

VILNIUS UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION
STUDENT OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION
MASTER STUDY PROGRAMME

Nazar Yaremus

The Impact of User-generated Memes in Film Marketing and Promotion:
The Case of Christopher Nolan's 'Oppenheimer' (2023)

Master Thesis

Supervisor: Assoc.Prof. Dr. Renata Šukaitytė-Coenen

Vilnius, 2024

ABSTRACT / SANTRAUKA

Released on July 21st, 2023, the *Oppenheimer* movie became a worldwide hit, grossing almost one billion dollars globally and revitalizing the movie industry after the COVID-19 pandemic. The successful release of the film was preceded by an extraordinary wave of organic social media buzz about it, which ended up promoting the *Oppenheimer* brand to the wider audiences. This master's thesis takes a closer look at the most popular user-generated memes about *Oppenheimer* on Reddit. The study combines deductive and inductive approaches to perform a qualitative content analysis of the memes and identify the major themes within. It argues that while the *Barbenheimer* phenomenon was one of the key reasons for the success of *Oppenheimer*, other factors include the memes about the movie using popular among Generation Z absurdist humour, portraying the film in a positive light, being organic and authentic reflections of their creators' experiences, being able to joke about controversial subjects with no danger to the brand itself, and having high intertextuality by constantly explicitly referencing other memes.

Keywords: qualitative content analysis; *Oppenheimer* movie; user-generated memes; *Oppenheimer* memes; meme marketing.

2023 m. liepos 21 d. pasirodęs filmas „Openheimeris“ tapo pasauliniu hitu, visame pasaulyje uždirbo beveik milijardą dolerių ir atgaivino kino pramonę po COVID-19 pandemijos. Prieš sėkmingą filmo išleidimą kilo nepaprastai daug organiško šurmulio socialinėje medijoje, kuris paskatino „Openheimerio“ prekės ženklą pristatyti platesnei auditorijai. Šiame magistro darbe atidžiau apžvelgiami populiariausi „Reddit“ vartotojų sukurti memai apie „Openheimerį“. Tyrime derinami dedukcinis ir indukcinis metodai, siekiant atlikti kokybinę memų turinio analizę ir nustatyti pagrindines jų temas. Jame teigiama, kad nors Barbenhaimerio fenomenas buvo viena iš pagrindinių „Openheimerio“ sėkmės priežasčių, kiti veiksniai - memai apie filmą naudojo tarp Z kartos atstovų populiarią absurdišką humorą, filmo vaizdavimas teigiamoje šviesoje, organiški ir autentiški kūrėjų patirties atspindžiai. Kūrėjai galėjo juokauti kontroversiškais temomis be pavojaus pačiam prekės ženklui ir pasižymėjo dideliu intertekstualumu, nuolat kūryboje aiškiai nurodydami kitus memus.

Raktiniai žodžiai: kokybinė turinio analizė; „Openheimeris“ filmas; vartotojų sukurti memai; „Openheimerio“ memai; memų rinkodara.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
1. LITERATURE REVIEW ON CHRISTOPHER NOLAN’S <i>OPPENHEIMER</i> , DIGITAL MARKETING OF BRANDS AND VISUAL MEMES.....	11
1.1. <i>Oppenheimer</i> within the Current Movie Environment.....	11
1.2. Contemporary Digital Environment.....	13
1.3. Relationship Between Brands and User-Generated Content	15
1.4. The Proliferation of Internet Memes	19
1.5. Dynamic Between Memes and Marketing.....	24
2. RESEARCH OF THE IMPACT OF USER-GENERATED MEMES IN MARKETING OF THE FEATURE FILM ‘OPPENHEIMER’.....	28
2.1. Research Aim and Objectives	28
2.2. Research Methodology	28
2.3. Research Design	30
2.4. Analysis of the Findings.....	31
2.5. Discussion of the Findings	39
CONCLUSIONS	43
LIST OF REFERENCES	46
ANNEXES	52

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Topic. The *Oppenheimer* movie has been surrounded with attention from journalists, online influencers, and even casual movie viewers since it was first announced back in September of 2021. That is when it was revealed that Universal Pictures, one of the biggest and oldest American film studios, had landed the right to produce and distribute it, employing Christopher Nolan as the movie's director (Fleming, 2021). The prominent and tragic figure of J. Robert Oppenheimer, an infamous "father" of the atomic bomb, was bound to become an interesting and intriguing premise for a serious biographical drama movie, especially considering the moral dilemma of his invention, its usage against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Oppenheimer's subsequent advocacy for nuclear power control and opposition against the development of a hydrogen bomb.

Christopher Nolan is famous for his critically acclaimed and universally loved movies that combine experimental and ambitious storylines with visually stunning and grandiose spectacles, such as "The Dark Knight", "Interstellar", "The Prestige", "Inception", "Tenet", "Dunkirk", and others (Parhizkar, 2024). After the success of Nolan's "Dark Knight" trilogy and later more experimental high-budget films, his every new movie is expected to deliver for all kinds of film enjoyers. Coupled with the household name of Christopher Nolan as the director and Cillian Murphy, the talented star of the widely popular "Peaky Blinders" TV show, playing the titular protagonist, *Oppenheimer* quickly became a highly anticipated movie by both dedicated cinephiles and casual audiences, even after COVID-19 and the global pandemic changed the movie consumption culture away from movie theatres and toward digital streaming services (Kim, 2021; Parhizkar, 2024).

Another industry, largely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, was social media, which saw a great boost in popularity and usage, as the restrictions and quarantine pushed more services into the digital format and more people than ever moved to the Web for socialization and entertainment. The main function of modern social media platforms is to allow their users to engage with each other by creating their own content and sharing the content made by others (Luca, 2015). Since the establishment of "Web 2.0", social media have grown in their importance and influence on the outside world, giving consumers new, previously unseen power to shape the products and media content they are interested in (Jenkins, 2006). However, after the pandemic they have become an inseparable part of every person who owns a smartphone or a personal computer, providing users with current news, entertainment, and new

virtual communities to associate with, creating a hyperreal space, often feeling more real than the physical world around them (Lazzini, 2022).

The rise and expansion of social media have radically changed the relationship between consumers and the products they consume. The spread of user-generated content (UGC) and especially the dominance of internet memes over the digital spaces, described as “the currency of social media” has given users unprecedented control over products and allowed the previously passive customers to participate in their co-creation (Rashid, 2018). This shift in the power dynamic had especially influenced media production, including film production. Previously, film studios controlled the marketing of their upcoming movies. However, now suddenly Internet users could either spread awareness and anticipation for their new movie through social media posts and memes, resulting in positive publicity and hype around it, or viciously mock the movie even before it was out, leading to the film not generating enough interest and failing in box office.

Unsurprisingly, the *Oppenheimer* movie with its cast of popular and prominent Hollywood actors, like Cillian Murphy, Emily Blunt, Matt Damon, Robert Downey Jr., etc., and one of the most popular modern movie directors in charge of it, was bound to generate lots of attention from the digital users. However, unlike the previous experimental high-budget films by Christopher Nolan, *Oppenheimer* was marketed as a somber biopic drama about the life of a real person with no overt action scenes. At first glance, it was different from the modern highly commercialized marketing-based blockbusters which have been the safe bets for film studios in recent years (Parhizkar, 2024). Despite that, *Oppenheimer* proved to be a massive hit with audiences, capturing the attention of Internet users around the world, leading to the discussions of the movie and the proliferation of Internet memes about it for months before the film was even released. This resulted in an unprecedented success, with the movie grossing nearly one billion dollars at the box office all over the world and becoming the highest-grossing biopic movie in history (Box Office Mojo, n.d.).

The Relevance of the Researched Topic. With the development of social media and the digitalization of our everyday lives, new technologies have provided previously passive customers with unprecedented power to influence and shape brands. This gave Internet users the ability to engage in “open-source branding”, now functioning as the creators and disseminators of branded content. “Social media technologies such as blogging, video sharing, social bookmarking, social networking, and community platforms enable open source branding by empowering consumers to create their own personalized experiences and by providing venues via which they can easily share content with like-minded friends” (Fournier & Avery,

2011, p. 194). At the same time, with their new power, consumers choose to participate in co-creation voluntarily, demanding to play an active role in defining the value of products and services (Almaghrabi, 2023).

One of the methods Internet users employ in co-creation is the consumption, dissemination, and creation of user-generated content (UGC). The motivation for the consumers to create UGC in relation to brands is to satisfy their own needs, often not related to any economic benefits. Daugherty (2013) suggests that the creation of UGC may serve the functions of helping the users understand the subject at hand and themselves, increasing their self-esteem by integrating them into an online community and giving them a sense of belonging. One of the most prominent types of UGC on the Web is Internet memes, described as “the currency of social media” due to their inherent ability to be easily transformed and disseminated among users (Almaghrabi, 2023).

The process of “memeification” of a product, media content, or an event by users involves taking it and adding humorous changes and elements, transforming the object as a result to be shared on the Internet, especially social media and is a common occurrence in the digital world since its conception (Miller, 2023). The influence and potential of memes to shape the real world should not be underestimated, as they have proven themselves to be effective tools for spreading propaganda, influencing public opinion, or even provoking social change (Bowo et al., 2024). With massive implications like that it is no surprise that memes are often the deciding factor of whether various products will or will not succeed financially, especially when it concerns the creative entertainment media like movies. Internet memes often become the initial exposure to an upcoming film for social media users, bringing them awareness about the brand and priming them to have a positive or a negative attitude toward it even before the product has been released. Based on this attitude, the audience later decides whether to attend the movie, demonstrating the massive influence of social media buzz and memes on the movie industry.

At the same time, it is known that mere widespread memeification of a movie is not enough and will not guarantee its commercial success. This is evidenced by the humiliating flop of the *Morbius* movie and its re-release in 2022. The *Morbius* movie by Sony Pictures Entertainment came out in the spring of 2022, receiving abysmal review scores from movie critics and vicious mockery by the audiences in the form of Internet memes. The memes would ironically praise *Morbius* as “one of the movies of all time”, making up non-existent scenes in the film, pretending like it received positive critic and audience reviews, and claiming that it is now the highest grossing movie of all time with a ridiculously high box office of 352 billion

dollars (Know Your Meme, 2022). In reality, the worldwide box office amounted to only 167 million dollars and the movie was considered a financial failure. Despite that, the trend of memes on the Internet, now named “Morbius Sweep”, was so widespread and contagious that a few months later Sony decided to capitalize on the trend and tried a small re-release of the movie in 1037 theatres around the US. Over the weekend the movie barely managed to gross three hundred thousand dollars, becoming the second failed release of *Morbius* and providing the Internet users with more fuel for their ridicule (Zinski, 2022). This demonstrates that mere exposure to a movie through memes is not enough and that Internet memes need to have certain qualities to spark interest among the potential audience.

The *Oppenheimer* movie serves as the prime modern example of how the propagation of user-generated content, including memes, can influence the commercial success of a film, turning what would have been seen as a niche biopic drama about the life of a scientist into one of the most anticipated movies of 2023 (Vanity Fair, 2022) with the third highest box office of the year, grossing over 975 million dollars worldwide. Therefore, the goal of this study is to explore the content, qualities, and broader context of these Internet memes to understand how exactly they have built such a widespread awareness of and interest in the movie, leading to its massive cultural prominence and commercial success.

Fundamental Research in This Area. Since the release of the *Oppenheimer* movie, there have been multiple scientific studies analysing it. However, the majority of articles that discuss the movie’s success view it not as a standalone product that became a hit with the audiences but through the lenses of another phenomenon - *Barbenheimer*. Expecting *Oppenheimer* to be a product for a more niche audience of film enjoyers, Universal Pictures has set the release date of the movie for the 21st of July, 2023, the same day as the more light-hearted *Barbie* movie by Warner Bros. This is known as “counterprogramming”, “a marketing tactic whereby a studio will schedule a simultaneous release with another film, knowing that their release is aimed at an opposing target audience” (Miller, 2023, p. 13). However, the humorous juxtaposition of a shiny, cheerful, and playful light-hearted comedy with the serious, dark, tragic biographical drama by Christopher Nolan gave birth to *Barbenheimer* as a cultural phenomenon, positioning the two movies not as competitors but as a “double-feature event” (Miller, 2023; Parhizkar, 2024). The marketing of both movies successfully capitalized off each other and both films ended up with a higher box office than they would have achieved as standalone projects events (Mitchell et al., 2024). The *Barbenheimer* phenomenon began on social media, largely in the form of memes joking about the juxtaposition, eventually growing so large it spilled into other forms of media.

The rise and influence of social media is a widely researched topic that has been receiving interest from the academic community since it first appeared. Social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). These platforms provide their users with the ability to communicate with each other by creating and sharing primarily user-generated content (Luca, 2015). The proliferation of social media platforms that provide their users with the ability to create and share any kind of content largely without censorship has led to users forming online communities based on similar interests. Creating and sharing content in an online community allows the users to express their identity and share their experiences, perceptions, and social capital with others (Almaghrabi, 2023; Rashid, 2018). This has significantly affected the members of Generation Z, which was born between 1997 and 2012 and grew together with social media, being actively engaged in consuming content online since their earliest years (Bowo et al., 2024). This is especially relevant today when most of Generation Z have grown up to be teenagers and young adults and now predominantly shape the social media landscape.

With the popularization of social media brands have been attempting to integrate themselves into the discussion. The brand is defined by how the consumers feel about it, their perception of its qualities and performance, what the brand entails, what it stands for, and the company that owns the brand. They exist outside of corporations and are partially independent of the intentions of their creators (Berthon et al., 2008). Therefore, social media platforms have provided brands with cost-effective tools to promote themselves to large audiences in a quick manner. However, as the brand’s activities moved online, they found themselves in a scary position where they were no longer in control of their messages. The top-down advertisements were largely ignored by the consumers on the Internet, who now possessed the power to hijack the brand messages and turn them against the companies, exposing and mocking them for their inauthenticity. People on social media started producing user-generated content featuring the brands without their consent, now having more power over the brands than ever before (Fournier & Avery, 2011). User-generated content is defined as “all the media content created and produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals, excluding things like e-mail, instant messages, and the republication of existing content” (Helms et al., 2012).

One of the most prominent kinds of user-generated content on social media are Internet memes. The term “meme” originates from Richard Dawkins (1976) and refers to a unit of cultural transmission, which replicates the human cultural environment, similar to a gene (p. 192). While the term “Internet meme” is more specific, referring to “units of popular culture

that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (Shifman, 2014, p. 367), it also reflects the importance the replicability of a meme. The four characteristics of an Internet meme are humour, high emotional intensity, ease of propagation, and brand prestige (Teng et al., 2021). Humour is the core ingredient of a meme which primarily attracts the attention of Internet users and makes it so memorable and spreadable. The humorous element allows the memes to fulfill the social needs of the users, such as entertainment, connection, and cohesion. This allowed it to become an integral component of internet culture, grounded in creativity, self-expression, and communication of symbolic meaning in the digital world (Bowo et al., 2024; Almaghrabi, 2023).

The majority of scientific research about the relationship between Internet memes and marketing focuses on the memes created by the brands and the consumers’ response to them. Internet memes are recognizable, and their audiences often have positive associations with them (Csordas et al., 2017). Memes are an alluring instrument for digital marketers to reach wide audiences of potential customers due to their ability to be easily understood, ease of spreading, their alignment with the culture and the target audiences, and the capability to evoke emotions. When an Internet meme that involves a brand reaches virality, it increases the brand’s top-of-the-mind awareness, brand recall, and consumer engagement (Bowo et al., 2024). Even a parody of a brand can positively affect the awareness and associations of the audience if it does not satirize the brand in a negative light (Fournier, 2011). However, at the same time, the users tend to be skeptical about the brands’ involvement in the meme culture, perceiving them as inauthentic and joyless. The users view social media as a place for individuals to interpret and share their experiences, not just another advertisement platform. The idea of corporations using memes just as a tool to promote their commercial products clashes with the values of authenticity and pureness of user-generated Internet memes (Almaghrabi, 2023; Fournier, 2011). The dynamic and quickly changing online environment is largely incompatible with the processes of traditional marketing. The shifting nature of Internet memes requires flexibility and quick responses, contrary to the slow structures of corporate marketing (Csordas et al., 2017). Additionally, once a corporate meme is created and shared, the organization loses all control over its message. In the digital environment the meme will travel around online communities, losing its original meaning and even potentially gaining an unfavourable interpretation, contrary to what the corporation intended to communicate to their customers (Almaghrabi, 2023). This suggests that if corporations want to succeed in the field of meme marketing, firstly they need to understand the meme culture and how memes

develop, what memes are relevant to their target audience, and how can be used in relation to their product (Bowo et al., 2024). Secondly, a brand that opportunistically injects itself into any meme that trends on social media with no contribution to the online community tends to be rejected by the users. To be legitimized in the digital space, corporate memes need to provide the users with symbolic value and demonstrate the company's interest in the community (Almaghrabi, 2023).

Object of the Research.

The objects of this study are the most popular Internet memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie, shared on Reddit in the time period between the release of the first trailer and the film leaving the majority of theatres.

Aim of the research. The aim of this study is to analyze the most popular user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie to determine what humour styles and types were most prominent and what are the shared themes of the memes.

Objectives of the Research

1. To select a sample of popular Reddit memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie from before and during the film's presence in movie theatres.
2. To analyse the content of the selected memes and determine what styles and types of humour are used.
3. To determine the common themes of the popular user-generated memes about *Oppenheimer*.
4. To analyze and discuss the findings using relevant scientific literature and draw conclusions about how user-generated memes influenced the success of *Oppenheimer*.

Methods of Academic Research. This master's thesis employs the following academic research methods: in-depth literature analysis on the subject of research and the qualitative research type, using qualitative content analysis to inspect the user-generated *Oppenheimer* memes and identify the prevailing themes within the memes. Both deductive and inductive approaches to coding are combined to analyze the artifacts, coding the memes according to humour styles and humour types, while discovering new themes inductively (Catanescu & Tom, 2001; Martin et al., 2003).

Structure of the Paper:

The introduction provides the context of the *Oppenheimer* movie, Christopher Nolan as its director, the surrounding attention before the film's release, and briefly goes over the importance of user-generated content (UGC) and Internet memes in the contemporary digital environment. It introduces the relevance of the topic, gives a general overview of the relevant

prior scholarly findings, and provides the aim, objectives, object, and methodology of the research.

The literature review presents the prior scientific revelations, relevant to the discussion of the influence of Internet memes on the *Oppenheimer* marketing. It explores the prior analyses of the *Oppenheimer* movie, Christopher Nolan as a director, and the *Barbenheimer* cultural phenomenon. The literature review delves into the contemporary digital environment, social media landscape, online communities, and identity formation on the Web. The chapter explores the concept of memes and Internet memes as an integral component of social media. Lastly, the literature review provides prior scientific findings about the relationship between memes and marketing and the difficulties brands face when using memes as a tool to promote themselves.

The methodology provides the research design and methods, which are used to analyze the chosen Internet memes about *Oppenheimer*.

The analysis chapter examines content within the objects of the study and provides the findings of the research. The discussion chapter provides an interpretation of the research findings and contextualizes them within prior academic knowledge to understand the implications of this study.

The conclusion provides the main findings of the research paper, discusses the limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for further research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW ON CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S *OPPENHEIMER*, DIGITAL MARKETING OF BRANDS AND VISUAL MEMES

1.1. *Oppenheimer* within the Current Movie Environment

According to Parhizkar (2024), *Oppenheimer* shares a strong resemblance with the “traditional, studio-controlled” films from the Golden Age of Hollywood. It attempts to deconstruct the work of J. Robert Oppenheimer and leaves the audience to question the ethical implications of his invention without providing a definitive moral judgement. The movie demonstrates its narrative in a serious tone, using humour extremely sparingly and never making it the focus, and maintaining the feelings of tension and urgency until the credits (Miller, 2023). *Oppenheimer*'s focus on questioning the morality of its protagonist and his actions brought Miller (2023) to the conclusion that the movie can be viewed as an example of metamodernism in art.

After its release in July of 2023, the *Oppenheimer* movie was a massive financial success, universally acclaimed by film critics and ordinary movie watchers (Metacritic, n.d.). However, the discourse around the movie had begun long before it arrived at movie theaters around the world. The anticipation surrounding the movie was largely generated by the person who directed it – Christopher Nolan. “Christopher Nolan's exclusive filmmaking style is characterized by its complexity, non-linear storytelling, and thematic depth” (Parhizkar, 2024, p. 29). The non-linear storytelling in his movies, including *Oppenheimer*, challenges the viewer's perception of reality and time, pushing the audience to think about the events happening in the narrative. Christopher Nolan is also famous for his ability to successfully combine his complex narratives and impressive visual spectacle to push the boundaries of storytelling in mainstream cinema while appealing to wide audiences. He is committed to using practical effects to achieve this level of visuals in his movies instead of relying on computer-generated graphics, adding another layer of authenticity to his films (Parhizkar, 2024).

A biopic drama like *Oppenheimer* would usually not be regarded as a blockbuster in the modern Hollywood environment. In recent years the term “blockbuster” has been used to describe high-budget commercialized franchises with mass appeal. They have been a large part of the Hollywood ecosystem, earning the studios massive amounts of money and being heavily marketed to create anticipation among the audience (Acland, 2020). Due to the blockbusters being seen as a safe investment by the film studios reboots, sequels, and adaptations have dominated the movie theatres at the expense of more artistic and personal films (Parhizkar, 2024).

However, the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 radically changed the film environment by shutting down movie theatres around the globe. It exposed the vulnerabilities of the Hollywood system that relied on releasing a few high-budget movies in a year and “disrupted the traditional blockbuster cycle, leading studios to reassess their release strategies and investment priorities” (Parhizkar, 2024, p. 24). The closure of the movie theatres drove movie consumers toward online streaming services, massively shifting their preferences (Yaqoub et al., 2024) and giving these digital platforms a massive push in their competition with the traditional theatre-centred movie culture. The blockbusters ceased to be the magical money-earning machines and the conventional formula of throwing massive investment into the production and marketing of a blockbuster no longer guarantees a high box office (Parhizkar, 2024).

Oppenheimer was set to release on the 21st of July 2023, the same day as the release of another highly anticipated movie *Barbie* by Warnes Bros and the director Greta Gerwig. The expectation was that the two contrasting movies would attract different audiences, with *Barbie* being a light-hearted comedy with a strong appeal to women, while *Oppenheimer* with its darker tone and focus on the life of the male protagonist would have a higher viewership from men. It is a commonly employed tactic by the Hollywood studios, known as “counterprogramming” (Miller, 2023). Successful cases of counterprogramming in prior years include the comedy-drama film *About a Boy* releasing in the United States only one day after the highly-anticipated *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (Fonseca, 2002). Another example of successful counterprogramming was the simultaneous releases of *Mamma Mia!* and *The Dark Knight* in 2008, ironically with the latter being also directed by Christopher Nolan (Parhizkar, 2024).

However, instead of dividing the audiences among the two upcoming movies, this unusual release pairing resulted in the formation of the cultural phenomenon known as *Barbenheimer*. The main reason *Barbenheimer* became so prominent on social media was the striking contrast between the styles and tones of *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie*. The dichotomy between the two movies ignited passionate discussions and a wave of memes on social media. “While *Barbie* challenged societal norms by foregrounding feminist perspectives and questioning gender roles, and yet still being rooted in the promotion of well-known branded intellectual property (e.g., IP), *Oppenheimer* obeyed the old Hollywood biopics, focusing on dominant male figures and historical narratives” (Parhizkar, 2024, p. 3). Users were amused by the juxtaposition of the two different movies releasing on the same day and would highlight it through irony and humour, creating user-generated content and memes about *Barbenheimer*

in high quantities long before the release. Miller (2023) remarks that the *Barbenheimer* phenomenon came from the habit of social media users to “memeify” everything, in this case, “poking fun at the idea of both movies together”. As a result, *Barbenheimer* went from a competition between the two movies to becoming a “double-feature event”, with the moviegoers planning out how they should watch both movies and even the actors of both films sharing themselves going to watch the other movie in the theatre (Miller, 2023).

The combination of the two movies and the *Barbenheimer* phenomenon on social media ended up strongly contributing to the unofficial marketing of both movies and possibly resulting in a better box office for each film than they would have gotten on their own. The discourse around *Barbenheimer* strayed away from pitting the films against each other and viewed the movies as if they were connected (Mitchell et al., 2024). According to Parhizkar (2024), the enormous surge in popularity was generated by wildly spreading Internet memes and the buzz about *Barbenheimer* on social media. This created a massive and organic online discourse around both movies, forming an “unprecedented cultural moment” and “revitalizing post-pandemic Hollywood and movie theaters” (p. 25). Notably, the release of *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* marked the highest-grossing weekend in movie theatres since the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching 302 million dollars worldwide. Parhizkar (2024) views both *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie* as “exemplars of contemporary blockbuster”, offering different visions of what a high-profile, successful blockbuster can be.

1.2. Contemporary Digital Environment

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) define “social media” as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” Social media have come to dominate the modern digital landscape, enabling billions of people around the world to interact with each other by creating and sharing content (Luca, 2015). Ang (2011) defines the “four major pillars” of social media, those being *connectivity*, *conversation*, *content creation*, and *collaboration*. *Connectivity* refers to the ability of users to connect with each other in the form of “subscribing” or “friending” others. *Conversation* describes the dialogues that take place on social media through posts and comments. *Content creation* represents the tendency for social media users to connect with each other by creating and disseminating user-generated content around the platforms. Finally, *collaboration* describes the ability to co-create projects together

with other social media users, for example, online wikis about a specific subject being written by many participants.

The spread of social media has not just enabled users to create content but also allowed it to be widely available, mostly removing the constraints of editorship for user-generated content (Barbosa dos Santos, 2021). A novel feature of social media in comparison to traditional media is that the platform's end-users serve as both contributors and consumers of content. This results in the amount and value of content on a given social media platform being dependent on the total amount of its users (Luca, 2015). Additionally, according to Howell (2019), on social media the creator of content cannot be certain who is going to be the audience of their creation due to how social media operates and the ability to share, comment, and like. This point is especially relevant with the widespread implementation of algorithms into social media platforms, which introduces users to new content primarily according to their interests and consumption patterns instead of their connections. According to Bowo et al. (2024), different social media platforms shape themselves to better facilitate specific types and genres of content. "Facebook facilitates connectivity and information exchange, Instagram focuses on self-visualization, while TikTok becomes a place for creativity through short videos" (Bowo et al., 2024, p. 193).

Currently, the dominant age demographic that defines the social media environment are members of Generation or Gen Z, young people born between 1997 and 2012. Generation Z has grown up during the rise and popularization of social media, adopting them and integrating into the digital environment from a young age. The preferences of content among Generation Z are defined by them being early adopters of social media, having easy access to it for most of their lives, and the diverse choice of content they have (Bowo et al., 2024). Attracting and maintaining the attention of Gen Z can be challenging for marketers due to their short attention spans and the habit of brushing off advertisements on social media (Agrawal et al., 2024).

Having spent most of their lives on social media, Generation Z are most adapted to the multitude of contexts needed to create and understand Internet memes. Studies show that after its members grew up to dominate social media the humour in memes had shifted toward being more absurd. Partlow & Talarczyk (2021) conclude that Internet memes featuring absurdist humour are perceived to be funnier by Generation Z members compared to memes with less absurdity. Bowo et al. (2024) identify three types of satisfaction that Gen Z users derive from creating and disseminating Internet memes. The first type comes from the humour of Internet memes and the ability to escape into the digital realm to be entertained. The second type of satisfaction comes from the ability to socialize and connect with other users. The third type of

satisfaction is informational, with Internet memes frequently serving not only as entertainment but also as sources of information for Gen Z users.

According to Almaghrabi (2023), “online communities refer to groups of people on social media who engage with one another based on similar interests” (p. 20). Online communities require their members to have something in common with each other, like a shared interest in a particular subject or phenomenon. They are sustained by their members constructing meaning about reality through shared experiences and practices (Almaghrabi, 2023). Circulation, reimagining, deletion, magnification, revisioning, translation, and remaking of cultural symbols are central to the process of communication and socialization in an online community (Coleman, 2010).

According to Rashid (2018), “the user-generated content can be regarded as an external resource which depicts perception, experience, context and social capital of the users” (p. 770). Social media provides online community members with the possibility of expressing their personal and collective identities and negotiating symbolic meaning by using digital content and participating in community rituals. The self-identity of an individual user is co-constructed through the creation and dissemination of an Internet meme within an online community (Almaghrabi, 2023).

1.3. Relationship Between Brands and User-Generated Content

Existing research struggles to provide an exact definition of what is a brand. Maurya & Mishra (2012) concluded that the term “brand” cannot be described in a few lines and changes depending on the cultural, social, economic, political, technological, and even geographical environment. They have identified twelve themes of brand definitions, including “brand as a logo”, “a company”, “an identity system”, “an image in consumer’s mind”, “a personality”, and “a relationship” (p. 128). According to Berthon et al. (2008), a brand cannot be fully controlled by the company that created it. Instead, they are partially independent from their creators, having “a life and meaning beyond” them. Consumers’ perceptions and attitudes toward a product, its identity, and the company that produced it are what differentiates a brand from an unbranded product. “In a real sense, brands are the collective possessions in the minds of multiple constituents” (p. 8)

When discussing the success of a brand, lots of importance is given to the level of its authenticity. *Brand authenticity* reflects the consumers’ subjective perception of its sincerity, credibility, heritage, traditions, standards, etc. (Almaghrabi, 2023). Brands with higher

perceived authenticity are more stable and tend to achieve higher cultural significance (Holt, 2004). This is especially relevant for companies who use social media to promote their brand because Internet users see authenticity as an important quality of social media content. Lack of authenticity is a major factor for why brand memes often fail to achieve resonance among social media users, being viewed as an opportunistic attempt to exploit an existing trend for profit (Almaghrabi, 2023; Csordas et al., 2017).

With the introduction and popularization of social media, a phenomenon known as “grassroots convergence” took place, defined by Jenkins (2006) as “the increasingly central roles that digitally empowered consumers play in shaping the production, distribution, and reception of media content” (p. 115). Grassroots convergence pushed consumers to demand a more active role in the value co-creation of the products they consume (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). One of the earlier occurrences of grassroots convergence Jenkins (2006) notes were fandoms on the Internet, quickly developing infrastructure and being able to mobilize and voice their opinions regarding the developments of their favourite TV shows (p. 141).

When marketers have only been making their initial attempts to disseminate corporate content using social media, they were met with users “hijacking” their messages and turning them against the brands for entertainment. Even though social media gave these companies an opportunity to be seen, the digital audiences now had a choice of what content to consume and they rejected the blatant advertisements (Fournier & Avery, 2011). These developments pushed corporations to shift their approach to product development from firm-centric to customer-centric, accepting the customers as co-creators of their products (Rashid, 2018).

Today Internet users actively contribute to brand culture, taking even more control from companies over their brands. In the age of social media, the identity of a brand is no longer carefully crafted by marketers, now formed through interactions between companies and their audiences online. Such open-source branding involves consumers themselves becoming the primary producers and disseminators of branded content, giving it more authenticity but at the same time leaving a risk of online communities giving new meanings to the brand, undesired by the company. (Almaghrabi, 2023; Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Co-creation is a completely voluntary activity that requires the consumer to be highly motivated “by dedicated incentives” to participate in it (Piller et al., 2012). One of the purposes for participating in brand culture for consumers is to construct and develop their identities and self-images. Another purpose is the possibility of socially bonding with other consumers of a brand on social media, as its content provides them with shared feelings (Almaghrabi, 2023).

To fulfill their desires for self-expression, Internet users co-create value by producing and sharing user-generated content that reflects their values, interests, and everyday experiences (Campbell, 2005).

The popularization of social media and the adoption of editing software has eased the process of content and brand parody creation. The emergence and wide availability of new technologies over the past decades have lowered the cost of production and empowered consumers to create their own user-generated content (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Jenkins, 2006, p. 149). According to Helms et al. (2012), user-generated content (UGC) “can be defined as simply all the media content created and produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals, excluding things as e-mail, instant messages and the republication of existing content” (p. 3). UGC is primarily distributed on the Internet, being the basis for all social media platforms. Social media exist by sourcing user-generated content from their own users (Luca, 2015). Most types of user-generated content are light-hearted, focusing on entertainment and humour (Daugherty, 2013).

Barbosa dos Santos (2021) proposes a different, expanded definition of user-generated content, one that “includes data created and publicized by users on digital environments that can be interpreted in a meaningful way by the same user or third parties, even though might have been collected or grouped together for analysis in absence of intention and/or awareness of the same user” (p. 106). Controversially, this definition includes not only major, intentional creations but even minor user interactions with other content: metadata, comments, “likes”, etc.

Users on social media come together to create and share content, services, and knowledge with each other (Almaghrabi, 2023). Daugherty (2013) recognizes four functions that the process of creating user-generated content serves. Firstly, the *utilitarian function* is based on self-interest, when the consumers create UGC in anticipation of gaining certain rewards. Second is the *knowledge function*, with users producing UGC to sense intrinsic wisdom by grasping the topic at hand, their environment, and themselves. The *value-expressive function* allows the creators to express themselves by creating and sharing content with an online community and to demonstrate their values and beliefs to others. Lastly, the *ego-defensive function* of creating UGC allows the users to “minimize their own self-doubts, feel a sense of belonging, and possibly reduce guilty feelings about not contributing” (p. 18).

On social media, every industry has been affected by the proliferation of user-generated content. Most types of media today attempt to incorporate or compete with UGC, often losing to users (Luca, 2015). Due to their recognizability and “cultural richness” brands provide a

good target for spoofing by social media users. Some brands have an inherently stronger parody potential, becoming punching bags for large numbers of users. However, often parodies do not mock the brand directly while producing positive effects in the form of brand awareness and emotional connection (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Existing research points to the strong potential of organic branded user-generated content as cheap and effective promotion, encouraging companies to stimulate consumers in its creation (Mayrhofer et al., 2019). Daugherty (2013) concludes that brand UGC and the development of digital relationships with consumers represent the future of marketing.

A special type of user-generated content regarding a brand are *consumer-generated advertisements* (CGA). Berthon et al. (2008) define CGA as a publicly available user-generated advertising message for a well-known brand. Consumer-generated advertisements “can vary from the modification of elements of a company’s advertising material (e.g. by distorting the meaning, the imagery, etc.) through the uploading of original variations on a theme of a company’s advertising material (e.g. humorous, subversive variations or spoofs)” (Csordas et al., 2017, p. 258). Based on interviews, Berthon et al. (2008) identified three main motivations for the creation of CGA: *intrinsic enjoyment*, *self-promotion*, and *changing perception*. *Intrinsic enjoyment* refers to deriving pleasure from artistry and the process of creation itself. *Self-promotion* involves the creators crafting an advertisement for their portfolio or to attract potential employers. Finally, sometimes CGA are made to *change opinions* of Internet users about something, often not related to the brand at hand. These three types are not mutually exclusive and can motivate a creator simultaneously.

Berthon et al. (2008) identify four distinct types of consumer-generated advertisements based on their attitude toward the product and whether the underlying message aligns with the original company message: *concordant*, *subversive*, *incongruous*, and *contrarian*. *Concordant* CGA use a positive or neutral attitude toward the brand and have their messages aligned with the brand. *Subversive* advertisements use the same style or messages as the original brand messages to mock and portray it in a negative light. The *incongruous* type of CGA has a dissonant messaging with the brand while the attitude itself is positive. On the other hand, *contrarian* ads subvert and change the original message and style to attach a negative meaning to a company or its product (Csordas et al., 2017; Berthon et al., 2008).

In addition to this, Berthon et al. (2008) have identified four possible response strategies that companies employ toward consumer-generated advertisements: *disapprove*, *repel*, *applaud*, and *facilitate*. While both strategies of *disapproving* and *repelling* involve a negative reaction from a company, the former implies a passive response or ignorance while the latter

involves the brand going after the CGA and its authors. When taking the *applaud* stance, a company reacts generally positively toward the advertisement but a relatively passive response with no overt actions. On the other hand, the strategy of *facilitating* involves actively helping the consumers to create and spread CGA, providing them with appropriate assets and software, and encouraging the users through competitions. Fournier & Avery (2011) suggest that the passive approaches toward consumer-generated advertisements tend to be the most popular among brands, posing fewer risks than overt actions and potentially leaving the brand looking better as a result. Active attempts to regulate consumer discussions can send users contradictory messages and damage the reputation of a brand, especially when the company is trying to suppress them (Jenkins, 2006, p. 147).

1.4. The Proliferation of Internet Memes

The term “meme” was first introduced by Dawkins (1976) as the basic units of cultural evolution and replicators of the human cultural environment (p. 206). Memes carry human culture in a similar way to how genes carry DNA, transmitting it to others through the process of communication. However, unlike genes, memes are not passed exclusively vertically, from parents to their children, but can spread across peer groups and do not require an entire generation to grow up to replicate. While memes themselves are just ideas, the “meme-carriers” through which they spread are physical: pictures, books, stories, data storages, etc. (Csordas et al., 2017). While the term had only been conceptualized and gained popularity by the end of the 20th century, memes themselves have existed as long as humanity itself. Memes themselves can span from being a simple phenomenon, like a song, melody, or even a single word, up to extensive “meme complexes” of knowledge, including ideologies and religions, wielding the power to shape beliefs, attitudes, and actions of social groups (Almaghrabi, 2023; Dawkins, 1976, p. 2012).

Like genes, memes go through the process of natural selection and competition with each other due to the limitations of the human mind and the contradictions two or more memes might have with each other, preventing them from co-existing in the same cultural environment. In the process of diffusion, memes adapt and transform to reach as many people as possible (Csordas et al., 2017). In the end, only memes that fit their sociocultural environment spread inside it successfully, while those that could not adapt become extinct. Therefore, a successful meme can be viewed as a representation of the culture in which it proliferates (Shifman, 2013).

However, today the commonly used term “meme” has shifted away from its original sociological scientific meaning toward representing *Internet memes*. While the traditional definition of memes is abstract and loose, Internet memes are a specific, more easily grasped phenomenon (Csordas et al., 2017). They can be defined as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). Additionally, while the science of memetics tends to focus on memes that are successful in the long term, Internet memes experience sudden success and high topicality but often quickly fade back into obscurity (Csordas et al., 2017).

Internet memes proliferate through being modified and shared by large numbers of users, forming the basis of social media culture. The process of creating an Internet meme involves borrowing and remixing content in order to create new variations of it. “Internet memes, by nature, do not exist in the same form permanently. Their meanings change as they travel through digital space whilst traversing individuals and communities. In addition to this, internet memes have a very short lifespan. By the time an internet meme has reached its peak, a new one is born” (Almaghrabi, 2023, p. 162). Remixing an Internet meme is a process of modifying its content by adding new meanings to it and then sharing the newly created meme with other users on social media (Shifman, 2013). In the case of Internet memes, modification is an essential characteristic that allows them to surpass the social and cultural boundaries of the original meaning, expanding and transforming the original idea (Csordas et al., 2017).

According to Bowo et al. (2024), Internet memes are a fundamental component of digital culture, becoming a tool for self-expression, communication, and identity formation for social media users. “Memes become a place to express creativity, allowing internet users to create unique and interesting works of art, music, or videos” (p. 191). Almaghrabi (2023) describes memes as the “currency of social media”. Due to the ease of modification and sharing, the ability to put complex meanings into an appealing humorous form, and allowing the users to interact with each other, Internet memes have become a core aspect of social media. “As oversimplified and exaggerated creations, Internet memes are authentic pieces of online culture. For being predominantly user-generated, it is hard to judge on the truth of the information they bear. Indeed, everyday users, creators are not bound by corporate rules, ethics or copyright laws, instead they can use any means they deem necessary for sending their own messages” (Csordas et al., 2017, p. 262).

The participatory culture of social media shifts the importance from the content of the meme itself toward “memeing” as a communal practice. The process of reinterpreting and

adapting a meme between different users became central and copies of a meme often become more prominent than the original (Almaghrabi, 2023). According to Bowo et al. (2024), the main qualities of memes that make them perfect for social media culture include *vulnerability to change*, referring to the ability of memes to be easily modified and adapted, and *ability to convey messages briefly and clearly*. Internet memes provide three distinct types of satisfaction to Generation Z consumers: entertainment, social, and informational.

Dawkins (1976) identified three main characteristics of a meme that can determine its success: *fidelity*, *fecundity*, and *longevity* (p. 208). *Fidelity* refers to the capacity of memes to be replicated and spread through high memorability. *Fecundity* refers to the speed at which a meme is spreading between individuals. Lastly, *longevity* describes the resilience of a meme and its capacity to survive for a longer period of time (Almaghrabi, 2023; Bowo et al., 2024).

The most important aspect of a meme that allows it to capture the minds of so many people is humour. Successful implementation of humour in an Internet meme provokes positive emotional responses from users, improving the memorability and likelihood of sharing (Sharma, 2018). “Humor, as a key ingredient in memes, proves itself to be a major factor in attracting attention and creating an appeal that allows sharing and memory. Previous research has emphasized the importance of humor in memes as the fulfillment of social needs, such as connection, cohesion, and entertainment” (Bowo et al., 2024, p. 196). According to Knobel & Lankshear (2007), the *fecundity* of an Internet meme depends on the elements of humour within the meme, references to topical real-life events, and unusual juxtaposition of images. According to Teng et al. (2021), the four qualities that positively affect the rate of transmission of an Internet meme by a brand are *humour*, *high emotional intensity*, *ease of understanding*, and *brand prestige*.

Catanescu & Tom (2001) identified seven distinct types of humour: *comparison*, *personification*, *exaggeration*, *pun*, *sarcasm*, *silliness*, and *surprise*. *Comparison* involves putting together or juxtaposing two or more elements to produce a humorous situation. The *personification* type provides animals, inanimate objects, or abstract concepts with human-like characteristics to produce comedy. *Exaggeration* hyperbolizes something to absurd and comedic proportions. *Pun* uses language in an uncommon manner to create new humorous meanings. *Sarcasm* communicates a blatantly ironic response to a situation. *Silliness* portrays funny facial expressions and gestures in response to a ludicrous situation. Lastly, the *surprise* type generates comedy through unexpected elements and resolutions (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015).

According to Martin et al. (2003), there are four major styles of humour: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating. *Affiliative* humour is used to enhance relationships with others using comedic remarks, jokes, and witty conversations. “This is an essentially non-hostile, tolerant use of humor that is affirming of self and others and presumably enhances interpersonal cohesiveness and attraction” (p. 53). *Self-enhancing* humour portrays a positive outlook on life in the face of adversities, used as a defensive mechanism to avoid negative emotions. Unlike the previous two, *aggressive* humour is impulsive, meanspirited, and negative. It includes sarcasm, ridicule, putting others down, and might hurt and alienate the subject of the joke. Lastly, *self-defeating* humour is also negative but directed inward. It is often used to make jokes at the expense of the author, becoming the “butt” of the joke and making others laugh (Agrawal et al., 2024).

According to the content analysis research of Indian Instagram memes about food delivery brands by Agrawal et al. (2024), user-generated brand-related memes predominantly utilized the *aggressive* style of humour, accounting for more than a half of the analysed memes. This humour is used to express negative emotions, criticism, and mock the brands for their failures. At the same time, 45% of user-generated memes utilized the *sarcasm* type of humour, primarily used for criticising and drawing attention to certain issues using irony.

According to Armelini & Villanueva (2010), digital content, including Internet memes, can be divided into three categories: *organic*, *amplified*, and *exogenous*. *Amplified* memes are created by corporations and organizations that seek to utilize already existing memes and modify them to serve their interests. The audience may accept the usage of an Internet meme by an organization, however, often this may be perceived as cynical, facing disapproval and rejection by the target audience. Unlike *amplified*, *exogenous* memes are explicitly created and distributed by the organization from the ground up. This kind of content is less likely to generate backlash but is more costly and is not guaranteed to yield results for the company. *Organic* memes are the most widespread and influential form of Internet memes on social media. They reflect actual experiences and values of Internet users and are created voluntarily (Csordas et al, 2017).

According to Deus et al. (2022), Internet memes can be seen as cultural texts, which hold the values and beliefs of their creators. Therefore, the creation and remixing of memes by an online community can reveal its habits, experiences, beliefs, and customs, providing an insight into its constructed reality. Within an online community, the creation and dissemination of Internet memes serve to establish discursive norms and boundaries, rituals, narratives, and values that form its collective identity. Memes can only survive through social interaction as

they are an inherently social phenomenon. This makes them an important factor in the dynamic of an online community and the construction of collective identities of its members (Almaghrabi, 2023; Miltner, 2014). While researching how online communities, Almaghrabi (2023) found that their members tend to mock the idea “that internet memes can even become viral without the community”, concluding that Internet memes can only spread “by the power of the community” (p. 117)

The motivation behind the creation of Internet memes can be the users’ desire to respond to social and cultural phenomena in a humorous, ironic manner. This allows them to express their opinions and beliefs through the medium of memes, possibly even leading to changes. While Internet memes are light-hearted and use humour, they can shed light on bigger problems and offer solutions to the existing problems they satirize (Almaghrabi, 2023). Memes use images and texts to express personal and communal thoughts, values, desires, and concerns of Internet users, wrapped in an appealing form. Memes serve as “authentic representations of the creators’ feelings” (Csordas et al., 2017).

As the production of Internet memes is a creative task, it can be viewed through the lens of seven basic motivations for undertaking creative tasks by Dahl and Moreau (2007). *Competence* refers to the satisfaction that the creator derives from completing a creative task. *Autonomy* describes the ability of the creator to personally choose what projects to work on. *Learning* is the desire to acquire or improve skills needed to complete the task. *Engagement and relaxation* refers to the anticipated enjoyment from the process of creating itself. *Self-identity* is the desire to improve the perception of self as a creative person. *Public sense of accomplishment* describes the expected recognition from others for the creator’s achievements. Lastly, *community* is the desire to share your creativity with those who have a similar interest. Other researchers reinforce the relevance of these motivations to the creation of Internet memes specifically by pointing out that they are a tool for self-expression, sense-making, and communicating with other users, especially after the pandemic (Almaghrabi, 2023).

“Memes today may require significant context and knowledge of obscure events to understand the joke, and others are downright incomprehensible” (Parlow, 2021). Because the creation and diffusion of Internet memes is a social practice, they have to be understood within the contexts and discourses in which they were produced. Furthermore, memes are fluid, flowing into each other and even leaking into everyday life, requiring the users to be even more familiar with their contexts (Almaghrabi, 2023). Grundlingh (2017) argues that to be understood Internet memes strongly rely on the context in which they exist due to functioning as speech acts in the digital environment. They do not exist in a vacuum and are synthesized

out of a multitude of discourses, phenomena, events, interests, and experiences (Milner, 2013). Another popular practice among Internet users is “memeification” of the reality around them. “The process of taking a normal or even serious media event and ‘memifying’ it by adding humorous edits or content is not uncommon in the online world, especially on social media” (Miller, 2023, p.13).

1.5. Dynamic Between Memes and Marketing

In recent years social media has become an appealing tool for marketers due to its ease of usage, low cost, instantaneous communication, and large pool of users who could potentially see their message (Sajid, 2016). Memes have proven to reach more users and achieve more organic interactions on social media in comparison to more traditional marketing practices (Agrawal et al., 2024). As brands started to follow their audiences to social media, they have set their eyes on Internet memes as a potential tool for marketing activities. Similarly to celebrities, memes are easily recognizable by wide audiences, making them prospective advertising materials (Csordas, 2017). “The success of memes in marketing can be explained through several key factors, such as the ability of memes to be easily understood, the alluring power of infection, the alignment of memes with the culture and target audience, and the ability of memes to stimulate brain areas related to emotions and rewards” (Bowo et al., 2024, p. 196).

Corporate memes usually try to capitalize on trends and relevant events using simple language and familiar themes. Researchers warn brands to minimize controversy and avoid controversial topics in their memes. When used in an appropriate manner, memes can provide value to customers in the form of entertainment and information while giving brand exposure to Internet users. If a corporate meme reaches virality, the brand’s top-of-the-mind awareness increases, positively affecting the brand recall rate (Bowo et al., 2024; Almaghrabi, 2023). Internet memes have a symbolic value that prompts users to repeatedly view and share them with others. As a result, when a brand is the subject of a meme, more consumers are exposed to it, forming positive emotional associations and improving the brand image (Teng et al., 2021). Even subversive user-generated content that utilizes brand memes can lead to the further dissemination of advertising messages, achieving cultural resonance (Jenkins, 2006, p. 148). “The success of memes in grabbing attention, increasing understanding, creating positive experiences, deepening marketing communications, and increasing social contagion makes them valuable instruments in consumer-oriented marketing strategies” (Bowo et al., 2024, p. 198).

Agrawal et al. (2024) identify four major meme content dimensions that describe the types of appeal a brand-related meme can have: *emotional*, *informational*, *entertainment*, and *creative*. *Emotional* appeal aims to elicit a specific set of emotions, emphasizing psychological or social needs of the users without describing the product in detail. *Informational* appeal emphasizes details about and practical advantages of using the brand. *Entertainment* appeal provides fun, enjoyable, and refreshing experience to the user, while attracting the user's attention to the product. Lastly, *creative* appeal uses unconventional elements and novel approaches to demonstrate the product to the customers. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive, and one meme can combine several appeals simultaneously. Agrawal et al. (2024) apply the meme content dimensions toward both brand-generated and user-generated memes.

However, while Internet memes have a high potential to increase brand awareness, recall, and image, companies face a number of challenges when trying to utilize them. Frequently corporate Internet memes are rejected by social media users because of their perceived inauthenticity, negatively affecting the public image of the company (Paris, 2022). Unlike brand-generated memes which focus on spreading the company message, user-generated memes about brands contain experiences of their creators with the product, often in the form of satire or parody. If negative, it might harm the brand image (Agrawal et al., 2024). Authenticity is an important criterion for consumers when evaluating content on social media, especially brand content. When online communities perceive that a company pretends to be a community member only for profit, they reject these attempts and mock the organization (Almaghrabi, 2023).

Social media users interpret Internet memes as a “mocking mirror of society” and an authentic counterpart to top-down advertising messages from corporations. This led to the authentic grassroots nature of user-generated content being established as the norm in the digital environment, making it difficult for meme marketing campaigns to catch on organically and be accepted by consumers (Csordas et al., 2017). In the digital world, much of the brand-made content is perceived as inauthentic, ingenuine, and out of place (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Almaghrabi (2023) concludes that when a meme is adopted by corporations on the Internet it becomes “joyless”. Often when an Internet meme gets commercialized by brands on social media, ordinary users lose interest and stop remixing and sharing it with others. The meme loses its organicity and authenticity, eventually rendering it dead and soon forgotten. Some users engage in the creation and dissemination of memes to escape corporate influence and do not appreciate it when corporations try to reach them on the Internet using the same medium.

A major challenge for brand marketers is the inherent nature of social media that demands flexibility, adaptability, and opportunism to succeed, especially when in the realm of memes (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Internet memes can gain popularity and lose relevance extremely rapidly and require swift responses from the brand, making it difficult for rigid corporate marketing structures to keep up. Corporate memes rarely achieve success as part of marketing communication. When they do, it is through understanding their audience, high resource investments, and even blind luck, in some cases making meme marketing an unreliable investment (Csordas et al., 2017).

Another challenge for brands is their almost complete loss of control over the message after a meme is out. The content will travel from one user to another, changing its meaning through endless remixing until the initial message is unrecognizable. These transformed Internet memes become new authentic representations of how users perceive the brand, changing its identity as well. Potentially the new meaning may even contradict what the organization wanted to send, causing damage to their brand. At that point, the company will not be able to simply retract their meme and will have to live with its consequences (Almaghrabi, 2023; Csordas et al., 2017).

To succeed in the digital world in these circumstances, marketers need to focus on providing interesting content for consumers, carefully foster an online community, and improve their authenticity. One of the methods to make corporate memes more authentic, suggested by social media users themselves, is to hire genuine members of the online communities that the brands cater to (Almaghrabi, 2023). Corporations need to acquire a deep understanding of the meme culture in which they operate and use memes that are relevant to their audiences. This will allow them to be accepted and build relevant relationships with their consumers on social media (Bowo et al., 2024). “It is evident, through findings, that users are able to detect an internet meme being used or interpreted in an incorrect manner, which usually results in rejection and ridicule” (Almaghrabi, 2023, p. 197).

The new goal of branding on social media is to provide symbolic value to consumers instead of bandwagoning the already existing trends (Fournier & Avery, 2011). When the company acquires social and cultural capital to understand the online community and its target audience, it will be able to create Internet memes that provide symbolic value. Only then brand memes can be accepted by the users. On the other hand, brands that just latch onto online communities’ trends without contributing anything and opportunistically capitalize on current memes get rejected by these communities (Almaghrabi, 2023). Internet memes as part of a marketing communication strategy must be created with the focus on their symbolic value to

consumers, “to the point where they are mind-infected” (Teng et al., 2021). Another usage of memes in marketing, suggested by researchers, is monitoring Internet memes to analyze the audience, their perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. Memes serve as cultural representations of their creators and the online communities in which they are created, making them a viable research tool for marketers to find out how a brand is perceived by its consumers. Internet memes are an authentic, catchy, and accessible illustration of social media users’ opinions. (Csordas et al., 2017).

One of the more subtle tactics corporations might use on social media is known as *stealth marketing*. In an environment where anyone can be a user, stealth marketing involves making advertising content disguised as UGC, obscuring its real nature as a marketing tool. This approach is very controversial among social media users and in some cases even might be illegal, but the brand will only face consequences if discovered (Csordas et al., 2017; Luca, 2015). One of the biggest advantages of masking brand memes as user-generated is social media users perceiving them as organic and authentic representations of someone’s experiences and not analysing them as critically as they normally would scrutinize advertisements. Mayrhofer et al. (2019) conclude that when a brand is identified as the source of content, the audience’s coping mechanism is triggered, and users regard the content more skeptically. On the other hand, when branded content is seemingly posted by users, the persuasive effect is stronger without triggering resistance toward advertising.

2. RESEARCH OF THE IMPACT OF USER-GENERATED MEMES IN MARKETING OF THE FEATURE FILM ‘OPPENHEIMER’

With the phenomenon of user-generated memes’ influence on marketing, this research focuses on the content, humour, and shared qualities of user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie on Reddit. This particular social media platform was chosen for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, Reddit is one of the most popular social media platforms in the world, reportedly averaging 97 million users daily (Roush, 2024). Secondly, the platform houses a wide range of communities built around various topics and interests, providing access to a wide variety of user-generated content, including memes. Thirdly, Reddit conveniently stores all content posted on the platform over the years, providing the tools to locate memes about *Oppenheimer*, that were not posted recently, through its search bar and multiple filters.

2.1. Research Aim and Objectives

Research Aim. This study aims to analyze the most popular user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie to determine what humour styles and types were most prominent and what the shared themes of the memes were.

Research Objectives:

1. To select a sample of popular Reddit memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie from before and during the film’s presence in movie theatres.
2. To analyse the content of the selected memes and determine what styles and types of humour are used.
3. To identify the common themes of the popular user-generated memes about *Oppenheimer*.
4. To analyze and discuss the findings using relevant scientific literature and draw conclusions about how user-generated memes influenced the success of *Oppenheimer*.

2.2. Research Methodology

To achieve its aim and objectives, this study employs qualitative content analysis, defined by Hsieh & Shannon (2005) as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Originally developed as a method of analysing written and spoken texts, content analysis can be used to analyse visual artifacts as well. Every decision

during content analysis involves the researcher making decisions about significance and meaning (Rose, 2016, p. 85). In contrast to quantitative methods which involve rigid classification and measurement, qualitative content analysis focuses on uncovering the details and depth of the text. The unit of analysis used are themes that can be expressed in any amount of text. This method explores the patterns between images, common themes and categories, and the underlying social reality behind the object of research (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009; Forman & Damschroder, 2008).

According to Zhang & Wildemuth (2009), the first step of qualitative content analysis is the preparation of data. Generally, when using the content analysis method, the sample size depends on the level of variation between images. When the variation is high, the sample size should include examples from the extremes (Rose, 2016, p. 91). At the same time, qualitative content analysis is purposeful and takes a close examination of smaller samples (Forman & Damschroder, 2008). While quantitative methods require an element of randomness when creating a sample, qualitative content analysis “consists of purposefully selected texts” that support the question of the research (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

The next step after choosing the set of images is developing a coding scheme for the content analysis, coming up with a number of clearly defined categories that can be attached to describe the images (Rose, 2016, p. 92). In qualitative content analysis, the researcher categorizes raw images into themes based on inference and interpretation. While it is recommended to make the categories distinct from each other, qualitative content analysis does not exclude the possibility of an image combining two themes simultaneously. Additionally, the process tends to be inductive, deriving the categories from the artifacts at hand. However, the qualitative method does not exclude deductive coding either, allowing the research to borrow categories from prior research or combining inductive and deductive reasoning (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

“The application of any set of coding categories must be careful and systematic. Each image must be carefully examined and all the relevant codes attached to it.” (Rose, 2016, p. 96). Due to qualitative content analysis being at least in part inductive, the process of coding itself takes place simultaneously with the development of the coding scheme. While it is possible to use inductive or deductive approaches exclusively, qualitative content analysis most often combines the two approaches, using previously identified deductive codes to analyse the data while extracting new inductive codes in the process (Forman & Damschroder, 2008).

The last step of content analysis is to draw conclusions from the coded data and report the findings of the research. The quantitative approach involves counting the codes to produce

statistical data, but a more nuanced analysis can be performed by exploring dynamics between different categories of codes. One of the weaknesses of the quantitative method is the hyperfocus on the number of occurrences, potentially assigning it too much importance (Rose, 2016, p. 98). Qualitative content analysis avoids this pitfall by instead paying attention to unique themes that demonstrate the set of meanings within the images (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

2.3. Research Design

This study employs qualitative content analysis of 33 user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie on Reddit. The memes were selected by searching up the term “Oppenheimer” on the platform’s search bar and sorting the posts by top of all time. The search produced a few hundred Reddit posts, sorted by how many “upvote” interactions they have received, mixing together all sorts of content about the *Oppenheimer* film and J. Robert Oppenheimer as a historical figure. Then the memes were manually separated from all posts. The criteria for separation included: (1) the visual format (an image or a video potentially accompanied by text); (2) the *Oppenheimer* movie being the main subject or one of the main subjects of a post; (3) the intentional humorous nature of a post. To be chosen for analysis the memes had to be published between July 28, 2022, and October 1, 2023, starting with the release of the first teaser trailer and ending with *Oppenheimer* leaving most movie theatres. During this timeframe, Internet memes had the most potential to influence the users into seeing the film. Additionally, memes about J. Robert Oppenheimer as a real-life figure would also be included if they were published during this time period because they were either influenced by the movie or would contribute to the cultural discussion about it.

The qualitative content analysis of the Reddit memes about *Oppenheimer* combines deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive coding schemes are composed of types and styles of humour, drawing on the prior research into user-generated brand-related memes on Instagram by Agrawal et al. (2024). According to Catanescu & Tom (2001), types of humour include *comparison*, *personification*, *exaggeration*, *pun*, *sarcasm*, *silliness*, and *surprise*. Martin et al. (2003) identify four major styles of humour: *affiliative*, *self-enhancing*, *aggressive*, and *self-defeating*. At the same time, new themes were identified inductively, through close reading of the user-generated memes about *Oppenheimer*.

This study explores the following questions:

RQ1: What styles and types of humour were prevalent in user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie?

RQ2: What are the major themes within user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie?

2.4. Analysis of the Findings

After conducting the qualitative content analysis, the selected sample of 33 user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie was categorized according to the deductive coding schemes of humour type and style. The types of humour were not mutually exclusive, and the majority of memes were found to utilize multiple types simultaneously, *sarcasm* and *silliness* being the most widespread among them. On the other hand, Martin et al. (2003) describe the four styles of humour as “mutually exclusive”, so each meme falls into one distinct category. Almost all of the analysed user-generated memes used *affiliative* or *aggressive* styles of humour, those types being directed outward, toward other people, objects, or phenomena. At the same time, the inwardly-directed *self-enhancing* and especially *self-defeating* types of humour were not prevalent and were found to be used sparingly.

Inductively, the qualitative content analysis identified seven major themes, present in the user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie on Reddit. These major themes are the following: *absurdity*, *satire of movie clichés*, *controversial humour*, *making fun of Oppenheimer’s moral dilemma*, *high intertextuality*, *achievements of the movie*, and *connection to the Barbie movie*. The themes are not mutually exclusive and almost every meme was found to feature several themes simultaneously.

Types of Humour. The most prevalent style of humour within the analysed sample was found to be *sarcasm*. The *sarcasm* type describes blatant sarcastic or ironic statements and responses, communicating a message that is different or opposite to the sender’s real intention for comedic purposes (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). The content analysis identified that *sarcasm* is used in 24 out of 33 user-generated memes about the movie. Most of these memes were highly ironic, utilizing absurdist humour to satirize overused movie lines or modern cinema clichés, mocking J. Robert Oppenheimer for creating a weapon of mass destruction, and referencing other memes to generate humour based on intertextuality and the audience’s prior knowledge. A prime example of a meme using the *sarcasm* type of humour is the meme about Albert Einstein having a post-credit scene in the movie (see Annex 1). The user in the meme ironically suggests that a serious movie like *Oppenheimer*, a grounded biographical drama film about a real person, will feature a post-credit scene, teasing an entire movie franchise. Moreover, the phrase “EINSTEIN WILL RETURN” is a direct reference to

the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), the superhero movie franchise that had successfully dominated the movie industry throughout the 2010s.

The second most frequently encountered type of humour was *silliness*, deriving comedy from funny reactions to absurd situations (Agrawal et al., 2024). It was identified within 17 out of 33 memes, with 10 of them combining *silliness* with *sarcasm*. The *silliness* type is primarily used to portray the reactions of users toward the various achievements of the *Oppenheimer* movie, including the box office success and special effects, and to mockingly portray how Oppenheimer reacted to learning about how his invention was used. An example of this type of humour being used is a meme comparing *Oppenheimer*'s commercial success to other movies of 2023 (see Annex 2). It utilizes a popular meme format where each movie is portrayed as a child in a pool, either having fun or drowning, depending on its success. While *Barbie* is shown to receive lots of attention from “literally everyone”, the *Oppenheimer* movie is depicted drowning with an uncomfortable facial expression. At the same time, the rest of the movies are embodied as a drowned skeleton, sitting at the bottom of the pool.

The fourth most popular type of humour utilized by the user-generated memes about *Oppenheimer* on Reddit was *comparison*. This type juxtaposes two or more elements with each other to create a humorous situation (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Nine of the thirty-three memes were identified to use *comparison*. The previously described meme about the success of *Oppenheimer* compared to other movies serves as a clear example of *comparison*, in addition to *silliness* (see Annex 2). Another apparent example of the *comparison* type is a video depicting a woman applying her make-up when the whole room starts shaking, captioned “audience members watching Barbie when the Oppenheimer IMAX showing across the hall finally gets to the nuclear explosion scene” (see Annex 3). The humour stems from juxtaposing the experiences of watching *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*.

The *exaggeration* type of humour was identified within ten of the most popular Reddit memes about *Oppenheimer*. *Exaggeration* involves “overstating and magnifying something out of proportion to reality” (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 291). The meme comparing the experiences of going to see *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* in the cinema serves as an example of *exaggeration*, amping up the impact of the nuclear explosion in IMAX to an absurd degree for comedic purposes (see Annex 3). A different example of *exaggeration* is another Reddit meme about a hypothetical “post-credit scene”, this time describing J. Robert Oppenheimer facing Thanos from the Marvel Cinematic Universe in a rap battle (see Annex 4). In this case, in addition to satirizing modern blockbusters, the meme references the extremely popular YouTube parody video series *Epic Rap Battles of History* (Know Your

Meme, 2018). Interestingly, every instance of the *exaggeration* type of humour was identified to be used together with *sarcasm*, combining the two types to make up humorous, exaggerated, and extremely unlikely scenarios.

Five out of the thirty-three selected memes contained the *pun* type of humour. *Pun* humour uses vocabulary and grammar in an unusual way or breaks linguistic conventions to create new humorous meanings. With the exception of one, all instances of *pun* humour among the selected memes were combined with *sarcasm* as well, using bizarre linguistic constructions to make up absurd scenarios and scenes within the *Oppenheimer* movie. As an example, one of the memes shows an article on Twitter about early audiences of *Oppenheimer* leaving the movie theatre devastated and a humorous response to it (see Annex 5). The user makes fun of J. Robert Oppenheimer, sarcastically writing “my le bomb... le killed people?”. The *pun* aspect comes from the usage of the French article “le”, typically unused in the English language. The humorous usage of “le” with different words has been an Internet meme since as early as 2003, creating comedy by breaking linguistic conventions (Know Your Meme, 2020).

The *personification* type of humour was found to be relatively rare among the most popular user-generated memes about *Oppenheimer*, found within only four out of thirty-three. *Personification* describes giving human-like attributes to animals, inanimate objects, and phenomena for comedic effect (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). All four instances of this type were found within those memes that contrasted the success of *Oppenheimer* to other movies that came out on a similar date, combining *personification* with *comparison*. One of the examples is the previously discussed meme about movies as children in the pool (see Annex 2), personifying *Oppenheimer* and other films as living beings. Another example would be the image that personifies *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* as Batman and Iron Man, both throwing money at each other, while *Sound of Freedom*, a film that came out while *Barbenheimer* was still dominating the movie theatres, is portrayed as Spider-Man picking up that money from the ground.

Finally, the least encountered type of humour within the analysed *Oppenheimer* memes is *surprise*, found only within three out of thirty-three artifacts. *Surprise* humour arises from unexpected resolutions to the setup of the joke. All three instances of *surprise* humour were tonally dark and controversial, delivering a sudden punchline that relates to the victims of Oppenheimer’s invention. For example, one of the memes features a photo of J. Robert Oppenheimer with a distressed facial expression, and the setup of the joke is framed as an “interesting detail” about the movie, asking why the man always looks so miserable (see Annex 7). The explanation, however, is very blatant and vulgar, informing the reader that “this is

probably due to the fact he built f*cking bombs that killed thousands of people”. The humour arises from the unexpectedly sharp and aggressive delivery, combined with the usage of *anti-humour*, delivering the correct explanation for Oppenheimer’s sombre mood when the reader expects a joke.

Styles of Humour. The most prevalent humour style used by the meme creators was *affiliative*, appearing in 18 out of 33 artifacts. *Affiliative* humour includes playful non-hostile banter, friendly jokes, and aims to improve relationships with others and reduce tensions, “affirming of self and others”. It may involve subtle teasing or poking fun at others but does not explicitly portray the subject of the joke in a negative or mocking light (Martin et al., 2003). Memes about *Oppenheimer* in the *affiliative* style are generally positive toward the movie, some implicitly praising the movie through humour. An example of an *affiliative* meme that is positive toward the movie is the one that depicts a Twitter user’s reaction to the news that Christopher Nolan did not use computer-generated imagery to create the nuclear explosion, to which the user exclaims “THE NUKE IS REAL?!” (see Annex 8). While the type of humour here is *sarcasm*, it is used not to make fun of the director or his methods but to exaggerate the usage of practical effects to an absurd extent, implicitly praising Nolan for using practical effects in the first place. Other examples of *affiliative*-style humour include the memes that apply movie clichés to *Oppenheimer* to satirize them without explicit aggression (see Annexes 1,4) and memes that compare the success of *Oppenheimer* to other movies in a positive light (see Annex 6).

The second most used style of humour was the *aggressive* style. *Aggressive* is the opposite to *affiliative*, ridiculing, disparaging, putting down, or mocking the subject of the joke. *Aggressive*-style humour does not take the possible consequences on others into account, making the joke at their expense (Martin et al., 2003). In the case of the most popular Reddit user-generated memes about *Oppenheimer*, the *aggressive* style was identified in 11 out of 33 artifacts of the research. While many of the memes that satirize movie clichés use *affiliative* humour, there are examples of memes taking a more negative approach. One such example was a screenshot, describing a fake *Oppenheimer* trailer made in the style of a summer comedy movie and filled with most of the genre’s biggest clichés, including an announcer describing the events of the movie with a pun, upbeat music playing in the background, and comedic dialogue with a moment of silence for audience laughter (see Annex 9). What makes this meme *aggressive* and not *affiliative* is, firstly, it explicitly juxtaposing the comedic tone with the tragedies caused by Oppenheimer’s research, making light of the deaths. Secondly, the meme

mocks Oppenheimer himself and his apparent inability to understand how inventing a bomb can lead to people dying.

However, while popular *aggressive*-style memes tended to have controversial humour, make fun of J. Robert Oppenheimer's short-sightedness, or attack other phenomena in the context of the movie, there was not a single case when they would attack the *Oppenheimer* film itself. In most cases the users utilized *aggressive* style to criticize or make fun of something other than the film, either making *Oppenheimer* look better in comparison or by simply increasing the exposure of other Reddit users to the movie.

The *self-enhancing* style of humour was used only in three artifacts from the whole sample. Unlike *affiliative* and *aggressive* styles, which were expressed outwardly, *self-enhancing* style is directed inwardly, toward the source of humour. It involves a humorous outlook on life itself, its circumstances and hardships, and a defensive mechanism against stress in the face of adversity (Martin et al., 2003). Each instance of *self-enhancing* humour uses the *sarcasm* type. As an example, the user-generated meme depicting an old woman sitting in her bedroom when suddenly an explosion happens behind her (see Annex 10). The image is captioned "trying to watch Barbie movie when the Oppenheimer screening is playing right next to me". In this meme, the creator puts themselves into an imaginary exaggerated situation without becoming the "butt of the joke".

The least utilized style of humour turned out to be *self-defeating*. According to Martin et al. (2003), *self-defeating* style attempts to produce comedy by making fun of the author, saying humorous things at your own expense, and laughing at yourself along with others. However, in the case of the most popular *Oppenheimer* memes on Reddit, only one of thirty-three artifacts was identified as having the *self-defeating* style. The meme uses a popular format of a terrified crying child running away from an orangutan riding on a bicycle (see Annex 11). The running girl represents the author of the meme watching *Oppenheimer* with his family, while the orangutan is captioned as "3 whole sex scenes" from the movie. This meme portrays the user's experience of viewing the film, along with others laughing at their discomfort. *Silliness* was identified to be the type of humour used, depicting the author as a scared child with a funny facial expression.

Major Themes. The most common major theme found within the selected sample of *Oppenheimer* memes on Reddit was the *absurdity* of the humour, encountered within 23 out of 33 memes. The majority of user-generated memes depicted nonsensical, illogical, or wildly exaggerated imaginary situations to the point of being surreal. This corresponds to the conclusion of the research by Partlow & Talarczyk (2021), which highlighted the popularity of

absurdist humour among the members of Generation Z. *Absurdity* theme was found to strongly intersect with the *sarcasm* type of humour, with creators using sarcastic or ironic remarks to make up humorous absurd scenarios. Only two of the user-generated memes that featured the *absurdist* theme did not combine it with any other six major themes. The first example was an image of a Tweet about *Oppenheimer* being Christopher Nolan's longest movie yet (see Annex 12). To describe the length of the film, the Tweet uses the phrase "it's kissing three hours" and the author of the Reddit post jokingly reinterprets it with a humorous caption, "OPPENHEIMER (2023) includes a 3 hours scene of Albert Einstein and Joe Oppenheimer kissing". The humour comes from an obviously absurd notion that such a scene could exist, and the types of humour of this meme were identified to be *pun*, *sarcasm*, and *exaggeration*.

The second *Oppenheimer* meme featuring only the *absurdist* theme is also a screenshot of an interaction on Twitter (see Annex 13). The first user interacts with a Tweet about Albert Einstein being in the *Oppenheimer* movie, asking an absurd question "what's his role?" as if Einstein is an actor in the movie, not a character and a historical figure. The second user replies with "hes Albert Einstein", providing a seemingly normal response that becomes absurd when viewed in the context of the entire interaction. The types of humour in this meme are *sarcasm* and *silliness* due to the second user's funny response to the dumb question and the overall illogicality of the question.

Another major theme that this research identified is *satire of movie clichés*, encountered in 7 out of 33 memes. This theme refers to those user-generated memes that were made to satirize overused tropes, clichéd lines, and modern movie trends by juxtaposing them with a more traditional biopic drama like *Oppenheimer*. *Satire of movie clichés* is directly linked to the *absurdity* theme, with all seven popular Reddit memes that feature this theme featuring *absurdity* as well. Multiple of the previously discussed memes serve as examples of this theme (see Annexes 1, 4, 9). Another example of satirizing recent movie tropes and the Marvel Cinematic Universe in particular is a meme describing an imaginary scene in *Oppenheimer* where Albert Einstein "steps out of shadows" at the end of the movie. He supposedly proclaims, "I'm here to talk to you about the Physicists Initiative", again making fun of an idea of an *Oppenheimer* movie franchise, referencing a line from *The Avengers* movie. The prevalence of this theme suggests that the users, tired of the same clichéd lines and tropes, are celebrating the more grounded and traditional approach of *Oppenheimer* to storytelling, demonstrating how dumb the modern movie trends are when placed into a serious movie.

The next major theme this research found within the popular Reddit memes is *controversial humour*, found in 10 out of 33 of the examined artifacts. While researchers recommend

corporations avoid controversy in their memes, the anonymous nature of the Internet allows users to avoid this constraint (Bowo et al., 2024; Agrawal et al., 2024). While the sensitive nature of the topic of *Oppenheimer* and the tragedies caused by nuclear weapons make any jokes about it at least slightly controversial, ten out of thirty-three most popular user-generated memes had explicitly used dark humour, made light of the deaths of Japanese citizens in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, used the tragedies as the basis for comedy, or at least used vulgar humour. The only meme that features the *controversial humour* theme without utilizing dark humour is an image stating, “Oppenheimer’s IMAX reel is reportedly over 11 miles long and weighs 600 pounds” but having the words “IMAX reel” replaced with “dick” (see Annex 14). The comedic aspect of this meme is vulgarity, but it does not reference the tragic events of the movie, making it the only meme that does not utilize dark humour in this category. On the other hand, an example of a controversial meme that explicitly makes light of the tragedy is an image of J. Robert Oppenheimer with the caption “Japan just banned Oppenheimer.. That’s fair though, I guess they already saw the movie” (see Annex 15). The types of humour used in this meme are *sarcasm* and *surprise* with the ending of the meme being sudden and unexpected. Some of the previously discussed Reddit memes have been categorized as featuring the *controversial humour* theme as well (see Annexes 5, 7, and 9).

The fourth major theme found within *Oppenheimer* memes on Reddit is *making fun of Oppenheimer’s moral dilemma*, encountered in 9 of the most popular memes about the movie. This theme proved to be popular among users with nine out of thirty-three artifacts from the sample. Memes about *Oppenheimer* from this category blatantly draw attention to the discrepancy between the actions of Oppenheimer and his later shock and regret over what his inventions have been used for. An illustrative example of this theme is the meme that depicts an utterly shocked man holding his head in disbelief with the caption, “Oppenheimer when the bomb that he designed specifically to murder millions murder millions”. Using the *sarcasm* and *silliness* types of humour, the meme makes fun of J. Robert Oppenheimer for his inability to realize that the bomb he is making for the military would be used by the military to kill people. This example features the *controversial humour* theme and utilizes the *aggressive* style of humour, like some of the previously discussed memes (see Annexes 5, 7, 9).

However, some of the popular user-generated memes about *Oppenheimer*, that featured the *making fun of Oppenheimer’s moral dilemma* theme, neither had *controversial humour*, nor used the *aggressive* style. These memes do not make J. Robert Oppenheimer “the butt of the joke” and do not base their humour on the deaths of civilians his inventions have caused. As an example, one of the memes depicts an edited image of Oppenheimer smiling with the caption

“Oppenheimer if he invented something fun like beyblade or a trampoline” (see Annex 17). This meme uses the *sarcasm*, *comparison*, and *silliness* types of humour to conceptualize an absurd positive situation and compare it to what happened in reality by showing how Oppenheimer would react positively if he invented a toy instead of a nuclear bomb. The style of humour here is *affiliative*, slightly poking fun at the protagonist instead of viciously mocking him as the previous examples of this category did.

The fifth major theme of the popular *Oppenheimer* memes is *high intertextuality*. This theme directly corresponds to the previous research which indicated that modern memes require knowledge of obscure events and understanding of the context, having to be understood within the discourse in which they were created (Partlow & Talarczyk, 2021; Almaghrabi, 2023). 15 out of 33, almost half of the analysed memes have been identified to feature the *high intertextuality* theme. To understand these memes a user would need to be familiar with the events, people, objects, and other memes that are referenced.

A striking example of a meme with *high intertextuality* is again an image of J. Robert Oppenheimer smiling, this time with the caption “Oppenheimer if he invented something fun like Shani Naan and Butt Chicken from Rajshahi Indian Restaurant” (see Annex 18). Rajshahi Indian Restaurant was a north Indian restaurant located in Australia, known for its meme advertisements on social media, using popular meme templates to promote itself and always making itself and its menu the punchline of every meme, similarly to how it was done in the example. Their absurd strategies have been noticed by Instagram meme pages in 2022 and the restaurant became a well-known meme on social media (Know Your Meme, 2023). To understand this meme the user would have to have encountered memes about Rajshahi Indian Restaurant before and know the context behind it. However, this post gathered more than thirteen thousand upvotes and became one of the most prominent memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie on Reddit. The types of humour were found to be *sarcasm*, *silliness*, and *comparison*, while the style of humour is *affiliative*.

The next major theme is *achievements of the movie*, referring to the accomplishments of *Oppenheimer* and Christopher Nolan as its director. 7 out of 33 most popular user-generated memes about the movie were found to feature this theme. They could be separated into two categories. The first category of the *achievements of the movie* memes are those that joke about the nuclear explosion scene in the movie being absurdly realistic and filmed using a real nuclear explosion. The examples of this category are the previously mentioned memes with the explosion behind an old woman, a woman being unable to put on her makeup because of an earthquake, and a Twitter user sarcastically exclaiming that the “nuke is real” (see Annexes 3,

8, 10). They use the *exaggeration* and *sarcasm* types of humour, *affiliative* style, and all share the *absurdity* theme. The second category of memes with the *achievements of the movie* theme are those that discuss the success of the movie at the box office. None of these memes feature the *absurdity* theme, instead relying on *personification*, *comparison*, and *silliness* types of humour to portray *Oppenheimer* and the movies it is being compared to as personified phenomena. Few of the previously described memes fit into this category (see Annex 2, 6).

The seventh and final major theme this study identified in the process of qualitative content analysis is *connection to the Barbie movie*, encountered in 7 out of 33 artifacts. Memes from this category discuss *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie* as if they are connected. This correlates with the prior research into the *Barbenheimer* as a cultural phenomenon on social media, when the juxtaposition of two tonally contrasting movies amalgamated in the minds of the audiences and became a “double-feature event”, with many users expressing their intentions to see both movies (Parhizkar, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2024; Miller, 2023). Interestingly, almost all instances of the *connection to the Barbie movie* theme exist alongside the *achievements of the movie* theme. This suggests that when describing the success of *Oppenheimer* users would associate it with the success of *Barbie* as well. The only *connection to the Barbie movie* meme in which *achievements of the movie* is not present is a screenshot of a Tweet in which a user ironically asks whether she will understand *Oppenheimer* if she has not seen *Barbie* first (see Annex 19). The type of humour used in this meme is *sarcasm*, asking a blatantly absurd question, and the style is *self-enhancing*, the user making herself the subject of the meme without disparaging herself.

2.5. Discussion of the Findings

This research aimed to analyze the content of the most popular user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie on Reddit to discover what types and styles of humour are most prevalent and find the common major themes inductively. With the analysis of the findings being complete, it is now important to view the findings through the lens of prior research and draw conclusions about how user-generated memes influenced the marketing of *Oppenheimer* and what this means for digital marketing as a whole.

Firstly, the findings of this research have revealed the popularity of absurdist humour in memes, being present within 23 out of 33 analysed most popular user-generated Reddit memes about the film. This revelation corresponds to the study by Partlow & Talarczyk (2021) which concluded that “absurdist humor does, in fact, influence humor rankings for Generation Z

students as compared to less absurd content” (p. 7). The majority of user-generated memes constructed blatantly surreal scenarios about the movie, its contents, the process of making the film, and J. Robert Oppenheimer’s reaction to how his invention was used. However, despite the memes inventing obviously fake scenes for the movie and even using *aggressive* humour to mock the main character, they did not negatively affect the commercial success of the movie. This can be explained by Jenkins (2006) who writes about the positives of the circulation of brand-related content on social media, when “even unauthorized and vaguely subversive appropriations can spread advertising messages” (p. 148). Therefore, even the subversive usage of the *Oppenheimer* brand by the popular memes serves to increase brand awareness and exposure to the film’s benefit.

Secondly, all of the analysed popular memes were either positive or neutral toward the *Oppenheimer* movie. When a brand-related meme manages to catch on with the users, the brand loses control over it. The meme then transcends the original target audience and reaches the wider public, now being exposed to new meaning-making and undergoing transformation (Csordas et al., 2017). Almaghrabi (2023) argues that on social media the processes of remixing and dissemination of a meme are so rapid they can undergo a number of fundamental changes and acquire a new meaning that could be unfavourable toward the brand. While this could pose a threat to a brand, the successful user-generated memes about *Oppenheimer* were never negative toward the film. Even the memes that used the *aggressive* style of humour were not making fun of the movie itself, only giving it more exposure.

On the other hand, many memes portrayed the movie as a film that users would want to watch. Firstly, through *sarcasm* and absurdist juxtaposition, *Oppenheimer* was shown as the opposite of the modern clichéd blockbuster. Prior research shows that after the COVID-19 pandemic and with the popularization of digital streaming services the tastes and consumption patterns of movie audiences have radically changed, moving further away from the high-budget blockbusters that dominated the movie industry for the last decade (Parhizkar, 2024; Acland, 2020). Therefore, by satirizing the clichés from popular blockbusters, *Oppenheimer* memes promised to give the audiences something different. Other memes spread the information about Christopher Nolan creating the film and prioritising the usage of practical effects over computer-generated graphics. Christopher Nolan is one of the most highly esteemed Hollywood directors, wielding a large fanbase and being known among wide audiences, and he is known for his commitment to practical effects to achieve the highest possible level of authenticity (Parhizkar, 2024). Therefore, these memes portrayed the movie in an even more favourable light, increasing not just *Oppenheimer*’s brand awareness but also its reputation.

Thirdly, this research confirmed the suggestions of prior studies about the importance of the *Barbenheimer* cultural phenomenon in promoting both movies. They have suggested that *Barbenheimer* emerged from discussing the humorous juxtaposition of *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* with their contrasting tones and evolved into the celebration of both movies, leading to higher box offices for each movie than they would have achieved individually (Parhizkar, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2023;). While this study did not explore how it affected the *Barbie* movie, the results have demonstrated that many of the memes about *Oppenheimer* featured the *connection to the Barbie movie* theme, framing the two movies as if they were somehow related. However, at the same this research focused on meme marketing in particular and the results demonstrated that only seven out of thirty-three most popular *Oppenheimer* memes on Reddit connected it to *Barbie*, demonstrating that while *Barbenheimer* was well-represented in memes, it might have been more prominent in other types of user-generated content.

Another finding of the research is that the persuasive strength of the memes about *Oppenheimer* lies in their organic nature, made and disseminated by regular users based on their experiences. According to Csordas et al. (2017), organic content is the most powerful type of content that constitutes the majority of social media content. Almaghrabi (2023) suggests that “the creation and consumption of internet memes is fundamentally concerned with organicity” because memes are created through the process of socialization and will lack authenticity if they are not organic. Authenticity is one of the most important aspects of social media culture while most brands seem inauthentic (Fournier & Avery, 2011). When interacting with a brand-generated post, users tend to view it as commercial, triggering coping mechanisms and making the audience process the brand content more critically (Mayrhofer et al., 2019). Because the most popular memes about *Oppenheimer* were organic, they have avoided most of the difficulties brand-generated memes face on social media. Organic *Oppenheimer* memes were accepted by online communities and their positive portrayal did not trigger the coping mechanisms, associated with brand content.

Because the memes about *Oppenheimer* were user-generated, they were able to utilize controversial topics and dark humour in their content, which would not have been permissible for brand-generated memes. Agrawal et al. (2024) conclude that brands try to avoid controversial topics by primarily using *affiliative* style and *silliness* type of humour. Bowo et al. (2024) recommend organizations to use familiar and easy-to-understand language while minimising controversy when creating “relevant memes”. While regular users can hide behind their anonymity, brands might be negatively affected by creating a controversy, therefore

Oppenheimer, a story about the inventor of nuclear weapons and the thousands of deaths that his invention caused, is not a great topic for brand-generated memes. A relevant example of how controversy can affect a brand is Warnes Bros, the studio behind *Barbie*, having to publicly apologise to the Japanese audience for interacting with the *Barbenheimer* phenomenon on Twitter. On the other hand, ten out of thirty-three memes examined in this research featured the *controversial humour* theme and nine of them built their humour on the tragedies caused by nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These posts have not received any effective backlash, instead becoming some of the most “upvoted” and shared *Oppenheimer* memes on Reddit, positively affecting brand awareness and exposure among wide audiences.

The last major revelation of this research is how many of the most popular memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie required the audience members to understand other, more niche memes and have knowledge about specific cultural phenomena. According to Almaghrabi (2023), as a social practice, Internet memes are created and understood only within the discourse around them. They are a layered and complex medium of communication that can be extremely specific to their context and sometimes even incomprehensible (Partlow & Talarczyk, 2021). While the importance of context to understand a meme has been known and discussed by researchers for years, this study demonstrates how popular can such memes be. Despite requiring their audiences to be more knowledgeable, the *high intertextuality* theme was found within 15 out of 33 most popular memes about *Oppenheimer* on Reddit. This suggests that, potentially, brands should not be afraid to lose audience by using more complex and intertextual memes when engaging in meme marketing.

CONCLUSIONS

Memes are a potentially strong marketing tool for brands, one that could foster a community around them and increase engagement with the advertising material. However, brands face a number of difficulties when trying to create and disseminate memes about their products, primarily because on social media users can choose what content to view and reject blatant advertisements. Therefore, the strong impact of user-generated memes on marketing and the success of the *Oppenheimer* movie was an interesting case of success. This success resulted from a combination of a multitude of factors, including the themes within, the humour styles, and the humour types that they have used.

The most prevalent type of humour by Martin et al. (2003), used by the most popular memes about *Oppenheimer* on Reddit turned out to be *sarcasm*, providing ironic or sarcastic responses and remarks to a situation, and used in 23 out of 33 artifacts. The *silliness* type was identified in 17 of the memes, 10 of which combined it with *sarcasm*. The *exaggeration* type of humour was found within 10 Reddit memes, each combining *exaggeration* with *sarcasm* to create exaggerated and absurd scenarios. The fourth most popular type of humour was *comparison*, used in 9 artifacts out of 33. The fifth most used type of humour was *pun*, involving humorous usage of linguistic constructions and being identified within five of the analysed artifacts. The personification type of humour was used in four of the memes, all of them comparing the success of *Oppenheimer* with other movies of the same year. Lastly, the least encountered type of humour turned out to be *surprise* with only three memes having a sudden unexpected punchline.

The most prevalent style of humour by Catanescu & Tom (2001) was found to be *affiliative* humour, used by 18 out of 33 memes about *Oppenheimer*. This type of humour was generally positive toward the movie and other subjects of the *affiliative* memes. At the same time, the second most encountered style of humour turned out to be the *aggressive* style, used in 11 of the examined memes. Unlike *affiliative*, this style of humour took a more negative approach and mocked the subjects of the memes with no regard for the consequences. However, *aggressive* memes have been found to never attack the *Oppenheimer* movie itself. The *self-enhancing* style of humour was used by only three memes, in each case in combination with the *sarcasm* type. Lastly, the *self-defeating* style was found within only one meme, using the *silliness* type of humour to make fun of the author of the meme and their uncomfortable experience of watching the *Oppenheimer* movie.

The qualitative content analysis identified seven major themes inductively, the most prevalent of them being the *absurdity* theme. *Absurdity* describes the user-generated memes, characterized by their reliance on nonsensical, illogical, or exaggerated scenarios, and was identified within 23 out of the 33 selected memes. The theme of the *satire of movie clichés* makes fun of the overused movie tropes and is encountered within 7 memes. The theme of *controversial humour* was found within those 10 popular *Oppenheimer* memes that build their joke on the tragedies caused by the nuclear bombs or that used vulgar humour. The major theme of *making fun of Oppenheimer's moral dilemma* was identified in 9 memes out of the sample of 33. It describes the memes that mock J. Robert Oppenheimer's inability to understand that his bombs will kill people, mostly using the *aggressive* style of humour. The theme of *high intertextuality* characterizes those popular user-generated *Oppenheimer* memes that require the user to know the subjects they reference. This theme was identified in almost half of the sample, 15 out of 33 memes. The sixth major theme is *achievements of the movie*, encountered within 7 Reddit memes. This theme is present in memes that highlight or exaggerate the successes of *Oppenheimer*, including the commercial success and practical effects used in the movie. Lastly, the final identified major theme is *connection to the Barbie movie*, present in memes that fall under the *Barbenheimer phenomenon*. This theme was found in 7 out of 33 most popular user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie on Reddit.

This research revealed that, firstly, the popularity of absurdist humour in modern memes and that absurdist humour did not affect the brand of *Oppenheimer* in a negative way while giving it more brand exposure. Secondly, the *Oppenheimer* memes were so effective partially because the most popular memes about the movie portrayed it in a positive light. It was positioned as opposite to clichéd blockbuster movies, a traditional biopic drama by the universally loved movie director. Thirdly, the *Barbenheimer* phenomenon was found to be one of the factors why the memes about *Oppenheimer* became so popular. The research showed that the organic nature of predominantly user-generated *Oppenheimer* memes allowed them to bypass the difficulties brand-generated memes usually face and removed the danger of controversy negatively affecting the brand. Lastly, a large amount of the popular *Oppenheimer* memes on Reddit require knowledge of the context, obscure memes, events, or phenomena. Despite that, they were able to succeed and become some of the most popular memes about the movie on the platform. This suggests that brands can utilise memes that require more knowledge to understand without fearing alienating the audience.

Limitations. This study is limited in its scope, examining a relatively small sample of 33 Internet memes, all taken from the same social media platform. It does not account for the

diversity of the different social media platforms and how the content is different on other platforms outside of Reddit. Additionally, the tactic of *stealth marketing* in some cases may be impossible to recognize, therefore some of the popular Reddit memes about *Oppenheimer* could secretly be created and disseminated by Universal Pictures or Warner Bros to create buzz around their movies.

Recommendations for Further Research. This study provides the results of a qualitative content analysis of the most popular user-generated memes about the *Oppenheimer* movie. The qualitative approach necessitated to focus the analysis on a relatively small sample of memes. Further studies may be conducted using quantitative designs to give more attention to the frequency codes on a larger sample. User-generated memes from other social media platforms can be analysed as well, the most popular being Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Finally, it would be interesting to how user-generated memes about a brand influence its marketing outside of the scope of just the *Oppenheimer* movie, focusing on different brands and products.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Acland, C. R. (2020). *American Blockbuster: Movies, Technology, and Wonder*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15kxg5z>
- Agrawal, A., Sharma, D., Mishra, M. K., Shah, M. A., Alam, M., & Khandelwal, V. (2024). How to Cook a Meme: Exploring Content Strategies in Brand and User-generated Memes on Instagram. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11(1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2366001>
- Almaghrabi, T. (2023). *Memes in Marketing: Exploring How Internet Memes Can be Integrated Into Social Media Marketing Activities in a Manner That is Accepted by Online Communities*. [Doctoral dissertation, Brunel University London]. Brunel University Research Archive. <http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/27848>
- Ang, L. (2011). Community Relationship Management and Social Media. *Journal of Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management*, 18, 31-38. <https://doi.org/10.1057/dbm.2011.3>
- Armellini, G., & Villanueva, J. (2010). Marketing Expenditures and Word-of-mouth Communication: Complements or Substitutes?. *Foundations and Trends® in Marketing*, 5(1), 1-53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1561/17000000025>
- Berthon, P., Pitt, L., & Campbell, C. (2008). Ad Lib: When Customers Create The Ad. *California Management Review*, 50(4), 6-30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41166454>
- Bowo, F. A., Anisah, A., & Marthalia, L. (2024). Meme Marketing: Generation Z Consumer Behavior on Social Media. *Jurnal Indonesia Sosial Sains*, 5(2), 188-201. <https://doi.org/10.59141/jiss.v5i02.995>
- Box Office Mojo. (n.d.) *Oppenheimer*. Retrieved from <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt15398776/>
- Campbell, J. E. (2005). Outing PlanetOut: Surveillance, Gay Marketing and Internet Affinity Portals. *New Media & Society*, 7(5), 663-683. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444805056011>
- Catanescu, C., & Tom, G. (2001). Types of Humor in Television and Magazine Advertising. *Review of business*, 22(1-2), 92.
- Coleman, E. G. (2010). Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media. *Annual review of anthropology*, 39(1), 487-505. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.012809.104945>
- Csordas, T., Horvath, D., Mitev, A. & Markos-Kujbus, É. (2017). User-Generated Internet Memes as Advertising Vehicles: Visual Narratives as Special Consumer Information Sources and Consumer Tribe Integrators. In G. Siegert, M. Rimscha & S. Grubenmann

- (Eds.), *Commercial Communication in the Digital Age: Information or Disinformation?* (pp. 247-266). De Gruyter Saur. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110416794-014>
- Dahl, D. W., & Moreau, C. P. (2007). Thinking Inside the Box: Why Consumers Enjoy Constrained Creative Experiences. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 44(3), 357-369. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.44.3.357>
- Daugherty, T., Eastin, M. S., & Bright, L. (2008). Exploring Consumer Motivations for Creating User-Generated Content. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 8(2), 16–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2008.10722139>
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deus, E. P. D., Campos, R. D., & Rocha, A. R. (2022). Memes as Shortcut to Consumer Culture: A Methodological Approach to Covert Collective Ideologies. *Revista de Administração Contemporânea*, 26(4), <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-7849rac2022210005.en>
- Fleming, M., Jr. (2021, September 14). *Christopher Nolan Chooses Universal Pictures for his Film About J. Robert Oppenheimer & The A-Bomb*. Deadline. <https://deadline.com/2021/09/christopher-nolan-universal-pictures-sets-next-film-j-robert-oppenheimer-development-atom-bomb-world-war-two-1234832975/>
- Fonseca, N. (2002, April 19). Duel Action: ‘Attack of the Clones’ vs. ‘About A Boy’ and Other Box-office Match Ups... *Entertainment Weekly*. <https://ew.com/article/2002/04/19/duel-action-attack-clones-vs-about-boy-and-other-box-office-match-ups/>
- Forman, J., & Damschroder, L. (2007). Qualitative Content Analysis. In L. Jacoby & L. A. Siminoff (Eds.), *Empirical Methods for Bioethics: A Primer* (pp. 39-62). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1479-3709\(07\)11003-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1479-3709(07)11003-7)
- Fournier, S., & Avery, J. (2011). The Uninvited Brand. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 193-207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.001>
- Grundlingh, L. (2018). Memes as Speech Acts. *Social Semiotics*, 28(2), 147-168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2017.1303020>
- Hantke, S. (2022). Science fiction cinema between arthouse and blockbuster: From Stanley Kubrick’s 2001 to Christopher Nolan’s Interstellar (2014). In T. McSweeney & S. Joy (Eds.), *Contemporary American Science Fiction Film* (pp. 109-127). Routledge.
- Helms, R. W., Booij, E., & Spruit, M. R. (2012). Reaching Out: Involving Users in Innovation Tasks Through Social Media. ECIS 2012 Proceedings. 193. <https://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2012/193>

- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Howell, A. R. (2019). *Politics, Memes, and Culture Jamming: Meme Culture's Potential to Engage Youth in Politics*. <https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/concern/defaults/9k41zm43c>
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York University Press.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>
- Kim, I. K. (2021). The Impact of Social Distancing on Box-Office Revenue: Evidence From The COVID-19 Pandemic. *Quantitative Marketing and Economics*, 19(1), 93-125. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11129-020-09230-x>
- Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2007). Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production. In M. Knobel & C. Lankshear (Eds.), *A New Literacies Sampler* (pp. 199–227). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Know Your Meme. (2018, August 29). Epic Rap Battles of History. *Know Your Meme*. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/epic-rap-battles-of-history>
- Know Your Meme. (2020, August 06). Le. *Know Your Meme*. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/le>
- Know Your Meme. (2022, June 13). Morbius Sweep. *Know Your Meme*. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/morbius-sweep>
- Know Your Meme. (2023, June 13). Rajshahi Indian Restaurant. *Know Your Meme*. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/rajshahi-indian-restaurant>
- Lazzini, A., Lazzini, S., Balluchi, F., & Mazza, M. (2022). Emotions, Moods and Hyperreality: Social Media and the Stock Market during the First Phase of COVID-19 Pandemic. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 35(1), 199-215. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-08-2020-4786>
- Luca, M. (2015). User-Generated Content and Social Media. In S.P. Anderson, J. Waldfogel, & D. Strömberg (Eds.), *Handbook of Media Economics* (Vol. 1, pp. 563-592). North-Holland. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-444-63685-0.00012-7>

- Martin, R. A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., & Weir, K. (2003). Individual Differences in Uses of Humor and their Relation to Psychological Well-being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37(1), 48-75. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566\(02\)00534-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00534-2)
- Maurya, U. K., & Mishra, P. (2012). What is a Brand? A Perspective on Brand Meaning. *European Journal of Business and Management*, 4(3), 122-133.
- Mayrhofer, M., Matthes, J., Einwiller, S., & Naderer, B. (2020). User Generated Content Presenting Brands on Social Media Increases Young Adults' Purchase Intention. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(1), 166-186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1596447>
- Metacritic. (n.d.) *Oppenheimer*. Retrieved from: <https://www.metacritic.com/movie/oppenheimer/>
- Miller, J. T. (2023). *Hopeful Oscillation: Metamodernism, Barbenheimer, and Our New Cultural Undercurrent*. https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/showcase/2024/media_communication/2/
- Milner, R. M. (2013). Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 34.
- Miltner, K. M. (2014). "There's no Place for Lulz on LOLCats": The Role of Genre, Gender, and Group Identity in the Interpretation and Enjoyment of an Internet meme. *First Monday*, 19(8). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i8.5391>
- Mitchell, A., Rogers, A. B., Harrington, E., Krämer, P., Radner, H., Sellier, G., Lake, K., Tyrer, B. & Bolton, L. (2024). Barbenheimer: Mass Appeal Cinema and the Evolution of the Blockbuster. *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 43(1), 119-150. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48787093>
- Parhizkar, H. (2024). *The Barbenheimer Phenomenon: Analyzing Discourse About the Dual Release of Barbie and Oppenheimer as Reflections on Post-Covid Hollywood*. [Master's Thesis, The Pennsylvania State University]. Penn State. <https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/catalog/28966hxp5284>
- Paris, C. (2022). *Achieving Brand Authenticity in the Age of Cancel Culture: Why Brands Can No Longer Be Neutral Without Being Seen as Complicit*. [Bachelor's Thesis, University of Arkansas]. ScholarWorks@UARK
- Partlow, C., & Talarczyk, P. (2021). Absurdism and Generation Z Humor: The Effects of Absurdist Content on Perceived Humor Levels in Generation Z Students. *Journal of Student Research*, 10(4). <https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v10i4.2011>

- Piller, F., Vossen, A., & Ihl, C. (2012). From Social Media to Social Product Development: The Impact of Social Media on Co-creation of Innovation. *Die Unternehmung*, 66(1), 7-27. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0042-059X-2012-1-7>
- Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation Experiences: The Next Practice in Value Creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(3), 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.20015>
- Rashid, Y., Waseem, A., Akbar, A. A., & Azam, F. (2019). Value Co-Creation and Social Media: A Systematic Literature Review Using Citation and Thematic Analysis. *European Business Review*, 31(5), 761-784. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EBR-05-2018-0106>
- Rose, G. (2022). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Roush, T. (2024, October 30). Reddit Stock Surges Nearly 40% Toward Best Day Ever After Revenue Beats Estimates. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tylerroush/2024/10/30/reddit-stock-surges-nearly-40-toward-best-day-ever-after-revenue-beats-estimates/>
- Sajid, S. I. (2016). Social Media and its Role in Marketing. *Business and Economics Journal*, 7(1). <http://41.89.240.73/handle/123456789/810>
- Santos, M. L. B. D. (2022). The “So-Called” UGC: An Updated Definition of User-Generated Content in The Age of Social Media. *Online Information Review*, 46(1), 95-113. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-06-2020-0258>
- Sharma, H. (2018). Memes in Digital Culture and Their Role in Marketing and Communication: A Study in India. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 9(3), 303-318. https://doi.org/10.1386/iscc.9.3.303_1
- Shifman, L. (2014). The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 340-358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914546577>
- Taecharungroj, V., & Nueangjamnong, P. (2015). Humour 2.0: Styles and Types of Humour and Virality of Memes on Facebook. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 10(3), 288-302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973258615614420>
- Teng, H., Lo, C. F., & Lee, H. H. (2022). How Do Internet Memes Affect Brand Image?. *Online Information Review*, 46(2), 304-318. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-05-2020-0192>
- Vanity Fair. (2022, December 26). The 26 Most Anticipated Movies of 2023. *Vanity Fair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/12/most-anticipated-2023-movies>

- Yaqoub, M., Jingwu, Z., & Ambekar, S. S. (2024). Pandemic Impacts on Cinema Industry and Over-the-top Platforms in China. *Media International Australia*, 191(1), 105-128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X221145975>
- Zhang, Y., & Wildermuth, B. M. (2009). Qualitative Analysis of Content. In B. M. Wildermuth (Ed.), *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science* (pp. 318-329). Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Zinski, D. (2022, June 5). Morbius Flops at Box Office Again – Memes Can't Save Marvel Movie. *Screen Rant*. <https://screenrant.com/morbius-box-office-flop-theaters-details>

ANNEXES

Annex 1: <https://www.reddit.com/r/196/comments/13cq1kb/rule/>



Annex 2:

https://www.reddit.com/r/meme/comments/15805zo/anything_worth_seeing_other_than_barbie_and/



Annex 3:

https://www.reddit.com/r/moviescirclejerk/comments/zoqd16/audience_members_watching_barbie_when_the/

Audience members watching Barbie when the Oppenheimer IMAX showing across the hall finally gets to the nuclear explosion scene ...



Annex 4:

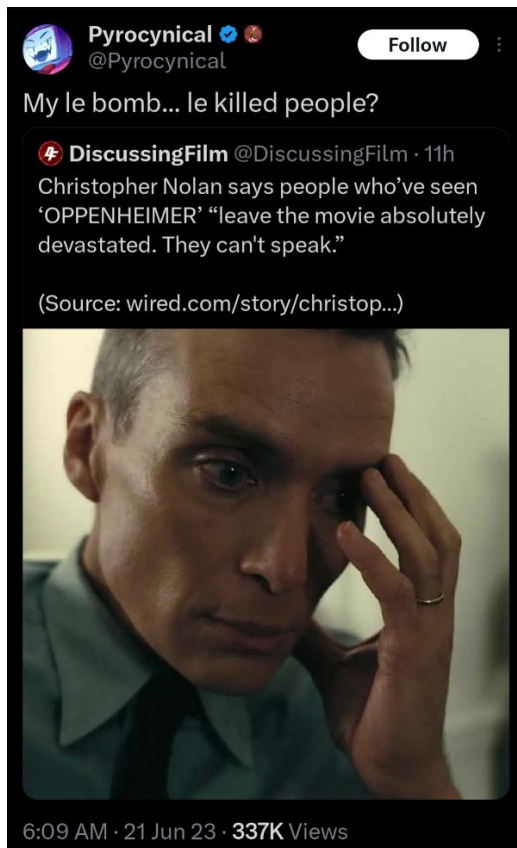
https://www.reddit.com/r/shittymoviedetails/comments/15815lw/my_favorite_part_of_oppenheimer_2023_was_the_post/

My favorite part of Oppenheimer (2023) was the post credits scene when Oppenheimer had a rap battle with Thanos



Annex 5:

https://www.reddit.com/r/NonPoliticalTwitter/comments/14eu8gk/i_am_le_shocked/



Annex 6:

[https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/15ja3o5/i_didnt_see_any_of_these movies/](https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/15ja3o5/i_didnt_see_any_of_these_movies/)



Annex 7:

https://www.reddit.com/r/shittymoviedetails/comments/14ikax0/in_oppenheimer_2023_oppenheimer_looks_miserable/

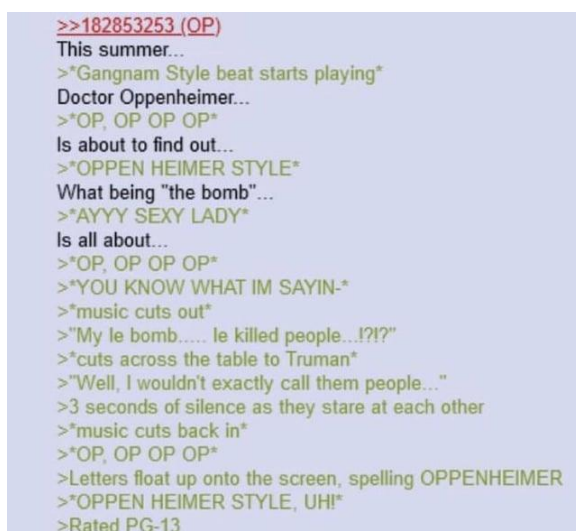
In Oppenheimer (2023) Oppenheimer looks miserable in every poster and Screen-cap he's in. This is probably due to the fact he built fucking bombs that killed thousands of people



Annex 8: <https://www.reddit.com/r/NonPoliticalTwitter/comments/1436xdt/perfectionism/>



Annex 9: <https://www.reddit.com/r/196/comments/12p0s4c/oppenheimerule/>



Annex 10: https://www.reddit.com/r/raimimemes/comments/12eg6y8/stinks_doesnt_it/

Trying to watch Barbie movie when the
Oppenheimer screening is playing right next to me :



Annex 11:

https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/15mwj6/i_just_wanted_to_watch_wholesome_me_bomb_man_movie/



Annex 12:

https://www.reddit.com/r/shittymoviedetails/comments/13ooyq0/oppenheimer_2023_includes_a_3_hours_scene_of/

OPPENHEIMER (2023) includes a 3 hours scene of Albert Einstein and Joe Oppenheimer kissing.

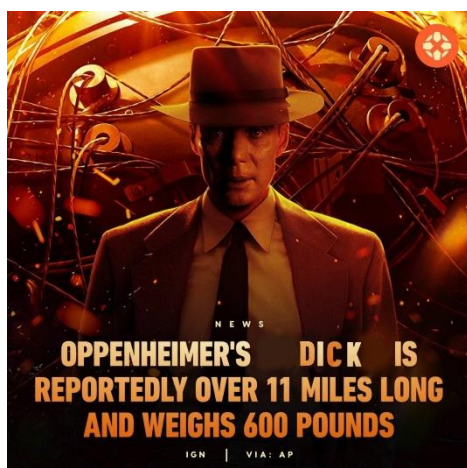


Annex 13: https://www.reddit.com/r/antimeme/comments/146cufj/he_is_albert_einstein/



Annex 14:

https://www.reddit.com/r/shittymoviedetails/comments/13z9v88/oppenheimers_2023_dick_is_quite_big/



Annex 15: https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/14z29si/saw_it_live/

Japan just banned
Oppenheimer.. That's fair
though, I guess they already
saw the movie.



Annex 16: https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/10dyzmd/when_i_become_death/

oppenheimer when the
Bomb that he designed
specifically to murder
Millions murders **Millions**



Annex 17: https://www.reddit.com/r/okbuddyretard/comments/159w3va/oppenheimer_real/

Oppenheimer if he invented something
fun like a beyblade or a trampoline



Annex 18: <https://www.reddit.com/r/okbuddyretard/comments/15gp1o6/rajshahi/>



Annex 19: <https://www.reddit.com/r/meirl/comments/153lxwb/meirl/>

