

Memes As A Marketing Communication Tool For Companies In The Context Of Gen Z Advertising Literacy

Denis Javorik^{1*}

¹ Department of Marketing Communication, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovak Republic

Abstract– This study deals with the issue of memes as a communication tool by companies targeting Generation Z. Generation Z, often called the Internet Generation, are highly active on social media and are constantly exposed to different types of content. This study focuses on how well Gen Z members are equipped to deal with advertising messages in the meme format. A quantitative survey was conducted with 399 respondents with the specific goal of determining their ability to distinguish between regular memes and those containing advertising messages. The research also analysed whether respondents were able to identify the advertiser behind the meme-based ads. The findings provide an insight into advertising literacy of Generation Z and their awareness of branded content in this popular digital format. Results suggest that while memes are a popular and engaging medium, many respondents struggle to recognize hidden promotional messages and often fail to identify the advertiser. These results have implications for marketing communication strategies targeting younger audiences.

Keywords– advertising, advertising literacy, memes, native advertising, social media marketing.

INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, digitalization has become a central goal of all enterprises and companies. The aim is to achieve a competitive advantage in the market, that has become increasingly global [1]. Digitalization has not bypassed the field of marketing. It allows companies to target more precisely, measure results, and receive immediate feedback from consumers. Thanks to digital technologies, companies can analyze data and better optimize their strategies [2]. From the perspective of the advertising business, digitalization has caused major changes in the way advertising is created as well as how it is distributed. Nowadays, ads can be tailored and personalized for specific users, which increases their relevance from the user's point of view [3]. As a result of digitalization, technologies for corporate marketing communication have become significantly simplified and more accessible. Thanks to new platforms and tools, as well as low entry costs, both large brands and small businesses can effectively communicate with their audiences. This approach has made marketing communication in the digital environment accessible to a wide range of actors [4]. However, it is essential to note that the simplification of accessibility and the growing number of advertising companies have ultimately had a direct negative impact on the increasingly saturated digital space. Currently, the digital space is oversaturated with content and advertising, which has a direct negative impact on users' attention and potentially leads to information overload. This oversaturated digital space significantly increases the pressure on marketers to find more creative and less disruptive forms of communication that blend seamlessly with the organic content of the given medium [5]. In addition to the many unquestionable advantages, digitalization has also brought several problems and ethical questions. One example is the sharing of private data for marketing purposes, the collection and analysis of big data, or invasive and even manipulative personalized ads in social media environments [6]. The oversaturated digital space means that consumers are being exposed to a large number of various marketing stimuli and cues. Attention, as a result of today's environment, has become an unattainable commodity in terms of the digitalized economy. The attention economy currently represents an important concept, where the essence is the perception of people's attention in the digital and media environment as a scarce and limited commodity [7]. Digital platforms, such as social media, face a significant increase in competition for this resource, which ultimately means that companies are striving to maintain consumer attention on their content for as long as possible. The essence of the attention economy is to maximize the use of the limited resource of attention, which requires technological innovations, analytical tools, and a deeper understanding of consumer psychology and behavior. In the attention economy, brands aim to influence consumers in this way and reflect their impact on purchasing behavior [8].

Currently, consumers are faced with constant bombardment of information, advertisements, and various stimuli. This information overload has a direct impact on people's attention and is reflected in a reduced ability to maintain focus on a single thing or concentrate for extended periods of time [9]. One of the factors that are directly affecting the attention of consumers is information overload. Information overload is a state that occurs when a consumer is faced with an excessive amount of information that exceeds their ability to process it adequately. This effect negatively impacts the ability to make informed decisions or to avoid making decisions under undue pressure. This phenomenon arises when the volume of information surpasses the consumer's ability to process and apply it effectively in practice [10]. Information overload also causes stress and anxiety in consumers, which in turn increases the pressure on information processing and the individual's mental health [11]. In the context of advertising, it is essential to realize that information overload reduces the effectiveness of traditional forms of advertising, such as banners. People automatically ignore ads and prefer content that is less invasive and more relevant. This means that for an ad to succeed, it must be personalized and tailored to specific segments. As a result of this factor, new forms like native advertising and influencer marketing have emerged. One form of native advertising are very popular memes.

Background

Online advertising differs from traditional forms of advertising primarily in the way it communicates with the consumer and in the amount and nature of the information it conveys. Online advertising allows for direct feedback as well as immediate measurability [12]. In the context of the attention economy, online advertising can be seen as one of the tools used to compete for attention. In the digital environment, information is constantly changing and being updated, which means users are continuously exposed to new messages. Therefore, online advertising must have the ability to capture and retain users' attention for as long as possible. This involves precise targeting, storytelling elements, and various emotional appeals and techniques [13]. In this environment, online advertising must adapt to be shorter, less disruptive, relevant, offer added value, and be memorable [14]. It is especially due to the effects of the attention economy and information overload that newer forms of advertising continue to emerge, aiming to adapt ads so that they appear natural, blend into the environment, and are not disruptive to the user.

In recent years, several new and innovative forms of advertising have emerged. One of the most noteworthy is advertising created using generative artificial intelligence (AI). These easily accessible tools can be used in marketing for more effective targeting, personalization, and automation of content and various repetitive processes, thereby saving resources for marketing agencies [15]. Generative artificial intelligence enables the creation of new texts, images, videos, and sounds. It also allows brands to quickly generate and test various versions of advertising content and subsequently optimize them based on the results [16]. Augmented reality (AR) advertising can also be considered an innovative form of advertising, as it helps create an interactive experience with the product. It allows users, for example, to try on clothing or accessories through various filters, or visualize furniture in real space, which can increase trust during the purchasing decision process [17]. Virtual reality (VR), on the other hand, can offer an immersive experience in which the user finds themselves in a world created directly by the brand. Although it is currently more technologically and financially demanding than AR advertising, VR holds significant potential in the field of experiential marketing [18]. However, in the context of the previously mentioned facts related to the attention economy, native advertising remains the most widespread form of advertising online. Social media platforms currently represent one of the most popular channels for consuming media content, regardless of age group. They serve as sources of entertainment, information, and a means of connecting with other users. At the same time, however, they have also become spaces where a vast amount of advertising messages are concentrated [19]. Native advertising, especially in the context of social media, can effectively blend into the organic user environment, resulting in more interactions from users. With native ads, the defensive effect is less likely to be triggered, making the ad more easily accepted by the user. It is seamlessly integrated into the content and feed of the platform [20]. One form of native advertising on social media is the use of meme content. Memes represent a form of content in which the original image, video, or text is placed in a different context, often in connection with humor or satire. These formats have a high potential for virality [21]. Marketers can use this format as a tool for marketing communication, as it spreads easily and is popular among audiences. The use of memes is associated with

strong positive emotions (humor), which can help brands strengthen their image, informality, engagement, or complement viral campaigns. Memes often respond to a relevant event that is widely recognized by the target audience [22]. Marketers can also collaborate with meme pages to create ads that adopt the identical format of the page, blending into their traditional content, with the only difference being a paid collaboration. Memes can thus be an effective tool because they not only use humor and current cultural references (making the ad digestible, entertaining, and relevant), but also appear more native and hidden from the target audience. These formats can promote products in a non-intrusive way [23]. Native advertising thus represents a great opportunity and advantage for advertisers, but from the consumer's perspective, it can also have its downside. The essence of native advertising is for it to remain, at first glance, hidden and not appear as an advertisement. This brings up an ethical concern regarding consumers' ability to recognize and distinguish advertising. It is in the best interest of both advertisers and society to avoid manipulating consumers. The situation presents a dilemma about whether consumers can effectively keep up with the rapid pace of technological advancement. According to the results of several studies, it can be stated that consumers have significant difficulty recognizing advertisements and advertising messages [24]. A study by Amazeen and Wojdyski highlights the fact that only 10% of respondents were able to correctly identify a native form of advertising [25]. According to Windels and Porter, only 68% of respondents were able to recognize at least one native advertisement, and even among those who could, they had significantly more difficulty compared to more traditional forms of advertising [26]. Pasandaran and Mutmainnah, in their study, point out that adolescents are unable to recognize native advertising and face significant challenges in identifying political native advertisements [27]. In general, research of this nature can be considered as studies of advertising literacy. Advertising literacy refers to the ability of an individual to recognize, understand, and evaluate advertisements and their messages. It also involves taking an emotional stance towards advertising, understanding its goals, strategies, and identifying persuasive techniques [28]. Individuals with a higher level of advertising literacy are able to recognize newer and more innovative forms of advertising, or they are aware that advertising is created with a specific goal to influence consumer behavior, opinions, emotions, or purchasing decisions [29]. Advertising literacy is considered a part of media literacy [30]. However, advertising literacy should hold a distinct position, as it represents skills that are closely related to media, but not identical. Media literacy focuses more on understanding the functioning of media as a source of information and entertainment, while advertising literacy specifically focuses on the peculiarities of advertising content. Media literacy deals with the consumption of media and the appropriateness of media content, while advertising literacy concerns the impact of advertising on individual behavior. Advertising literacy is divided into various dimensions, and different authors approach it in different ways. For the purposes of this article, we understand three dimensions of advertising literacy: cognitive advertising literacy, affective advertising literacy, and moral advertising literacy [31]. Cognitive advertising literacy focuses on the ability to recognize, understand, and critically assess advertising messages. This dimension ensures that the consumer can identify that the content is advertising and also determine the advertiser associated with the ad [32]. Affective advertising literacy focuses on the emotional aspect of advertising. It refers to the ability to identify how advertising affects individuals, the emotional response it triggers, and how it influences consumer behavior and decision-making. A key part of affective advertising literacy is also the ability to regulate emotions [33]. Moral advertising literacy focuses on the ethical aspects of advertising, specifically the ability to assess whether the advertisement adheres to norms, does not exploit vulnerable groups, or contain unethical practices. Moral advertising literacy also deals with the issue of morality when it comes to the communication strategy itself. This dimension relates to the ability to assess whether the advertisement promotes socially responsible behavior [34]. The specific aspect of advertising literacy that was the focus of this study was the cognitive dimension.

METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the research was to determine to what extent respondents from Generation Z are able to identify advertising and advertisers within the meme format on the social network Facebook. The target group consisted of 399 university students from Generation Z. To obtain relevant results, we used a quantitative research approach. The primary data collection method was a survey conducted through

an electronic questionnaire distributed via computers. Computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) is a data collection method that gathers questionnaire data online [35]; in this case, the questionnaire was distributed via a hyperlink. The questionnaire was created using the Survio platform. Survio is an online platform for creating questionnaires that enables organizations (or individuals) to conduct online surveys. The platform offers automatic processing of responses in real time and clear visualizations of results through various dashboards [35]. The questionnaire was launched on November 21, 2024, and lasted until December 20 – a total of 30 days. In addition to questions for demographic segmentation, the questionnaire also included several specific meme images from a popular Slovak page, some of which were organic and some paid. Based on labeling of the advertising content, respondents were asked to determine the purpose of the given meme (i.e., whether it had a commercial or entertainment character) and which brand sponsored the meme (if any). The sample consisted of a total of 399 respondents aged between 18 and 25. The sample included 60.4% women, 39.3% men, and one respondent who declined to state their gender. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first contained questions focused on demographic data and additional questions aimed at identifying the target group's behavior on social media – how much time they spend on these platforms, which platform they use the most, whether they read post captions, and whether they read profile names. The second part included questions focused on specific memes that were produced by a real Facebook page, which meant that respondents may have seen them even before the study. The questions were directly aimed at identifying whether the message of a given meme was advertising-related or a regular unpaid post, with all of the memes containing a specific brand in their content. The difference was that some memes were paid for by the brand and marked as a collaboration with the meme page in the post caption. The examination of native advertising on the social network Facebook in the context of cognitive advertising literacy provides insight into how Generation Z is able to recognize and critically evaluate more subtle advertising content that is disguised as entertainment. As stated before, memes often evoke strong emotions and tend to blur the lines between organic and sponsored content, thus offering an ideal environment for assessing the ability to understand the intent behind communication. These findings contribute to clarifying the overall picture of advertising literacy levels and aim to help identify areas for improvement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the research results, 39% of respondents spend more than four hours a day on social media. A total of 29.5% of respondents indicated that they spend more than three but less than four hours on social media. This means that over 68% of respondents spend more than three hours on social media daily. Three respondents stated that they spend less than one hour a day on social media, and two respondents said they do not use social media at all. These figures indicate that social media plays a significant role in their daily lives, with a substantial portion (39%) potentially exhibiting excessive use, which is often associated with various risks. For marketing communication, this further confirms that social media represents a key channel for Generation Z. However, social media should not be approached as a homogeneous concept. Social networks differ in terms of interface, content, and purpose. In this context, it is important to note that Facebook ranked only fourth in the research findings. In response to the question "Which social network do you spend the most time on?" Instagram came out far ahead (as much as 66.4%), followed by TikTok and YouTube. A total of 211 respondents stated that they spend less than an hour on Facebook, and 136 respondents indicated that they do not actively use Facebook at all. For comparison, only 16 respondents (4%) reported spending more than three hours a day on Facebook. From the above, it can be concluded that, based on the results of this research, Facebook is losing its position among younger users. It also highlights the need for a differentiated approach to platforms – communication targeting Generation Z should therefore be carried out primarily on Instagram and only after followed by other social media platforms. Almost 75% of all respondents stated that when interacting with posts on social media, they tend to always or almost always read the captions of individual posts. This is a very important parameter for this research, as in the case of memes, the labeling of advertising collaborations is identifiable specifically through the post caption, since it is mandatory to disclose such collaborations there. The first meme image on Facebook refers to scenes from the film *Heretic*. The static image featured various shots from the movie, in which the characters were

wearing different types of glasses. Respondents were given time to view the post in PC format, including the image, the profile name, the post caption, and available comments. None of the comments mentioned the nature of the post – that is, whether it was an advertising collaboration. This information can only be found in the caption of the post. Respondents were then asked to answer three questions: about the nature of the meme (i.e., recognizing its advertising intent), whether they remembered the brand mentioned, and to provide the brand name, which they had to write out themselves without multiple-choice options. A total of 54.9% of respondents correctly stated that the intention of the post was to encourage followers to see the movie in the cinema. However, 39.1% of respondents incorrectly indicated that the purpose of the meme was to promote the purchase of glasses, and 6% believed it aimed to support the arts. When asked whether they noticed the brand mentioned in the image caption, as many as 285 respondents (71.4%) answered “no.” Out of the total number of respondents, only 53 were able to correctly identify the advertiser (13.2%). Several conclusions can be drawn from these findings. When determining the nature of the meme itself, respondents largely misinterpreted its intent. Some associated the post with the promotion of glasses, which suggests that the visual content of the post (a character wearing glasses) had a strong influence on their interpretation—more so than the caption. This indicates a low ability among some respondents to critically analyze visual elements within advertising. Additionally, there was a low level of brand recall and recognition in the context of the meme. It is important to note that the advertiser's name was not part of the meme itself but was mentioned only once in the caption as part of the required advertising disclosure. The second meme was again a static image; however, this time it was not a sponsored post but a regular humorous post. Nevertheless, the post featured a product from a specific brand – Bambino processed cheese spread – which was interjected into an image from the TV series *The Bear*. The post humorously suggested that someone using this spread feels like a head chef while cooking. Respondents were once again shown the image, the profile name, the caption, and the comments section, which, in this case naturally, did not mention any advertising connection with the manufacturer or brand. Unlike the previous post, this meme directly included the branded product in the visual itself, although it was not a paid promotion. A total of 59.4% of respondents correctly identified the post's intent as to entertain users. The remaining respondents incorrectly stated that the meme had an advertising purpose. As many as 39.3% believed that the post aimed to promote the purchase of the cheese spread, and 1.2% thought the intention was to support a streaming platform. However, in this post, 66.7% of respondents noticed that the meme included a specific branded product, and of the total sample, 61.7% correctly identified the product as being from the Bambino brand. Several key differences can be interpreted from the given examples. When it comes to decision-making and identifying the nature of a post, the visual content plays a more significant role for respondents than the text in the caption. In the case where the brand was not directly included in the image, recognition of the post's intent dropped by approximately 4.5%. In the second, humorous and non-promotional meme, as many as 39.9% of respondents believed it was an ad – essentially “seeing advertising where none actually existed.” Regarding brand recognition, only 13.2% of respondents were able to spontaneously name the brand based on the sponsorship mentioned in the caption of the first meme, while in the non-advertising meme, 61.7% correctly identified the brand from the product shown directly in the image. This opens up a discussion on whether brand products should be visually integrated directly into the meme in advertising posts. Clear visual representation of the product significantly improved brand recognition. The visual element holds strong influence – some respondents automatically assumed the presence of a brand indicated an advertising intent, regardless of the broader context. Therefore, it is essential to note that advertising literacy among respondents is relatively situational and selective depending on the context in which it is applied. The form of communication plays a crucial role in effectiveness – visual brand integration is more impactful than textual mentions in captions. Overall, only 36.6% of respondents were able to correctly identify the intent of both posts, which points to significant shortcomings in skills related to cognitive advertising literacy. In the case of people who stated that they regularly read post descriptions, this result rises to nearly 60%. These results reveal significant deficiencies in cognitive skills related to advertising literacy. Based on the findings, it can be interpreted that the greatest barrier to achieving a higher level of advertising literacy is the fact that respondents perceive advertising even where it is not present. The fact that nearly 40% of respondents considered a non-sponsored post to be an advertisement

solely because it featured a branded product indicates that the presence of a brand in a meme's visual automatically triggers the impression of commercial content, leading to an overinterpretation of the post. This, in turn, significantly blurs the line between entertaining and commercial (advertising) content. Based on the results, we assume that a similar situation could occur with other types of posts that operate on a similar principle – such as content from various influencers or short videos on platforms like Instagram or TikTok. A very similar study was conducted by Čábyová and Hudáková in 2022, focusing on the cognitive aspect of advertising literacy in relation to meme images, although their target group was adolescents [37]. Both studies focus on memes, but Čábyová and Hudáková also focus on more advertising formats, such as PR articles in news. In their study, the results indicate similar challenges in recognizing advertising intent. When it comes to understanding the intention behind advertising, in Čábyová and Hudáková's study, only 29% of the respondents managed to choose the correct answer. Even though it is significantly lower than in this study, one must consider the age difference between these two target groups. Similar to this study, the respondents were also able to more easily identify organic and fun content with the brand directly embedded in the visual content of the meme post. It shows that visual content is of significant importance when it comes to meme content. The results of the study highlight the need to separate advertising literacy from media literacy, as it is evident that when observing and identifying advertising, respondents focus on far more aspects than just the labeling of the content as an ad. A key factor for them is the visual element, which in this case accompanied unpaid memes that respondents were able to recall more easily and identify as having an entertaining character. The findings of this study indicate that despite the widespread presence of memes, it is essential to continue educating Generation Z in the field of advertising literacy, as they struggle to identify this type of native advertising.

CONCLUSION

The results presented in this paper also point to the strong effectiveness of meme formats in the process of marketing communication targeted at Generation Z, particularly in the context of their underdeveloped advertising literacy. The combination of entertaining – and in some cases commercial – content creates a form of communication in which respondents struggle to recognize advertising elements. The aim of this paper was to analyze the extent to which Generation Z respondents are able to identify advertising and understand the intent behind meme posts, as well as to determine to what degree and in which cases respondents are able to associate memes with a specific brand. The findings show that visually incorporating a branded product into meme content can significantly increase brand recall, but at the same time reduces the respondents' ability to recognize the advertising intent. The results make it clear that when interpreting the purpose of a post, respondents relied more on their intuition based on the content itself than on the presence of an ad label in the caption. The importance of the visual component is seen by respondents as the key indicator of the post's intent – whether it is advertising or purely entertainment. Identifying advertising becomes more difficult when the brand is integrated into humorous (or narrative) content. The findings highlight the need for further development of advertising literacy, even among Generation Z. Memes (like other formats) often go beyond traditional understandings of advertising, which makes it necessary to also consider hybrid forms of advertising and communication strategies within digital and online environments. Finally, it is important to address some limitations of the study. The sample consisted of respondents from Slovak Generation Z. It is likely that results would differ if the same type of study were conducted with other Slovak generations (e.g., Boomers), or even within the same generation in a different country. The development of advertising literacy is influenced by many factors, including age, education (and the education system), and the broader social and cultural environment. Moreover, the research focused solely on one format (static memes); further validation of these findings could be pursued through audiovisual formats, such as short videos, memes, or influencer content. Future research should therefore consider a broader spectrum of formats, including both traditional and digital media, but also more emerging and interactive formats or content made by artificial intelligence. Further research should also include educational proposals aimed at strengthening advertising literacy and critical thinking for this type of content, especially among more vulnerable audiences.

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