

Brand Defaming and Identity in Digital Society: A Semiotic Analysis of Temu Memes

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ABSTRACT: Memes, as symbolic media, are a multifaceted form of communication, spanning from entertainment and humor to social commentary and persuasive influence on their audience, ultimately shaping the digital culture. Recently, Temu, an online shopping platform, has expanded massively in Pakistan. The paper explores the impact of Temu memes in shaping digital culture by hypothetically defaming the platform's brand identity. Drawing on van Dijk's mental model theory (1983) the study investigates the impact of Temu memes on consumer behavior and their contribution to brand defamation. This qualitative research employs a descriptive method; 10 popular memes (both English and Urdu) have been selected for analysis. The findings reveal that Temu memes are a source of relatability among their audience and contribute significantly to social knowledge. In addition, as a means of self-expression, Temu memes not only serve the purpose of humor and entertainment but also foster a sense of skepticism surrounding the platform's brand reputation. Future researchers aiming to study the broader impact of social media on consumer culture can benefit from the study.

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Introduction

Memes have really become an integral part of everyone's life these days as they amuse people in many ways (Leiser, 2022). People heavily depend upon them to express their feelings and emotions, especially anger, happiness, sadness etc. They shape people's behaviors, set trends and spread like a wildfire. The research focuses on the impact of these Internet memes on the brand defamation of one of the online shopping platforms, Temu, which has made a fresh entry in the Pakistani ecommerce market (Bhattacharya, 2019). While the social media platforms are flooded with its advertisements offering massive discounts and showcasing multiple products in an attractive manner, the Internet is loaded with several memes on Temu, based on the experiences of people. Some of these memes celebrate the platform's presence in their specific humorous manner, thus showing its positive image in the Pakistani ecommerce industry, while on the other hand, a lot of them serve as a common representation of its users' negative experiences with Temu. Taking the present digital culture around the platform into account, the researchers will explore the memes which are defaming the online shopping platform. For this purpose, the study employs Van Dijk's Mental Model Theory (1983) to investigate the cognitive and social mechanisms that shape public opinion, and analyzes the selected memes that circulate in Pakistan by using a qualitative descriptive approach.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of Temu memes on consumer behavior and their contribution to brand defamation?

Literature Review

The term “meme” was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* to refer to “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” or any cultural values that spread from person to person and move from one generation to another in a way that they become a shared social phenomenon (Dawkins, 1976, 192). The same idea can be applied to internet memes that are “digital artefacts, e.g.: photo, video, text, etc.” transformed by internet users and shared online (Hassan, 2022, 30). In this context, memes can easily impact the perception of the people towards a brand or a shopping platform due to its dominance on social media and easy access. Shifman (2013) believes that memes are a form of “participatory culture”, where content is not only created and shared to create humor, but is also used to reshape the reality to reflect people’s personal or collective expressions, as they often carry social, political or commercial messages for marketing purposes and to influence consumer behavior. Similarly, Haidău (2023) argues that humor and ridicule can potentially serve as a mechanism for criticizing or commenting on a social event and consequently affecting or influencing people, primarily because of the message’s resonance with the people. Memes defaming anything can magnify its effects as people believe in memes and trust them. Excessive exposure to them increases their believability. Van Dijk’s Mental Model Theory (1983) stresses upon the cognitive ability of the individuals to interpret and understand messages. They organize and understand messages to create mental models. In this context, it has been assumed that the Pakistani people’s perception of Temu is not only based on their culture, experience and socio-economic backgrounds but also on the memes that have been frequently shared on social media, which in result, is affecting the platform’s reputation in the Pakistani ecommerce industry. The theory, thus, upholds the idea that memes are not standalone messages to be analyzed in isolation, but a part of a bigger picture made up of cultural references and shared experiences. Various researches on memes have proved that memes play a very important role in shaping people’s behavior due to its relatability. Oftentimes memes express more than an individual can do with his words. They connect with the experiences of the audience and shape their opinion about the brand which can be negative or positive.

All in all, this paper will see how memes can defame a brand with humor and by using people’s experiences. We have a complex media landscape as we are influenced by other countries’ content a lot. Previous work on memes also reflects how memes have become really relatable these days with their catchy language, colors, setting and pictures.

Research Methodology

Research Design

To explore the hidden meanings conveyed in a light-hearted tone, the paper uses a mixed-method research design as it validates the findings of the study.

Data Collection

An exploratory sequential approach has been used to collect the data: in the first phase, purposive sampling technique has been used to collect the qualitative data by using the key phrase “Temu memes in Pakistan” on Google and Instagram resulting in the selection of 10 most relevant and popular posts created and posted in the month of November, 2024 featuring both Urdu and English text with visual context lying in comic scenes from Bollywood movies; this was followed by quantitative data collection through an online survey using snowball sampling technique, with a sample size of 100 participants conducted over a period of two weeks.

Data Collection Tool

Two data collection tools have been used to collect the qualitative and quantitative data. For the qualitative data collection, relevant memes were selected through Online platforms like Google (search engine) and Instagram (social media platform), whereas the quantitative data has been collected through an online survey. The questionnaire shared online was based on Temu memes and their impact on consumer experience in Pakistan, so as to elicit authentic user experience. The questionnaire comprising of eighteen statements that required the participants to state their level of agreement against a three-point likert scale has been divided into two sections: the first section, comprising of seven statement that corroborate the memes presented in qualitative analysis, is followed by the second section that comprises of eleven questions to which each participant has responded.

Data Analysis

A three-step approach has been used to analyze the qualitative data. In the first stage of Description, the linguistic elements (captions) and the visual elements (images) have been described; the second stage of Explanation focussed on explaining the multimodal elements (both the verbal and non-verbal elements) in the selected memes with reference to Temu in Pakistan; this was followed by the final stage of Interpretation with respect to the Mental Model Theory (1983). For the quantitative data, pie charts from Google forms have been copied and analyzed. The findings have been divided into two sections: qualitative analysis and quantitative results.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of mental models was primarily used to analyze verbal discourse, but its focus on the complex relationship between the multimodal discourse and knowledge makes it a suitable approach to analyze the selected memes. A mental model refers to everyday experiences, as it is the cognitive definition of consciousness, suggesting that during each moment of one's life, the individual represents oneself and one's immediate environment as a mental model: Time, Place, Participants in a Situation, Event of Action with Goals, etc. This would include Experience Models (for everyday experiences), Context Models (for more specific communicative situations), and Event or Situational Models (what we talk about). These models are stored in the episodic memory which is a part of the long term memory with personal experiences, opinions, and emotions. Mental model theory is considered as the basic idea of cognitive representations of situations, experiences, or the events of the natural and social world. The theory is believed to affect the production and interpretation of text and talk; for instance, in storytelling, characterization, argumentation, etc. Mental models are thus a product of external data (including perceptions, experiences, and comprehension) and generic knowledge (which is organized in schemas, scripts, and frames, etc) (Abdel-Raheem, 2020). This suggests that memes cannot be analyzed in isolation as they are not only a part of complex networks of previously existing similar memes and the new combinations of currently existing ones, but also of non-mimetic discourse, such as films, advertisements, iconic figures, etc (Nassaji, 2015, 38).

Findings

Qualitative Analysis

Figure 4.1, referencing the iconic love triangle scene from the Bollywood film "Kuch Kuch Hota Hai" (1998), serves as a humorous analogy for consumer behavior while shopping online. The meme depicts Rahul (the consumer) embracing Anjali (Temu, a relatively newer ecommerce platform) on one hand, while holding Tina's hand (Daraz) on the other hand, thus representing a transition in consumer preferences. Using cultural familiarity among its audience, the meme highlights the emotional and functional dilemmas that the Pakistani ecommerce users have been experiencing, since Temu's arrival to construct a mental model of shifting consumer loyalties.

Image 1



Figure 2 features a scene from a Bollywood movie, with a character forcefully making the other person look at something, with the caption “Dekh..... Dekh na” (Look.... Just look). The meme humorously refers to Temu’s marketing that included several sponsored Instagram stories, and repeated ads on other social media platforms, so as to grab the attention of its audience. Having been shared on Instagram, one of the most widely used social media platforms, the meme can be seen as a representation of the mental model that Temu’s marketing efforts are overly aggressive, intrusive, and attention-seeking.

Image 2



Figure 3 features a scene from the Bollywood movie “Sivaji: The Boss” (2007) starring Rajnikanth. As The caption reads “Temu right now in the e-commerce industry: Kyu hilaa dala na” (You were shaken, weren't you?). The meme depicts Rajnikanth’s character as a disruptive dominant force, which is humorously applied to Temu’s presence in the e-commerce market. In light of the applied theoretical framework, the meme can be seen as a representation of the mental model that Temu asserts its presence and dominance in the e-commerce industry, thus making the meme a lighthearted comment on the competitive nature of the e-commerce market.

Image 3



Figure 4 is a meme from a Bollywood comic scene featuring Akshay Kumar and Johnny Lever from the movie “Khatta Meetha” (2010). The meme satirizes the newly launched online shopping platform for its mismatched orders and delivered products, as the caption reads, "Jo order krenge wesa hi milega?" (Will it be the same (product) as the one ordered?). “Temu: Iski guarantee me nahi de sakta” (I can't guarantee that). The meme not only conveys a shared experience of its consumers but also spreads a rumor about Temu in a humorous tone, thus reinforcing a mental model that Temu has a history of inconsistent order fulfillment.

Image 4



Figure 5 features a scene from a popular Indian series, “Mirzapur” (2018), featuring Munna Tripathi (Temu) confidently claiming “Jalwa hai hamara yahan” (The spotlight’s on us) to the girl (Daraz and AliExpress) beside him. The meme depicts Temu’s presence in the e-commerce market, which is quite similar to Munna’s bold claim; the already established platforms like Daraz and AliExpress are represented as "girls" in the scene, thus implying that Temu is trying to outshine them. Overall, the meme uses an Indian pop culture reference to convey a perception of Temu’s confidence and its portrayal as a competitive player in the Pakistani e-commerce industry.

Image 5



Figure 6 is a text-only meme that lists the types of fever in Pakistan. In addition to dengue and malaria, other common types of fever in Pakistan include “Kabhi mein kabhi tum”, which is one of the most watched Pakistani dramas in 2024, Temu, which became the talk of the town in 2024, and another popular meme of 2024, “juice pila do mosambi ka”. The meme compares Temu’s unavoidability to the viral nature of diseases, trendy memes, and popular TV shows, implying that, despite being just an online shopping platform, Temu has become a household name in Pakistan. Using a humorous tone, the meme conveys a mental model about Temu’s widespread presence, suggesting that it is impossible to avoid shopping on Temu.

Image 6



Figure 7 features the famous Raju pose from one of the most famous comic Bollywood films, “Phir Hera Pheri” (2006). As Raju pretends to be rich in this scene, the meme references the same pose for the Temu customers, feeling excitement and pride for receiving an order from Temu, thus representing the mental model that ordering and actually receiving the product from Temu is a luxurious experience. The humorous tone of the meme is a comic exaggeration of pretentiousness and pride of not being scammed, which is usually associated with Temu’s consumer experiences, implying that it’s an unreal experience.

Image 7



Figure 8 features multiple still frames of a person merged in a single image; all the poses of the meme character convey a sense of relief, achievement, and freedom. The caption "I did it, y'all. I placed an order on Temu" makes it a mental model that depicts the societal pressure Pakistanis have been facing since the launch of Temu. The meme humorously exaggerates the impact social media has on its users, implying that one needs to stay updated about social media trends in order to be accepted in society. Consequently, the meme also reduces the status of the widely used online shopping platform to a mere trend that people might forget about with time. On the other hand, the text and image of the meme convey that ordering on Temu is a feat worthy of celebration.

Image 8



Figure 9 features a famous Bollywood actor, Salman Khan, dressed in a prisoner's attire. The caption "People with no credit card looking at Temu cart" conveys the idea of longing that the majority of Pakistani people have experienced, as it is believed that adding to the cart doesn't cost one anything. Amidst the era of inflation and unemployment in Pakistan, Temu's launch has been a source of yearning for many people. The meme reinforces the frustration of Pakistani people by particularly targeting the "Temu" cart, as despite the lowest prices, there are a lot of people who cannot afford to shop online, but to experience a sense of solidarity and relatability and to feel accepted by the society for at least knowing about and using Temu, people add the items they wish to buy to their online carts. The meme represents the mental model that the unavailability of the credit card makes it impossible to complete the purchase on Temu, which is frustrating and limiting for online customers.

Image 9



Figure 10 features a scene from one of the famous comic Bollywood films, "Golmaal 3" (2010). In this meme, Vasooli Bhai (the consumer) doesn't understand what the Temu notification "You won 40,000 coupons" means, but says, "Samajh nahi aaya lekin sun kar acha laga" (I didn't understand (it), but it sounded good). The meme humorously represents consumers' skepticism and confusion about Temu's promotional offers, implying that they're either too good to be true or too confusing to be understood. The meme highlights the mental model that Temu, as an online shopping platform in Pakistan, is too new to be believed, yet the promotional offers are quite appealing. The "Me:" in the caption creates a sense of relatability among all the Pakistani users of Temu who find the platform both confusing and appealing at the same time.

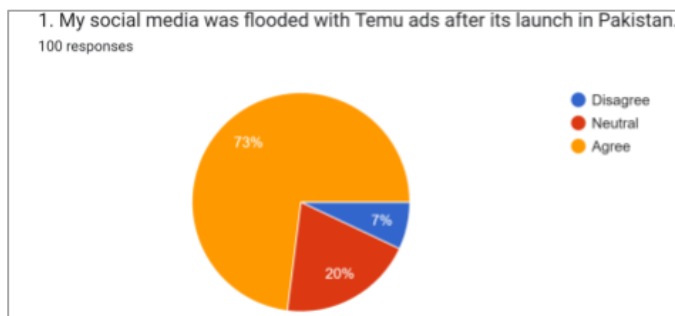
Image 10



Quantitative Results

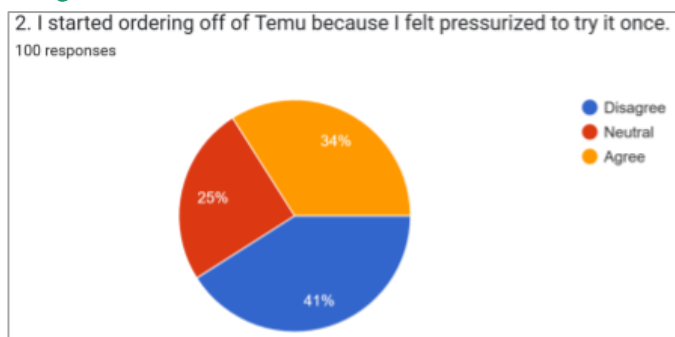
Figure 11 presents the authentic user experience in corroboration of the meme in Figure 4.2. When the participants (n=100) were asked to indicate their agreement with the statement ‘My social media was flooded with Temu ads after its launch in Pakistan’, the majority of them (73%) indicated a positive response, while only seven (7%) disagreed with the statement. Twenty participants (20%), however, indicated a neutral response.

Image 11



Based on the meme presented in Figure 8, it was assumed that Temu’s aggressive marketing strategy might have influenced the social media users to a point where they would’ve felt pressured to at least try and check if the hype built around Temu was worth it. Figure 12 presents the participants’ (n=100) responses to the statement ‘I started ordering off of Temu because I felt pressured to try it once’. Almost half of the participants (41%) disagreed with the statement, indicating that the meme presented in Figure 4.8 might be an exaggeration of Temu’s marketing influence. More than thirty participants (34%), however, agreed with the statement, while a quarter of the whole population (25%) indicated a neutral response.

Image 12



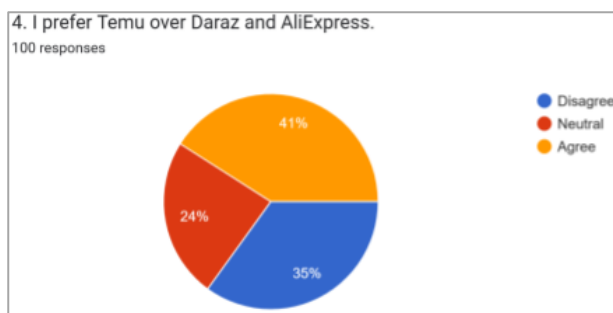
Apart from Temu’s overwhelming promotion on different social media platforms, it is assumed that the fascinating discounts and affordable prices have also grabbed the consumers’ attention. Figure 13 shows how more than half (56%) of the participants (n=100) agree with the given statement; however, a small number of participants (16%) disagree, thus highlighting the skepticism attributed to the platform’s name, as the prices and discounts might seem too fascinating to be true. In a similar context, a significant number of participants (28%) indicated a neutral response.

Image 13



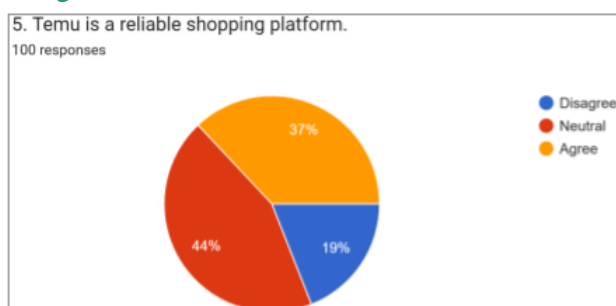
Entering a saturated e-commerce market can be challenging, but the participants’ responses (n=100) in Figure 14 suggest a different reality and rather reinforce the idea presented in Fig 4.5. A large number (41%) of the participants agree with the statement that they prefer Temu over Daraz and Ali Express, while a significant number (35%) disagree with the statement, and a quarter (24%) of them indicate a neutral response.

Image 14



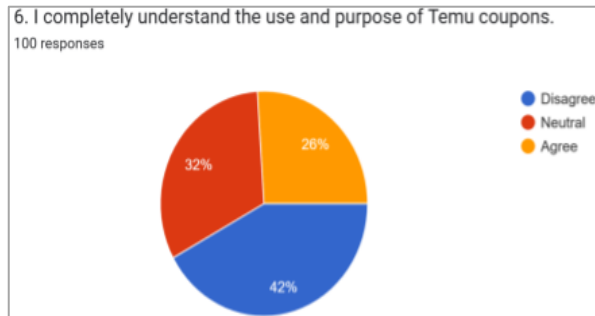
In order to gain a general understanding of its consumers’ perception about Temu, the research participants (n=100) were asked to indicate a response to the statement “Temu is a reliable platform”. While nineteen (19%) participants indicated a negative response, a significant number (37%) of them agreed as well, with the majority (44%) of them indicating a neutral response, as shown in Figure 15.

Image 15



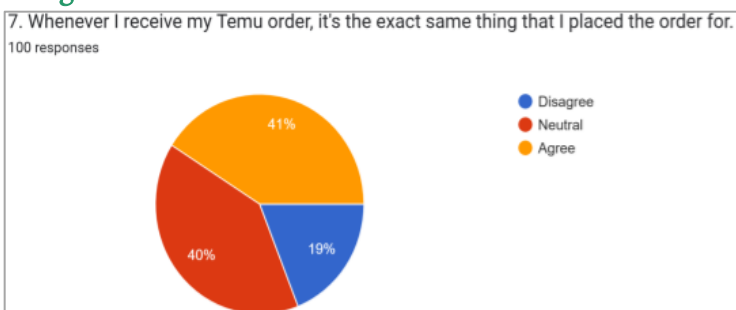
In corroboration of the meme presented in Figure 4.10, the research participants (n=100) were asked if they actually understood the use and purpose of Temu coupons, to which only a small number (26%) agreed, while almost half (46%) of them disagreed. A significant number (32%) of the participants, however, remained neutral in response to this statement, as shown in Figure 16.

Image 16



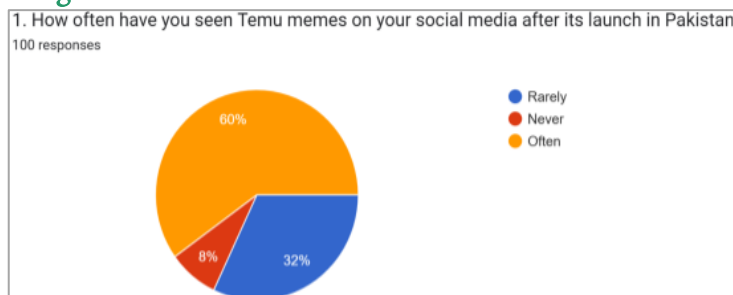
The last statement of the first section aimed at eliciting responses regarding the authentic consumer experience of shopping on Temu. Figure 4.17 shows that forty (40%) indicated a neutral response, and an equal number (41%) of them agreed to have received the exact same product that they placed the order for. A small number (19%) of the participants, however, disagreed with the given statement, thus raising speculations regarding Temu’s inconsistent order fulfillment, which has been humorously presented in Figure 17.

Image 17



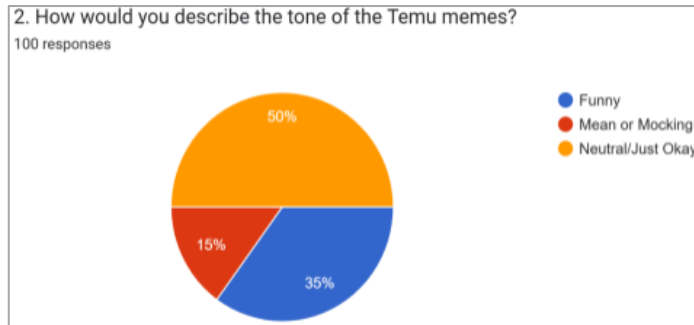
In order to elicit an authentic user experience and people's perceptions regarding Temu, its products, services, and the related memes circulating on social media, the second section has been made up of eleven questions. In the first statement of the second section, the participants (n=100) were asked, “How often have you seen Temu memes on your social media after its launch in Pakistan?”, to which more than half (60%) of the participants responded that they had often seen Temu memes on their social media after its launch in Pakistan, however, for some (32%) of them, it was a rare experience, and a small number (8%) indicated that they had never seen any Temu memes on their social media, as shown in Figure 18.

Image 18



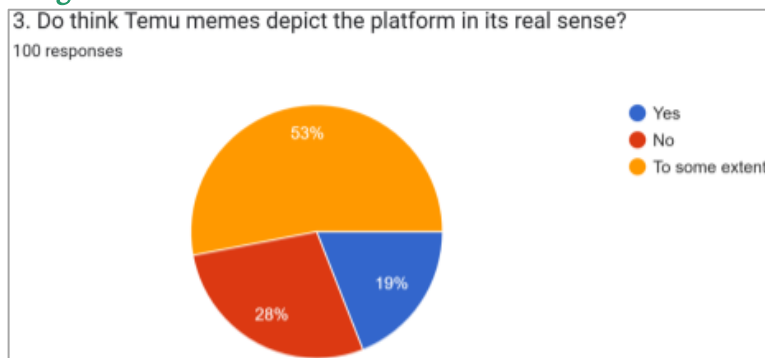
In the following statement, the participants (n=100) were asked to describe the tone of the Temu memes as mean, neutral, or funny. Figure 19 shows that according to the opinion of half (50%) of the participants, the tone of the Temu memes was described as neutral or just okay. However, a large number (35%) of participants selected the first option, thus describing the Temu memes as funny, while some (15%) of them found the tone of these memes to be mean or mocking.

Image 19



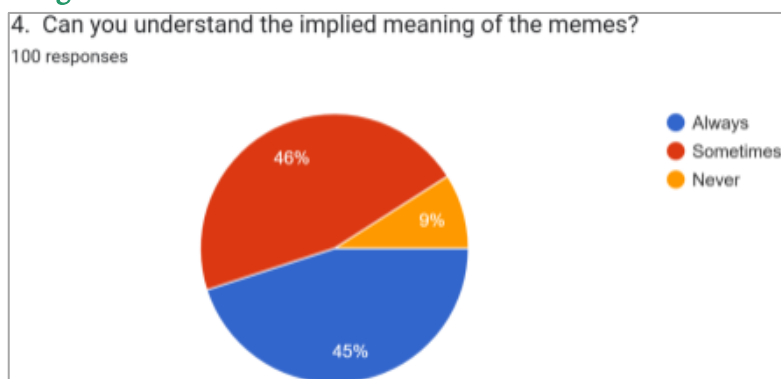
To delve deeper into the inquiry, the participants (n=100) were asked if they thought these memes depicted Temu in its real sense; the responses have been demonstrated in Figure 20. Only a small (19%) of the participants agreed that the Temu memes circulating on social media depicted the platform in its true sense. On the other hand, a larger number (28%) of participants disagreed with the idea of depicting the platform's identity through memes. Notably, more than half (53%) of the respondents expressed a middling view.

Image 20



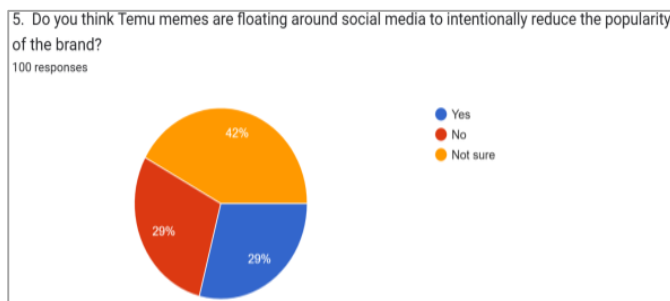
Since memes are subject to multiple interpretations, the survey participants (n=100) were asked if they understood the implied meaning of the Temu memes. Figure 21 clearly shows that a large number (45%) of participants admitted their understanding of the implied meaning of Temu memes, whereas an equal number (46%) of participants indicated a moderate level of agreement. Only a small number (9%) of participants chose the last option, thus indicating that they never understood the implied meaning of Temu memes.

Image 21



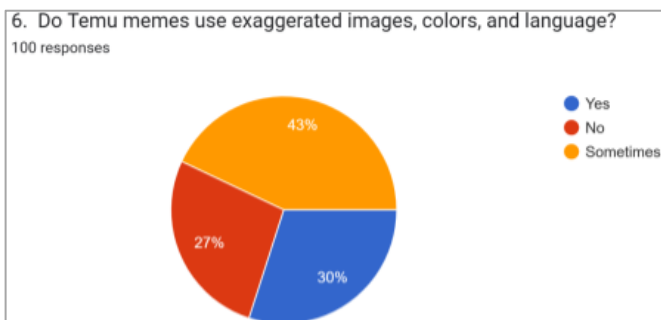
In order to get a view of how social media users perceived the circulation of Temu memes on different platforms, the research participants (n=100) were asked, “Do you think Temu memes are floating around social media to intentionally reduce the popularity of the brand?”, to which an equal number (29%) of the participants responded with a yes or no response, and the majority (42%) of them indicated a degree of uncertainty, as shown in Figure 22.

Image 22



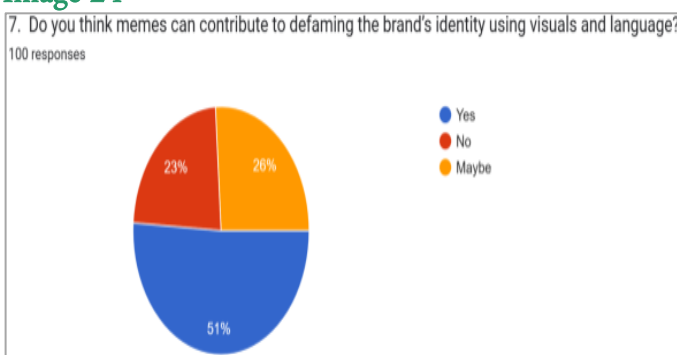
Colors and language are important aspects of memes, and thus, the research participants (n=100) were asked to share their views in the context of Temu memes. As shown in Figure 23, a significant number (30%) of the participants believed that Temu memes used exaggerated colors, images, and language, whereas a slightly lesser number (27%) of the participants believed otherwise. A subset (43%) of respondents expressed a middling response.

Image 23



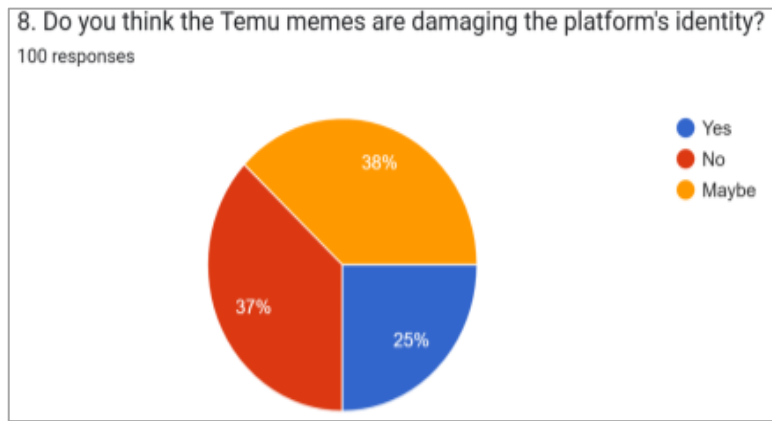
Delving deeper into the inquiry, the survey participants (n=100) were asked to share their views about the effect of language and visuals of memes on the brand’s identity. More than half (51%) of the participants believed that yes, memes can contribute to defaming the brand’s identity using visuals and language, as shown in Figure 24. Almost a quarter (26%) of the respondents believed in the idea's possibility, whereas the rest (23%) of them disagreed with the statement.

Image 24



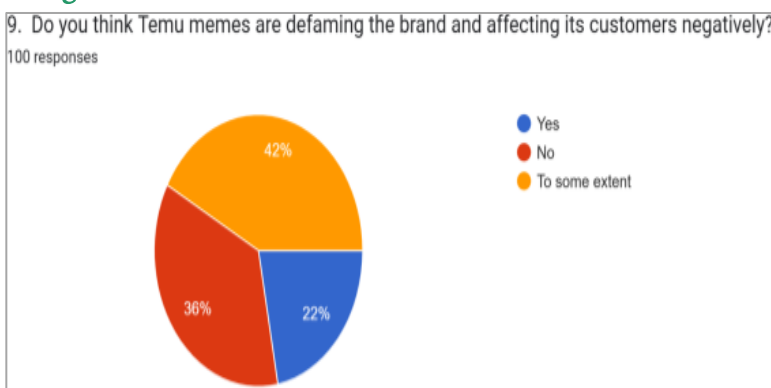
While talking of Temu memes, particularly, the survey participants (n=100) were asked the same question as the previous one. To this, a quarter (25%) of the participants straightforwardly agreed, while a significant number (37%) of the respondents believed that Temu memes are not damaging the platform's brand identity. A similar number (38%) of participants indicated that there might be a possibility of Temu's brand identity being negatively affected by the memes, as shown in Figure 25.

Image 25



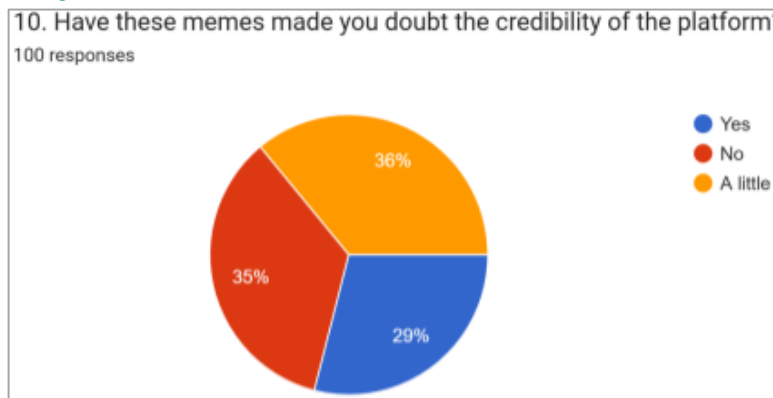
One of the most noticeable features of a platform's brand identity is how customers perceive, respond to, or interact with the brand. In order to shed light on the effect of Temu memes on the platform's brand identity, the survey respondents (n=100) were asked, "Do you think Temu memes are defaming the brand and affecting its customers negatively?" A small number (22%) of participants agreed to the statement, a relatively larger number (36%) of them indicated otherwise; however, a significant number (42%) of respondents believed that Temu memes might be defaming the brand and affecting its customers negatively, as shown in 26.

Image 26



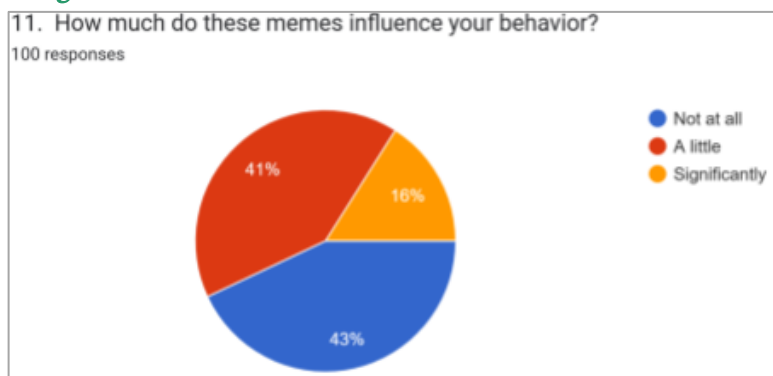
In order to elicit perceptions of the survey participants about the credibility of Temu as an online shopping platform, the participants (n=100) were asked, "Have these memes made you doubt the credibility of the platform?" As shown in Figure 27, more than a quarter (29%) of participants expressed a 'yes' response, while, on the other hand, a significant number (35%) of participants indicated a 'no' response. A similar number (36%) of participants expressed that there might be a possibility for them to doubt the platform's credibility due to the frequently circulating memes.

Image 27



In the last question of this section, the participants (n=100) were asked to share the extent to which Temu memes have affected their behavior, and as shown in Figure 28, a significant number (43%) of participants claimed that Temu memes did not affect their behavior towards the shopping platform at all. A similar number (41%) of them indicated a middling response, whereas only a small number (16%) of them claimed that these memes significantly influenced their behavior towards Temu.

Image 28



Discussion

Internet memes are characterized by user-generated images that gain popularity among social media users when witty captions are added to them (Sulhan, 2016). According to Kariko (2014) the meaning of a meme relies upon people as does the meaning of advertisements as both are combinations of visual and verbal elements. Therefore, like advertisements, internet memes convey political, cultural and social messages. To decode these complex messages, memes are analyzed semiotically, thus revealing their denotative and connotative meanings. The semiotic analysis, in this way, helps to identify the positive or negative impact of memes on a particular phenomenon (Javed et al., 2022). The semiotic analysis of Temu memes using van Dijk's mental model theory (1983) reveals that the visual context used in the selected memes is based on the popular Bollywood movie scenes, and the verbal (linguistic) context is based on Urdu and English language, thus indicating the meme creators' awareness of the users' background knowledge. This suggests that the primary purpose of memes is to entertain the users by presenting a social phenomenon in a humorous way. The number of people who understand and share a particular meme shows how common a particular social event is. In the same way, the analysis of the selected Temu memes, and the collected responses is evident of Pakistani Temu users' personal experiences and shared cultural knowledge, suggesting that the memes about Temu might be true. Based on the encyclopedic nature of social media, however, the findings of the

study reveal that memes about Temu in Pakistan have been damaging the platform's brand identity by spreading negative reviews, and using a mocking tone against its presence in the Pakistani ecommerce industry.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that mental models are influenced by personal experiences, cultural norms, and shared knowledge. As the findings reveal, the selected Temu memes create a sense of skepticism and mistrust around the brand in Pakistan, thus highlighting a negative narrative that is reinforced through social media sharing, which is reflected in the collected responses of survey participants. In this way, the findings not only highlight the significance of personal experiences but also emphasize the importance of cultural norms in shaping the mental models and consumer perception of online shopping platforms like Temu. While highlighting the role of shared knowledge on mental models, the study findings also reveal Bollywood's significant impact on the Pakistani meme culture as the majority of memes rely on the shared cultural vocabulary, with references to iconic scenes and characters frequently appearing in the local memes. To conclude, although the primary function of Internet memes is to add humorous exaggeration or commentary to an existing social event, the selected memes, however, appear to criticize or mock the brand, potentially damaging its reputation in the industry.

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