

“Internet Memes as a Field of Discursive Construction of Identity and Space of Resistance”, Pavlović (2016) examines internet memes as platforms for social critique and resistance as well as instruments for creating and destroying identities. The study looks at how memes have been reinterpreted as participatory symbols in digital culture, drawing on Dawkins' (1976) idea of memes as cultural replicators. The study highlights memes' function in influencing online discourse and challenging current narratives by relating them to identity theory (Hall, 1996). The study also highlights how intertextual memes are, how quickly they spread, and how they affect cultural and political representation.

“The Use of Viral Humorous Memes to Raise Awareness of a Service Through Social Media Platforms”, Hisham, AlSayed, and Saad (2021) Research how funny memes that go viral affect social media subscription intention, consumer interaction, and brand exposure. By encouraging casual, relatable conversations, memes improve brand engagement, according to the study, which uses Netflix as a case study. The results are consistent with earlier studies on memes as useful instruments for digital marketing (Shifman, 2013; Benaim, 2018). The study emphasizes how humor may influence online consumer behavior and increase customer loyalty, underscoring the necessity for firms to incorporate memes into their social media campaigns.

“No Prejudice Here – Examining Social Identity Work in Starter Pack Memes “, Eschler and Menking (2018) Examine how Reddit's "starter pack" memes help users express and construct their social identities. After analysing 500 memes, they discovered that they frequently perpetuate prejudices about race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The study found that memes are more than simply for fun; they affect how individuals see different groups in society. The authors relate starting packs to "prototypes" that use well-known imagery to simplify complicated identities. Their findings are related to previous studies on how memes affect online culture and reinforce social divides.

“Dilemmas of Branding for Startups – Opportunities and Challenges in the Digital Era”, Roshanzamir (2018) addresses the specific branding issues that startups confront owing to limited resources, a lack of internal organization, and unclear business strategies. The study focuses on how digitization provides new chances for entrepreneurs to build brand identity and connect with customers. It proposes a three-stage branding model—Emotion, Innovation, and Co-Creation—that emphasizes the importance of narrative, distinction, and consumer engagement in brand development. Using Coursera as a case study, the article shows how successful firms use digital platforms to increase exposure and trust. The study adds to branding literature by concentrating on early-stage startups rather than established organizations.

“Brand Strategy and Brand Evolution – Welcome to the World of the Meme”, This article investigates the concept that brands act like memes, developing and spreading based on their capacity to reproduce in a competitive market. Drawing on Dawkins' (1976) memetic theory, it contends that successful brands survive not via complexity but by being "fit" for their environment, much like natural selection in biology. The study contrasts traditional branding techniques, which emphasise strategic intricacy (Aaker, 1993; Keller, 2003), with the notion that brand longevity is dependent on adaptation and replication. It also investigates brand mutations, in which customer views change brand identity, sometimes positively, sometimes badly. The research adds to the branding literature by incorporating evolutionary and memetic ideas into brand planning.

“Social Media Marketing Strategies for Small Businesses”, **Isaac Deel (2023)** investigates how small businesses may effectively use social media for marketing, brand building, and consumer involvement. According to the survey, social media allows businesses to boost awareness and create relationships with their target audience at a low cost. It covers important tactics such as content planning, audience targeting, brand identity creation, and utilizing trends like video marketing and memes. Deel also emphasized the need of responding to platform changes and refining strategy with data-driven insights. The outcomes are consistent with previous studies on digital marketing, demonstrating that social media is an effective tool for small firms to compete in the market.

“Advertising to Gen-Z College Students with Memes – A Focus Group Study”, **Christopher Vardeman (2024)** examines how older Gen-Z college students view firms that use memes for advertising. The study found that memetic advertising is most effective for fun, lighter firms with an active social media presence, but less effective for serious brands that actively adopt meme culture for profit. The study found that comedy, cultural relevance, and social ties are essential for successful meme marketing.

This study focuses on a significant research gap by studying how Indian startups employ memes for exposure and brand recognition. While previous study has focused on worldwide markets, nothing is known about meme marketing inside India's startup environment. This study analyzes memes to better understand their efficacy as a branding tool and their influence on digital engagement.

Research Methodology

This study combines a qualitative and quantitative research technique, integrating meme content analysis and startup case studies. The data collection focuses on startups that use social media platform such as Instagram to distribute memes. To further assess engagement levels and customer responses to meme marketing methods, brand-created posts will be analyzed using likes, comments, and audience interactions. A comparative examination of meme techniques across the five startups is carried out to identify patterns.

Objectives

- To explore how Indian startups use memes to gain visibility.
- To identify the visual element of memes that are attractive to Indian audiences.
- To analyze the influence of meme marketing on audience engagement and brand perception.

Data Collection

- Analysis of meme-based content produced by Indian startups (e.g., Zepto, Foxtale Skin, Blur India, Schmooze, Burger Singh).
- Analysis of audience reactions to memes (likes and comments).

Case Studies

a) Zepto: (Quick-Commerce & Grocery Delivery) Zepto presents itself as a 10-minute grocery delivery service that caters to urban clients such as busy professionals, students, and impulse buyers. The company thrives on convenience, speed, and cost, making it a key player in the quick-commerce market.

Zepto's meme marketing approach is largely focused on pop culture references, festival trends, and viral content on the internet. Zepto makes grocery shopping feel easy and even enjoyable by employing comedy about singlehood, late-night desires, and the last-minute worry of running out of basics. The

company frequently promotes its service as a savior in critical situations, underlining its promise of speed and efficiency.

Figure no.1 is a post created by Zepto in February 2025 during the Valentine's week. It is a post with a humorous take on singlehood, with 701 likes and positive response in the comment section. Using humor, the audience (Gen Z and Millennials) connects and engages with jokes and references to Valentine's Day and Friday.)

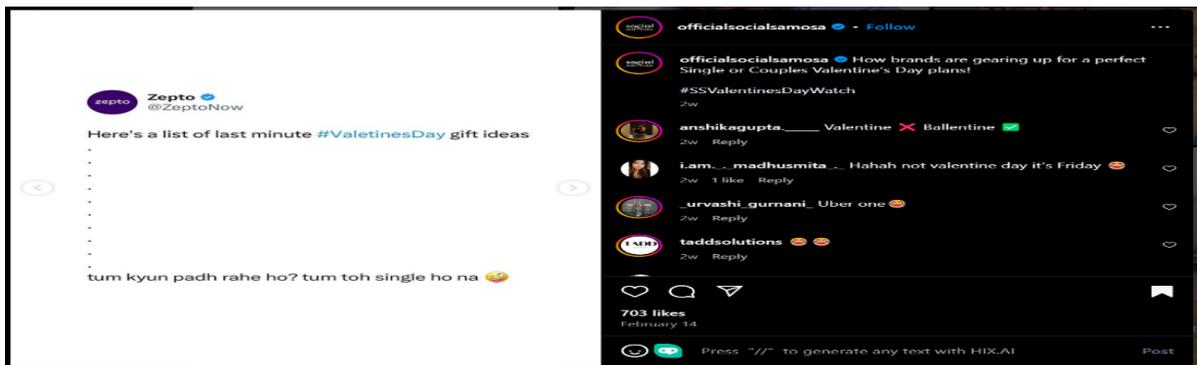


Figure no.1- Zepto Meme, Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DGDcGM6SWSv/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

b) Foxtale Skin: (Skincare & Beauty) FoxTale Skin is a science-based, dermatologist-approved skincare line that focuses on hydration, barrier restoration, and unique skincare treatments. It competes with companies such as Minimalist, Dot & Key, and Plum, bringing expert skincare to modern customers.

FoxTale Skin takes a self-aware and lighthearted approach to memes, making skincare enjoyable and accessible. The content frequently focuses on the fascination with skincare regimens, the excitement (and confusion) over new skincare components, and the challenges of sticking to a daily regimen. By infusing comedy into everyday situations, the brand establishes a deep emotional connection with its target audience. Furthermore, FoxTale Skin engages users with interactive aspects like as quizzes, polls, and call-to-action postings, which promote community involvement and brand loyalty.



Figure no.2- Foxtale Skin Meme, Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DGNtbrCI_Ff/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Figure no.2 is a fun post on removing makeup before bed that has 1022 likes and positive engaging comments. It was posted in February 2025. Users found it relatable and have expressed love for skincare, and some comments reflect their addiction to skincare routines.

c) **Blur India** (Beauty & Cosmetics) Blur India is a trendy, vegan, cruelty-free beauty company aimed at Gen Z and millennial consumers. The company sets out itself with its stylish, simple, and gender-neutral cosmetics approach, making it inclusive and attractive to a modern audience. It adopts a strong, quirky, and distinctive branding strategy.

Blur India's meme marketing strategy focuses on relatable beauty problems, such as cosmetic tutorials that never end out as planned, eyeliner mistakes, and foundation shade mismatches. The company employs a casual and welcoming tone to make beauty conversations feel approachable, ensuring that consumers are not forced by unrealistic beauty standards. Instead of aggressively pushing its products, Blur India smoothly incorporates comedy into its material, softly highlighting its beauty line in a way that feels natural and engaging.



Figure no.3- Blurindia Meme, Source:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C9rngUFS2cj/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Figure no.3 is engaging post of Blur India with a relatable meme about trying multiple makeup tutorials. With 1048 likes and positive interactive comment section, this was uploaded in July 2024. Users interact with the meme by asking questions regarding delivery and leaving comments that are humorous.

d) **Burger Singh** (Quick-Service Restaurants – Indian Fast Food) Burger Singh sets itself apart from worldwide fast-food franchises such as McDonald's, Burger King, and KFC by serving Indian-inspired burgers packed with strong, unique tastes. It mostly caters to youthful urban consumers who prefer fusion dining experiences.

Burger Singh's meme marketing focuses on cultural relevancy, connecting with Indian people through cricket, Bollywood, and regional comedy. The brand routinely engages in India vs. Pakistan sports banter, which is a high-engagement issue that appeals to sports fans and gives a sense of lighthearted rivalry. By portraying its burgers as an integral element of watching sports, relaxing with friends, or celebrating victories, the brand taps into emotions and social connections, making its offerings become more than simply food—they become part of an experience.



Figure no.4- BurgerSingh Meme, Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CyYg01uSP65/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==
Figure 4 is a post by Burger Singh that includes humor and Urdu references to the India-Pakistan cricket match. This was posted in October 2023, with 204 likes and a hilarious comment section. Users are connecting with memes through laughter and regional reference.

e) **Schmooze:** (Dating & Social Networking) Schmooze is a distinct dating app that emphasizes comedy and common pop cultural interests, distinguishing itself from competitors such as Tinder, Hinge, and Bumble. It targets to Gen Z and millennials who desire a fun and unusual approach to dating.

Schmooze's meme marketing is heavily influenced by pop culture, incorporating puns, movie allusions, and topical memes into their material. The brand encourages users to "match over memes," which makes the dating experience feel more informal and pleasant rather than serious and stressful. Its material frequently incorporates festive and occasion-specific comedy, such as Diwali puns, which increase seasonal engagement. Schmooze makes comedy the core aspect of their branding, creating a laid-back and fun ambiance that connects with younger customers.



Figure no.5- Schmooze Meme, Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DBwLVj6SHuy/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Figure no. 5 is a Diwali-themed pun post that was published during Diwali festival in October 2024. It has 900 likes and the comments are engaging, with users making meme related jokes.

Research Analysis and Findings

a) **Analysis of Meme Marketing Strategies:** The five case studies—Zepto, Foxtale Skin, Blur India, Burger Singh, and Schmooze—show how meme marketing has become an essential tool for brand communication, particularly among Generation Z and millennial customers. A comparative analysis of their approaches reveals key insights into meme-driven branding and audience engagement.

i) **Humor and Relatability as Core Elements:** All five brands use humor as a main way to engage their consumers. Zepto's memes focus on ordinary urban issues such as grocery shopping urgency, while Foxtale Skin and Blur India make beauty and skincare rituals enjoyable and engaging. Burger Singh uses cultural allusions, notably cricket and Bollywood, to generate highly engaging material. Meanwhile, Schmooze infuses comedy into its app offering by allowing consumers to "match over memes." This demonstrates that relatability is an important aspect in meme marketing success, since it helps people feel emotionally linked to the brand. By including similar experiences, brands can change their content from just promotional to something more enjoyable, ultimately strengthening their identity.

ii) **Audience Engagement and Interactions:** The engagement figures (likes and comments) show how effectively these brands connect with their audience.

- **Zepto's** Valentine's Week meme received 701 likes and positive responds, showing how humor about relationships may increase engagement.
- **Foxtale Skin's** meme on makeup removal before bed received 1,022 likes, indicating a strong emotional response and a shared interest in skincare.

- **Blur India's** relatable beauty tutorial problems drew 1,048 likes and multiple responses, with users discussing cosmetics and product queries in the comments while having fun.
- **Burger Singh's** cricket-themed meme amassed 204 likes, demonstrating how sports-themed humor connects with regional and national audiences.
- **Schmooze's** Diwali-themed pun received 900 likes, confirming that seasonally appropriate comedy increases engagement.

These findings confirm the idea that memes promote interactive communities in which users engage in beyond mere consumption—they participate, comment, and establish digital conversations.

iii) Cultural and Seasonal Relevance: Brands that use references to culture and festival-related themes into their meme marketing see increased engagement.

- **Burger Singh's** India vs. Pakistan cricket meme tapped into Indian popular culture's obsession with sports rivalry.
- **Schmooze's** Diwali-themed meme used festive humor to engage consumers over the holiday season.
- **Zepto's** Valentine's meme tapped into relationship humor, a trendy topic every year.

Brands may enhance exposure and engage in existing online conversations by aligning meme content with cultural events and broadly relatable occasions.

Key Findings

- **Memes Enhance Brand Identity-** A strategic application of humor enables companies to create a distinct personality that is consistent with the values and interests of their target audience. Zepto's humorous perspective on grocery shopping urgency, as well as Foxtale Skin's humorous skincare memes, contribute to the brand's youthful, approachable image.
- **High Engagement Through Emotional Connection-** Relatable information, particularly around shared consumer experiences, promotes organic connections and digital communities. Blur India's meme about cosmetics instructional mishaps shows how self-deprecating humor stimulates audience engagement.
- **Festive and Trend-Based Content Boosts Visibility-** Burger Singh and Schmooze effectively used cultural themes, demonstrating that seasonally appropriate material generates better engagement rates. Capitalizing on hot subjects increases the shareability of memes and expands brand reach.
- **Meme Marketing as a Soft-Selling Technique-** Instead than actively pushing their products, brands employ memes as an indirect, non-intrusive marketing tactic. Blur India and FoxTale Skin effectively integrate their goods into amusing stories, making marketing appear natural rather than forced.

Conclusion

The research highlights on the transforming influence of memes in Indian startups' digital marketing strategies. Memes, with their humor, relatability, and cultural relevance, have emerged as an effective tool for raising brand awareness, building emotional connections, and driving audience engagement. Using memes, companies may overcome budget limits and compete with established brands in a congested market.

The case studies of Zepto, Foxtale Skin, Blur India, Burger Singh, and Schmooze show how memes can be employed in a variety of ways to establish brand identity and connect with target audiences. From pop culture references and regional humor to self-aware satire and festive puns, these firms have effectively used memes to establish a unique and engaging brand presence.

In conclusion, memes are more than simply a trend; they are a strategic tool that helps Indian startups achieve success in a competitive digital market. By emphasizing humor, cultural relevance, and relatability, companies may build a strong brand identity, develop loyalty, and achieve long-term success. Future research could explore at the long-term effects of meme marketing on brand loyalty and consumer behavior.

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