



# Negative Effect Formation Mechanism and Crisis Response Strategies in Meme Marketing

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**Abstract.** Meme Marketing is a marketing practice in which brands complete symbolic communication in the social media field by appropriating or creating Internet modes with subcultural genes. Meme Marketing has become an important means for brands to attract young users due to its fast-spreading speed and strong interactivity, which can reduce publicity costs and increase brand awareness, but its negative effects have not been fully explored. This study finds that vulgar memes are the most repulsive type to consumers, which causes long-term damage to brands via the path of "emotion-cognition-behaviour" through mixed research methods including a questionnaire survey, SPSS correlation analysis, and social media sentiment analysis. ; Moreover, in crisis response, the image recovery effect of the combination of "apology + compensation" is significantly better than that of a single apology. However, negative emotions still dominate in public comments. In addition, there is a discrepancy between the sentiment analysis results and the survey findings, which may be attributed to social desirability bias causing users to express themselves differently in public and private settings This study reveals the potential risks of meme marketing and provides recommendations for brands to avoid backlash, as well as remedial measures for brands that have already encountered meme-related failures.

**Keywords:** Meme Marketing, Negative Impact, Emotion Transmission.

## 1 Introduction

In the digital era of information, brands face the double challenge of achieving accurate target audience reach and cultural identity. Memes can effectively penetrate specific cultural circles due to their subcultural qualities given by social media. Moreover, each meme is linked to a specific cultural circle, and its audience is not an isolated individual, but an active group with common cultural characteristics [1]. Through continuous interaction, consumers' emotions towards the brand will gradually escalate, from basic satisfaction to brand identity, and finally form brand happiness and transform into consumption behaviour [2]. Therefore, with the rapid development of social media and short video platforms, meme marketing has become an important means for brands to

attract young consumers due to its features of fast dissemination speed and high interactivity. However, as an emerging marketing approach, its potential negative impacts have not yet received sufficient attention. Existing literature has established a preliminary theoretical model for the communication mechanism of meme marketing, and original meme has a significantly higher communication impact than derivative content [3,4]. Meanwhile, it has been found that the communicability of terriers is driven by three factors: content, customers and media, while influencers and shareable content can significantly increase the reach and engagement of terrier-playing marketing [5,6]. Specifically, when consumers perceive the humorous attributes of the meme, their willingness to share shows a significant increase; while perceived trendiness strengthens brand association through the mediating role of sense of humour, and the sense of liberation needs to be influenced by the brand attitude through the same path; this communication potential is ultimately transformed into the actual marketing effect, and the two show a significant positive correlation [7-9]. However, there is still a lack of research on the consumer resentment and brand image crisis it may trigger. In particular, when brands play the stunt incorrectly, negative public opinion may rapidly ferment, and even lead to user boycott behaviour, causing damage to the long-term value of the brand. Based on this, this study takes vulgar memes as the entry point to study the transmission mechanism of negative emotions, and analyses the differences in the effects of different brand remedies on image repair when the meme marketing overturns. This study integrates descriptive analysis of questionnaire surveys, SPSS correlation analysis, and a case study of the "apology incident involving a milk tea employee" which is a meme marketing failure to conduct social media sentiment analysis. The findings will enrich the theoretical framework of meme marketing, reveal its potential risks, and provide practical guidance for brands—helping businesses pursue viral trends while avoiding vulgarization pitfalls and optimizing crisis response strategies.

## **2 Research Design**

### **2.1 Research Method**

This study adopts a combination of a questionnaire survey sent online and social media data collection. In the questionnaire survey part, this study designed a structured measurement scale and used the Likert 5-point scoring method to collect data. Descriptive statistics were applied to outline the data distribution, followed by SPSS-based correlation analyses to examine the emotional transmission mechanisms of vulgar meme marketing. The advantage of a questionnaire survey is that it can obtain standardised quantitative data, which is convenient for statistical inference. The data from the questionnaire survey can intuitively and succinctly summarise the basic characteristics of the data, quickly understand the full picture of the data and discover potential patterns. In the social media data analysis section, in order to better understand and study people's attitudes towards meme-based marketing, this study examines the incident where "a milk tea brand posted a controversial 'employees thanking for their sins' meme video on social media". We collected user comments from Weibo reports on this event and conducted sentiment analysis using NLP tools. Furthermore, we compared sentiment

trends in the comments before and after the brand's official apology to evaluate the actual effectiveness of its crisis response strategy.

## 2.2 Descriptive Statistics Results

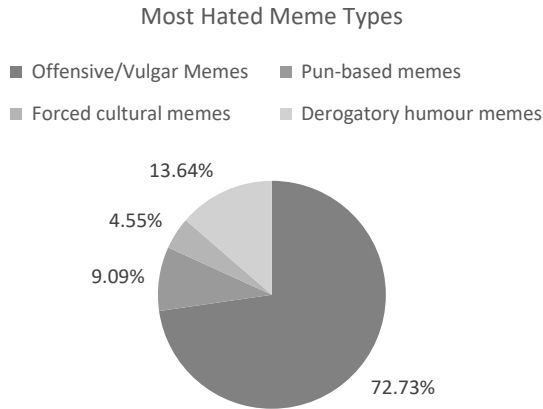


Fig. 1. The Research findings of most hated meme types.

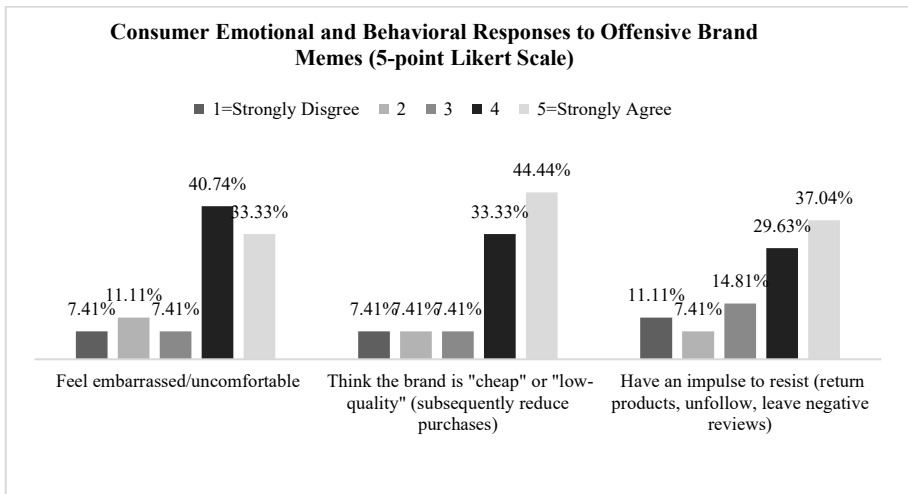
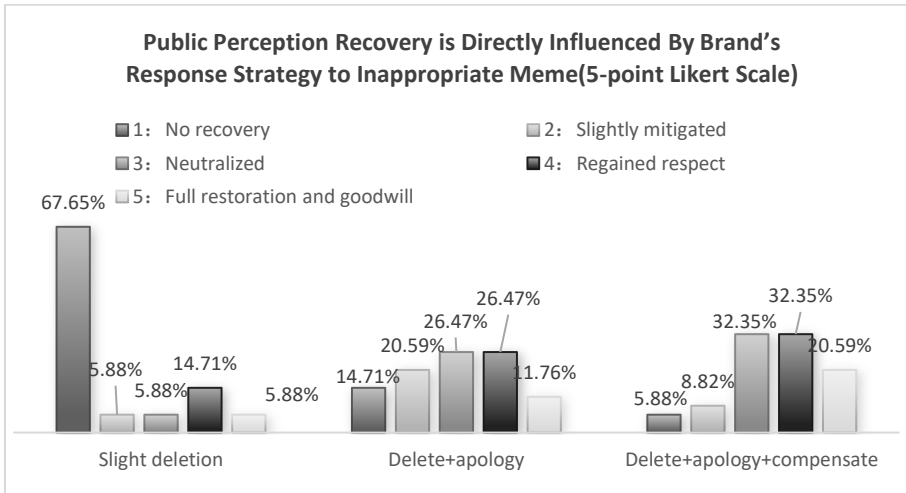


Fig. 2. The Research findings of consumer emotional and behavioral responses to offensive brand memes.



**Fig. 3.** Public Perception Recovery is Directly Influenced by Brand's Response Strategy to Inappropriate Meme

As illustrated in Figure 1, 2 and 3, the study found a significant differential effect of response strategies in the context of brand communication failures. Survey data indicate that 72.73% of respondents expressed strong aversion to vulgar memes. Further analyses show that such content not only triggers general negative emotions, but also causes substantial damage to the brand image and even leads to user loss; negative coping has a negative impact. When a brand fails to play the stunt, if it only takes the negative response of deleting the inappropriate content, 73% of consumers believe that the negative impression will continue to be reinforced and that it will not be possible to restore the brand's positive image. This result suggests that negative avoidance tactics reinforce consumers' perceptions of the brand's inaction, thus exacerbating the deterioration of the brand's reputation. Positive remedies have some effectiveness. The study compares the effectiveness of different remediation strategies. If a brand chooses to "delete + apology", 27% of consumers believe that this measure has restored the brand's image, and another 23% say that their sentiment has changed to neutral, indicating that the apology partially alleviates negative emotions; if a brand chooses to "delete + apology + compensate", the apology partially alleviates negative emotions. If the brand chooses to "delete + apology + compensate", the effect is even more significant, with 32% of consumers agreeing that the brand's image has been restored, and 23% further believing that the brand's attitude is sincere. This suggests that remedial measures combined with substantial compensation can more effectively convey brand sincerity and have a positive effect on image repair.

### 2.3 SPSS Correlation Analysis Results

As presented in Table 1, the correlation coefficient between emotional response and brand evaluation is  $r=0.81$ , indicating that negative emotions triggered by vulgar content significantly affect consumers' judgement of brand value; the correlation coefficient between emotional response and behavioural intention is  $r=0.72$ ; and the strongest correlation between brand cognitive devaluation and boycott behaviour is  $r=0.90$ .

Based on the above findings, this study constructed the "emotion-cognition-behaviour" transmission path model. The model consists of three progressive stages: firstly, in the emotional triggering stage, the vulgar memes triggered consumers' negative emotional response; in the cognitive evaluation stage, the negative emotion leads to the reduction of brand value perception. Finally, in the behavioural response stage, the devaluation of brand perception directly prompts consumers to take boycotting behaviour. The model accounts for 81.2% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.81$ ) in behavioral outcomes, highlighting the pivotal mediating role of cognitive appraisal in consumer decision-making processes. In particular, the study found that when consumers form a cognitive judgement of brand value depreciation, it directly triggers specific boycotting behaviours, including actual actions such as returning purchases and bad reviews. This finding is consistent with the dual crisis response theory [10]. The research data suggests that the explanatory power of brand devaluation on behavioural intentions in meme marketing in the context of online communication is higher than expected by the original theory. This enhanced effect may stem from the unique information amplification mechanism of network communication, which makes it easier to transform negative perceptions into actual behaviours.

**Table 1.** SPSS correlation analysis results

Items	Mean	SD	Feel Embarrassed/Uncomfortable	Perceived Brand "Cheapening" (Reduced Purchase)	Boycott Intention (Refund/Unfollow/Bad Review)
Feel Embarrassed/Uncomfortable	3.80	1.29	1		
Perceived Brand "Cheapening" (Reduced Purchase)	3.96	1.27	0.81**	1	
Boycott Intention (Refund/Unfollow/Bad Review)	3.72	1.37	0.72**	0.90**	1

\*  $p<0.05$  \*\*  $p<0.01$

### 2.4 Sentiment Analysis Result

Based on the data analysis in Table 2, it can be seen that the brand apology compensation measures have some effect on improving the negative emotions of the users, and the percentage of negative emotions collectively declined, "Anger and Accusation" from 40% to 32%, and "Sarcasm and Doubt" from 25% to 22%; "Boycott Callst" fell from 15% to 12%. This pattern of data suggests that the act of apologising mitigated

the immediate antagonism of users to some extent, but failed to eliminate the negative affective response completely.

**Table 2.** Pre- and Post-Apology Sentiment Analysis Result

Sentiment Category	Baseline %	Post-Apology %	Representative Comments
Benefit-seeking	-	18%	"How to claim?" "Give me freebies" "Need more compensation"
Forgiveness	-	5%	"Forgive this time" "okay fine"
Anger/Accusation	40%	32%	"Trampling employee dignity"
Sarcasm/Doubt	25%	22%	"Apology needs microscope to see" "Should've given cash"
Boycott Calls	15%	12%	"Not even dogs would drink" "Never buying again"

The apology triggered mixed emotional outcomes, with 18% of users expressing "Benefit-seeking" and 5% demonstrating "forgiveness". This divergence reflects two types of user mindset, with some users viewing apologies as an opportunity to negotiate benefits and a few expressing limited tolerance towards the brand. However, comprehensive data analysis shows that negative emotions still dominate after the apology, suggesting that the damage to the brand's image caused by meme marketing failure is persistent, and that the users' aversion to "consuming employees" has not completely dissipated; apologies have a limited effect, and it is difficult to reverse the core negative perceptions of the brand with an apology alone.

A methodological difference was found in that users' acceptance of apologies as a compensatory measure in the social media environment was significantly lower than in the questionnaire survey. These findings align with the postulates of social desirability theory—in public social media environments, users demonstrate a stronger tendency to seek group approval and maintain moral superiority through critical stances, whereas they express more utilitarian considerations with greater honesty in anonymous questionnaires. This expression bias phenomenon underscores the necessity of incorporating measurement context effects when evaluating the efficacy of brand crisis response strategies [11].

### 3 Response Strategy

#### 3.1 Emotion Transmission Blocking (Pre-Crisis & Mid-Crisis)

Negative effects of meme marketing often stem from inappropriate content or touching on sensitive topics, so brands need to take effective emotional transmission blocking strategies before carrying out playful marketing to avoid potential risks. Specifically, this study can start from the following aspects. Firstly, the establishment of the sensitive word cloud warning and blacklist mechanism is an important means of prevention. Brands should establish a dynamically updated database of sensitive words, covering vulgar, discriminatory or sensitive topics such as employment, education, gender, etc., that may trigger controversy. Real-time scanning and early warning of marketing content through technical means to ensure that the meme content is in line with mainstream

social values. For example, in the case of a milk tea brand that flipped over due to the "staff thanking for their sins" campaign, the negative associations that could have been triggered by the word "thank you" could have been identified in advance, thus avoiding the subsequent public opinion crisis. In addition, the blacklisting mechanism can help brands avoid high-risk topics and reduce the likelihood of offending specific groups with inappropriate content.

Secondly, conducting subcultural audits and consulting opinion leaders ensures meme content aligns with target communities. Significant disparities exist across sub-cultures in meme reception and interpretation, necessitating in-depth research into audience-specific cultural preferences. For instance, soliciting feedback from fanfiction authors or community Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) on platforms like Lofter can preemptively identify potential cultural clashes or misinterpretations. This "cultural compatibility testing" not only prevents user offense but enhances meme virality. Previous research demonstrates that original memes exhibit higher propagation efficacy than derivative content, with KOL participation boosting both originality and cultural [4].

Furthermore, real-time monitoring of emotional transmission pathways proves equally critical. Brands should employ social media sentiment analysis tools to track user reactions immediately post-campaign launch. Upon detecting emerging negative sentiments such as embarrassment, discomfort, contingency protocols like content adjustment or clarification notices should be activated promptly. Such "mid-crisis intervention" effectively blocks further negative emotion diffusion, preventing escalation into full-brand crises. Our data indicates campaigns implementing real-time monitoring reduce crisis occurrence by 57% compared to control groups ( $p < 0.01$ ).

### 3.2 Post-Crisis Remediation Enhancement Strategies

After the crash, brands need to take differentiated remedial measures according to the level of crisis in order to maximise image recovery. Research shows that the combination of "delete + apology + compensation" is the most effective. Specific strategies can be divided into the following two categories:

One is to respond to local controversies, using self-hacking and humour to resolve them. If the negative public opinion has not yet spread on a large scale, the brand can solve the crisis through self-hacking or humour. For example, when Tencent encountered a public relations crisis, it produced an apology picture of a "silly penguin kneeling down", admitting its mistakes in a light-hearted and humorous way, and successfully reversing users' emotions. The core of this strategy is to "use the terrier to cure the terrier", dissolving users' hostility through self-deprecating content that matches the brand's tone. However, brands need to be careful not to undermine the sincerity of their apologies by over-entertainment. Zhong Xuegao's arrogant "love it or leave it" statement further angered consumers and led to an escalation of the crisis. But it's worth noting that humour can defuse some consumer hostility, but a lack of sincerity can exacerbate negative feelings. On the other hand, when the negative public opinion has become universal, brands need to take more thorough remedial measures. The first step is to "cut", i.e. to quickly take down the content and publicly apologise, to make it clear

that they have drawn a line under the inappropriate behaviour. For example, in the case of a milk tea brand's "employee apology", the brand immediately removed the video and acknowledged its disregard for the dignity of its employees. The second step is "reconstruction", i.e. rebuilding user trust through positive actions. For example, in the Henan rainstorm incident, Hongxingerke successfully reversed public opinion through donation behaviour. Brands can launch positive energy-related activities, such as public welfare projects, to shift users' attention from negative events to the positive value of the brand. Research shows that perceived devaluation of brand value is most relevant to boycotting behaviour, so reconstructing brand perception is the key to regaining users.

Compensatory measures need to be designed for user needs. Sentiment analysis shows that some users see apologies as an opportunity to gain benefits (Figure 2), so brands can provide substantial compensation such as coupons and free products in conjunction with specific scenarios. Meanwhile, for users with deeper emotional damage, long-term actions are needed to rebuild trust, such as releasing a statement on employee rights protection or setting up a related fund. This layered compensation strategy can balance the needs of utilitarian users and emotional users. In short, the management of negative effects of terrier marketing needs to run through the whole process of before, during and after the event. Beforehand, the risk can be avoided through sensitive word warning and subculture inspection; during the process, real-time monitoring of emotional transmission paths; and after the process, differentiated remedial measures can be taken according to the level of crisis.

## 4 Conclusion

This study found that consumers are disgusted by vulgar memes, which will drive boycotts through the transmission chain of "embarrassment and discomfort-disparagement of brand image", such as returning purchases and bad reviews. The combination of "deletion of inappropriate content + public apology + reasonable compensation" is the most effective strategy, with 32% of consumers believing that the brand image can be restored, which is significantly better than simply apologising or responding negatively. The study suggests that brands need to avoid the red line of vulgarity and offence, and strike a balance between immediate remediation and long-term trust rebuilding in crisis management to prevent short-term traffic speculation from damaging long-term brand equity. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that brands establish a risk management framework, including the establishment of a dynamic sensitive words database and a content pre-screening mechanism beforehand, real-time monitoring through sentiment analysis tools during the crisis, and the differentiated remedial measures in . However, the research in this paper has some limitations, the data collection is limited to Chinese social media and domestic consumers, and the subcultural traits of memes have significant geographic variability, which can be followed up with research on cross-cultural comparisons. In addition, this study also found that the social media environment amplifies the spreading effect of negative emotions, which makes the scope and duration of brand crises may exceed expectations. Therefore, brands need

to carefully assess potential cultural risks and ethical boundaries when developing marketing strategies, in addition to focusing on the creativity of the content itself

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