Understanding the Use and Application of Meme Marketing in Strategic Communications in Bangladesh

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Abstract

As a strategic communication tool, meme marketing is successfully connected with modern audiences, automatically assuming its preference in the Bangladeshi strategic communication field. However, there has yet to be any comprehensive study about whether this strategy is as effective as it is in other areas of the world as opposed to Bangladesh. Duplicating a strategy that worked well in other areas does not confirm success here, and there needs to be concrete proof of how to make this work here, considering the country's specific contexts and the associated culture. This study drew insights from heavy meme consumers of Bangladesh through a comprehensive analysis of survey responses. The participants were picked from the leading meme groups on Facebook and through a purposive sampling. The survey found out about the participants' meme source preferences and the correlation between their liking a meme and their buying behavior. It also included if they did not like a meme, then what were the reasons behind it. Furthermore, participants' criticisms and suggestions were also included in the paper on how to make the strategy a better-implemented tool. As a guide for the users of this tool as a means of strategic communication, the matters of ethical considerations and cultural appropriateness were thoroughly discussed. This study concludes with a holistic understanding of memes as a strategic communication tool in digital culture.

Keywords: meme marketing, strategic communication, social media marketing, branding, engagement, promotion strategy.

Introduction

One of the most successful forms of social media marketing today is meme marketing. Meme marketing has been incorporated into brand marketing strategies due to the remarkable expansion of social media. This strategy is becoming progressively more significant to Bangladesh's strategic communication field. Since it has become an accepted norm over the past few years, the application of memes in marketing has also been altered to

keep up with the shifting social media landscape and customer tastes (Manrai, 2013). The potential of meme marketing should be the primary objective of the more recent advertising techniques. However, while doing so, it is crucial to consider our country's unique cultural, social, and linguistic characteristics, as the international discourse of meme marketing will not coincide precisely with the local context of Bangladesh.

Internet memes have become integral to modern marketing strategies as they effectively engage audiences, raise brand awareness, and add personality to brands. Memes thrive in the online realm due to their effortless sharing, diverse formats (images, text, videos), anonymous creators, and the survival of the most powerful ones. Sharing memes is a breeze, and they have the potential to spread like wildfire, capturing the attention of a large audience and boosting brand exposure (Krasnigi et al., 2021). Meme marketing has undergone significant transformations to stay relevant in the ever-changing landscape of internet culture. At first, meme marketing began with 'memejacking,' where marketers used existing content for branding. This signaled the start of memes becoming more accessible and widespread among people. In addition, memes are frequently funny and visually attractive, which makes them highly captivating to users on social media platforms. Humor plays a vital role in memes, enhancing online communication and enabling brands to establish a relatable and entertaining connection with their target audience. Memetics has gained significant traction as a prevalent mode of communication within the realm of social media. Users are actively engaged in the pursuit of captivating and easily shareable content (Alban et al., 2021). A recent study discovered that memes were significantly more enjoyable than their non-humorous counterparts (Yang, 2022). Sharing rates were higher for memes compared to the more serious images. However, according to Yang (2022), the findings did not indicate that individuals were more inclined to share the meme solely because it was a meme. Instead, the mediating variable of humor perception played a role.

As memes gained popularity in internet culture, companies recognized their value as a means of connecting and interacting with online audiences. Memes, known for their relatable and humorous content, have proven to be practical tools for businesses to engage with younger audiences who are active on social media platforms (Ngo, 2021). Social networks provide a platform for turning casual conversations into more calculated interactions, often without users realizing it (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2023). Memes are content that is designed to be easily shared and enjoyed by many people. Businesses can foster engagement by inviting audiences to participate in meme challenges, contests, or user-generated content

campaigns. By encouraging engagement and conversation around memes, businesses can enhance their online community and build stronger brand loyalty (Mukhopadhyay, 2022). Companies that integrate memes into their marketing strategies can enjoy higher levels of engagement, stronger brand loyalty, and a more relatable brand image. Memes allow brands to display their unique personality, imaginative thinking, and ability to make people laugh, establishing a personal connection with consumers. By incorporating memes into their marketing strategies, brands can remain current in the digital era and engage with younger audiences who actively participate in online communities (Krasniqi et al., 2021). The internet fostered an atmosphere that encouraged the development of a collaborative culture, enabling users to generate and distribute memes effortlessly. The flexibility and accessibility of memes have played a significant role in shaping internet culture and contributing to the widespread use of meme marketing strategies (Triet et al., 2022).

Literature Review

In February 2021, McDonald's shared a black-and-white image on their official Facebook page. The picture showed their Szechuan Sauce placed on what appeared to be an otherworldly surface. Accompanying the image was the caption, "There it is". This clever utilization of memes and humor struck a chord with online audiences, resulting in significant attention and interaction (Mukhopadhyay, 2022). During the 2013 Super Bowl blackout, Oreo took advantage of the situation by promptly creating a meme-style social media post with the caption, "You can still dunk in the dark." This realtime marketing effort gained widespread attention, highlighting Oreo's quick thinking and innovative approach to incorporating current events into their marketing strategy (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2023). Wendy's Twitter account became popular for clever and entertaining replies to followers, frequently incorporating memes and references to popular culture. This strategy for social media engagement allowed Wendy's to differentiate itself and establish a robust online presence, appealing to a younger audience (Guenther et al., 2020).

Extensive research on meme marketing and its influence on brand relationships has unveiled several significant discoveries. A recent study by Lin (2022) discovered that incorporating humorous memes into Twitter posts related to brands can positively impact consumer attitudes and their willingness to share. This effect is significantly pronounced when there are bandwagon cues present. The perceived humor of a meme can have a substantial impact on its effectiveness. In a recent study, Teng (2021) highlighted the significance of social media marketing (SMM) in influencing

consumer-based brand equity (CBBE). The study found that various cognitive, personal integrative, and social integrative benefits mediate this relationship. Another study emphasized the significant impact of internet memes on brand image, mainly when they include elements like humor, brand interactions, and prestige (Teng et al., 2021). Finally, Caliandro and Anselmi (2021) discussed the idea of 'memetic brands,' which refer to a series of branded social media posts that express a discourse on flexible and context-dependent consumption. These findings highlight the power of meme marketing in influencing consumer-brand connections, especially when the memes are funny, involve brand interactions and prestige, and fit well with social media platforms. When participants found the deployed meme funny, they showed a positive attitude towards the post and a greater inclination to share it on social media (Yang, 2022). Internet memes have a significant impact on positively shaping the brand image (Teng et al., 2021). Social media users often engage with brands in ways that are influenced by the features and capabilities of the platforms they use (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021).

In order to successfully incorporate memes into marketing strategies, businesses need to possess a thorough comprehension of their target audience and the online communities they interact with. Understanding their audience's preferences, humor, and interests allows businesses to create memes that resonate and connect with them. Memes tend to come and go quickly, often connected to current events or popular trends (Guenther et al., 2020). Businesses must stay current with the latest trends and internet culture to keep their content relevant and timely. By leveraging popular memes and trends, businesses can enhance the likelihood of their content becoming viral. Businesses need to monitor the effectiveness of their meme marketing campaigns (Duong et al., 2019). By keeping track of metrics like engagement, shares, likes, and comments, businesses can evaluate how well their meme content is performing and use this data to make informed choices for future campaigns. By implementing these strategies, businesses can utilize memes to connect with online audiences effectively, enhance brand recognition, and foster customer engagement in the digital realm (Ngo, 2021).

Origin of Memes in Marketing

According to Molina, 2020, a meme is an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture or society, often through the internet or other forms of media. The term was coined in 1976 in the book, 'The Selfish Gene' by Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins (1976). It refers to a humorous image, video, text, etc. that Internet users rapidly copy and

distribute, often with slight alterations. The term 'meme', is an abbreviation of 'mimeme' derived from the Greek word mimesis which means, imitation. Internet memes are highly engaging content that is shared in an array of formats (including animation, GIF, tag, image, text, or video) and relies on humor, sarcasm, and quiddity to promote an idea or message (Brubaker et al., 2018). They are digital products with shared attributes, such as online images created by Internet users and later replicated, imitated, and improved (Shifman, 2014).

The term "meme" has gained significant attention in popular culture and marketing as a means of reaching its target audience. According to Zubiaga (2015), a meme could be a representation of an event that is not particularly significant for mainstream recognition but draws a large target audience due to its natural appeal. Evidence suggests that the term mememarketing originated on the internet and not in academia. In 2009, when analyzing an advertising campaign for the fragrance brand 'Lenthéric', the website 'Trendhunter' identified Internet meme marketing as a novel and noteworthy pop culture phenomenon. This marks the first time the term was actively employed to describe the emerging phenomenon. As Musicco (2009) described meme-marketing in the following words: "Mememarketing entails more than simply affixing a catchphrase to a humorous image. It is interpreting a significant cultural moment and transforming it into a strategic message that resonates with the public."

Memes as Communication Approach

A perfect meme at the perfect time and in the perfect context can generate massive organic reach for the company. In numerous instances, meme marketing demonstrates higher effectiveness when compared with conventional marketing initiatives. The meme-marketing strategy has the power of persuasion. Memes used in marketing can relate more to a personal level. For instance, when a person connects with memes used in marketing, he will try out at least one product or service from that company (Mullet & Karson, 1985). Because purchase intent arises when consumers have a favorable opinion about it (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000). Memes can affect a brand's image among consumers. A humorous meme can influence a consumer's response, whether it leads to a laugh, a cry, or another response. These reactions have been established by the meme and those who understand it. By linking an effective meme with a brand, companies will be able to influence what customers think of the brand by using the meme's impact on the brand. Brand engagement and connecting with customers have become essential to the longevity of a brand in response to the rapidly evolving industry (Vasile et al., 2021).

Meme marketing will be more engaging for young consumers because of its relatable characteristics and current trends. While memes help businesses engage with their consumers, they involve a lot more within (Bury, 2021.). First, meme marketing is extremely cost-effective compared to traditional marketing. Second, meme marketing leverages existing popular memes, which allows it to connect the target audience to the advertisement context. Given the prevalence of memes, marketers can organically connect with their target demographics. Finally, they are easy to make by altering existing meme templates (Malodia et al., 2022). Memes, as opposed to other marketing strategies, are often effective at reaching the younger generation with their bizarre and perplexing jokes.

As markets have become overexposed worldwide, brands are competing for the attention and positive interaction of the digital consumer (Vasile et al., 2021). A popular instance of using a meme for effective advertising is the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme, adopted by the Swedish stock photo and video company, 'Depositphotos' (Scot, 2022). The meme went viral and generated a great deal of attention for Depositphotos, with hundreds of people sharing and commenting on it on social media. The campaign's success demonstrated the effectiveness of using popular memes to create relatable and shareable content that resonates with a large audience, ultimately resulting in increased brand awareness and potential new customers.

According to Eisend, (2011), there are multiple explanations for why humor in advertising works better compared to non-humorous marketing. They can be categorized as either cognitive or affective. The first reason for the cognitive explanation is that humor increases attention to the advertisement, giving it more time to convey its message. The second explanation is that humor disrupts the process of making arguments in opposition, which is typical when having to face commercials. In contrast to established brands, funny advertisements had a greater impact on consumers' memories of new brands, according to research by Chung and Zhao (2011). That's why, more sophisticated and established brands seem to be wary about using this strategy. Looking into the previous studies, this paper attempts to understand the potential scopes for meme-marketing in Bangladesh. This study looks for answer to the follow research questions:

RQ1: How effective is the practice of meme-marketing as a strategic communication tool in Bangladesh?

RQ2: What are the ways this meme-marketing practice can be improved in Bangladesh?

Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were taken for this research. Within a survey, an open-ended question was incorporated; hence, a qualitative and quantitative analysis was possible. The sample consisted of around 150 participants aged between 16 to 35 for purposive sampling. As the primary target groups were the heavy users and consumers of internet memes, the participants were picked from popular meme groups in Facebook and were reached out privately after observing their level of activeness among these groups (posting and sharing memes).

Participants were asked to complete a survey that focused on their experiences with meme-marketing campaigns. They were presented with 10 randomly chosen memes, sourced from different Facebook pages, specifically designed for promotional purposes (for a few examples, see Appendix). These memes were used for advertising fast food businesses, OTT platform shows, delivery services, online shopping services, and toiletries. Participants rated their level of agreement on a 3-point Likert scale regarding whether they had seen the meme, whether they liked it, and whether it influenced their purchasing decisions or product usage. The survey questions also included their level of engagement with memes on a daily basis and their preferred sources for these kinds of advertisement campaigns.

Within the same survey form, participants were allowed to share their qualitative feedback on how strategic communication through memes in the context of Bangladesh can be improved. In their responses, they talked about the prospects and challenges to be faced by this strategy from the perspective of the Bangladeshi audience.

Data Analysis

As this methodology contains two different parts, the qualitative part was done through thematic analysis. The responses from 148 participants were thoroughly analyzed and divided into core themes. For the quantitative analysis, mean, median, and correlation were attempted via the SPSS tool.

The researcher collected 148 responses from participants. A purposive sampling method was used. Groups and communities that are involved in creating, consuming, and sharing memes in Bangladesh, were reached out to. These groups were selected based on their affiliation with meme culture and strategic communication. The male-to-female ratio was significantly close. As the samples were chosen based on their affiliation with the meme community, the majority of the participants came from the 19–25 age range. Around 74% of the sample size are regular heavy consumers of memes (more than 5 memes a day) (Figure 1). To ensure a higher number of

targeted audiences for this communication strategy, this approach was taken into consideration.

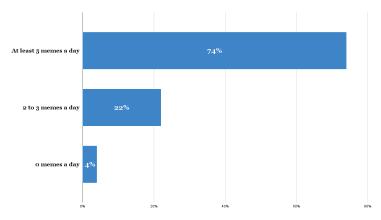


Figure 1: Level of meme consumptions of participants

Platforms being used in this communication strategy

Facebook stands out as the primary source of memes, with a very high percentage of participants obtaining memes from this platform (Table 1). Instagram follows as another popular source, but its prevalence is notably lower than that of Facebook.

Reddit, Discord, and online threads contribute to meme sourcing, with Reddit having the highest prevalence among these sources. Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube are less commonly used sources for memes. Overall, the analysis showed the dominance of Facebook among the participants' meme sources. This piece of information could be important for the marketers to know the platforms they can disseminate this kind of advertisement to what platform and what would be the best platform for their target audience.

u	iar platforms for meme generation and distribution	
	Facebook	94%
	Instagram	51%
	Reddit	21%
	Discord	11%
	Threads	8%
	Twitter	7%
	Tiktok	5%
	Youtube	3%

Table 1: Popular platforms for meme generation and distribution

Types of businesses successfully using meme-marketing strategy

The collected data suggests that businesses in the food, delivery service, and online shopping sectors heavily utilize memes for advertising (Table 2). Other sectors such as OTT content and ride-sharing also employ memes for advertising, but the prevalence is somewhat lower. There are also other types of businesses that are regularly seen using this strategy, Money transaction services and the contraceptive sector. This specific data gives an insight into the sectors already using memes as a strategy for advertising and the ones that are not. It is also evident from this segment that luxury brands or sophisticated businesses tend to avoid this type of marketing strategy as seen before by Sharma (2018). They explored the brands that could use memes to engage with social media users in India, including youth-related brands, e-commerce businesses, fashion brands, and news brands with playful or fresh tones. Chung and Zhao (2011) claimed that humorous advertisements have a more positive effect on brand recall on unfamiliar brands compared to familiar brands.

Table 2: Popular services/products in meme-marketing

Food	92%
Delivery Service	69%
Online shopping	67%
OTT Content	54%
Ride Sharing	32%
Money Transaction	25%
Contraceptive	18%

Visibility of the memes

Correlation between liking and buying the product/service

For each content, the Pearson Correlation coefficient (r) between "Likeness" and "Rate of Buying" ranges from approximately 0.512 to 0.630. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) which indicates that the correlations are statistically significant. From the correlation coefficient and significance value, it is evident that there is a consistent and significant positive correlation between the "Likeness" of the provided memes and the "Rate of Buying." Overall, these findings suggest that, when participants indicated a higher level of liking for a meme, there was a corresponding increase in their rate of buying that product or service, as shown before by Lee et al., 2019. This pattern was consistent across Content 1 to Content 10.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the variable "Visibility" across Content 1 to Content 10, the memes provided for the participants. The values for the rate of visibility of the memes vary across content categories, ranging from approximately 1.78 to 3.19. The meme from Content 1 (Delivery service named 'Delivery Hobe') has the lowest visibility score (1.78), while Content 3 (Food outlet named 'Kacchi Bhai') has the highest visibility score (3.19). This suggests that none of the meme content used for advertisement purposes had significantly high visibility among the participants being the average visibility score for all memes being 2.789.

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Visibility	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Avg
Content 1	148	1	5	1.78	2.789
Content 2	148	1	5	2.92	
Content 3	148	1	5	3.19	
Content 4	148	1	5	2.34	
Content 5	148	1	5	3.09	
Content 6	148	1	5	2.57	
Content 7	148	1	5	2.76	
Content 8	148	1	5	3.14	
Content 9	148	1	5	3.13	
Content 10	148	1	5	2.97	
Valid N (listwise)	148				

Table 3: Visibility across contents

Challenges for meme-marketing as a strategy

Smart Consumer embodies people who dismiss memes as simply advertising tactics employed by the brand. Although they may like the meme, they are not the ones to be impressed by that alone. However, when they are intrigued, they are likely to express it by sharing the meme, thus giving the brand the exposure, it wants.

Inauthentic and out-of-touch memes

The use of memes in marketing is also susceptible to failure if the humor or message comes off as inauthentic or out of touch with the target demographic (Dalakas et al., 2023). It is essential for marketers to recognize the context and socio-cultural significance of a meme before applying it and to make sure that their use of the meme is appropriate and aligns with their brand's principles. A famous instance of such is the "Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad," which was released in 2017 showed that coming off as culturally insensitive can be very hard on the brand name (Ferrucci & Schauster, 2022). Most of the participants in the survey complained about the memes being too irrelevant and unrelatable to the Bangladeshi audience. Some of them were: "Most companies are using them wrong. Not every pun is a good one." (Participant-127); "They don't relate to Bangladeshi audiences." (Participant-49)

Negative marketing

According to Vasile (2021), any negative content or unfavorable chat on social media might damage the customer's impression of the brand. However, the study of Yang (2022), did not find that meme advertisements increased brand recall, however, the case might be different for advertisements using memes that are not specific to the brand or product. A meme that gets conceived negatively, can be very damaging to the products or brand's image. Most of the participants in their suggestions, tried to be aware of the risk of the tool backfiring, as humor can vary across different consumers.

Overuse of strategy

Another common theme among the responses was that the strategy is sometimes overly used, hence making the tool rather annoying instead of increasing engagement, so says participant- 117, "A qualityless meme cannot be a good strategy." Overusing a template can actually harm the process instead. Moreover, using memes in product-marketing tactics requires extra effort because a less humorous meme with marketing intention might result in less customer attraction than a typical campaign (Shifman, 2013). "A great deal of meme-marketing feels like this: reluctant attempts to capitalize on whatever everyone else is talking about" (Musicco, 2009).

Culturally inappropriate

Many participants indicated that the memes being used in this strategy often become very offensive and inappropriate. Some of them also said the

memes use too much sexual innuendo. As participant-51 said, "I believe meme marketing should be respectful and actually funny, not degrading to any group of people. They are focusing more on making the content sensual and less on their products."

A study published in the Journal of Advertising Education concluded that using humor in digital marketing campaigns can increase engagement and favorable views of the brand, but that it is crucial to think about the appropriateness and cultural context of the type of humor used (Gregory et al., 2019).

Recognizing the target audience

Prior to creating a meme, it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of the preferences and humor of the target audience. This knowledge makes it easier to create memes that connect with the audience and increase their chance of going viral. Given that people's tastes in memes vary, adopting a predominant meme template can be applicable. The content must have sharing qualities while still being relevant to the target demographic. Participants emphasized on the memes not being effective for the target audience. They indicated that marketers are continuously making content that is going to the wrong plate.

Staying relevant

Memes that are in line with current trends and relevant to marketing measures might be used as models for unique initiatives. The importance of timing cannot be overstated, and the quick incorporation of popular events or incidents into memes is recommended. The quick application enhances the meme's potential and ensures an effective connection with the audience. Another key component of meme marketing that connects with a wider audience is relatability, which gets improved by the contextual link. Some of the participants suggested: "The fresher the better, it has to be time appropriate and when an event is at its peak. Making a meme out of Tamim Iqbal's retirement and coming back from retirement per se." (Participant-38); "If a person relates with 4 to 5 memes used in marketing, I think he will try out at least one product." (participant-72)

According to Wiggins and Bowers, (2015), there are three separate factors that determine the success of a memevertisement — needs to be humorous, memorable, and shareable. Malodia (2022) said, trending memes can generate better results than non-trending ones. Using a meme that is currently trending, instead of a brand-specific, non-trending meme can therefore generate different results.

Authenticity and humor in meme content

According to Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015), humor is defined as an effort to provoke fun, laughter, or amusement. Memes' effectiveness comes from their humor, relatability, and authenticity. It is recommended to stay away from overtly used meme content. Instead, the focus should be on incorporating the brand's persona into the meme material to create a deeper connection with the audience. At the moment, fun and entertainment are more prevalent than informative communication. Therefore, there is a greater chance of success when marketing is included in an entertaining narrative. Memes being overused have been another complaint evident from the participants during the survey. Here is one: "They need to stop overusing the templates — because a less funny meme with marketing intent may return in less consumer attraction than a regular campaign."

According to Teng (2022), there are four significant characteristics of Internet memes: humor; positive emotional intensity; brand interactions, and; high spread-ability. And humor has to be authentic or the steak gets lost in repetition.

Consider user-generated content

Higher engagement and a sense of community are fostered by promoting user-generated meme content that relates to the brand. Meme competitions and challenges can encourage user participation. A well-crafted meme strategically used at the appropriate time and context can achieve extraordinary organic reach, increasing brand visibility beyond conventional marketing initiatives. One of the suggestions from the participants was to "Encourage your audience to create and share memes related to your brand."

Cultural appropriation

Conscious marketers avoid promoting gender-based storylines since they are aware of the negative effects of gender-based humor. Not only gender, it is crucial to maintain cultural awareness to promote tolerance and respect in the world of meme marketing. Many participants complained about the insensitive attitude of the memes these days that are being used for marketing. Some also said that they did not like the rivalry meme marketing when it gets too much. One such comment was, "Gender neutrality is something that's often seen absent in these days' memes." A study published in the Journal of Advertising Education concluded that using humor in digital marketing campaigns can increase engagement and favorable views of the brand, but that it is crucial to think about the

appropriateness and cultural context of the type of humor used (Gregory et al., 2019; Mason, 2022).

Conclusion

Contemporary consumers spend much of their time browsing the internet, and social media platforms, allowing users to co-produce, share, build identities, express themselves, and create relationships (Russo, 2012). Their way of connectivity resonates through internet memes (Meer, 2022). Memes will be a new dynamic in the market, research showed, memes can get more organic reach. It has been shown in the paper that memes can be very effective in the digital sphere. The findings demonstrate that memes can have a positive impact on the buyer's behavior and a good laughable meme can result in the buyer buying or using a product or service. Although it is a risky venture, it has some undeniable challenges that can reverse its results. The suggestions from the consumers were also discussed here for the future development of memes as a tool in the strategic communication field of Bangladesh.

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Appendix



	Not at All	Sometimes	Absolutely
Have you seen this meme?	0	0	0
Did you like it?	0	0	0
Did you consider buying the product or	0	0	0



	Not at All	Sometimes	Absolutely
Have you seen this meme?	0	0	0
Did you like it?	0	0	0
Did you consider buying the product or service after this?	0	0	0

When you're Hungry and Maddelivery asks to reconfirm



	Not at All	Sometimes	Absolutely
Have you seen this meme?	0	0	0
Did you like it?	0	0	0
Did you consider buying the	0	0	0



	Not at All	Sometimes	Absolutel
Have you seen this meme?	0	0	0
Did you like it?	0	0	0
Did you consider buying the product or service after this?	0	0	0



	Not at All	Sometimes	Absolutely
Have you seen this meme?	0	0	0
Did you like it?	0	0	0
Did you consider buying the product or service after this?	0	0	0



	Not at All	Sometimes	Absolutely
Have you seen this meme?	0	0	0
Did you like it?	0	0	0
Did you consider buying the product or service after this?	0	0	0