



Scrolling or Thinking?: An Exploratory Study on  
How Consumers Cognitively Process and  
Perceive Meme-Based Short-Form Video  
Marketing

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<p><b>Abstract:</b></p> <p>As traditional digital marketing loses effectiveness among younger demographics, brands are increasingly turning to meme marketing to foster engagement through humor, relatability, and cultural relevance. A recent development in this domain is the rise of branded short-form video (SFV) memes, as platforms like TikTok and Instagram shift toward video-dominant content. However, this new format presents additional cognitive processing challenges due to dynamic audiovisual elements and the fast-paced nature of online consumption.</p> <p>While existing research has primarily focused on static image meme formats, this thesis addresses the gap surrounding SFV meme marketing by exploring how Generation Z consumers cognitively process branded SFV memes on TikTok. Using the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as an enabling lens, the aim was to explore how consumers engage with these memes through both central (systematic) and peripheral (heuristic) processing routes and what potential brand and consumer outcomes arise as a result.</p> <p>A comprehensive review of literature on the three main topics of digital content marketing, video marketing, and processing fluency provides the theoretical foundation for this research. Literature on meme marketing and SFV marketing were also reviewed in conjunction with these topics.</p> <p>A qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews was employed to collect insights from eight Finnish Generation Z participants active on TikTok and familiar with meme marketing. As supporting material for interviews, a video elicitation method was employed in which respondents were exposed to four branded SFV memes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, followed by a thematic qualitative analysis.</p> <p>The findings reveal that consumers mainly process branded SFV memes heuristically, relying on superficial cues such as humor, platform-native visuals, and trending sounds, to make quick judgements. However, a combination of both peripheral and central route processing also emerged when memes combined entertainment with informational or personally relevant content. As a result, brand awareness increased, but there was limited attitude change or purchase intent. Therefore, these insights position SFV meme marketing as a top-of-funnel complementary marketing strategy most suitable for non-serious brands aiming to build brand awareness with young consumers.</p>	
<b>Keywords:</b> meme marketing, social media marketing, Generation Z consumers, cognitive processing, consumer perceptions, attitudes, TikTok	

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, brands face growing challenges in capturing consumer attention and fostering meaningful engagement with their social media marketing efforts. Traditional social media advertising, such as banner ads and influencer marketing, is losing effectiveness due to rising ad fatigue, decreasing click-through rates, and growing ad avoidance among consumers, especially Generation Z (Malodia et al., 2022). As a result, meme marketing has emerged as a high-engagement strategy, using humor and relatability to seamlessly integrate into users' social media feeds (Razzaq et al., 2023).

A meme refers to an idea, concept, or trend in the form of an image, text, GIF, or video that spreads virally online as it adapts and evolves through social sharing. Memes leverage sarcasm, humor, and quiddity to convey a message or idea. (Shifman, 2013). According to eMarketer (2021), memes are the third most shared type of content on social media, and this popularity has now gained recognition in the marketing world through the development of the social media market strategy known as meme marketing (Razzaq et al., 2023). In a marketing context, branded memes are meme-inspired content created or modified by a brand on its social media channels to engage with consumers in an informal and entertaining manner (Godey et al., 2016). Unlike traditional advertising that may feel intrusive or overly promotional, memes blend seamlessly into consumers' social media feeds, making them more enjoyable and shareable (Malodia et al., 2022).

Meme marketing has risen in popularity on brands' social media platforms as a mode of marketing communication due to a multitude of advantages. Firstly, meme-based marketing is highly cost-efficient compared to traditional advertising, as it is an organic form of content posted on social media. Secondly, meme-based marketing utilizes existing popular memes, which makes them easy to create and automatically enables the target consumer to relate to the advertisement context. (Malodia et al., 2022). Thirdly, given the popularity of memes- exemplified by the fact that 75% of social media users aged 13-36 regularly share memes (Ypulse, 2019)- marketers can naturally engage with their audiences. These advantages then translate into tangible outcomes, with meme marketing yielding exceptional engagement results with a 30% engagement rate on social media in comparison to the 1% engagement rate on Google Adwords. (Razzaq et al., 2024).

Academic literature on meme marketing has evolved over the past decade with most research either having focused on static image memes (Kim & Baek, 2024; Razzaq et al., 2023; Razzaq et al., 2024; Shen et al., 2023) or no specified format (Kim & Kim, 2024;

Malodia et al., 2022). Studies have examined meme marketing's impact on brand engagement (Kim & Kim, 2024; Malodia et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2023), brand love (Kim & Baek, 2024), brand image (Teng et al., 2021), and brand recall (Yang, 2022).

Against this background, the newest development in meme marketing is the rise of short-form video (SFV) memes, combining the virality of memes with the immersive engagement of SFV platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts (Razzaq et al., 2023). These platforms capitalize on the fast-paced nature of online consumption, offering bite-sized, entertaining videos (Kim & Kim, 2024). In comparison to traditional video marketing, SFVs are more likely to achieve virality on social media (Jiang et al., 2024), making them suitable for meme marketing due to memes' inherent viral nature.

A prime example of effective meme marketing can be seen with Duolingo, the language learning app. By participating in viral trends and meme culture on their TikTok, they grew their followers from 50,000 to nearly 5 million in their first year on the app (Stahl, 2022). Another successful example of meme marketing is Wendy's use of satirical jokes and memes on Twitter, which more than doubled Wendy's number of mentions and re-shares (Kao et al., 2020). These two brand cases exemplify the effectiveness of meme marketing when it comes to self-promotion.

However, despite the benefits and meme-marketing success stories, brands face several challenges in the use of this marketing strategy, particularly when it comes to SFV memes. Given that social media platforms are increasingly prioritizing SFV content (Mulier et al., 2021) and SFV memes are capturing the attention of both brands and consumers, it is important to address these challenges, further exemplified by how companies have been hesitant to implement memes into their marketing communication (Kao et al., 2020). Kao, Hong, Perusse, and Sheng (2020) attributed this slow implementation to the fear brands possess of being perceived as inauthentic and therefore being susceptible to user-generated anti-branding. While meme marketing can offer brands increased reach, cultural relevance, and organic engagement (Malodia et al., 2022), it also presents notable challenges regarding brand authenticity, consumer expectations, and execution complexity.

### **1.1 Research problem**

Firstly, brands face the risk of coming off as inauthentic when trying to partake in meme culture. Recent research indicates that while 41% of consumers (and 49% of Generation Z) want brands to participate in meme culture and social media trends, only 25% (31% for Generation Z) want to see brands use popular phrases, slang, and expressions in their

content, indicating that brands need to be careful that their content does not come off as forced when posting online. (Bevilaqua & Miller, 2024). It is evident that there is a demand for the use of branded memes, but if it is not done correctly, it may be met with backlash for trying too hard to be “relatable” (Oh & Pham, 2021).

Furthermore, meme marketing is not suitable for all brands, as consumers distinguish between brands suited for meme-based marketing and those that may appear out of place. For example, brands may receive criticism if meme marketing feels inauthentic or forced, or if there is a mismatch between the brand’s identity and the humorous nature of meme-based communication. It is important to distinguish which kinds of brands would benefit from meme marketing and how they can implement this in an effective manner (Vardeman, 2023).

Another challenge is aligning with the motivations behind consumers' use of social networking sites and what makes memes appealing to them. A study done by Vardeman (2023) found that consumers view memes as a form of escape and prefer not to see ads on their social media, as they typically engage with memes while trying to relax. In line with this, designing this type of branded content for social media is difficult as consumers do not readily associate their social media activity with commercial intent, brands, or advertising (Araujo et al., 2015; Yuki, 2015).

Whilst SFV meme marketing is on the rise, it presents newfound challenges in comparison to static meme marketing and does not benefit from all the advantages of static image meme marketing. For example, static image memes benefit from pre-existing meme templates that marketers can repurpose for their brand (Malodia et al., 2022). While SFVs often must be made from scratch and are more inspired by meme trends on SFV platforms. This means they require increased complexity in execution and higher production effort. SFV memes may also require scripting, recording, editing, animation, or voiceovers. This leads to higher potential costs and increased production time, making it less cost-effective than static meme marketing. (Xiao et al., 2024).

SFV memes also face attention span limitations. Static memes are interpreted immediately, which benefits the whole idea of memes as they are designed to be instantly understandable. However, videos demand more of the audience's attention, and failing to capture the audience's interest within the first few seconds may lead to users scrolling past and not engaging. (Xiao et al., 2024).

In addition to the issues relating to the implementation of SFV meme marketing, there is a substantial research gap surrounding SFV meme marketing, as no meme marketing studies to date have focused on the SFV format, let alone the video format. Therefore, researchers have called for further exploration of different formats of meme marketing to understand their varying effects on consumer engagement (Razzaq et al., 2023; Razzaq et al., 2024). Additionally, research has yet to explore the role of individual cognitive fluency in the processing of branded memes, and Razzaq, Shao, and Quach (2023) have also called for future research on this. They justify this call by stating that meme marketing requires consumers to interpret and engage with content, meaning its effectiveness may depend on how easily individuals process and comprehend meme marketing messages. (Razzaq et al., 2023). This is an important aspect of branded SFV memes when it comes to achieving success, as cognitive fluency determines whether consumers will engage with, understand, and share branded SFV memes (Kostyk et al., 2019).

## **1.2 Aim of the study**

This study adopts a cognitive approach from a processing fluency perspective, using the framework of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Cognition plays an important role in consumer research as information processing reveals how motivational and affective factors shape cognitive processes, offering insights into persuasion and the implicit drivers of consumer behavior (Bartels & Johnson, 2015). A cognitive processing fluency approach was chosen because SFV meme marketing, unlike static memes, presents additional cognitive processing demands and challenges in retaining attention. Compared with static images or text, videos possess richer information, such as bodily, facial, and vocal features that need to be cognitively processed and interpreted (Dong et al., 2023). Regarding attention, exposure to these SFVs is strongly dependent on the speed of the consumers' swiping, with the possibility that consumers scroll past them without noticing. This directly affects the cognition of this type of content, as sufficient time is necessary for the cognitive processing of marketing communications (Rohrbach et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to explore how consumers process and perceive meme-based SFV marketing on social media and uncover the potential consumer and brand outcomes that arise as a result.

To reach the aim, the following research questions will guide this study:

- RQ1: How do consumers cognitively process meme-based short-form video marketing on social media?

- RQ2: What potential consumer or brand outcomes arise from the cognitive processing of meme-based short-form video marketing?

It is not uncommon for qualitative consumer research to use an “enabling lens” to aid in theory building and analysis. This term refers to an existing framework, model, or theory that “the researcher uses to make sense of the patterns that have emerged during data analysis”. (Fischer & Guzel, 2022, p.267). It is important to note that while a researcher may extend or refine the enabling lens, this should not be seen as either ideal or necessary (Fischer & Guzel, 2022). The ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) was chosen as an enabling lens as it provides a way of studying this processing fluency and how this impacts brand and consumer outcomes, such as brand attitude and purchase intent regarding SFV meme marketing (Kitchen et al., 2014). The model is commonly used in consumer research to explain how consumers process persuasive messages via two routes and how their attitudes form as a result. The first one is the central route (systematic processing), where consumers use more cognitive effort and actively consider a message's argument, leading to attitude formation, endurance, or change. The second route is the peripheral route (heuristic processing), which is when consumers engage superficially with a marketing message, using mental shortcuts based on entertainment, familiarity, or social cues. (Kitchen et al., 2014). Consumer responses to digital content can vary significantly based on cognitive engagement levels, influencing how persuasive marketing content is.

### **1.3 Delimitations**

To maintain a clear research scope and ensure feasibility, certain delimitations have been set. Firstly, this study is limited to meme-based SFV marketing on the social media platform TikTok, excluding other meme formats. This is because SFVs require different cognitive processing demands compared to static content. Moreover, TikTok was chosen as it is one of the most influential platforms for SFV content, meme culture, and branded memes. (Razzaq et al., 2024). The study does not compare different SFV platforms, as the focus is to gain an in-depth understanding of meme-based SFV marketing within a single dominant platform.

Secondly, the ELM serves as the primary theoretical framework to explore how consumers process this type of marketing. This framework was chosen because it distinguishes between peripheral (heuristic) and central (systematic) route processing, allowing for a deeper understanding of how consumers process digital marketing content and form attitudes as a result (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This, however, means that alternative cognitive models are not included in this study, as the primary focus is on cognitive processing and perception through dual-route information processing.

Lastly, the sample consists only of Generation Z consumers, as they are the primary demographic engaging with meme culture and SFV content, especially on TikTok (Razzaq et al., 2023). Due to geographic and resource constraints, only consumers in the capital region of Finland were studied. While findings may not be generalizable to all Generation Z consumers, they may be more applicable to other Nordic and Western consumers due to cultural similarities.

#### **1.4 Use of AI**

AI tools were used according to Hanken School of Economics' AI use guidelines in order to help with efficiency and text quality. Firstly, the AI-powered tool Turboscribe (Turboscribe, n.d.) was used to help transcribe the interview transcripts. After the transcripts were created, the researcher went through each of them individually to correct and refine them.

Secondly, the AI tool Grammarly (Grammarly, n.d.) was used to help improve grammar and language. This AI tool is embedded in Microsoft Word and highlights words or phrases that could be grammatically improved. The AI tool ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023) was also used to help correct grammatical errors and refine text written by the author. This was done by inputting text written by the author and asking prompts such as "correct the grammar for this", "improve the language of this", "give me a synonym for this", and "shorten this". The texts generated and improvement suggestions were reviewed, and no changes that altered the informational content of the text were accepted. Instead, slight modifications related to grammar and the coherence of the text were implemented by the author without changing the intended meaning of the original text.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews literature across three key domains: digital content marketing (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018; Terho et al., 2022), video marketing (Li et al., 2019; Tafesse, 2020), and processing fluency (Kostyk et al., 2019; Reich & Pitman, 2019), in relation to SFV meme marketing. Figure 1 illustrates the intersection of these key domains, which form the foundation of this study: the processing of SFV meme marketing. As a form of digital content marketing, SFV meme marketing naturally lies at the intersection between digital content marketing and video marketing. Cognitive processing of short-form videos occurs at the intersection of video marketing and processing fluency, whilst the processing of digital content marketing, such as memes, lies at the intersection of digital content marketing and processing fluency. At the core of all these topics lies the focus of this study, which is how consumers process SFV meme marketing.

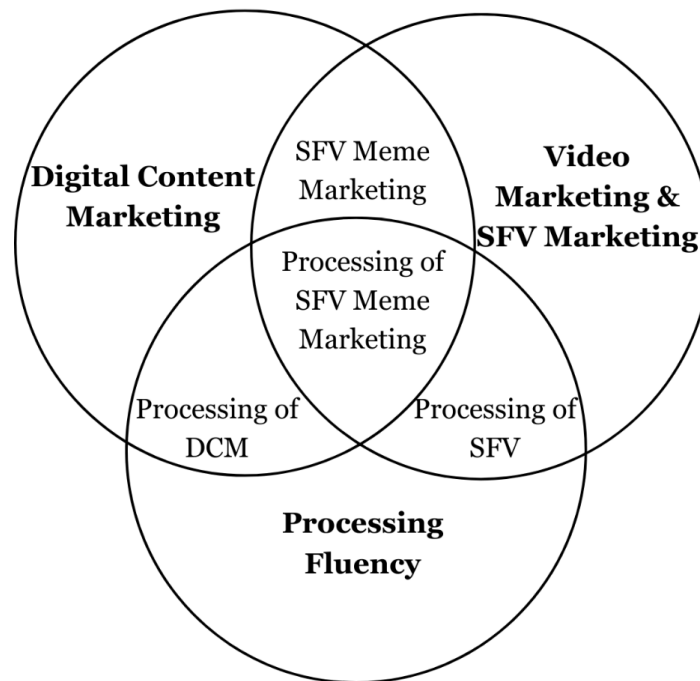


Figure 1 Central Literature Concepts

### 2.1 Digital content marketing in the social media era

Digital content marketing (DCM) pertains to the creation of content for digital platforms, such as social media, that is relevant, valuable, consistent, reliable, entertaining, and interactive. DCM differs from traditional advertising as, instead of trying to persuade consumers to purchase certain offerings, it attempts to increase potential consumers' appreciation of the brand by adding value to their lives. (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018).

Given the increasing importance of DCM on social media in consumer decision-making, this chapter explores the evolution of DCM, its key dimensions, and its success factors.

Furthermore, as this study's focus is SFV meme marketing, this chapter will position it within the broader landscape of DCM, outlining its characteristics, types, and relevance as a modern-day marketing tool. Through this exploration, this chapter aims to provide an understanding of how DCM strategies shape consumer engagement, brand relationships, and marketing effectiveness in the digital landscape.

### ***2.1.1 Conceptualizing digital content marketing***

DCM plays a crucial role in fostering brand relationships and consumer trust (Kannan & Li, 2017). The increasing dominance of digital platforms has allowed brands to create content strategies that utilize multiple formats, are personalized, and interactive, to drive engagement (Shankar et al., 2022). However, despite the growing popularity and adoption of DCM, there is debate surrounding the conceptualization of DCM. To tackle this issue, Hollebeek and Macky (2018) provide a foundational conceptualization of DCM, highlighting how DCM fosters consumer engagement, trust, and value creation through a multi-tiered process that emphasizes psychological drivers, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to digital content. In line with the theory of uses and gratifications, the framework suggests that consumers' functional, hedonic, and authenticity-based motives initially stimulate consumer engagement with DCM, which then consequently influences their attitudes, perceptions, and actions towards the brand.

However, whilst Filipovic and Arslanagic-Kalajdzic (2023) agree with the importance of consumer motivation and engagement, they critique the framework's sole focus on this. In response, they extend Hollebeek and Macky's (2018) framework with their mirroring digital content marketing (MDCM) framework that incorporates the provider perspective. This framework serves as a mirror, as the consumer-based elements of motivation and engagement in Hollebeek and Macky's (2018) correspond to the MDCM's provider-based elements of digital content material and engagement response.

Furthermore, Terho, Mero, Siutla, and Jaakkola (2022) argue that DCM has been approached too narrowly, with most existing literature focusing on delivering value-based content to consumers, with little consideration for how firms identify what different stakeholders find valuable. This is especially problematic for B2B markets, where many stakeholders influence decisions (Huber & Klenaltenkamp, 2020). Therefore, they developed an activity-based conceptual model of DCM, citing that Hollebeek and Macky's (2018) framework relies on a single lens. Terho et al. (2022) put the consumer-centric principles outlined by Hollebeek and Macky (2018) into practice and combine this with Filipovic and Arslanagic-Kalajdzics' (2023) consideration for other actors, such as the provider, by

positing that DCM is more than just a promotional tool and is instead an intelligence-driven process that maps customer journeys, creates a tailored content portfolio, and strategically spreads information to meet consumers' ever-changing needs. Their framework highlights the dynamic nature of DCM and how data-informed strategies can aid in aligning content with specific stages of the consumer journey.

#### *2.1.1.1 Types of digital content marketing*

DCM is executed across multiple communication channels and platforms that brands utilize to engage with their consumers, enhance brand visibility, and drive conversions. These formats include email marketing, search engine marketing, mobile communications, and social media marketing, which all have distinct characteristics (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018; Shankar et al., 2022). This means their effectiveness varies depending on consumer behavior, media synergy, and technological advancements. The interplay of these formats determines how brands can maximize their impact on consumer engagement and trust. (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018).

The most relevant forms for this study are mobile communications and social media marketing, which have become key types of DCM as smartphone usage rises (Shankar et al., 2022). Branded SFV memes fall within this category. Research highlights that mobile communication, such as through geo-targeted promotions and mobile coupons, can significantly influence consumer behavior, often leading to impulse purchases (Hui et al., 2013). Unlike display ads that are easily ignored, mobile display ads are more effective at marketing utilitarian and high-involvement products (Bart et al., 2014).

Social media marketing refers to firm-generated content on social media platforms (Shankar et al., 2022). Extant research has mainly focused on a multitude of marketing objectives achieved through social media marketing, such as increasing brand awareness, facilitating sales, improving brand image, reducing marketing spend, increasing traffic to online platforms, and promoting active user engagement through content creation and sharing (Felix et al., 2016). Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, and Hughes (2013) found that brand-generated content advances brand image with consumers, leading to sales and customer loyalty. Additionally, Hollebeek and Macky (2018) suggest that social media marketing differs from traditional advertising by facilitating two-way communication between brands and consumers.

Moreover, Shankar et al. (2022) suggest that social media marketing can be viewed in funnel stages, with consumer exposure to brand-generated posts influencing awareness,

consideration, purchase intent, and sales to varying degrees of effectiveness. Grewal et al. (2016) provide further support for this as they posit that mobile and social media ads can initiate recognition of an unmet need or purchase opportunity near them through targeted ads derived from the consumer's location and search history. However, research is lacking in how a brand's social media efforts influence consumers' cognition, conation, and behavioral outcomes (Shankar et al., 2022).

### **2.1.2 Digital content marketing success factors**

Effective DCM strategy is determined by various factors, including agility (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018; Terho et al., 2022), audience understanding (Arrivé, 2021; Hollebeek & Macky 2018; Terho et al., 2022), and quality communication (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Shankar et al., 2022). Agility refers to a firm's ability to adapt DCM efforts swiftly in response to market changes, consumer behaviors, and technological developments (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018; Terho et al., 2022). Important aspects of this are speed and iteration, enabling firms to quickly adapt DCM to major market shifts and emerging industry trends ahead of competitors. This allows firms to better differentiate themselves by providing content that remains relevant.

Secondly, audience understanding is equally critical as DCM strategies must align with target audience expectations, preferences, and values (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018; Terho et al., 2022). For instance, while luxury brands like Rolex benefit from sophisticated and sleek content, casual brands such as the fast-food chain Denny's are better able to reach their consumers with humor (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018). This is further echoed by Arrivé (2021), who found that both advertisers and agencies work towards finding and creating content that satisfies and is accepted by the user. He further states that the firm's responsibility is to have a sociological understanding of the audience's needs to create appropriate content.

Thirdly, the quality of communication is vital as content must be clear, engaging, and aligned with consumer values to drive higher engagement and purchase intent (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). This involves both the content and its format (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018). For instance, Lee, Hosanagar, and Nair (2018) found that informative content reduces engagement and social sharing, whilst content featuring amusement, timeliness, inspiration, and warmth increases social sharing (Borah et al., 2020; Tellis et al., 2019). Hollebeek and Macky (2018) argue that emotional content is central to DCM success, leading to higher engagement and therefore fostering brand relationships. However, Terho et al. (2022) argue that informative content plays an equally important role, especially in B2B contexts where credibility is crucial.

From a consumer perspective, DCM serves three main purposes: functional, hedonic, and authenticity seeking (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018). Arrivé (2021) supports these dimensions and further explains how the multifaceted nature of content strategy justifies content being entertaining, informative, or more brand-specific. These motives can be linked to Kim, Spiller, and Hettche's (2015) content typology, which describes task-oriented, interaction-oriented, and self-oriented content. However, while this typology offers clarity, it may oversimplify how motivations interact in consumption, where content often fulfills multiple motivations at once (Arrivé, 2021).

The functional motive involves consumers searching for brand-related information to help their decision-making process, such as product information, tutorials, or usage guidance, which can then be mixed with more entertaining (hedonic) content (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018). This motive requires content to be continuously optimized and personalized to match the different needs consumers have promptly (Terho et al., 2022). Hedonic motivations are especially relevant when it comes to the humor-based nature of meme marketing content, as consumers are drawn to content that entertains, inspires, or provides escapism (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018). Emotional resonance is key here as content that elicits positive emotions such as happiness or excitement is more likely to be engaged with and socially shared (Arrivé, 2021). The last motive, authenticity, refers to consumers' demand for genuine brand communications and transparency (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018). This consumer motive is especially important for Generation Z, as many marketing messages are ignored or avoided by this group (Djafarova & Bowes, 2020).

Particularly relevant to this study is what makes DCM on social media successful from the perspective of Generation Z. Smith's (2017) study on mobile advertising found that this is the preferred form of DCM for Generation Z. Some of their notable findings were that Generation Z consumers prefer content that is informative, simple, and engaging, with a preference for marketing content that offer real-world applications. They are also more likely to engage with content that aligns with their values and practical needs, which mirrors Hollebeek and Macky's (2018) emphasis on authenticity. In addition to being informative, this generation also wants content to be entertaining, with a particular focus on humor and emotional appeal. Whilst informative content enhances perceived value, humor facilitates engagement, making a combination approach particularly effective. (Smith, 2017).

### **2.1.3 Meme marketing as a subset of digital content marketing**

Meme marketing has risen as a compelling strategy within DCM, where brands leverage the humorous, relatable, and viral nature of memes to connect with audiences in a more participatory and organic way (Razzaq et al., 2024). Brands are increasingly creating meme-based marketing content to foster engagement on social networking sites such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook (Vardeman, 2023). Memes can be characterized as “artifacts of participatory digital culture” (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015 p. 1891) and represent concise, highly shareable digital content that internet users leverage to “collectively negotiate cultural elements that make up our digital social world” (Leiser, 2022 p. 237). Digital content becomes a spreadable or viral meme by being continuously modified in subtle but meaningful ways before being shared again. As one of the most widely shared types of digital content (Vardeman, 2023), its integration into branding strategies is a natural progression (Razzaq et al., 2023).

Meme marketing is akin to multiple elements of digital content marketing. Firstly, digital content marketing is known to be a “pull” marketing strategy, as its purpose is to attract the consumer voluntarily and not be invasive. Meme marketing follows this same principle as it pulls the target consumer via engaging and non-disruptive content that improves customer receptiveness to the brand message. (Razzaq et al., 2023). Secondly, the main goal of DCM is to disseminate branded content through owned media to garner earned media (Pang & Choy, 2020). Aligning with this, meme marketing is performed via brand-run platforms such as their own social media pages to foster conversation through various engagement metrics (Razzaq et al., 2023).

Moreover, meme marketing is a unique form of DCM that differs from other forms in how the content is constructed. Whilst DCM types tend to focus on offering original content that engages consumers, meme marketing instead creates and delivers both original and copied content. The term copied content here refers to how meme marketing adheres to the nature of memes, which is that they tend to mimic texts or images from other references and adapt them to enhance the intended message. (Razzaq et al., 2023).

When it comes to brand engagement, studies have demonstrated that memes and their participatory digital culture can increase brand awareness, engagement, and recall, due to their humorous and highly shareable nature. Malodia et al. (2022) found that humor, relevance, and recognizability enhance meme-marketing virality, increasing brand engagement. Similarly, Razzaq, Shao, and Quach (2024) found that brand-prominent meme marketing, in comparison to brand-subtle, yielded better attitudes toward branded memes

and consumer engagement with them. Kim and Kim (2024) had similar findings regarding high brand engagement and attributed this engagement to the meme's ability to resonate with and elicit emotional reactions from the target audience. They also highlighted the importance of understanding the semantics of consumer language. This allows brands to create memes that are not only humorous but also engaging and relevant, helping them resonate with the audience and drive engagement and brand affinity. However, Shen, Lee and Lin (2024) cautioned that meme engagement may be short-lived, with consumers interacting for entertainment rather than long-term brand loyalty, which is yet to be studied in meme marketing research (Kim & Kim, 2024).

Brand engagement with memes has also been found to be contingent on informational cues embedded within memes, such as meme-brand congruity, novelty, and comprehensibility (Shen et al., 2024). Shen et al.'s (2024) study found that when consumers perceive memes as coherent with a brand's image, they are more likely to positively engage with them. However, they found that sarcasm, which is common in meme culture, can negatively impact engagement as it may alienate consumers or create confusion. This finding contrasts with the more generalized perspective that humor is a prominent driver of engagement and is sufficient on its own (Kim & Kim, 2024; Malodia et al., 2022; Razzaq et al., 2023). This suggests that whilst humor is a major driver for engagement, brands must carefully balance their tone to avoid negative perceptions.

Expanding upon brand engagement, the role of branded memes in facilitating brand love has been studied (Kim & Baek, 2024), highlighting the psychological mechanisms that drive consumer engagement with meme marketing content. One of the key findings aligns with the previously mentioned notion that perceived humor plays an important part in strengthening self-brand connections, which encourages brand love. Kim & Baek (2024) also identified perceived trendiness as a predictor of perceived humor and self-brand connection, showcasing that it is not enough for memes to be purely humorous, as they should also be culturally relevant to enhance consumer engagement.

**Table 1 Literature Review of Meme Marketing Studies**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	<b>Type of Meme</b>	<b>Consumer and Brand Outcomes</b>	<b>Theory</b>
<b>Malodia et al. (2022)</b>	To develop a framework for viral meme creation and identify content, customer, and media factors driving engagement.	Viral/topical memes in no specified format	Content engagement via social media metrics, increased brand recall	Schema theory, social contagion theory
<b>Razzaq et al. (2023)</b>	To define meme marketing and categorize meme speech acts to clarify communicative intent and customer value.	Static image memes	Improved consumer-brand relationship, meme-consumer fit	Speech act theory, theory of consumption values
<b>Razzaq et al. (2024)</b>	To test how meme type (brand-prominent vs subtle) impacts narrative transportation and consumer engagement.	Brand prominent vs brand subtle static image memes	Better attitudes, content engagement via social media metrics	Narrative transportation theory, associative network theory
<b>Kim &amp; Baek (2024)</b>	To investigate how branded memes influence brand love through perceived humor, trendiness, and self-brand connection.	Static Image Memes	Increased brand love, self-brand perception	Uses & Gratifications theory
<b>Kim &amp; Kim (2024)</b>	To explore how strategic meme marketing enhances brand engagement and community building on social media.	No specified format	Content engagement via social media metrics, Brand perception	No specified theory

<b>Vardeman (2023)</b>	To understand how Gen-Z perceives meme ads and what factors influence their reception of memetic brand content.	No Specified Format	Brand perception	No specified theory
<b>Shen et al. (2024)</b>	To investigate the role of informational cues in branded memes in shaping consumer-brand relationships using cue utilization theory.	Static image memes that contain branded elements	Consumer-brand relationship, Improved brand attitudes	Cue utilization theory
<b>This Study</b>	To explore how consumers perceive and cognitively process meme-based short-form video marketing on social media.	Short-form video memes	No brand attitude change, increased brand awareness, passive engagement, low purchase intent	Elaboration Likelihood Model

### 2.1.3.1 Types of memes

The evolution of internet memes has resulted in various formats and typologies, each serving unique communicative and marketing functions, with the three main ones being static images, GIFs, and short-form videos. This section will then delve into the distinct characteristics of each type and how these influence their virality, audience engagement, and adaptability in online spaces (Shifman, 2014). Malodia et al. (2022) proposed a four-stage model of meme format evolution, reflecting technological advancements and shifts in consumer behavior. Initially, memes were static image macros, which are single images accompanied by humorous text overlaid. As social media platforms evolved, so did meme formats, and a new image format was popularized- top-text and bottom-text memes. The third stage featured the rise of rage comics, which involved crudely drawn cartoon panels that illustrated humorous or relatable situations. The last stage then involved a pivot to new formats such as videos and GIFs, as new social media platforms emerged, such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. (Malodia et al., 2022). Short video memes are a popular subset of

video memes that take advantage of trending sound clips or popular formats to engage consumers (Kim & Kim, 2024).

Within digital marketing, memes can be broadly categorized into two types: original memes and imitated memes (Razzaq et al., 2023). From a brand perspective, original meme marketing involves unique textual and visual brand elements such as the brand name, product name, and logo that communicate the brand message (Brubaker et al., 2018). For example, the candy brand Snickers has created a meme that does not use any meme template to depict their brand message of how a person's hunger can be satisfied with a Snickers (Razzaq et al., 2023). Thus, for consumer engagement to occur with this type of branded meme, customer brand knowledge and familiarity with the brand or product characteristics are paramount (Kim & Baek, 2023).

On the contrary, brands can use imitated meme marketing that capitalizes on existing popular internet memes, which emphasize symbolic value instead of visual and textual brand elements. Internet memes contain deeply rooted symbolic values and their interpretation is dependent on the consumer's meme literacy (Benaim, 2018). For example, the food brand Ruffles used an existing meme template called 'Skipping Stairs' which depicts an individual's willingness to jump across multiple stairs to get to the top, to attain something they want. In this example, Ruffles demonstrates an individual's desire to obtain their product (Razzaq et al., 2023). Razzaq et al. (2023) found that around 60% of meme marketing falls into the imitated meme category, using popular meme templates by editing and remixing them to recontextualize the meaning to serve the brand.

Moreover, the success of these types is contingent on the interplay of two dimensions, which are the degree of meme literacy and brand knowledge. It is suggested that for consumers who score low on both dimensions, meme marketing should not be used as they will not be able to relate to either the brand elements or understand the imitated meme templates. Therefore, original meme marketing is suggested for audiences who have high brand knowledge and low meme literacy, meaning that imitated meme marketing is more appropriate when there is low brand knowledge but high meme literacy. However, with consumers scoring highly on both dimensions, either meme marketing type would suffice. (Razzaq et al., 2023).

## **2.2 Video marketing and short-form video content**

Video marketing has risen as a dominant form of digital content marketing as it offers brands an engaging way to connect with their consumers (Tafesse, 2020). To gain a better

understanding of this study's focus on SFV marketing, it is important to explore the literature on this format and how meme-based SFV marketing contributes to it. Therefore, this chapter will explore the evolution of video marketing, the growing prominence of SFV marketing, and its unique characteristics that contribute to its success. Subsequently, the emerging trend of meme-based SFV marketing will be introduced. By integrating findings from various studies, this section aims to contextualize the role of SFV and branded SFV memes within digital marketing.

### ***2.2.1 Video as a dominant digital marketing format***

The rapid growth of digital media has enabled video marketing to become a dominant and influential format for marketing communications, particularly on social media (Li et al., 2019; Tafesse, 2020). Video marketing pertains to the use of video content that emphasizes creativity for product promotion and brand communications. Compared to static images or text, videos encompass richer information by incorporating facial expressions, body language, and vocal elements that make them more engaging and widely consumed (Kang et al., 2022).

Research on traditional video marketing effectiveness on platforms such as YouTube has mainly focused on video virality (Khan & Vong, 2014; Tellis et al., 2019), the effectiveness of video advertising (Tucker, 2015), and video marketing's influence on sales (Oh et al., 2017). However, extant research has mainly focused on post-view engagement behaviors such as comments (Moldovan et al., 2019), likes, and shares (Oh et al., 2017; Tellis et al., 2019). Relatively little is known about the drivers of video views themselves, which are the initial touchpoints for engagement. Video views and initial engagement have the potential to trigger subsequent consumer behaviors such as positive brand attitude formation and purchase intention, making the understanding of the elements that lead to views a crucial yet underexplored area (Tafesse, 2020).

These studies primarily researched the internal content of videos, such as their arousal level, emotional sentiment (Tellis et al., 2019), information content (Moldovan et al., 2019; Tellis et al., 2019), and persuasion power (Tucker, 2015). Tellis et al. (2019) found that videos containing positive and high-arousal content are positively correlated with higher video shares, while videos containing factual product information and prominent brand cues were negatively correlated with video shares. However, Moldovan et al. (2019) found that videos with a combination of creativity and information led to increased views. Furthermore, while some research suggests that high video views are associated with lower advertising persuasiveness (Tucker, 2015), other research indicates that video shares can predict sales

(Oh et al., 2017), representing the multifaceted effects of video engagement on consumer decision-making.

Accompanied by the growing prominence of video format is the rise of digital consumption via mobile devices. This has necessitated a shift in video marketing strategies, specifically toward vertical video formats. Vertical video formats dominate the social media space with social media apps such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, implementing interfaces optimal for vertical videos. (Mulier et al., 2021). A study done by Mulier, Slabbinck, and Vermeir (2021) on the effectiveness of vertical video ads revealed that consumers process vertical video ads more easily than horizontal ones, though age plays a moderating role. Younger consumers, such as Generation Z, preferred vertical video ads while older generations, such as Generations X and Y, processed horizontal formats more easily. This finding suggests that marketers need to consider demographic differences when designing video marketing content.

### ***2.2.2 The rise of short-form video marketing***

One of the most common forms of social media vertical video formats is short-form videos (SFV). This video format is known for capturing consumer attention in a highly engaging and immersive manner. These videos last from a few seconds to three minutes (Yin et al., 2023) and are meant for leisurely viewing on mobile devices, providing convenience and accessibility (Cho et al., 2024). SFV platforms allow users to create and share useful tips or interesting experiences from their day-to-day lives while interacting with other creators by liking, commenting, or sharing content (Meng & Leung, 2021).

Aligned with the trend of SFV, social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Netflix have introduced short-form video sections known as Reels, Shorts, and Fast Laughs. Additionally, TikTok, a short-form video platform, has become the leading platform for short-form video marketing (Cho et al., 2024). Much of its success can be attributed to its algorithm that delivers content relevant to the consumer, which encourages fast consumption and high engagement rates (Yin et al., 2024). Brands have started to leverage this by creating short, engaging videos that blend entertainment with promotional messaging (Fan et al., 2025).

An advantage of SFV marketing is its ability to facilitate passive recognition. Normally, the purchase funnel starts with the consumer recognizing their needs or problems, leading them to search and evaluate for solutions. However, when it comes to SFV marketing, the need recognition generated by users is passive, as personalized content is fed to the consumer with

the help of a recommender system. As a result, users are in a more leisurely state and thus more likely to pay attention to embedded marketing videos. With a fragmented yet focused attention, engaging product demonstrations and highly relevant content might drive users to recognize underlying or previously unknown needs, which could then transform them from user to consumer. (Xiao et al., 2022). Yin et al.'s (2024) study on how SFV marketing influences users' engagement with advertisements supports this notion as they found that these affordances prompt users to withhold immediate judgement, ultimately enhancing their purchase intentions.

Given that SFV platforms allow users to interact with the content and content creators, studies have explored what influences user engagement behaviors in SFV marketing (Nikolinakou & King, 2018; Xiao et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Zhang, Zhao, and Wang (2023) classify engagement into two types: process-based and performance-based engagement. Process-based engagement refers to a consumer's active participation in content co-creation through interactions like commenting. While performance-based engagement involves measuring and evaluating the performance of cocreated content through likes, shares, comments, and favorites. Additionally, emotional engagement is a key driver in viral SFV advertisements, with highly positive emotions prompting consumers to share these advertisements and discuss them on social media (Nikolinakou & King, 2018). Audiovisual factors of SFV also influence engagement, as Xiao, Li, and Mou (2024) found that in addition to content, technical attributes such as the number of shots, speech rate, and video format significantly influence engagement.

#### *2.2.2.1 Key characteristics of short-form video marketing*

Research has shown that the content characteristics of SFV marketing are crucial for rapid consumption and subsequent engagement. These include audiovisual elements, interactivity (Xiao et al., 2024), storytelling, and emotional resonance (Dong et al., 2023). Given how short and fragmented SFV advertisements are, it is important to effectively design these videos with competitive audio and visual features that attract consumers (Xiao et al., 2024). Research in traditional advertising shows that richer visuals enhance cognitive attitudes, improve purchase intention, and evoke emotional responses that shape consumer behavior. (Kim & Lennon, 2008). However, SFV advertisements differ from traditional static ones as they combine different types of audio with video to enhance message perception. Visual and auditory elements are the richest sensory data, and their combined quality influences the perceived quality of videos (Xiao et al., 2024).

Xiao et al. (2024) applied these concepts to SFV marketing and conducted a study on the impact of visual and audio elements on consumer engagement behavior with SFV advertisements. They found that these elements do indeed influence consumer engagement behavior, but that these effects are dependent on the type of interaction, including comments, shares, and likes. Firstly, it was revealed that the number of shots and image complexity enhance consumer interest when there is moderate variation, whereas excessive complexity might negatively impact information processing. Furthermore, aligning with the previously mentioned research done by Mulier et al. (2021), vertical video formats were found to be more effective in fostering comments and shares due to being mobile-friendly and more immersive. Lastly, when it came to audio, faster speech boosted shares due to enhanced perceived information richness and credibility, while more chaotic or emotionally intense audio reduced likes and comments. (Xiao et al., 2024).

Beyond the visual-audio perspective, SFV marketing contains brand post content and characteristics (Dong et al., 2023). In SFV marketing, brand post content includes characters, music, products, text, and other information featured in branded videos. For SFV, characters (Dong et al., 2023; Gan et al., 2023) and branded product information (Dong et al., 2023) are especially important. Regarding characters, research has shown that attractive spokespeople improve consumer purchase intentions (Dong et al., 2023) and that celebrities and “cute” characters, such as animals and babies, foster positive emotions (Tellis et al., 2019). Moreover, branded product information within SFV advertisements is an important promotional aspect, with Maaya, Meulders, and Vandebroek (2020) finding that this type of information affects consumers' decision-making choices and that it can increase consumers' attention to the relevant attributes.

Dong et al. (2023) categorized brand post characteristics as information relevance, content matching, and emotionality. Information relevance is crucial for branded SFV content as irrelevant information about the brand may negatively impact the consumer's search process for brand-related information (Ha et al., 2021). Content matching is important because when the content aligns with the consumer and the content leads to higher perceived fluency, and this fluency leads to better consumer attitudes toward the brand, promoting consumer engagement (Dong et al., 2023).

Lastly, emotionality is commonly present in branded SFVs, which can influence consumer attitudes both negatively and positively (Smith & Rose, 2020). Positive emotions like joy and love positively impact consumer behavior (Dong et al., 2023) and can lead to more social

sharing (Tellis et al., 2019). However, negative emotions such as sadness or anger can lead to consumers speaking less about the brand (Dong et al., 2023).

### **2.2.3 Meme-based short-form video marketing**

Building upon the growing literature on SFV marketing, an emerging yet underexplored area is the rise of meme-based SFV marketing. Studies have examined meme marketing (Kim & Baek, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2024; Malodia et al., 2022; Razzaq et al., 2023; Razzaq et al., 2024; Shen et al., 2023), viral video marketing (Tellis et al., 2019), Youtube Video memes (Shifman, 2011), SFV marketing (Cho et al., 2024; Nikolinakou & King, 2018; Xiao et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2023), TikTok marketing (Jiang et al., 2024) and TikTok's memetic culture and platform affordances (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). While the existing literature on related topics provides valuable insights into meme marketing strategies, viral video dynamics, and video memes, the intersection of these three elements in the SFV marketing landscape remains underdeveloped.

Firstly, SFV video memes are characterized by the use of popular formats and trending audio clips to engage with viewers (Kim & Kim, 2024), and brands leverage the virality of SFV memes with the immersive nature of SFV platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts (Razzaq et al., 2023). SFVs are more likely to go viral on social media in comparison to traditional video marketing, and the success of SFV meme marketing lies in its ability to align with mobile internet trends, making it a powerful bridge between brands and consumers. (Jiang et al., 2024). TikTok emerges as an effective platform for SFV video memes (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) and SFV marketing (Jiang et al., 2024), and consequently, the intersection of these two. SFV marketing on TikTok is carried out by businesses, independent merchants, and brands to spread content and marketing messages (Jiang et al., 2024).

Literature on YouTube memes finds that user-generated meme content employs two main mechanisms, in which they either imitate an original meme video or remix it (Shifman, 2011). This participatory nature is encouraged on platforms such as TikTok through technological features allowing for content replication, such as built-in audio sampling, in-app editing, stitch functions, and algorithm-driven trend cycles (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

When it comes to the characteristics of an SFV marketing meme that contribute to their success and replication, those outlined by Shifman (2011) for meme videos on YouTube can be applied. Firstly, meme videos can be characterized by their focus on ordinary people with everyday individuals gaining popularity through their online presence. This user-generated

content tends to drive better engagement in comparison to professionally produced videos, likely due to the relatability they provide for audiences. Another major characteristic is humor through incongruities such as mismatched audio-visuals, superiority where original content is mocked or parodied, and playfulness through creativity and audience participation. The third characteristic is simplicity and repetitiveness, which ensures the message is easy to understand and replicate, often featuring minimal editing, limited characters, and straightforward themes. Lastly, video memes often feature whimsical content without any fixed or serious themes, which appeals to a wider audience. (Shifman, 2011).

### **2.3 Processing fluency in short-form video marketing**

Processing fluency plays a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of SFV marketing as it influences how consumers engage with digital content and form brand perceptions (Argyriou & Melewar, 2011). Firstly, this sub-chapter will discuss processing fluency in the context of digital marketing. This is then followed by a discussion of the ELM, which serves as the enabling lens for this study by offering a structured way to explore how processing fluency affects consumer attitudes. The degree of processing fluency aligns with the ELM, as easy-to-process communications are more likely to influence attitudes through the peripheral route under low elaboration. Whereas under high elaboration with the central route, ease of processing plays a reduced role as more focus is given to the message content. (Min, 2022). Therefore, an analysis of how the ELM has been applied to digital marketing and SFV marketing is conducted to enable the effective application of this model at later stages.

#### **2.3.1 Consumer outcomes of processing fluency**

Processing fluency plays a critical role in consumer research, as how consumers process marketing communications influences consumer judgment and decision-making (Kostyk et al., 2019). Defined as the “ease or difficulty with which new information can be processed” (Schwarz, 2004 p. 333), fluency in marketing results from the fit between two message characteristics, such as theme and imagery (Reich & Pitman, 2020). Higher processing fluency often positively influences consumer outcomes such as brand engagement (Reich & Pitman, 2019), brand attitude (Kostyk et al., 2019; Reich & Pitman, 2019), and brand choice (Kostyk et al., 2019).

When it comes to digital marketing content, fluency has been conceptualized in two primary dimensions: comprehension fluency, concerning the ease of processing and understanding, and imagery fluency, referring to the ease of generating associated imagery during information processing. (Huang & Ha, 2020). In line with this, studies have shown that visually appealing and easily comprehensible content leads to higher engagement (Huang &

Ha, 2020; Kostyk et al., 2019). For example, Huang and Ha (2020) found that imagery fluency plays a mediating role between visual content and consumer attitudes toward brands on Instagram. Similarly, Reich and Pittman (2019) found that when content and platform characteristics were aligned in social media marketing, fluency increased, leading to better consumer engagement. These findings highlight the importance of fluency-enhancing elements in marketing communications, such as easy-to-process narratives (Huang & Ha, 2020) and high-quality visuals (Huang & Ha, 2020; Kostyk et al., 2019).

### **2.3.2 *The elaboration likelihood model and digital marketing***

As the cognitive processing fluency of meme-based SFV marketing is the focus of this study, the ELM was chosen as the enabling lens. The ELM provides a framework to explore the role the degree of processing fluency plays in influencing the level of elaboration via either the central or peripheral route (Min, 2022). This model, developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), explains how consumers process persuasive messages via two routes: the central route, involving deep, systematic processing, and the peripheral route, involving heuristic, superficial processing based on cues like entertainment or familiarity. Attitudes form and change depending on the processing route, with systematic processing leading to stronger and more stable brand attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The ELM also emphasizes the importance of message and content cues in message processing, by distinguishing these into central and peripheral cues (Filieri et al., 2017).

A consumer's processing route is dependent on their motivation and ability to process (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which influences consumers' responses to advertising (Bart et al., 2014). Motivation refers to the consumer's willingness to engage in thoughtful cognitive processing with a marketing message, where higher motivation promotes systematic processing. This motivation can often be attributed to how relevant the marketing message is to the consumer. (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). On the other hand, processing ability refers to the ease or difficulty of elaborating on marketing stimuli, where systematic processing is linked with higher processing ability (Bart et al., 2014). Systematic processing requires higher cognitive effort than heuristic processing as it requires the consumer to understand, evaluate, and compare the content with prior knowledge. In contrast, heuristic processing only requires consumers to connect with salient positive or negative cues associated with the message. Consequently, decisions based on systematic processing are typically more stable and long-lasting. (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). However, most digital messages elicit moderate elaboration, involving elements of both routes (Shi et al., 2018).

The ELM has been applied in digital marketing contexts to evaluate consumers' decision-making (Gan et al., 2023; Kulkarni et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2018). For instance, Kumar, Prakash, Gupta, and Cappiello (2022) found that in electronic word-of-mouth contexts, systematic processing was driven by argument quality, whilst heuristic processing was influenced by peripheral cues such as store image and review. Shi, Hu, Lai, and Chen (2018) similarly showed that both processing routes positively impacted sharing behavior on social media with topical relevance and the richness of information supporting systematic processing and source attractiveness and social ties enabling heuristic processing. These findings underscore the importance of creating digital marketing strategies with the varying levels of cognitive involvement in mind, as both routes impact consumer attitudes and decision-making.

Furthermore, informational (utilitarian) and emotional (hedonic) content aligns with central and peripheral processing, respectively, and many studies have examined the effects of these appeals. Studies show that informational appeals were more effective when there was a high need for cognition, and that emotional appeals were effective when there was either a low or high need for cognition (Chun & Lee, 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2018). These results were found to be mainly in line with the principles of the ELM, however, the finding that even high need for cognition consumers responded well to emotional appeals, was surprising as traditionally it has been believed that high need for cognition consumers prefer informational appeals solely. By dividing marketing content into these two categories, researchers can better understand how different types of appeals in line with dual-route processing influence consumer and brand outcomes.

#### *2.3.2.1 Central and peripheral cues*

According to the ELM, marketing message and content elements can be separated into central and peripheral cues, influencing the processing route through which consumers process information and form attitudes. Central cues such as argument quality require more cognitive effort and relate to the strength and informational appeal of a message (Kumar et al., 2022; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In digital contexts, topical relevance and information richness also serve as central cues, requiring consumers to assess the relevance and sufficiency of content for decision-making (Kulkarni et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2018). For example, Shi et al. (2018) suggest that when going through social media feeds, consumers are more likely to pay attention to posts with topics of interest, requiring effortful elaboration to judge this topical relevance between themselves and the post.

On the other hand, peripheral cues require less cognitive effort as they are largely superficial and emotional elements, allowing consumers to form an attitude regarding a marketing message quickly (Shi et al., 2018). Some common heuristic cues from the extant literature concerning video marketing are perceived source credibility and attractiveness (Kumar et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2018), visual attractiveness (Gan et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2020), audio attractiveness (Gan et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2016), and emotional appeals (Kim et al., 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2020).

In social media marketing, source credibility and source attractiveness are especially important and relevant to meme marketing on TikTok. Shi et al. (2018) posit that if the source is deemed trustworthy, with instant cues such as verification badges on verified profiles (Liu et al., 2012), then the message is more likely to be viewed as trustworthy regardless of a potential lack of information. Whereas source attractiveness is commonly deciphered through the account's follower count (Liu et al., 2012), with accounts with more followers having a higher chance of being viewed as opinion leaders (Shi et al., 2018). Interestingly, Shi et al. (2018) found that source attractiveness positively influenced sharing behavior, whereas source trustworthiness was found to be insignificant.

Audiovisual elements as peripheral cues also play an important role in SFV meme marketing, where attention-grabbing sounds and visuals can influence information processing and meaning construction (Gan et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2016). For example, Kim et al. (2016) found that audio cues such as popular or famous music can distract consumers from processing other information, inhibiting central route processing (Kim et al., 2016). This finding is particularly relevant for branded SFV memes on TikTok as they often feature popular songs or sounds that people repurpose (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). When it comes to visual elements, motion (Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011), color (Elliot & Maier, 2014), and feature complexity serve as peripheral cues (Pieters et al., 2010). For example, feature complexity triggers peripheral route processing as visual clutter disturbs the consumer's ability to pay attention to the message (Pieters et al., 2010).

#### *2.3.2.2 The elaboration likelihood model and short-form video marketing*

This model has also been used to study video marketing, including viral video marketing and SFV content (Gan et al., 2023; Kulkarni et al., 2020). Researchers have categorized video elements according to the two processing routes, proposing that factors such as content complexity and design complexity serve as central cues (Shin et al., 2020), whilst factors such as motion (Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011), color (Elliot & Maier, 2014) feature complexity of

video (Walter et al., 2020), and special visual and sound effects (Kim et al., 2016) serve as peripheral cues.

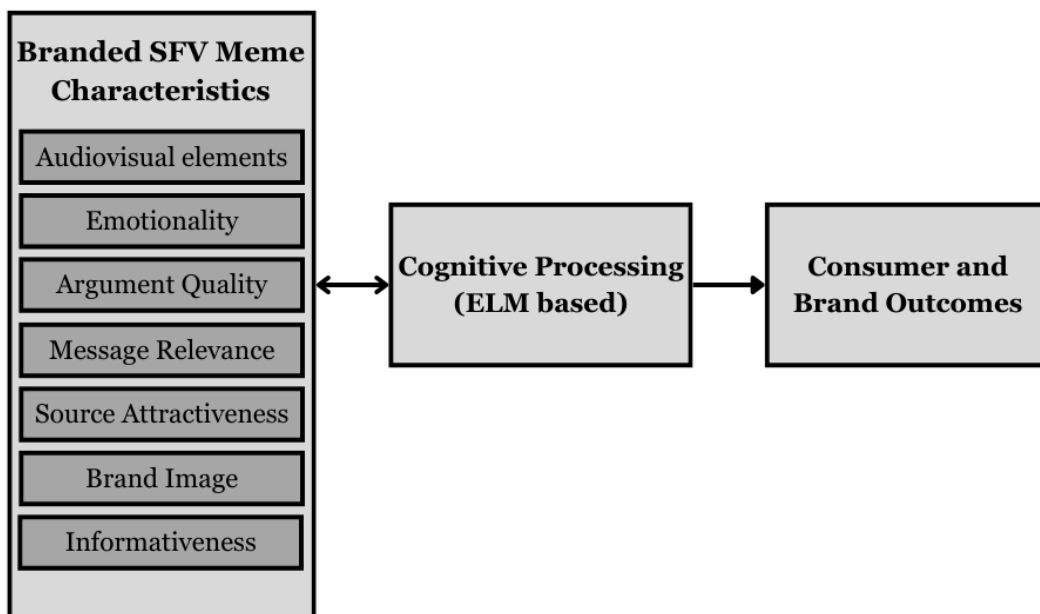
In viral video marketing, of which meme videos are a subset of, brand prominence has been shown to trigger elaboration and activate persuasion knowledge (Kulkarni et al., 2019). Kulkarni, Kalro, and Sharma (2019) found that consumers with a high need for cognition who processed the videos through central route processing had higher intentions to share informational branded viral videos. Notably, this was also the case for emotional ads, when brand prominence was high, challenging traditional assumptions that emotional appeals are purely engaged through the peripheral route (Kulkarni et al., 2019). Gan, Shi, Filieri, and Leung (2023) also found that SFV marketing elements such as visual, verbal, and narrative ones affect the processing route. For example, they found that matching visual perspective (first-person vs. third person) with visual content (activity-centric vs. site-centric) enhanced imagery fluency, which led to message processing through the central route. Overall, these findings extend the ELM by showcasing how it can be applied to branded SFVs.

#### **2.4 Summary and conceptual framework**

This subchapter summarizes key concepts from the literature review related to the cognitive processing of SFV meme marketing. The review established a comprehensive foundation for the study by positioning SFV meme marketing at the intersection of DCM, video marketing, and processing fluency. Key findings suggest that while meme marketing is highly engaging, the SFV format presents challenges in terms of cognitive processing.

First, DCM was explored to provide a backdrop for the discussion around meme marketing and SFV marketing. Findings suggest that DCM plays an influential role in consumer engagement and brand communication (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018). Then, meme marketing was introduced as a subcategory of DCM, with previous research highlighting its cost-effectiveness, viral potential, and ability to foster cultural relevance (Razzaq et al., 2023). Video marketing and the rise of SFV marketing were also discussed, leading to a conceptualization of SFV meme marketing that highlights its persuasive power, especially through humor and emotional appeal (Nikolinakou & King, 2018; Tellis et al., 2019). Lastly, processing fluency and the ELM were discussed to provide the necessary information on the enabling lens of this study. Unlike static memes, SFV memes demand higher cognitive effort as they require consumers to process multiple stimuli at once, such as visuals, sound, and motion (Dong et al., 2023). The ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) then provides a way to study the ease of processing and how this impacts brand attitudes and other brand outcomes regarding SFV meme marketing.

In line with the study and the literature review, this study proposes a conceptual framework (Figure 2) that integrates content characteristics of SFV memes with central and peripheral cues, cognitive processing via the ELM, and consumer and brand outcomes. The framework suggests that the characteristics of brand SFV meme content, based on existing research on the use of the ELM in video and social media marketing, influence how consumers cognitively process information based on the ELM. At the same time, ELM factors such as the need for cognition, motivation to process, and ability to process also affect which branded SFV meme characteristics the consumers notice. This mutual influence is represented by the two-way arrow. Finally, this processing leads to various consumer and brand outcomes.



**Figure 2 Conceptual Framework for Study**

### **3 EMPIRICAL DESIGN**

This chapter will present the empirical design of this study. First, the research design is described with a justification for why a qualitative research method following an abductive approach is the best-suited method for this thesis research. It is important to note that no research approach is inherently better or worse; rather, each is better suited for certain topics and aims (Dubois & Gadde, 2013). However, it is important to justify the choice of method as simply stating that a method is appropriate does not suffice to establish it as a scientific approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

This is then followed by a description of the sample and data collection process, including the creation process for the interview guide and selection of materials for the video elicitation exercise. This chapter will then give an overview of the data analysis process, the quality of data, and ethical concerns.

#### **3.1 Research design**

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory approach with semi-structured interviews to explore how Generation Z consumers cognitively process and perceive meme-based SFV marketing on TikTok. The research design was informed by prior studies on meme marketing and their methodological choices, where qualitative methods were employed when the study was exploratory and the topic underexplored (Malodia et al., 2022; Vardeman, 2023). Following the in-depth literature review, the researcher deemed a qualitative research approach the most appropriate due to the limited research on both short-form video format meme marketing and the cognitive processing of meme marketing.

This qualitative study will adopt an exploratory approach, starting with a broad focus that will become more focused as the research advances. According to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2023), exploratory studies are advantageous for their flexibility and adaptability to change, with the possibility of the research changing direction due to new data and insights. Additionally, Patton (2015) states that exploratory, qualitative inquiry is well-suited as a starting point for research on topics where not much is known about the nature of the phenomenon and little research has been conducted. Given the lack of prior research on this phenomenon, a qualitative, exploratory approach is most fitting as the goal of this study is not to confirm or validate previous research but instead to discover something new (Dubois & Gadde, 2014).

As this research has to do with individual consumers' perceptions and cognitive processing, which are complex and context-dependent (Razzaq et al., 2023), it is paramount that the

research method captures the complexity of consumer thinking. A qualitative approach allows respondents to express their experiences and reflections in a way that structured surveys, for example, may not fully capture. This method helps uncover underlying thoughts, attitudes, and motivation (Patton, 2015), which shape consumer perceptions and cognitive processing (Ormerod & Ball, 2017). A qualitative approach is further justified by the increasing recognition within cognitive psychology that certain aspects of cognition, such as reasoning, interpretation, and decision-making, are better captured through qualitative methods as they can help better understand context-dependent and goal-oriented processes that unfold over time (Ormerod, & Ball, 2017). This is especially relevant for studying the personal and context-dependent interpretations and mental processing of branded SFV memes on TikTok, where the researcher needs to be able to dig deeper into the underlying reasons behind them. Furthermore, this approach allows for the development of foundational insights that can facilitate future quantitative studies to test and validate these findings.

Moreover, an abductive approach was adopted, as it allows for iterative interaction between empirical data and existing theoretical frameworks (Saunders et al., 2023; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), such as the ELM, which serves as the enabling lens for this study. Furthermore, abduction allows for the use of pre-existing theories as a means to help find and interpret patterns, allowing the researcher to apply the principles of the ELM when analyzing the data (Saunders et al., 2023).

Following Saunders et al.'s (2023) suggestion for semi-structured interviews for exploratory studies, a semi-structured one-on-one interview format was chosen. They are useful in gathering meaningful emotional, behavioral, and attitudinal data, facilitating deeper insights into consumer experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of meme-based SFV marketing. This approach positions interviews as a dialogical space where theoretical insights are examined and developed through interaction with respondents' lived experiences (Arsel, 2017). An interview guide (Appendix 1) will be used to ensure consistent coverage of key topics while allowing space for respondents' individual experiences and insights (Patton, 2015). This format provides flexibility while ensuring alignment with the research questions (Arsel, 2017).

### **3.2 Sample**

Before selecting a sampling strategy or determining sample size, it is essential to define the relevant units of analysis, which refer to the main entities being studied (Patton, 2015). The primary unit of analysis for this study is individual Generation Z consumers born between

1997 and 2006. This aligns with the recommendations for small, information-rich samples in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). Generation Z consumers were chosen to address the research questions, as they are the primary demographic engaging with TikTok and meme-based marketing (Razzaq et al., 2023), comprising 60% of TikTok users (*Social media and Generation Z*, 2024). Another unit of analysis in this study falls under the analysis-focused category and consists of the specific interview questions (Patton, 2015).

To study this consumer group, purposive sampling is required. This sampling method is commonly used in qualitative research, as it allows for the intentional selection of cases that are particularly informative and relevant to addressing the research questions (Patton, 2015). Therefore, the sample consists of eight interviewees, in line with Saunders et al.'s (2023) recommendation to interview 4-12 respondents when the sample is homogeneous. The chosen sampling strategy is criterion sampling, as it is the most suitable approach for selecting cases that fulfill a predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2015). It was imperative to the study that all respondents be a part of Generation Z (18-28 years old), actively use TikTok, and have experienced meme-based SFV marketing on TikTok, due to the niche nature of meme marketing. A summary of the interview respondents can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2 Overview of Interview Respondents**

<b>Interviewee Code</b>	<b>Birth Year</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Top 3 Ranked Branded SFV Meme Characteristics</b>	<b>Interview Length</b>	<b>Interview Location</b>
<b>R1</b>	1998	Female	Unemployed	1. Visual Attractiveness 2. Audio Attractiveness 3. Argument Quality	50 minutes	Private meeting room at Oodi
<b>R2</b>	1999	Female	Bachelor's Student	1. Entertainment 2. Audio Attractiveness 3. Visual Attractiveness	50 minutes	Private Meeting room at Oodi
<b>R3</b>	2004	Male	Data Center Operations Intern	1. Source Trustworthiness 2. Message Relevance 3. Entertainment	40 minutes	At the interviewees home

<b>R4</b>	2004	Female	Salesperson	1. Entertainment 2. Audio Attractiveness 3. Visual Attractiveness	35 minutes	At the interviewees home
<b>R5</b>	1999	Male	Events Management	1. Entertainment 2. Visual Attractiveness 3. Informativeness	1 hour	At the interviewees home
<b>R6</b>	1999	Female	Masters' Student	1. Entertainment 2. Audio Attractiveness 3. Visual Attractiveness	55 minutes	Private meeting room at Oodi
<b>R7</b>	2001	Female	Masters' Student	1. Entertainment 2. Message Relevance 3. Informativeness	50 minutes	At the interviewees home
<b>R8</b>	1999	Male	Finance Specialist	1. Entertainment 2. Audio Attractiveness 3. Visual Attractiveness	45 minutes	At the interviewees home

Due to practical constraints and the researcher's geographical location, the sample was drawn from the capital region of Finland. The respondents were recruited through the researcher's social media, as many of their followers met the criteria. A temporary story post was posted on the researcher's Instagram, outlining the thesis topic and respondent criteria, followed by a request for interested people to contact the researcher via direct message. Once enough people had contacted the researcher, a screening process was carried out to ensure the respondents met the criteria.

### 3.3 Data collection

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in April 2025 with eight respondents aged 20-27 living in Helsinki. This format allowed the researcher to note visual cues and build rapport whilst reassuring the respondent of any concerns they may have. Face-to-face interviews also encourage more open discussion, resulting in richer data. (Saunders et al., 2023).

The interviews in this study integrated Patton's (2015) emphasis on open-ended questions and active listening with Arsel's (2017) semi-structured, reflexive approach, which

encourages meaningful researcher-participant interaction. Additionally, the interviews followed a thematic format in which data were collected to address the research questions using pre-determined themes and pre-planned questions to guide the interview (Saunders et al., 2023). This approach was chosen because it allowed the researcher to ensure both research questions were addressed and to include questions inspired by the ELM.

The respondents who passed the pre-screening process during the sampling phase were contacted via Instagram direct messages and asked if they would voluntarily participate in the interview. Once they accepted, they were sent the consent form (Appendix 2) provided by Hanken School of Economics, via email, along with the study's privacy notice and instructed to sign and return the form to the researcher. The consent form notified the respondent that they can withdraw from the interview and research at any point without reason, and that at their request, information they provided could be deleted or excluded.

A pre-test of the interview was conducted with someone the researcher knew, and who met the predetermined criteria of the sample population, following Arsel's (2017) recommendation that friends are more likely to provide honest feedback. A pre-test was done to test the questions and wording, as researchers may use overly theoretical wording that confuses the average consumer (Arsel, 2017). Overall, the feedback was positive, but one suggestion was to combine two similar questions. As a result, the researcher made this change for the final interview guide. The researcher also took notice of some aspects that should be altered for the next interviews. For example, when asked to rank eight branded SFV meme characteristics, the respondent was unsure about what a couple of the terms meant. Therefore, the researcher added clarifying contextual information in brackets next to the terms. A few questions were also reordered for better flow.

Each interview began with a brief introduction by first thanking the respondent for agreeing to take part, followed by a statement about the topic of the interview. The first part of the interview delved into the respondents' personal experience and engagement with branded memes on TikTok, covering topics such as whether they had encountered such content, their perceptions of it, and any memorable examples. This was followed by a video-elicitation exercise in which respondents were shown four branded SFV memes from TikTok, representing two brands, with each brand having both a hedonic and utilitarian meme (Appendix 3). The final part of the interview focused on respondents' concluding thoughts on branded SFV memes and included a sorting exercise of eight branded SFV meme characteristics. The structure of the interview and the choice of stimuli are further described in the next two sub-sections.

In the viewing exercise, respondents viewed the videos in a random order without knowledge of the hedonic or utilitarian categories to avoid priming effects. After viewing, respondents were asked questions relating to their content preferences and brand impressions. First, they were asked to select their two favorite memes and justify why, to shed light on which content category they prefer. Next, respondents ranked all four memes and justified this ranking, to further uncover the thought processes and feelings each meme type evoked, aligning with the ELM's dual-processing perspective.

To support the interviews, notes were taken throughout the interview, an interview guide was used, and follow-up questions were asked to probe deeper into certain responses to improve the richness of the data (Patton, 2015). Sometimes questions were omitted, altered, or added to avoid repetition or to delve deeper into a specific answer (Saunders et al., 2023). Additionally, to aid in the interpretation and analysis of the raw data, the interviews were recorded on the researcher's phone and promptly uploaded to their Hanken OneDrive account for secure storage. The recordings were then deleted once the thesis was submitted and finalized.

### ***3.3.1 Interview guide***

The interview guide was informed by Patton's (2015) question types, with both Patton (2015) and Arsel (2017) emphasizing the importance of using varied question types to generate meaningful insights whilst honoring respondents' perspectives and experiences (Patton, 2015). These question types include opinion and values questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, background/demographic questions, and experience and behavior questions (Patton, 2015). The interview guide is provided in Appendix 1.

The interview guide was divided into four themes to maintain focus and ensure alignment with the research questions, previous literature, theory, and the researcher's personal experiences with the topic. Saunders et al. (2023) stress that even exploratory studies require broad themes to provide direction and purpose. The themes include: the consumers' experience with TikTok and memes, the consumer's relationship with branded SFV memes on TikTok, the consumers' engagement with SFV memes on TikTok, and concluding thoughts on SFV meme marketing and their characteristics. The video-elicitation exercise had its own section in the guide but still addressed the core themes.

Opinion and values questions constituted the majority of the interview guide, aiming to uncover cognitive and interpretive processes regarding branded SFV memes on TikTok (Patton, 2015). These questions encouraged respondents to actively reflect on and evaluate branded SFV memes on TikTok. Many of the questions were inspired by the different ELM peripheral and central cues to uncover which one's appeal to them the most. The second-largest question category was experience and behavior questions, designed to explore respondents' actions and experience with branded SFV memes by eliciting detailed accounts of their behaviors and activities (Patton, 2015). These questions aimed to explore behavioral outcomes potentially arising from central and peripheral route processing. Furthermore, feeling questions were employed to delve into the emotional responses relating to the respondent's experiences and thoughts of branded SFV memes, reflecting emotions such as anxiety, happiness, fear, and confidence (Patton, 2015). These were especially important for investigating how emotional appeals influence heuristic processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Additionally, one knowledge question was included to inquire about information possessed by the respondents regarding their awareness and objective experience with branded SFV memes on TikTok. It was also important to include a few sensory questions (Patton, 2015) about the visuals and audio of branded SFV memes, both generally and in the video-elicitation exercise, aligning with the heuristic cues of audio-visual attractiveness from the ELM (Kim et al., 2016). Lastly, background and demographic questions regarding age, residence, and occupation were included to help characterize the interviewees, supporting the sample profile (Patton, 2015).

Respondents also completed an ordering exercise in which they ranked branded meme characteristics from most important to least important. These characteristics represented either peripheral cues, which were entertainment, visual attractiveness, audio attractiveness, and source trustworthiness, or central cues, which were message relevance, informativeness, argument quality, and brand image, as identified in existing ELM literature (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This ranking exercise was inspired by the card-based game approach proposed by Rowley et al. (2012), who outline it as the "creation of cards with words that are used in the interview to ask questions regarding the words on the cards, and to pose arrangement activities relating, for instance, to the relationships between the concepts, or the prioritization of the concepts on the cards" (Rowley et al., 2012 p. 95). By explicitly prompting respondents to rank these cues, the exercise encouraged them to reflect actively on their preferences and evaluations (Rowley et al., 2012), eliciting distinctions in cognitive processing preferences amongst the respondents. Additionally, the visual and interactive nature of this exercise helps minimize researcher bias, provides clearer participant

responses, and makes complex concepts more accessible and understandable for interviewees (Rowley et al., 2012). Once the ranking was complete, follow-up and probe questions were employed to understand why each respondent ranked the cues the way they did.

### ***3.3.2 Selection of stimuli for video elicitation***

The viewing exercise, which involved showing branded SFV memes from TikTok, employed a visual research method (VRM) known as video-elicitation, in which videos are incorporated into interviews (Patton, 2015). Although photo-elicitation dominates VRM literature, Harper (2002) notes that its principles extend to video formats. Video-elicitation aims to trigger insights, evoke emotions and memories (Harper, 2002; Roger & Blomgren, 2019) while also easing the interview dynamic and enabling richer participant engagement (Clark-Ibanez, 2004).

During this exercise, the respondents were shown four branded SFV memes from the two app brands: Duolingo (language learning) and Discord (communication). These can be found in Appendix 3. For each brand, one utilitarian and one hedonic meme were selected, aligning with the dual processing routes of the ELM and with previous studies that have examined hedonic versus utilitarian marketing content using the ELM (Chun & Lee, 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2018). The utilitarian memes were defined as informative and brand-relevant, advertising a feature of the app. This was expected to trigger central route processing due to more consideration of the content due to its useful information. In contrast, the chosen hedonic memes were humorous and did not explicitly mention the brand's offering. These were expected to evoke heuristic processing as the judgements were more likely to rely on superficial and affective cues (Shi et al., 2018).

The utilitarian meme from Duolingo advertised the friends quest feature using the brand's mascots and a trending meme audio. The utilitarian meme from Discord advertised its light mode feature, using a popular meme format and sound. The hedonic Duolingo meme humorously featured their mascots with no mention of the app and used a popular meme format and audio. The hedonic meme from Discord also used a popular meme format and audio, featuring an image of a haircut with the Discord logo shaved into it. Therefore, both utilitarian memes explicitly featured the application and a specific feature, whereas the hedonic memes were unrelated to the functionality of the apps and simply followed meme trends with some brand element present.

By having respondents compare different types of content, the study aimed to observe which processing route or routes they tended toward and under what conditions. The respondents' brand attitudes were also explored, as ELM predicts persuasion and attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In line with Harper's (2002) recommendation, respondents were given a point of reference to help trigger insights and reactions that might not arise through abstract questioning and recall alone. Choosing only two brands, both mobile apps, was to minimize the potential effect of brand-related biases, allowing for a clearer attribution of differences in responses to the meme content types rather than to varying brand perceptions of loyalty, and to improve comparability.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Qualitative data analysis, according to Lester, Cho, and Lochmiller (2020), is a systematic approach for examining textual or visual data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. This approach enables researchers to interpret various types of data effectively and to investigate complex phenomena within their natural settings. Spiggle (1994) further highlights the richness of data gained from exploring consumer experiences, behaviors, and interactions, suggesting the data analysis stages of categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, and integration. This study employed Spiggle's (1994) framework to navigate the complexities of qualitative analysis, allowing for systematic yet flexible engagement with the data to generate meaningful insights that capture consumer perceptions and their cognitive processes.

This process was coupled with Gioia, Corly, and Hamilton's (2013) methodology for ensuring qualitative rigor. They highlight the need for systematic, conceptual, and analytical discipline in developing new concepts, aiming to produce credible interpretations that convincingly support the plausibility and defensibility of the research conclusions. This study used Gioia et al.'s (2013) qualitative data analysis steps of coding the first-order concepts, categorizing these into second-order categories, and finally deriving the aggregate dimensions and main themes from those.

#### **3.4.1 Categorization**

The initial stage of qualitative data analysis is categorization, as described by Spiggle (1994) and aligned with Gioia et al.'s (2013) coding of first-order concepts. This entails systematically organizing qualitative data into meaningful categories through coding, laying the groundwork for identifying themes, patterns, and key insights within large volumes of data. Gioia et al. (2013) emphasize using informant-centric terms during the initial coding phase to maintain the integrity and depth of the respondents' perspectives.

After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher carried out a preliminary analysis by performing open coding, which involved deriving themes from the interview notes and transcripts, then color-coding relevant excerpts to support these themes. First, information relevant to the research aim and questions that came up repeatedly in the data were coded in line with Lester et al.'s (2020) definition of a code- a descriptive word or phrase that captures the meaning of data relevant to the study's purpose. Following the guidance of Lester et al.'s (2020), the researcher identified significant experiences and reflections of analytical relevance that emerged in the interviews. The coding generated a range of concepts, and as Spiggle (1994) suggests, excerpts from the transcripts were used to illustrate the different categories of interest that contribute to answering the research aim and questions. The initial coding resulted in 78 labels, which were then reduced and combined into a total of 56.

After this reduction, a more structured approach to the next stage of deriving the second-order themes was established. The goal was to progress beyond the descriptive nature of first-order concepts and develop more generalizable, theoretically insightful second-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2012). This resulted in grouping all the codes into eight second-order categories to better describe these labels. The categories were established with the research questions in mind, ensuring the application of ELM principles. Iteration was also conducted by going back and forth between each stage of analysis until data saturation was reached.

**Table 3 Codes and Categories Derived from the Data**

<b>First-Order Categories</b>	<b>Second-Order Themes</b>
Dislike for overly polished/high quality video Preference for trending audios Preference for video format of memes Edit or effects feeling cheap Visual and audio supporting one another Importance of visuals Preference for image slideshow format on TikTok Preference for higher visual quality Preference for lower visual quality	Processing of Audio and Visuals
Audio as the key identifying factor in memes Attention grabbing in first few seconds Content fit for TikTok Memes relevancy to the consumer TikTok usage intent	Attention Capture and Retention Cues

Social Proof via more likes, shares, followers,  
and comments

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Confusion over brands intention with memes	Barriers to Attention and Message Consideration
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Low interest in long videos  
Taking too long to understand the video  
Oversaturation of content on TikTok  
Ad avoidance  
Entertainment without consideration for the  
brand  
Low desire to think about the intended  
message  
Not understanding the brand element of the  
meme

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Algorithm influencing receptivity	Motivators for Central Processing
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Offering information in a humorous way  
Humorous way for brands to accept consumer  
feedback  
Comment section co-constructing meaning  
Brands making fun of consumer experiences

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Brands making fun of themselves	Cues that Encourage Peripheral Processing
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Preference for silly/"brain rot" memes  
Unique take on existing meme trends  
Brands commenting on their own and other  
memes  
Preference for verified accounts  
Preference for unverified accounts

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Learning about unfamiliar brands	Consumer Outcomes
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Brands not memorable when unsuccessful  
with branded memes  
TikTok video not enough for purchase intent  
Branded SFV meme triggering purchase intent  
Following brands for their memes  
Searching for more information after viewing a  
meme  
Attitude towards the brand remains the same  
No engagement with branded memes  
Engagement with branded memes  
Getting re-acquainted with a brand

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Dislike for memes that come off forced	Consumer Perceptions
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Neutral emotions towards branded SFV  
memes  
Positive emotions towards branded SFV  
memes  
Negative emotions towards branded SFV  
memes  
Humanizes the brand

Brand disregarding brand guidelines	
Memes as a way to enjoy marketing	
Meme suitability for brand image/values	
Every day brands being suitable for meme marketing	Brand Image and Meme Suitability
Preference for following small brands over big ones	
Meme marketing unsuitability for luxury or serious brands	
Brands deemed successful at branded memes	

### **3.4.2 Abstraction and comparison**

The next stage, abstraction, entails progressing from first- and second-order concepts to broader, more abstract themes. As Spiggle (1994) explains, this process involves identifying patterns or themes that transcend individual data points, enabling a deeper understanding of the phenomena. The second-order themes were aggregated into four dimensions to address the research questions. To organize the codes, categories, and themes, an Excel file was created, accompanied by supporting quotes from the interviews. An example from this Excel file can be found in Appendix 4.

To address the first research question on the processing of branded SFV memes, the categories “processing of audio and visuals” and “attention capture and retention cues” were grouped to create the dimension: attention triggers and avoidance factors in SFV meme marketing. The categories “barriers to central processing”, “motivators for central processing”, and “motivators for peripheral processing” were grouped to form the dimension: drivers and barriers in processing branded SFV memes. To address the second question on what consumer and brand outcomes arise from branded SFV memes, the categories “attention allocation outcomes” and “consumer perceptions of branded SFV memes” formed the dimension: consumer outcomes of SFV meme marketing. Lastly, the category “brand image and meme suitability” formed the fourth dimension: brand-level outcomes of SFV meme marketing. These dimensions are expanded upon in the empirical findings chapter.

Furthermore, the researcher employed the comparison stage simultaneously during categorization and abstraction. This was done by systematically exploring the similarities and differences across incidents within the collected data. This process applies logical reasoning to draw inferences from the data, thereby increasing the depth and rigor of the analysis (Spiggle, 1994). By comparing the data across all eight interviews, the researcher

deemed that sufficient data had been collected, as no new themes or insights emerged during the analysis of the final interviews, indicating that data saturation had been reached.

### **3.4.3 Dimensionalization**

Spiggle (1994) describes dimensionalization as a step in qualitative analysis in which properties or characteristics of categories and constructs are identified along continua or dimensions, mapping the conceptual range of these attributes. The researcher applied dimensionalization to this study by drawing upon the first-order concepts and second-order themes identified earlier. Certain significant factors that showed clear variation in the data were selected. Firstly, the most significant attention and processing cues were chosen as they demonstrated the greatest variation in the data. For example, while most respondents preferred lower visual quality, others preferred higher visual quality. This category of attention and processing cues helped the researcher address RQ1. The second category then represents the range of consumer outcomes, in which respondents showed considerable variation, thereby helping to address RQ2. These categories and their accompanying dimensions are demonstrated in Figure 3.

#### **Attention and Processing Cues**

Low Visual Quality.....High Visual Quality  
 Unrecognizable Audio.....Recognizable Audio  
 Image Format.....Video Format

#### **Consumer outcomes**

No engagement.....Active engagement  
 No purchase consideration.....High purchase intent  
 No follow-up behavior.....Follow-up behavior  
 No change in brand attitude.....Change in brand attitude  
 Low brand-content fit.....High brand-content fit

**Figure 3 Dimensionalization of Constructs**

### **3.4.4 Integration**

The integration stage of qualitative analysis, as described by Spiggle (1994), focuses on mapping relationships between conceptual elements, including gestalt connections, causal links, or other explicit associations. This step enables researchers to go beyond recognizing patterns or themes and develop a coherent, integrated theory that remains closely tied to the data. For this abductive study, the findings were compared to findings presented earlier in the thesis and to the enabling lens, the ELM. (Spiggle, 1994). The results of the integration of

the collected data and theory are presented in the final chapter, under the theoretical implications sub-chapter.

### **3.5 Quality of data**

Every research approach, no matter its underlying scientific philosophy, requires methods to assess the reliability of its findings. The specific criteria for evaluating reliability can vary greatly depending on the chosen research framework and philosophical perspective (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Nonetheless, the importance of reliability is universally recognized amongst the scientific community. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) outline five criteria for evaluating research reliability and examine different methods for ensuring reliability in data collection, interpretation, and reporting.

The first criterion, credibility, relates to how believable the research findings are to the study's respondents. Achieving credibility requires prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field, as well as triangulating data sources, methods, and investigators. (Patton, 2015; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). For this study, sufficient time was allocated for all interviews to facilitate prolonged engagement with the respondents, ensuring they did not feel rushed. Additionally, respondents were told their individual anonymized code used in the study in case they wanted to read the thesis and its findings. During the interviews, the researcher observed the respondents' body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions and took notes throughout. By combining these observations with the interviewing process, triangulation was improved. Furthermore, an abductive research approach was employed, enhancing methodological triangulation as recommended by Dubois and Gadde (2002).

Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings of a study can be applied to different contexts or settings. Enhancing transferability involves providing rich, detailed descriptions of the research context and results, as well as using purposive sampling to cover a wide range of situations (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Due to the sample being taken from the capital region of Finland, the results may not be entirely applicable to other cultural contexts. However, most of the brands brought up by respondents were international brands, meaning the experiences of the consumers in Finland do not necessarily differ much from consumers in other countries. Additionally, the video elicitation exercise included two international brands. Therefore, if this study were to be replicated in other cultural contexts with Generation Z consumers, similar results could be expected, and more so in other Nordic countries due to cultural similarities. Furthermore, the comprehensive description of the context, methodology, and findings supports the potential for applying the results to other

settings. However, the findings of this study are tied to SFV meme marketing on TikTok, lowering transferability to other contexts.

Dependability highlights the importance of a research process that is logical, traceable, and well-documented, ensuring that its findings are consistent and could be replicated over time (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). To meet this criterion, an interview guide was thoroughly planned and described (Appendix 1), which would enable other researchers to carry out similar interviews with other respondents. A pre-test was carried out before finalizing the guide, which also increased its reliability. However, since interviews were only done in one instance, it is difficult to determine how dependable the responses are, as potential changes appearing after an extended period were not observed.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which a study's results are influenced by the respondents and research conditions rather than the researcher's biases (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). To ensure this, the interviews were thoroughly documented through field notes, audio recordings, and detailed transcriptions created shortly after each interview to maintain accuracy. Additionally, direct quotes from the respondents were used, and the steps from data collection to analysis were clearly outlined to strengthen the study's confirmability and enable tracing conclusions back to the original data. However, it is important to acknowledge that qualitative data analysis is subjective to a certain degree, and therefore, there is a possibility that another researcher would interpret the data differently.

Lastly, integrity involves ethical aspects such as honesty in reporting findings, transparency throughout the research process, and respect for respondents' confidentiality and consent (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Ethical standards were adhered to as the respondent was told they would remain completely anonymous to protect their privacy, and written consent was obtained from all interview respondents. The respondents were also fully informed about the nature of the study and its objectives. Lastly, the respondents were given the choice of venue and time for their interview, to ensure the respondents felt comfortable and that the time and place were convenient for them.

### **3.6 Ethical Concerns**

For any research, it is important to consider and implement research ethics. One must think carefully about how they will gain access to collect their data and about any possible ethical concerns that could come up throughout the research project. (Saunders et al., 2023). This thesis topic does not involve any sensitive topics such as underage people, vulnerable groups, sexuality, illegal activity, or violence, for example, meaning there is a very low risk of any sort

of threat to the informants. However, certain actions were taken to make sure this study met ethical research practices.

Firstly, respondents were told they would remain anonymous in the thesis and that they could withdraw at any point during the interview. Additionally, informed consent was obtained before the interview through a consent form provided by Hanken School of Economics (Appendix 2). A privacy notice was also supplied to the respondents, in which they were informed about all their rights regarding the study, how their data would be used, and any other necessary information. Additionally, all data collected and analyzed, as well as the signed consent forms, were stored in a location where unauthorized people could not access it, and this was done by using storage services provided by Hanken through the researcher's personal Hanken Microsoft OneDrive account. All respondents were also kept anonymous in the transcripts and were referred to by their code.

## 4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter presents the empirical findings, which are divided into the four aggregate dimensions that were derived from the data analysis process. To address the research questions more effectively, these dimensions were further grouped into two main themes. The first sub-chapter addresses RQ1 and includes results regarding the cognitive processing of SFV meme marketing, focusing on attention triggers and avoidance factors as well as the drivers and barriers to processing branded SFV memes. The second sub-chapter then addresses RQ2 with results concerning consumer responses and reactions to branded SFV memes and the brand-level outcomes of SFV meme marketing. The evidence for the findings is provided as respondent quotes.

### 4.1 Cognitive processing of branded SFV memes

Respondents described various cognitive reactions relating to attention triggers, avoidance factors, and the drivers and barriers to processing branded SFV memes on TikTok. The principles of ELM were apparent through the importance of peripheral and central cues and various processing antecedents, which are expanded upon in the following sub-chapters.

#### 4.1.1 *Attention triggers and avoidance factors in branded SFV memes*

Participant responses revealed various factors that grab, retain, and lose their attention when it comes to branded SFV memes within TikTok's oversaturated and fast-paced SFV environment. These factors included both content characteristics and non-content characteristics unique to the SFV format. Overall, when it came to attention-grabbing, all respondents discussed how important it was for branded SFV memes on TikTok specifically to capture their attention within the first three to ten seconds.

R1: "There is that certain threshold where if I lose interest, I just skip it without even watching the full video to the end. This could be like, three to five seconds."

R2: "It usually, within the first second, it needs to somehow grab my attention. Like, it needs to be recognizable in the sense that, okay, I know it's a certain trend or a meme, or there's just some sort of hook that makes me want to watch it."

Firstly, among non-content characteristics, the importance of the peripheral cues, audio and visual attractiveness (Gan et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2016), came up repeatedly with all eight respondents. With visuals specifically, the most novel finding was that most respondents expressed a preference for lower camera quality and lower production value because that

seemed more native to TikTok, with some respondents noting how overly polished production can make the meme feel inauthentic and overly commercial.

R6: “Aesthetic-wise, I don't like things that are overproduced. I think I would even say if it's shot on an iPhone versus expensive camera equipment, I view it better because then it's similar to all the other content I look at. It doesn't stand out as much.”

R5: “The super, super high quality can also affect it [whether they scroll past]. Because maybe it is such high quality that it doesn't feel organic and it feels too professional.”

However, while most respondents shared this view, one respondent showed a preference for visually high-quality branded SFV memes, as they expect companies with large budgets to adhere to high production standards. They did, however, acknowledge that SFV memes are sometimes inherently low quality, but then followed this by stating that it would be risky for brands to attempt those sorts of memes.

R4: “If it's for example, some very well-known brand, the fact that maybe the video is a bit of worse quality, that sticks out to me because you'd expect this kind of like studio production from a certain company.”

This singular respondent's view aligns with previous research (Huang & Ha, 2020; Dong et al., 2023) on the importance of SFV marketing materials being visually high-quality. However, the fact that most respondents share the opposite view represents a unique situation in which SFV meme marketing content is being held to the opposite standard.

Visuals in general were also deemed important by all respondents, who mentioned how videos are inherently a visuals-first format, the importance of quickly understanding the visuals, and how audio and video go hand-in-hand for video efficacy.

R1: “...the visual and audio are equally important, because with the visuals, if it takes me too long to understand, what is the point of the video? Or if I don't really understand what's going on, then even if the audio is like trendy or funny, I'm not going to like it as much...but I think for the first two videos, like both the audio and the visuals were on trend or like they worked well with each other.”

Audio also played a significant role in grabbing attention, with trending or well-known audio on TikTok acting as hooks for the viewer, allowing them to immediately recognize the video as a meme. This was not only mentioned in the respondents' recall of branded SFV memes

but was also mentioned by all the respondents in the video-elicitation and ranking exercise. Their ability to recognize the audio and their pre-existing opinion on the audio affected all the respondents' rankings of the four branded SFV memes, and five out of eight respondents ranked audio attractiveness in their top three branded meme characteristics. Respondents also expressed knowledge of how the algorithm boosts videos that use these trending audios.

R3: "I would say those audios, for example, in the four videos you showed, would catch my attention. It would be like, boom. It's recognisable. I know it's going to be a meme...You're going to be like, I want to see what happens. I want to see if it's going to be funny. And then there's no chance of you skipping it because you don't know it's a meme. You're just like, oh, what is this?"

Multiple respondents also discussed their meme format preferences, with five explicitly mentioning that video format is their favorite due to its abundance on social media platforms and the ease of watching and engaging with them. However, a couple of respondents stated they like both static image and video memes equally, but that when it comes to TikTok specifically, they prefer videos.

R5: "I usually do prefer video memes, just because they're easier to engage with... but a good photo meme can be way more impactful, because you leave it up to the imaginary, so it's not that direct."

R7: "I think I equally like pictures. Or on TikTok specifically, I guess, videos. The photo ones I usually skip if they're like photo memes because if there's also video, it's just easier to watch a video."

Additionally, a couple of respondents mentioned that they prefer the image slideshow format on TikTok, which serves as a middle ground between image and video meme formats. This preference was due to their similarity to "old style classic memes".

R6: "I think when it comes to a meme, I think not having a moving image per se, but like a slideshow often is more meme-y, if that's an adjective. So I think Discord was definitely using a more old school, classic meme platform."

Many respondents expressed a preference for shorter videos in comparison to longer ones, especially when it comes to branded SFV memes. Respondents expressed that if they know a video is branded, then they are less likely to watch a longer-form video. Additionally, some respondents felt that, in general, they prefer short-form videos as they tend to contain more edits, which keep them interesting.

R6: "...I think the length also, you have to be quite snappy with it, especially if it's branded content. I cannot imagine myself watching a four-minute branded content. But I could watch someone talk for four minutes if they're doing a story time or something else."

R1: "...but the videos tend to be formed almost kind of like in a YouTube video in a way where it's longer than a typical YouTube video and there's not a lot of edits to make it interesting. So those are the types of videos that I lose interest in more quickly than the others."

In addition to these non-content characteristics, the content of the branded SFV meme was deemed significant by all respondents when it came to grabbing and retaining attention. The meme's relevance was significant, with all respondents mentioning that they are more likely to watch a branded meme that somehow felt relatable or relevant to them personally or as a target group. For example, many respondents mentioned how memes often represent a generational group's humor, such as millennials or Generation Alpha, and noted that if the humor was geared more towards those groups rather than their own, they would avoid it.

R1: "Another aspect is if the humor just doesn't really hit. I feel like Millennial and Gen Z's make up currently the biggest audience on TikTok and our humor tends to be a little bit unconventional, in the sense that it can be a little bit unpredictable to know what will be funny to us. So if the joke or the punchline seems a little outdated, or not very Gen Z Millennial-ish, then it can feel like, okay, well, who made this video? Or why are they making this video? It doesn't really fit into the platform."

Personal relevance was also deemed important and came up as the main reason the utilitarian Discord meme was ranked as number one by six respondents and as number two by one. All the respondents who ranked this meme so highly mentioned being able to relate to the topic of the meme, which was the dislike for a feature known as light mode. Additionally, branded memes that related to the respondent's interests or their experience with the brand as a consumer were better received.

R3: "...the Discord light mode was one of my favourites. Because first of all, I personally get it. I've used Discord for many years, and I understand the hate against light mode. So it was quite funny because of that."

R5: "Obviously, like I could relate more to that, like in the beauty field than like, I guess Duolingo or Ryanair because I don't fly that airline. So I, I really don't care. It doesn't relate to me in that sense."

Another major factor that contributed to respondents scrolling past or avoiding branded SFV memes was whether it had an official advert tag, overexposure to the same brand, and obvious commercial intent. Many respondents stated that a prerequisite for them staying and watching a branded SFV meme was that it came up organically on their feed and felt native to TikTok as a platform.

R7: "If it just looks super organic, I think I'd watch it just normally, but if it's like something where in the first few seconds I can tell that it's already an ad and some brand trying something, then I'll be like, oh my god, okay, I don't wanna see this."

R5: "...if it's meant for TikTok and entertainment, if it's not like entertaining at all, then I'm just not going to engage with it. It defeats the purpose, right? Like, if it's going to be some sort of ad, and it's going to be so obvious that you're trying to sell me something, you're going to lose me completely."

In line with this, many respondents expressed that if the branded meme came up organically on their feed due to their algorithm, they would be more likely to watch it. The algorithm also came up as a reason for not following brands on TikTok, as respondents felt they would get this content on their feed regardless and did not want to risk overexposure.

R2: "I appreciate them more when they pop up on my feed, because it comes from the algorithm, and not because I follow them, because I feel like if I'm exposed to their content all the time, it just makes me want to not engage with it...so when I don't follow, and it pops up on my feed, I know it's, like, okay, my algorithm knows that I'm gonna like this content"

R8: "...usually if I see a brand meme on TikTok it's already kind of popular and I will see it again. I will see the account in the future also just because of the algorithm."

Lastly, perceived authenticity came up as a prerequisite for paying attention to a branded SFV meme. When memes appeared forced or out of touch, they were typically dismissed. One aspect that came up as making the content seem authentic was when the brand was self-aware and making fun of itself. Additionally, posting too frequently and trying too hard to fit into meme or TikTok culture led to respondents skipping the video or not enjoying it.

R6: "I think it's very visible when the person that makes branded content in TikTok doesn't use TikTok themselves. I think this is an opportunity to hire young professionals for those things, people who have grown up on these platforms, grown up with this kind of humor."

R7: “Well, I guess where it just feels very forced, like the brand doesn't really fit into the topic in any way. And it's not funny. They're trying to force and add into a meme format. And also just seeing it too often. Like if they like constantly try to do it, it would annoy me...if it's every once in a while, then I think it's fun.”

#### **4.1.2 Drivers and barriers in processing branded SFV memes**

Both drivers and barriers to processing branded SFV memes in relation to the ELM's central and peripheral processing routes came up in the data, particularly when discussing the respondents' preferences regarding branded SFV memes. Through this discussion, respondents demonstrated preferences for certain central and peripheral cues. However, respondents showed a larger preference for peripheral cues when initially engaging with branded SFV memes, with audiovisual elements, social proof, and humor emerging as particularly important.

Central processing routes were evident through the respondents' mention of certain central cues such as informativeness, argument quality, and relevancy (Kulkarni et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2018). If a meme was somehow intellectually or emotionally stimulating, often due to the humor being grounded in truth, satire, and personally relevant topics, it seemed to be processed more thoughtfully. For instance, multiple respondents could recall specific memes from Ryanair, citing how the brand jokes about the consumer's experience. These types of memes appeared to prompt deeper reflection and discussion, indicating central route activation.

R7: “...for example, the Ryanair [memes] where they made fun of how you can't take any stuff with you on the airplane. Like you have to put all your clothes on and it's kind of like, okay, well, it's nice that you're aware of the meme, but are you going to do anything about it?”

Consumers also seemed to reflect more on memes that showed the brand was listening to their consumers and making light of their feedback. Five respondents explicitly mentioned their affinity for the fact that the Discord utilitarian meme from the viewing exercise did just that. Not only was this feedback relevant to them, as they agreed with the comments from the video, but it was also apparent that this type of meme required more cognitive effort. Since the main focus was the message content, more active processing and evaluation of the information were required.

R1: “The Discord [utilitarian] video, I found it funny because there was a clear intention of showing, oh, our users are hating on Light Mode, and I think the whole point was that they're showing all the feedback of users and it's just like hate comments or trolling on Discord, so it's

like a humorous way of the brand accepting feedback, even if the feedback is a little bit not professionally written.”

In line with this, the central cue of informativeness came up explicitly with multiple respondents, especially when it comes to brands offering information through their memes in a humorous manner. Respondents discussed how branded SFV memes are not only for entertainment purposes, but also often provide information on the brand’s offerings. These types of memes seemed to trigger more consideration for the brand itself, with memes offering information being the only ones that had the potential to trigger purchase consideration.

R1: “With Scrub Daddy, that's kind of actually how I got more acquainted with their products. And I ended up buying, I still buy their sponges to this day. But that's how I took the step to buy the sponge because before that, I'd heard of the brand and seen it on TV, like when they were pitching their product before they made it big. But I kind of was always skeptical...But then seeing their humorous content and seeing other commenters like hype it up, has led me to purchase.”

R6: “...memes make us laugh. And obviously, if I gain information, if that is even marketed information, and laugh while receiving, I'm going to have a more positive reaction...And if it's a good meme, you don't look away even if you know kind of that it might be sort of an ad.”

Another aspect that seemed to elicit more attention and thought to the meme was the comment section, as respondents expressed that the comments offer valuable information on the brand from other users, which is more trustworthy for them due to being organic feedback. The comment section also acts as a source of entertainment, and respondents looked forward to going through them, meaning they stick with the meme for a longer time. This aspect seems to be unique to TikTok as a platform, as studies on other social media platforms fail to mention this element.

R1: “ for almost every video, I always check the comments. And sometimes somehow the comments end up being 10 times funnier than the video or 10 times interesting than the video, because someone's sharing something related to the video.”

R6: “I think what is most likely to happen is I like [the video]. Or I like a comment. Rarely do I comment myself... I do read the comments and I see how other people are interacting and I might uplift the reactions that I resonate with as well.”

Conversely, central route engagement was hindered when messages were ambiguous or took too long to understand. Several respondents shared the sentiment of feeling confused about the brand's intention with the meme, missing the branded element entirely, or taking too long to decipher what the video was about in the first place. For example, half of the respondents mentioned being confused over the hedonic Discord meme from the viewing exercise, stating that they either did not realize or it took a while to realize that the Discord logo was shaved into someone's head. This contributed to seven respondents ranking this meme as their least favorite.

R3: "...I found it funny in a stupid way. I just didn't really get the Discord hair thing. It was just kind of stupid. I was just like, what's happening?...And then also the the Duolingo What The Sigma [Duolingo hedonic meme]. I was like, I'm kind of confused. Like, what is this? What's the goal of this?"

Central route engagement was also hindered by the widespread perception that branded SFV memes are purely for entertainment, leading to low consideration for the brand or message-related aspects of the content.

R8: "Since we're approaching it through memes, if it's a brand, I don't care. If it's funny, then it's funny. I don't care about the brand that much. Like, that's not important. If it makes me laugh, if it's a brand, sure.. Argument quality. how convincing? Well, if it's a meme, it's already kind of ridiculous. So it's not going to convince me to consume the product."

R6: "I think I would say in the past I have not thought of them too deeply...But I don't think I've thought of them more than the trends. Their message in my eyes has always been the trends that they participate in."

The likelihood of respondents processing branded SFV memes peripherally seemed to be greater overall, but especially in cases where humor, trend alignment, social proof, or audio-visual appeal carried the message. These cues seemed to allow respondents to enjoy the meme without analysis of the brand's message. Inherent to a meme is its humorous appeal, but what arose as unique to branded SFV memes is that this humor is largely comprised of brands making fun of themselves.

R7: "Well, I guess the ones I'm thinking of are more for entertainment purposes, like the Duolingo and the Ryanair and everything. Like they're kind of just making light of their own shortcomings in a way. So yeah, I feel like I haven't necessarily learned anything valuable from them, but it's just kind of funny and relatable."

Following a meme trend and being on time with trends, especially when the trend was altered to be unique by the brand, also seemed to encourage peripheral processing. Respondents expressed being able to recognize that it is a meme and enjoy it purely as such, when brands used popular trends either within the content itself or with the audio.

R1: "I think one thing is their posting schedule is so frequent... And they're constantly on time with trends, or then sometimes they might even come up with their own meme instead of jumping on a trend."

Another humorous cue for many of the respondents was when brands would either comment on their memes and interact with the audience that way, or when they commented on other brands or other creators' content humorously. This did not seem to elicit any further consideration for the branded SFV memes' message, but instead allowed them to enjoy the brand more organically.

R3: "...a lot of brands nowadays, like their accounts will be commenting on videos. Like the video will have nothing to do with any brands, it's a random person's video, and in the comments, it's the admin of that brand's account meme-ing. Being a person. I like that a lot."

R5: "Ryanair will make fun of how bad their flights are and their customer service. But it's something that they're owning up to...they're gonna be like responding to comments and doing all that.... A lot of the times I see brands commenting funny stuff, quote unquote, on other people's videos."

However, a couple of respondents mentioned that this kind of behavior can backfire and appear as an inauthentic way to get noticed, especially when the content commented on did not seem to relate to the brand in any way.

R5: "But I see brands just commenting like funny stuff. And this just feels like a cash grab, kind of like they're just trying to be noticed. And it doesn't feel very genuine to me unless it has to do with the brand."

R7: "...there are some brands that I've seen commenting on a meme or on a trendy topic...and the brands are in the comments, making jokes and participating in the meme of like hating on a person, for example, and that makes me respect a brand less and I wouldn't really want to support that brand specifically."

Additionally, social proof acted as a peripheral cue as it helped respondents decide whether the video was worth watching. Certain popularity indicators, such as comments, likes, and

the accounts' followers, were repeatedly brought up by respondents as something they pay attention to. These indicators also seem to increase the perceived value of the content.

R7: "...if I saw it's a big creator and a very followed page and millions of likes and tons of comments and stuff, I'd be more inclined to stay and watch the video, because I feel like other people also like this. So I guess either consciously or subconsciously, you feel you need to also like it or at least see what it's about."

R5: "If you see that a lot of people have liked it or commented on it, you automatically feel like this is content that is being liked and shared by others, and that must mean that I must like it. Let me sit here and watch it. It's different when you see one that has just a few hundred likes, or just ten. Like, you're just gonna maybe scroll past it, even without watching the video, because subconsciously, you think it's not a good video."

Moreover, whether the content came from an unverified or verified account made a difference. Some respondents mentioned that they are more likely to trust the message if the video comes from a verified account, whereas others mentioned that this verification can sometimes lead to avoidance and seem less authentic. This social proof has also led to consumer outcomes, which will be elaborated on in the next sub-chapter.

R3: "...if it's not posted from an account that I know is the official account, I don't really care. I don't really count it. It's not a branded meme. It's just a meme that anyone could have made...so it definitely has to come from the official account for me to process it as a branded meme."

R5: "I don't like actually when these brands with the Blue Check are posting some videos because automatically you think, okay, this is a brand. And I'm gonna scroll past it, cause it's gonna be some ad in it. You're trying to sell me something. I prefer seeing content from people who aren't verified."

## **4.2 Consumer and brand outcomes of SFV meme marketing**

In addition to the themes relating to cognitive processing, themes regarding consumer and brand outcomes were also derived from the data, specifically to address RQ 2. These outcomes reflect how consumers respond to branded SFV memes beyond cognitive processing. Both tangible and intangible results that emerged are explored, shedding light on the broader implications of this marketing strategy.

### **4.2.1 Consumer outcomes of SFV meme marketing**

To gauge the effectiveness of a branded SFV meme, it is important to look at what consumer outcomes and perceptions arise as a result. Throughout the data, various consumer actions

and attitudes regarding this type of marketing came up. It is especially important to delve deeper into the implications for attitude, as it is proposed that the processing routes presented in the ELM lead to attitude formation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Firstly, engagement behaviors such as liking, commenting, sharing, and following were observed at times when the content resonated with either the respondents' sense of humor or their interests. Liking the content was the most common behavior expressed, whereas commenting and sharing were rare. Some respondents also stated that they had followed brands because of their memes, but on the other hand, others stated that they do not feel the need to follow the account because they will see it on their feed.

R1: "I don't predominantly follow brands on TikTok. But if the content that they make on TikTok is interesting, even if- for example, Duolingo, I don't really use the app ever and seeing their content on TikTok hasn't made me personally want to use the app more- But it definitely has warmed me up more to the brand itself. And that's why, I've subscribed to their account."

R3: "Usually if it's like just an organic video that gets on my page from a brand, if it's well-made, I'll like it. I don't like it if it shows up as an ad."

R4: "Well, I'd say if the video is interesting, and I like it, if I don't follow them, I do like the video. I'd say I don't really otherwise engage."

Off-platform actions also sometimes occurred after seeing a branded SFV meme. This included purchasing the product or service; however, only a few respondents mentioned having done so. Multiple respondents mentioned that they do not think a branded SFV meme is enough to make them want to consume from the brand.

R1: "Well, for example, with Scrub Daddy, that's kind of actually how I got more acquainted with their like products. And I ended up buying. I still buy their sponges to this day."

R5: "...I like to decide myself if I'm going to buy the product...like one video isn't going to tell me like if it's good or not like I have to see many people reviewing it or I have to see like that it's really gonna like help me do something for me to purchase it."

Another off-platform action that would take place was looking for information about the brand outside TikTok, with some respondents stating that if they were interested in the product, service, or brand, they would search for more information on their website, for example. However, similarly to purchase intent, this was quite rare.

R3: "I saw this, there was like this town township in Britain where their council posted meme videos on TikTok and I went to their like city website and read about their city."

Some other outcomes that came up repeatedly were either discovering new brands or getting re-acquainted with a brand through their branded SFV memes, with respondents citing that this kind of marketing content gives a better initial impression than more traditional marketing. Additionally, some respondents discussed the desire to consume from a brand again, or that they have consumed from a brand again because they got reminded of them through a branded SFV meme.

R2: "That's when I downloaded Duolingo again. So, I guess that was something, like, oh, Duolingo does exist, and I started to use it."

It was also apparent that branded SFV memes influenced emotional reactions towards the brand, product, or service. Positive emotional reactions reinforced favorable attitudes, especially if the meme marketing was deemed successful due to perceived humor value, brand suitability, authenticity, and relatability.

R2: "I feel like I think of the brand quite positively. And I think because it resonates with me, I'm sure it resonates with other people, especially younger audiences."

R6: "If I think it's genuine content and done well, it makes me view them positively."

R7: "I like the fact that they're self-aware. So, I guess it would make me respect them a little bit more"

These positive emotions were also reinforced by sentiments of brands disregarding brand guidelines and posting something unexpected. Multiple respondents mentioned that it is more memorable when brands post memes that would not necessarily be appropriate for professional corporations to post.

R1: "The types of branded content that are the most memorable to me, have been things that are unexpected, where I wouldn't have expected the brand to make such like a silly goofy post."

R5: "...some of the brands like obviously Duolingo and Ryanair have this meme marketing approach, and they don't care about their brand guidelines. And I like that. I like that they can go out of the box."

However, negative opinions also arose when the meme marketing was seen as unsuccessful for reasons such as being cringey, too commercial, or not on-trend.

R6: "...If I feel like they're just trying to push product more and more into my eyesight and gain visibility, I think it can actually do the opposite, where I view them a little bit more

negatively. So I think it's really about how you use that humor and do you use it in a genuine and almost creative way or do you just try to repeat what you've seen before.”

R1: “If it's not done well enough, or if it's not done with true intention to be like, really funny and meme-y, it can come off a little try hard-y and a little cringey, like not in a good way or a funny way, just kind of like, oh, another company that's trying a, generic marketing tactic of being hip with the kids.”

R2: “If it just doesn't fit the brand, then I feel cringe. Like, oh, why would you do that?”

A notable finding is that whilst all respondents expressed an affinity for this type of marketing, it did not and has not explicitly changed their pre-existing attitudes towards the brand in any of the respondents. This was especially evident in the video-elicitation exercise when respondents were asked about their attitudes toward the brands shown. Some respondents expressed already having positive opinions on those brands, while others expressed that their previous attitudes of not needing the brand remained the same after viewing the memes, even if they deemed them to be successful. Some respondents also believe that this form of marketing can only change their view of the company's marketing department rather than the company itself.

R8: “Honestly it doesn't affect it at all. I think if a company engages in meme marketing then it's not gonna actually change my perspective of the company because I think the only thing that it's gonna change is my perspective of their marketing department.”

#### **4.2.2 Brand-level outcomes of SFV meme marketing**

The final theme focuses on the implications of SFV meme marketing for brands. Various brand outcomes, such as brand awareness, brand trust, and brand-content fit, serve as good indicators of how successful a branded SFV meme is.

Brand awareness came up with all the respondents, as they acknowledged that well-executed branded SFV memes make the brand more memorable and that it is a good way to build awareness with younger consumers. Not only was this theme apparent in the explicit conversations on brand awareness, but it was also seen in the repetition of certain brands by most respondents. Every respondent brought up Duolingo before the viewing exercise, as a successful meme marketing brand. Ryanair was also brought up as successful by many respondents. This indicates that these two brands have stuck in the consumer's mind and increased both their awareness and recall.

R2: “Based on the things that I've seen, a lot of it is just for entertainment, so it is a lot for just the brand awareness. I mean, it's the beginning, of communications with the brand and the customer, so, yes, I think it's a good way.”

R5: “Yeah, I like that they can go out of the box. And they're not trying to shove a brand down your throat. They're just trying to make you laugh and smile. And that's the whole purpose of TikTok, you don't want to be honestly sold anything. So it increases your brand awareness, obviously, and your likability.”

It was also evident that brands that failed at SFV meme marketing were not memorable. When prompted to think about an unsuccessful brand, most respondents could not recall any examples, with some even explicitly mentioning that they probably do not remember the brands for this very reason.

R1: “No, I think that's why they're unsuccessful.”

R3: “I feel like I can remember so many times a company has tried to post a meme or seem relatable and flopped. And then it just ends up with the entire internet memeing on them for that. I can't remember any of what companies those were.”

Brand trust also came up as consumers felt that the brand was more authentic and more human, and therefore more credible when they were successful at posting branded SFV memes. Brand trust did not seem to stem from message or source trustworthiness but instead arose through perceived relatability, authenticity, and humor.

R1: “Well, I think it makes the brand more human, it humanizes the brand and makes them seem more trustworthy. And I think that's a big part of credibility as well. Building brand relationships with customers or potential customers.”

Another theme that came up repeatedly was brand suitability for branded SFV meme marketing. All respondents had opinions on what types of brands they think would benefit or not from meme marketing based on their respective industries, brand image, and brand values. Most respondents brought up that meme marketing is best suited for consumer-based brands, small brands, and everyday brands. In contrast, more serious brands or luxury brands were perceived as incompatible with meme marketing, with some respondents suggesting that if they do want to attempt it, they should do so with caution due to the risks for their brand image.

R1: “I don't necessarily think that it's the right move for like every single brand. And I think maybe the reason why some brands content doesn't hit as hard is because it just doesn't work with their brand values or their brand image. For example, a brand that's super serious like Deloitte or something, I can't really imagine them making brain rot content. Or it might make me view them a little bit differently.”

R5: “I would recommend it to people who kind of want to be more relatable and they want their audience to kind of get to know them a bit more, and so I would recommend it to maybe small brands and brands who are less expensive.”

### **4.3 Summary of findings**

This study explored how Generation Z consumers process and perceive branded SFV memes on TikTok. Using the ELM as an enabling lens, it revealed complex interactions between central and peripheral processing cues that guide attention, interpretation, and outcomes. These insights led to the development of four dimensions related to the cognitive processing of branded SFV memes and the potential outcomes they produce.

At a cognitive level, peripheral cues such as trending audio and native, low-quality visuals were the most effective in capturing attention and subsequent engagement. The most novel finding was that, contrary to the notion that marketing video content should be of high quality (Dong et al., 2023; Huang & Ha, 2020), respondents cited a preference for low-production visuals and casual filming on phones rather than professional cameras. Central cues such as informativeness and relevance also played a role in certain cases, but only when delivered humorously.

In terms of outcomes, engagement was generally passive, with liking being the most common behavior and with often little to no interaction. This challenges previous meme marketing studies that suggest meme marketing generally increases engagement metrics (Kim & Kim, 2024; Malodia et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2024). While successful SFV meme marketing increased brand awareness, it did not increase purchase intent or brand loyalty. Notably, despite the positive perception of branded SFV memes, there were no signs of attitude change towards the brand, challenging traditional ELM assumptions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

To synthesize these findings and provide a conceptual understanding of the range of processing routes observed, this study proposes a branded SFV Meme Processing Matrix (Figure 4). This framework places consumer processing of branded SFV memes along two continua: systematic processing and heuristic processing, both from low to high. Each quadrant of the model then represents four distinct types of branded SFV meme processing, inspired by the findings and the ELM.

<b>Heuristic Processing</b>	<i>High</i>	<p><b>Entertainment-Driven Engagement</b></p> <p>Branded memes are consumed for their humor, audio-visual cues, and/or social proof but with low message consideration.</p>	<p><b>Optimal Dual Processing</b></p> <p>Branded memes capture attention and promote message consideration by combining peripheral cues (e.g. humor and audio-visual attractiveness) with central cues (e.g. information and relevance)</p>
	<i>Low</i>	<p><b>Passive Avoidance or Disengagement</b></p> <p>Branded meme fails to catch attention or entertain due to poor execution, confusion, and/or ad avoidance.</p>	<p><b>Reflective Engagement</b></p> <p>Branded meme triggers meaningful thought or brand evaluation due to high informational value or relevance, without much consideration for peripheral cues.</p>
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<b>Systematic Processing</b>			

**Figure 4 Branded SFV Meme Processing Matrix**

To utilize this matrix effectively and fully understand it, it is helpful to be aware of the most probable outcomes of each processing route combination. Potential outcomes based on the study's results will be provided for each quadrant with the support of respondent quotes. Firstly, passive avoidance or disengagement, representing both low heuristic and systematic processing, tends to lead to no consideration of either the brand or the video's message. Respondents explicitly stated they do not even remember brands that have failed at SFV meme marketing.

R7: "I guess the unsuccessful ones were so unsuccessful that I don't remember them."

Secondly, entertainment-driven engagement, classified by high heuristic processing and low systematic processing, was the most common and can lead to brand awareness, positive associations with the brand, and potential engagement. However, it is less likely to increase purchase consideration or intent to consume from the brand.

R3: "...I follow Duolingo because of their memes. I didn't follow because I was really passionate about learning languages. It's just because they're funny. They have really good marketing."

Thirdly, reflective engagement, characterized by low heuristic processing and high systematic processing, was the least common. The results showed that when content provided useful information, peripheral cues also played a role due to the inherent humorous nature of branded SFV memes. As this type of processing was not present in the specific

context of SFV memes, this study offers no concrete outcomes for this quadrant, and it should not be the goal of marketers.

R3: "...they give valuable information. Like it tells about a new product or something, but it's kind of in a joking way."

Lastly, optimal dual processing represents the ideal situation where the consumer processes the content with both high systematic and heuristic processing. This type of processing was rarer, but still present in the study, with outcomes including purchase consideration and searching for more information about the brand or their offering.

R1: "...with Scrub Daddy, that's kind of actually how I got more acquainted with their like products. And I ended up buying, I still buy their sponges to this day."

## 5 DISCUSSION

Using the ELM as a guiding framework, this study aimed to explore the cognitive processing of branded SFV memes. The empirical findings led to the support for, expansion of, and challenges to previous research, while contributing novel insights regarding this marketing tactic. This chapter discusses the main empirical findings in conjunction with previous research and the enabling lens, the ELM. Theoretical and managerial implications are also presented, followed by the study's limitations and the researcher's recommendations for future avenues of research. The chapter concludes with final remarks.

### 5.1 Cognitive processing of branded SFV memes

In addressing RQ1, the integration of the ELM as an enabling lens provided comprehensive insight into how content and non-content characteristics of branded SFV memes interact to influence processing. As SFV memes contain more non-content characteristics that need to be processed, such as moving visuals and audio, this study offers insight into how these factors both facilitate and inhibit consumer processing, which previous studies on meme marketing have neglected. Respondents processed branded SFV memes through both central and peripheral routes, depending on these characteristics and their motivation to process.

Informational content that felt relevant showed signs of being processed through the central route, demonstrated by better recall of such content. However, only branded SFV memes that coupled this with humor were seen as successful, meaning a combination of both systematic processing and heuristic processing is likely. Humor, trending audios, meme familiarity, and audio-visual cues acted as peripheral triggers that caught immediate attention and allowed the respondent to enjoy the content without further consideration of the brand or the intended message. These findings are aligned with the dual-route processing principles of the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and are further supported by Shi et al. (2018) and Kumar et al. (2022), who found that both central cues such as argument quality, and peripheral cues, such as humor, can simultaneously influence engagement in digital environments.

The peripheral non-content cues of audio and visuals proved to be the most influential in the processing of this type of content. Respondents highly valued visuals and surprisingly preferred low-quality visuals, which is a novel contribution to the literature that is further discussed in the theoretical implications sub-chapter. Additionally, emotionally intense and chaotic sounds, common attributes of trending meme audios, were preferred, challenging Xiao et al.'s (2024) findings that chaotic or emotionally intense audios reduce engagement with SFV advertisements. These findings suggest a reinterpretation of fluency within SFV

meme contexts where perceived authenticity and alignment with platform norms through audio-visual complexity or chaos outweigh the traditional notions of aesthetic quality.

These findings have clear implications for brand suitability, as using platform-native aesthetics such as lower quality and chaotic audio is not appropriate for all brands. Brands with a young target audience and playful brand identity, such as fast-food chains, are well-positioned to benefit from applying these principles because their audiences are more likely to be receptive to them. On the contrary, if brands with target audiences who are more mature and appreciative of sophisticated marketing, such as luxury brands, tried to implement these principles, it would likely feel forced or off-brand. This could ultimately damage credibility rather than build it.

This study also supports the call to research by Tafesse (2020) into early-stage impacts of video marketing by exploring what drives video views and engagement in the first place. Peripheral cues such as social proof (Liu et al., 2012; Shi et al., 2018) and humor (Kulkarni et al., 2020) were dominant when it came to capturing attention. Consumers were more likely to pay attention to a branded meme if the post had many likes and comments or if the account had many followers (Liu et al., 2012). However, while previous studies suggest that verification badges increase trustworthiness (Liu et al., 2012; Shi et al., 2017), this study found conflicting views. Some respondents shared this sentiment, whereas others viewed content that came from unverified accounts as more trustworthy, feeling it was more organic and less commercial. This further reinforces how Generation Z consumers crave content that feels native to the platform.

The most dominant systematic cues were relevance and information (Shi et al., 2018), but only when done humorously. Memes were more memorable when perceived as personally relevant, supporting Shi et al.'s (2018) finding that consumers are more likely to pay attention to social media posts with topics of interest, prompting central processing due to the effort needed to judge the topical relevance between themselves and the post. Drivers of attention included relatability, authenticity, and a balance between information, echoing Hollebeek and Macky's (2018) framework that proposes DCM engagement is driven by functional, hedonic, and authenticity-based motives. Furthermore, these findings echo Smith's (2017) finding that digital natives favor content that is informative and entertaining at the same time.

This study also found conflicting implications for previous meme marketing literature, regarding brand subtlety. Respondents in this study favored branding in SFV memes that

came secondary to entertainment value. Prominent brand presence or obvious self-promotion intent led to perceptions of inauthenticity and cringeworthiness. This contradicts the findings of Razzaq et al. (2024), who found that brand-prominent memes, compared to brand-subtle, led to improved cognitive processing, attitudes, and engagement towards branded memes. Instead, this study suggests that subtle branding can enhance cognitive and emotional engagement by adhering to the entertainment-first nature of content on TikTok. This also supports the notion that Generation Z consumers are especially adept at picking up on brands' commercial intent and are more likely to disregard them (Djafarova & Bowes, 2020).

Furthermore, this study expands content-related preferences identified in previous static meme marketing findings as applicable to the SFV format. This study found perceived trendiness to be an important preference factor, akin to Kim and Baek's (2024) study. However, this study adds specificity to this factor by identifying the importance of trending audio. The findings also support those of Malodia et al. (2022), who found that humor, relevance, and recognizability lead to better engagement, as well as those of Shen et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of coherence between branded memes and the brand image. This study ultimately contributes to existing meme marketing literature by responding to Razzaq et al.'s (2024) call for research on the video format of branded memes, helping bridge findings from static image to SFV meme formats.

## **5.2 Consumer and brand outcomes of SFV meme marketing**

Regarding RQ2, the most common consumer outcomes that arose because of branded SFV memes were positive emotions, passive engagement, low-purchase intent, brand discovery or re-familiarization, and limited attitude change or purchase intent. Although respondents often enjoyed branded SFV memes, they rarely translated into stronger brand attitudes, explicit engagement, or purchase intention. Respondents consciously separated entertainment from consideration for the brand or the branded memes' intended message. This contradicts prior research (Grewal et al., 2016; Rapp et al., 2013; Shankar et al., 2022), which suggests that DCM on social media leads to downstream outcomes such as loyalty and sales. Grewal et al. (2016) partly attribute this to how the consumers' search history affects the content they receive; however, whilst this is akin to how TikTok's algorithm functions, similar results were not found. Respondents instead expressed that the algorithm improves their receptivity to the branded SFV meme due to likely relevance, but this did not lead to the same outcomes that Grewal et al. (2016) found. The divergence here might suggest that emotional and cognitive engagement with this type of content does not lead to further

conversion down the purchase funnel, particularly because of a clear intention of consuming branded SFV memes for hedonic reasons rather than brand evaluation.

The findings, however, suggest that this is a top-of-funnel marketing tool that helps build brand awareness or reinforce brand familiarity, as the findings show these were positively influenced by successful branded SFV memes. This is akin to Malodia et al.'s (2022) research that suggests meme marketing enhances recall and visibility. This was evident through the repeated mention by all respondents of Duolingo's and Ryanair's meme marketing. However, there was little evidence to show that branded SFV memes alone lead to brand loyalty as respondents cited more important factors such as their pre-existing need for the brand's offering and actual evidence of the quality of the brand's offering. This contradicts Rapp et al.'s (2013) finding that brand-generated content on social media leads to long-term brand loyalty and supports Shen et al.'s (2024) speculation that meme engagement may be short-lived, as consumers may just be interacting for entertainment rather than long-term brand loyalty.

Whilst brand awareness and re-familiarization were common, other objectives, such as purchase intent, were limited because memes were not persuasive enough on their own to prompt consumer action. These further underscore branded SFV memes' role as top-of-funnel marketing tools, which should be coupled with other marketing tactics to reach other objectives. The principles of the ELM help explain this, as even though peripheral cues such as humor and audio were successful in capturing attention, the focus on such cues prevents central elaboration needed to drive long-term attitude or behavioral change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Furthermore, similarly to how this strategy is best suited only for certain objectives, the findings show that it is also best suited for certain brands and not others. Brand-content fit was critical as respondents were more receptive to branded SFV memes from brands viewed as casual or non-serious and were skeptical towards luxury or serious brands adopting a similar approach. This finding contradicts Malodia et al.'s (2022) claim that meme marketing is effective for all categories of brands and instead supports Shen et al.'s (2024) emphasis on brand-meme coherence. Furthermore, respondents repeatedly mentioned that this could be a useful strategy for new or small brands, given that they are also non-serious, as it can be a low-budget strategy that gets their brand noticed.

Explicit engagement through likes, following, commenting, and sharing was also found to be limited. Although respondents enjoyed branded SFV memes and were able to recall specific

examples and brands, they rarely shared or commented on this type of content, with liking being the most common. This challenges claims made by Malodia et al. (2022), Razzaq et al. (2024), and Kim and Kim (2024) that branded memes enhance traditional social media metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. This study instead found that engagement was more passive and isolated to viewing behavior, with occasional traditional engagement. This suggests that the full spectrum of cognitive or emotional impact of branded SFV memes may not be fully captured by standard social media behavioral indicators.

Some off-platform brand exploration also came up because of branded SFV memes, such as visiting the brand's TikTok page or their website. While this does not guarantee further engagement or purchase intent, it suggests that branded SFV can lead audiences to further interaction with the brand. This is akin to the consideration phase of the purchase funnel, which Shankar et al. (2022) propose applies to social media marketing content.

Lastly, whilst successful branded SFV memes led to generally positive attitudes towards the brand, negative attitudes towards branded SFV memes were often triggered by brands being late to meme trends, supporting the importance of agility and ability to adapt to changing markets (Hollebeek & Macky, 2018; Terho et al., 2022). Terho et al. (2022) further stress the importance of speed in this context, which is also supported by this study, as respondents mentioned how fast meme trends on TikTok specifically change, and the need for brands to keep up.

### **5.3 Theoretical implications**

This study makes three novel theoretical contributions to the three main streams of literature explored in this thesis: video marketing, digital content marketing, and processing fluency. Firstly, this study contributes to the literature on SFV marketing. It does so by finding that when it came to branded SFV memes, respondents preferred content that appeared lower in production value and quality. Respondents associated such content with authenticity and content-platform fit, while overly produced content was seen as overtly commercial. This contradicts previous research on SFV marketing (Huang & Ha, 2020; Dong et al., 2023) that has emphasized how visual coherence, high-quality production, and moderate complexity enhance fluency. Instead, this study showed a preference for lower quality and more chaotic aesthetics when it comes to SFV meme marketing.

Secondly, this study provides new insights into DCM on social media concerning the role of brand behavior outside of their posts. This study found that consumers enjoy and pay attention to when brands on TikTok comment on other creators' or brands' content in a

humorous or meme-like manner. This finding has not appeared in previous literature regarding branded memes or SFV marketing. When aligned with the brand and contextually relevant, these interactions strengthened positive attitudes for the brand. However, if the consumer felt the brand was commenting on other content that was not relevant to the brand, just for the sake of commenting, it came across as disingenuous. Respondents were able to recall specific examples of both instances, showcasing the role of this type of interaction in brand recall and awareness. This finding represents an underexplored form of brand participation and subtle brand building.

Lastly, this study contributes a novel finding to existing understandings of processing fluency and the ELM in the context of SFV and meme marketing. It does so by revealing a divergence from the assumption that central processing typically leads to attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This study found that even when consumers seemingly systematically processed a meme, there was essentially no attitude change. This was also the same for when consumers seemingly processed branded SFV memes heuristically. Respondents expressed their pre-existing attitudes towards the brands, and that seeing a meme is not enough for them to necessarily change those attitudes, even if they enjoyed the meme or it was relevant to them. However, some respondents did state that they might view the marketing department more positively. Overall, these contributions expand existing theory by demonstrating that platform culture, brand participation, and prior attitudes play a larger role in shaping consumer processing and perceptions of SFV marketing and meme marketing than previously assumed.

#### **5.4 Managerial implications**

This study offers important managerial implications for brand strategists, social media marketers, and content creators using or considering the use of branded SFV memes on TikTok. While SFV meme marketing is increasingly popular, its niche nature means that brands must possess the necessary knowledge to assess its strategic fit. This study can help guide these informed decisions as it offers insights into how Generation Z consumers perceive and process branded SFV memes. Additionally, this study offers insights into what outcomes brands can expect and therefore, focus on when using this marketing strategy.

Firstly, not all brands are equally suited for this approach. The findings suggest that the image and values of the brand need to somehow align with the playful nature of meme marketing. As stated by the respondents, non-serious and casual brands benefit the most, whilst more serious brands, such as those in the luxury or pharmaceutical industries, risk harming their brand image. SFV meme marketing works best for brands that are not overly

concerned with appearing conventional and are ready to be seen as a brand that potentially disregards brand guidelines. Additionally, the findings show that new brands can especially benefit from this type of marketing as they serve as an effective brand awareness tool.

Secondly, brands that want to prioritize this type of marketing on social media due to high suitability should consider hiring individuals who are well-acquainted with meme culture and the target audience's preferences. As highlighted by the respondents, this individual should be able to stay up to date with meme trends to remain relevant and avoid seeming out of touch. Additionally, this person must be able to convey the humor and tone of the target audience. This is especially important for implementing one of this study's novel findings, which is brand interaction outside of their own. However, hiring a separate meme marketer is not recommended for smaller brands with smaller budgets. Instead, smaller brands or brands that wish to employ this tactic as a complementary tactic to their main social media marketing should consider ensuring hiring someone for social media marketing who also meets the aforementioned requirements. This would enable them to carry out regular social media marketing and allow them to venture into meme marketing if requested.

Thirdly, branded SFV meme content creation should prioritize subtle branding and platform-native aesthetics. This study found that Generation Z consumers are particularly resistant to branded content that feels commercial or inauthentic. For brands to capture and retain the attention of audiences, they should aim for subtle brand integration by prioritizing the humor and relatability aspects. Additionally, platform-native aesthetics were viewed as important and can be achieved through filming with phones, using trendy or chaotic audio, and adopting an organic editing style. However, it is important to ensure that the audio and visual elements are relevant to the content, as respondents are aware of brands potentially using certain sounds or meme formats purely because they know the algorithm will boost it. For further inspiration and guidance, it is recommended to check Duolingo and Ryanair's TikTok accounts, as the findings show they are regarded as highly successful at SFV meme marketing.

Lastly, brands should set realistic expectations and goals regarding this marketing strategy. Branded SFV memes can raise brand awareness and lead to initial brand discovery, but they are less successful at promoting brand loyalty, attitude change, or purchase intent. Therefore, marketers should position branded SFV memes as a top-of-funnel marketing tool that focuses on gaining visibility and engagement rather than conversion. Meme marketing should be viewed more as a complementary marketing strategy rather than a sole one.

### **5.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

There are four main limitations of this study that are addressed through suggestions for future research. Firstly, due to the qualitative research design and the time and resource constraints of a master's degree thesis, this study was limited to eight Generation Z informants living in Finland, representing only four birth years out of the possible sixteen. Ethical constraints further excluded respondents who are not of legal age, making five birth years ineligible. Consequently, these results are not representative of all Generation Z consumers. Therefore, future research could study a larger and more diverse group of Generation Z consumers via a quantitative study to either strengthen the findings of this thesis or provide differing results. Additionally, given the consistent sentiment expressed by multiple respondents that other demographics, such as Generation Alpha and millennials, have differing meme preferences compared to Generation Z, future studies could research these other generations that are also largely present on TikTok and consumers of memes.

Secondly, whilst this study provides theoretical deductions using the ELM, these findings have not been empirically tested through surveys or experiments. To support these findings and provide robust evidence, future research could conduct either a quantitative study, as many marketing stimuli studies using the ELM have, or an experiment that uses proven psychological methods to study unconscious cognitive processes regarding branded SFV memes.

Thirdly, there are some limitations concerning the stimuli used for the video-elicitation exercise. The branded memes chosen were curated examples selected by the researcher to reflect hedonic and utilitarian categories. Whilst care was taken in selection, the chosen memes may not fully represent more nuanced versions of branded memes that combine both these elements, or necessarily be perceived the same way by the respondent. Moreover, the memes came from two app-based brands to improve comparability, meaning that this study does not consider or investigate how other industries' memes might affect cognitive processing and perception. Therefore, future studies could investigate how branded memes from various sectors are processed and perceived. This would provide more industry-specific insights and help validate and expand upon the findings of this study regarding brand suitability for meme marketing.

Lastly, this study was limited to only one SFV social media platform, TikTok, which could mean that the results are only applicable to TikTok due to differences in content and platform-specific norms. This limits transferability to other SFV platforms such as Instagram or YouTube Shorts. Therefore, future research could study branded SFV memes with users

from other platforms to test whether these findings are applicable across different platforms and to better inform branding strategies dependent on the platform being used.

Beyond these limitations, further research outside the domain of cognitive processing or the consumer perspective could interview current marketing professionals responsible for executing meme marketing. This would offer valuable insider knowledge into how meme marketing efforts are developed, implemented, and evaluated within companies. This would enrich theoretical understanding of meme marketing by grounding it in organizational realities, allowing for comparison between consumer perspectives and marketer intent.

## **5.6 Concluding remarks**

The primary objective of this thesis was to explore a niche yet increasingly popular frontier in digital marketing: meme-based SFV marketing. This was done by exploring how consumers cognitively process and perceive branded SFV memes on TikTok. Through a qualitative approach and extensive empirical investigation guided by the ELM, this study provided both supporting and novel insights regarding meme marketing and the SFV format specifically.

The findings reveal that consumers will not just passively scroll through such content if it catches their attention through a mixture of peripheral and central cues. When done right, branded SFV memes are not just noticed, but remembered. The results highlight that in a digital space oversaturated with content, SFV meme marketing succeeds by being authentic, both content-wise and non-content-wise. Whilst some consumers may process a branded SFV meme centrally through informational value and personal relevance, many rely on peripheral cues such as audio-visuals, humor, and platform fluency. Ideally, branded SFV memes combine both peripheral and central cues to create content that entertains first and markets second. This thesis not only extends current meme marketing research but also provides a starting point for research endeavors regarding the SFV format.

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## APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW GUIDE

Probing	Question Type (Patton, 2015)	Link to Theory	Purpose
<b>The Consumers Experience with TikTok and Memes</b>			
What do you primarily use TikTok for and how often?	-	Experience and Behavior	To understand the informants usage of and experience with the platform of focus for this study (TikTok)
How would you describe your "for you page"?	-What kind of content do you usually get? -Out of this content, what do you enjoy the most? Why? -What do you enjoy the least? Why?	Experience and Behavior	
Do you follow any brands on Tiktok? Why or why not?	-Which brands and why? -If not, have you come across branded content? How do you engage with this content?	Experience and Behavior	
What kind of memes do you enjoy?	-Format? -How often do you consume memes? -What platforms do you use primarily? -Do you use TikTok for memes?	Experience and Behavior	
<b>The Consumers Relationship with Branded Memes on TikTok</b>			
What kind of memes have you encountered from brands on TikTok before?	-How often? -Which brands? -What type of brands?	Experience and Behavior Knowledge	To understand the informants experiences regarding branded memes on TikTok
How do you feel about brands sharing memes on TikTok?	-If they enjoy- why? -If they don't enjoy- why?	Opinion and Values	To understand how the informant perceives brands usage of memes
What are your thoughts on the purpose of branded memes on TikTok?	-Do you feel that branded memes on TikTok offer valuable information or are more for entertainment purposes?	Opinion and Values	
		ELM: Processing Antecedent-Utilitarian (systematic) vs Hedonic (heuristic) (Chun & Lee, 2016)	

Is there any brand in particular that stands out to you as being successful at posting memes?	-What made their efforts succesful?	Opinion and Values	To understand the informant's preferences regarding branded memes
Is there any brand in particular that stands out to you as being unsuccessful at posting memes?	-What made their efforts unsuccessful?	Opinion and Values	
<b>The Consumers Engagement with Meme Marketing</b>			
How often do you find yourself engaging with branded memes on TikTok?	-Do you ever share them with your frineds? Why or why not? -Do you like, comment on, or share the memes? Why or why not? -Have you ever followed a brand on TikTok because of their memes? Why or why not?	Experience and Behavior	To understand the informants behavior regarding branded memes on TikTok
What kind of actions have followed after you've seen a branded meme on tiktok? Aside from the initial engagement with it as previously mentioned.	-Have you ever looked for more information about a brand or product because of a meme they posted? Why or why not? -Have you ever ended up consuming from a brand after seeing their meme marketing efforts? Why or why not?	Experience and Behavior	
How much attention do you typically pay to a branded meme on TikTok?	-How long do you spend looking at one? Why? -What determines whether you stop and watch the meme versus scrolling past it? Why? -If you don't get a meme immediately, do you usually keep scrolling or try and figure it out? -Do you ever reflect on or think about the message in a branded meme after seeing it? If so, why or how?	Experience and Behavior	To help understand the informants cognitive processing of branded memes

Think about a meme-based video from a brand that felt relevant or meaningful to you—what made it resonate with you?	-Could you share an example? -How does this affect your perception of the brand?	Opinion and Values	ELM: Processing Antecedent- Prior Knowledge, Systematic Cue- Topical Relevance (Shi et al., 2018)	
What kind of emotions arise from watching branded memes on TikTok?	-Does humor play an important role? If so, how?	Feeling	ELM: Heuristic Cue- Humor (Kulkarni, Kalro, & Sharma, 2020)	
When watching branded memes on TikTok, what makes the message credible or trustworthy?	-Does the account posting play any part? -What about if your familiar with the brand versus not familiar?	Opinion and Values	ELM: Heuristic Cue- Source attractiveness/credibility (Shi et al., 2018)	
How do you react to meme content from brands you're familiar with?	-Does this familiarity affect the way you engage with the memes? If yes, how? -Could you share an example?	Experience and Behavior	ELM: Processing Antecedent- Prior Knowledge (Shi et al., 2018)	
What kind of visual or audio elements of branded memes on TikTok stand out to you?	-Why do they stand out to you?	Sensory	ELM: Heuristic Cue- Audiovisual elements (Gan et al., 2023)	
<b>Viewing Exercise</b>				
Which two memes do you prefer?	-Why?	Opinion and Values	ELM: Processing Antecedent- Content Utilitarian (systematic) vs Hedonic (heuristic) (Chun & Lee, 2016)	To understand the informants preference for informational (systematic) or emotional (heuristic) branded memes and how this influences their processing and perception of branded memes
How do these memes make you feel about the brand?	-Were you previously familiar with the brands? If yes, do you follow either of them? Why? -Did you develop any new attitudes towards the brand? -Did any existing attitudes change? If so, how?	Opinion and Values	ELM: Processing Antecedent- Prior Knowledge (Shi et al., 2018), Attitude Change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)	

What about these memes resonates with you?	-	Opinion and Values	ELM: Processing Antecedent- Relatedness (Shi et al., 2018)	
How did the visual or audio aspect of these memes influence your preference?	-Could you describe how?	Sensory	ELM: Heuristic Cue- Audiovisual elements (Gan et al.,2023)	
What kind of emotions did these videos bring up for you?	-Did you find them humorous? -How big of a role did this play in you preferring these memes? -ASK to rank at the end!	Feeling	ELM: Processing Antecedent- Emotional Arousal (Kulkarni, Kalro, & Sharma, 2020)	
<b>Concluding Thoughts on SFV meme marketing and their characteristics</b>				
Based on the conversation we've had today, what advice would you give to brands using meme based short-form video marketing?	-How can they better capture your attention? -What kind of brands do you think would benefit from this type of marketing and why? -Which brands do you think would not benefit and why?	Opinion and Values		To identify consumer-driven recommendations for brands engaging in SFV meme marketing
Please order these branded meme characteristics from most important to least important; Message relevance, informativeness, entertainment, argument quality, visual attractiveness, audio attractiveness, brand image, source trustworthiness	-Why did you place X as the most important and why did you place X as the least important?	Opinion and Values	ELM: Heuristic and Systematic Cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)	To identify which elements the informant percieves to be more important when deciding whether they like a branded meme or not.
What year were you born?	-	Background and Demographic		To identify informant characteristics

Where are you residing currently and what is your nationality?	-	Background and Demographic	
What is your occupation?	-	Background and Demographic	

## APPENDIX 2 CONSENT FORM

### Consent to the processing of personal data in the study “Scrolling or Thinking? An Exploratory Study on How Consumers Cognitively Process and Perceive Meme-Based Short-Form Video Marketing”

I have been requested to participate in the study identified above.

I have received sufficient information about the study and processing of my personal data, I understand the information, and have had the possibility to have my questions answered.

Yes  No

I understand that the participation in the study is voluntary, and that I have the right to refuse to participate and the right to withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawal from the study will not result in any negative consequences to me. The anonymous information collected from or about me up to the point of my withdrawal may still be used in the study.

Yes  No

I agree that the interview with me will be recorded for the study's purpose. The recordings will be processed in such a way that I cannot be identified in them.

Yes  No

I understand that the information I have provided during the study can be used as anonymized statements in the thesis. My identity as an individual respondent will not be disclosed in the thesis or any other research results to be published.

Yes  No

I hereby give my consent to the participation in the study and processing of my personal data in the manner described in the Privacy notice I have received in writing (in print or electronical form).

Yes  No

\_\_\_\_\_  
The respondent's signature and name in block letters

\_\_\_\_\_  
Place and date

\_\_\_\_\_  
MSc Isabel Nelson [isabel.nelson@student.hanken.fi](mailto:isabel.nelson@student.hanken.fi)

Studying at Hanken School of Economics, major in Marketing

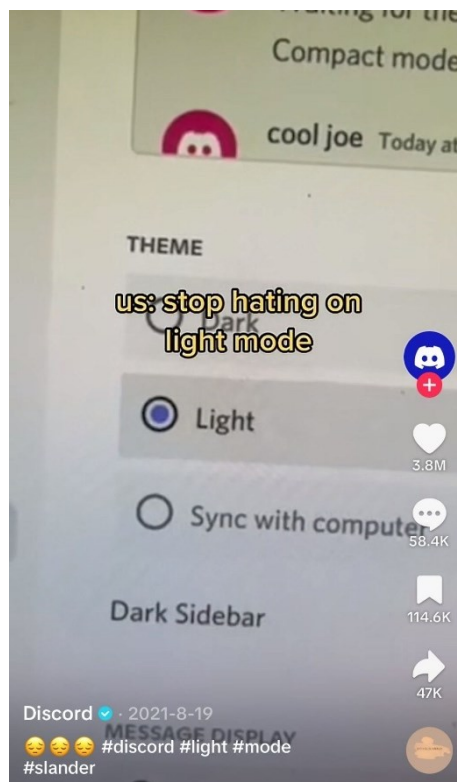
## APPENDIX 3 VIDEO-ELICITATION STIMULI



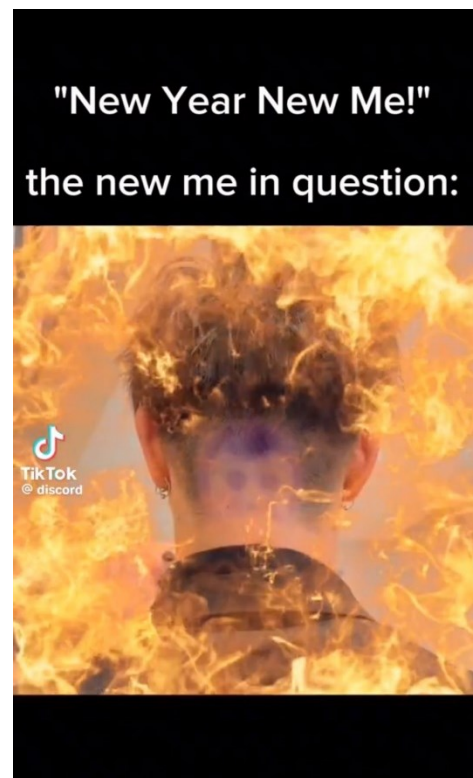
Utilitarian Duolingo Meme (Duolingo, 2024b)



Hedonic Duolingo Meme (Duolingo, 2024a)



Utilitarian Discord Meme (Discord, 2021)



Hedonic Discord Meme (Discord, 2025)

## APPENDIX 4 EXAMPLE OF CODING TABLE

Codes	Quote 1	Quote 2	Quote 3
Preference for trending audios	R1: In terms of visuals, I can't really pinpoint like one specific thing. Like audio wise, like I mentioned before, like there's all kinds of trends like coming in and out. One way trends start is through like, audio sound, whether that be like a song that's trending or like an old song that's coming back into trend, because it's being used in a meme way, or then even some like random clips of like people in like, from like a reality TV show or like weird situations, like a person getting arrested or something like that being used. Yeah, like in a meme way. So for me, like audio sounds, trends like are sticking to my mind a lot more.	R2: It's hard to say. I mean, just the if it's a trending audio, or, or if it's if it is visually something trendy, or like, then if it's something new that they're coming up with, it needs to be something that grabs my attention. I honestly can't pinpoint what would be something. But I think that goes into psychology, those like, somebody's doing their makeup in the beginning or putting camera down, that might be something that I'm like, okay, that grabs my attention.	R3: I mean, I really like it. Like the F1 teams I mentioned, the TikToks they make with their drivers, for example, is very often just these trending sounds. It's the kind of trends that like, you know, some friends would make together in like school or something. And it would be like two drivers like being goofy. Um, so I like that a lot. I do. Because it makes it even more relatable in a way. Uh, but yeah, I guess I like that.
Preference for video format of memes	R2: I guess, these days, it's more video meme content, just because I feel like there is way less picture formats going on, now that video formats are, I mean, especially on TikTok, I mean, it's the, like, the biggest thing, I think, even though there are the picture formats, as well, but I think, for me, I just, I just like the videos, and as long as they're short, and funny, that goes, and content-wise, just, you know, if it has a bit of dark humor in it, that is always, like, a good thing.	R3: Oh, yeah. I guess all of them. Yeah. I'm not, I'm not really partial to any in particular. I guess nowadays I'm more like video memes. Of course I do. I scroll Reddit and I scroll Instagram and stuff, but I feel like I enjoy memes on TikTok and stuff more.	R5: I usually do prefer video memes, just because they're like, easier to, you know, to engage with. Like, you know, you're just watching it on your on your page. But a good, a good photo meme, as you said, can be like way more impactful, because like, you leave it up to the imaginary, you know how you feel about that, you know, so it's not that so, you know, direct.

Importance  
of visuals

R1: Well, I think like people consume content with their eyes first. Like so like the first few seconds of what they see, like has to be like in some way like visually interesting. It doesn't necessarily have to mean like, you know, super HD quality videos, but like in some way visually interesting. So I put the visually attractive first.

R3: As long as it's well filmed and doesn't look bad. Obviously, I just want it to be pleasant to look at, I guess.

R5: I mean we are visual people like for like for someone to say I mean at least like, you know, for able-bodied like if we can see like that's the first thing we will see is visual cues right. I work in social media so the first three seconds is the most important thing like is something is something interesting enough to see, like is it som- that- I mean that's why like all these influencers are attractive like it's for a reason you know it's not because they're funny.