MEME CULTURE ON TIKTOK:
An Analysis of Ryanair's Visual Communication and Self-Aware Humour

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Social Media Digital Culture TikTok Memes Humour Brand Communication Generation Z Ryanair	*TikTok has become a pivotal platform for Generation Z. This study analyses Ryanair's visual communication strategy in Spain, with a particular focus on the use of memes and humour. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining content analysis (n = 50 videos) with a survey of Generation Z users (n = 282), in order to examine the construction of the brand's identity and its connection with its audience. The findings indicate that the strategic deployment of humour, memes and the visual humanisation of the brand generates strong user engagement, prioritising notoriety over conventional corporate image and fostering interaction. This dynamic emerges as a pivotal aspect of contemporary digital visual culture.*

1. Introduction

Platforms such as TikTok have established themselves as central spaces for Generation Z (Díez, 2019), offering both numerous opportunities and notable challenges for brand communication. With more than 200 million monthly active users in Europe alone (TikTok, 2025), of whom 41% belong to Generation Z (Silverio, 2024), TikTok is a particularly relevant communication environment. It is characterised by its dynamism, ephemeral audiovisual content and a participatory culture shaped by trends, memes and viral challenges (Azpeitia, 2021; Zuo and Wang, 2019.

Brands face the challenge of adapting their strategies to these social media platforms, where communication must be increasingly dialogical and user centred (Quesenberry, 2024). Traditional advertising often generates resistance or rejection (Briones, 2022), reinforcing the need to develop organic content capable of generating genuine engagement. Within this context, the low-cost airline Ryanair, specifically its Spanish account (@ryanair_es), has adopted an unconventional communication strategy on TikTok. Rather than focusing on direct promotion, the brand employs an honest, humorous, human and self-aware tone, drawing on memes and actively participating in platform specific trends to connect with a young audience. While this approach has proven successful in terms of visibility, with 53,300 followers, it also raises questions regarding its actual impact on brand perception and on the relationship established with users.

Academic literature has begun to address brand communication on social media (Quesenberry, 2024; Rocha et al., 2020), the TikTok phenomenon (Gao et al., 2021; Valiño et al., 2022), meme culture (Shifman, 2014) and its application in marketing, commonly referred to as *memevertising* (Musicco, 2023; Surya et al., 2024), as well as the role of humour in digital communication and the specific characteristics of Generation Z (Boffone, 2022; Prakash Yadav and Rai, 2020). However, there remains a gap in research concerning how specific communication strategies, such as Ryanair's combination of self-aware humour, memetic culture and a strong visual component, operate within particular cultural contexts, such as Spain, and how they are received and interpreted by Generation Z within contemporary digital visual culture. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing Ryanair Spain's visual and humorous strategy on TikTok and its connection with young audiences, thereby contributing to ongoing debates on communication strategies, emerging digital narratives and the socio-cultural impact of social media.

Derived from the above, this article is guided by the following research questions. How does Ryanair Spain shape its visual brand identity and establish a connection with Generation Z through the strategic use of memes, self-aware humour and specific visual elements on TikTok within the framework of Spanish digital culture? How do Generation Z users perceive and interpret this communication strategy?

To address these questions, a series of specific objectives is proposed.

1. Identify the theoretical foundations underpinning the strategic management of visual brands on TikTok, integrating concepts related to digital communication, visual culture and human-to-human marketing.
2. Analyse Ryanair Spain's visual and humorous communication strategy on TikTok, with particular attention to the role of memes, self-aware tone and viral content.
3. Evaluate Generation Z's perception and interpretation of this strategy in Spain through their interactions and expressed opinions.

The relevance of this study is twofold. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to knowledge on emerging forms of brand communication on visual digital platforms, the role of memes and humour in contemporary digital culture, and the relationship between brands and young audiences. From a practical perspective, it offers professionally applicable insights that point to new ways of connecting with Generation Z in an authentic and effective manner within increasingly saturated digital environments.

This article is structured as follows. After this introduction, the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis is presented, addressing brand communication on TikTok, meme culture, digital humour and Generation Z. The mixed methodology employed is then outlined, combining a content analysis of Ryanair Spain posts (n = 50) with a user survey (n = 282). The results of both analyses are subsequently presented, followed by a discussion that interprets the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and research questions. Finally, the article concludes by outlining the main contributions of the study, its limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Brand Communication in Digital Visual Culture

The contemporary media landscape requires brands to develop increasingly innovative communication strategies in order to connect more effectively with their audiences. Social media is no longer merely a channel for distribution but has evolved into a complex ecosystem of interaction in which global, real time and ongoing conversations shape brand perception and success (Quesenberry, 2024). This environment demands a shift towards customer centred strategies, in which communication adopts a more personal and dialogical character, positioning user behaviour and attitudes as central considerations. One way communication and intrusive advertising, often perceived as irritating by a significant proportion of users (Briones, 2022), are increasingly being replaced by the need to generate engagement through organic and interactive content that offers real or symbolic value.

Within this context, predominantly visual platforms such as TikTok have acquired particular prominence, especially among younger generations. This development necessitates a reinterpretation of brand communication and of the processes through which brand identity is constructed in the digital sphere.

2.1. Digital Branding in Participatory Environments

Within this participatory environment, brand management, or branding, acquires new dimensions. The strength of a brand in the digital context lies not only in its tangible elements, such as logos and messages, but more fundamentally in its intangible elements. These include the promises it makes, the perceptions it generates among customers, who ultimately define the brand, the expectations it creates, and the personality it projects (Tho, 2021). Strategic brand management must therefore focus on building and sustaining a coherent and meaningful mental image of the brand (Chernev, 2020).

The participatory nature of social media reshapes processes of brand identity construction. Consumers are no longer passive recipients but active participants who contribute to the brand's narrative by sharing experiences and opinions and by generating their own content, commonly referred to as user generated content or UGC. Digital platforms enable more direct communication and continuous exchange between brands and consumers, allowing for higher levels of engagement and interaction (Sheak and Abdulrazak, 2023). As a result, brand identity can no longer be understood as a static construct imposed by the company but rather as a dynamic process co created through interaction with the online community.

Brand attitude, understood as the overall positive or negative evaluation formed by consumers, becomes a key factor in this context. A favourable brand attitude can enhance customer loyalty and increase sales, which is particularly significant for companies that compete primarily on price. Effectively managing brand attitude requires a detailed understanding of consumer opinions and of how these attitudes are shaped from the initial point of contact with the brand (Intalar and Yodpram, 2021).

Closely related to this is the concept of brand value. A strong brand with high perceived value can justify higher prices and foster greater levels of loyalty (Pradana, 2023). In the digital environment, maximising brand value involves strengthening consumers' ability to recognise and recall the brand, commonly referred to as brand awareness. Social media platforms constitute efficient and cost-effective tools for achieving this objective (Sheak and Abdulrazak, 2023).

2.2. Narrative Strategies on Ephemeral and Visual Platforms

Communication on visual social media platforms requires narrative strategies that extend beyond the simple presentation of product or service attributes. Given the widespread rejection of conventional advertising (Briones, 2022; Kortelainen, 2024) and the ephemeral, entertainment-oriented nature of these platforms (Zuo and Wang, 2019), brands are required to adopt alternative narrative approaches.

One of the principal strategies involves the creation of entertaining content. Brands that succeed in producing content perceived as amusing, clever or surprising are more likely to capture and sustain user attention, thereby offering value that transcends purely functional considerations. This form of value is described by Sheak and Abdulrazak (2023) as eudaimonic. Content of this kind demonstrates a higher potential for viewing and sharing on platforms such as TikTok.

Storytelling functions as a key vehicle for communicating emotions and ideas (Berger, 2014). Through narrative construction, brands can articulate their personality, connect with user experiences,

or align themselves with prevailing cultural trends on the platform. This approach is particularly relevant when communicating experiential attributes that can only be evaluated after consumption, such as the comfort of a flight. In such cases, narrative strategies can help to anticipate or evoke the experience for the user (Chernev, 2020).

These narratives must be tailored to the specific affordances of each platform. In the case of TikTok, this entails consideration of the brevity of video formats, the central role of sound and music, the dominance of visual aesthetics, and integration with interactive formats such as challenges or duets (Azpeitia, 2021).

2.3. TikTok As a Communicative Ecosystem and Participatory Culture

TikTok is one of the preferred platforms among Generation Z, including in Spain, where it has 23.4 million users, most of whom are young people (Fanjul et al., 2025a; TikTok, 2025). Its ecosystem is characterised by a powerful algorithm that prioritises content discovery through a personalised recommendation feed commonly known as the For You page, which offers users content based on their previous interactions (Gao et al., 2021; Zhang and Liu, 2021). Unlike other social networks, this system facilitates the viral circulation of content from any creator, regardless of the number of followers they possess (Quiroz, 2020).

The predominant format on the platform is the short vertical video, in which sound, including music and viral audio clips, functions as a central resource that drives trends and plays a significant role in determining content reach through algorithmic distribution (Zhang and Liu, 2021). TikTok's interactive features, such as Stitch and Duet, actively encourage participation and creative remixing, thereby facilitating dialogue and the shared construction of meaning among users (Azpeitia, 2021). This environment fosters a participatory culture in which users act as active cocreators (Kotler et al., 2021) and perceive themselves as having the potential to achieve viral visibility (Quiroz, 2020).

Entertainment, including humour, wit and creativity, represents the primary motivation for platform use, although TikTok also fulfils social needs related to connection and belonging (Zuo and Wang, 2019). This combination contributes to the platform's capacity to sustain prolonged engagement over time (Valiño et al., 2022). Trends and challenges, frequently associated with specific audio clips, function as cultural pillars that reinforce shared norms and aesthetic conventions within the platform's community.

3. Memes and Humour as a Strategy on TikTok

Within the communicative ecosystem of platforms such as TikTok, attention constitutes a scarce resource, and young audiences increasingly demand authenticity and entertainment. In this context, two cultural and communicative elements have become particularly prominent, namely memes and humour. Rather than functioning as peripheral tools, these elements have emerged as central modes of expression through which meanings are negotiated, communities are formed, and relationships are established, not only among users but also, increasingly, between users and brands.

3.1. The Meme as a Visual and Cultural Language on the Internet

Within digital culture, the Internet meme can be understood as a digital object, whether image, video or text, that is intentionally produced and disseminated, and subsequently transformed and reinterpreted by multiple users throughout its circulation (Shifman, 2014). In contrast to viral content, which typically spreads widely while remaining relatively unchanged, memes rely on active user participation. Users modify, recontextualise and generate variations based on an original format or idea as part of the transmission process (Petrova, 2021).

Accordingly, the meme may be defined as a fragment of cultural information, such as an idea, concept, or expression, encapsulated within a digital format that may include images, GIFs, short videos, audio or text. This content circulates rapidly online through processes of imitation, parody and remixing. While memes frequently adopt humorous, ironic, or satirical tones, they are capable of conveying a broad range of messages and emotional responses. Their nature is inherently multimodal, as they combine visual, textual, and auditory elements in the construction of meaning (Bini et al., 2022).

The multimodal character of memes renders them difficult to classify into fixed categories. Nevertheless, recurring styles and compositional patterns can be identified based on the ways in which visual, textual and auditory elements interact to produce meaning. On this basis, several common types of memes can be distinguished, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of memes by type

Typology	Characteristics
Character meme	The figures in the image are redefined by text, thus attributing the actions or reactions of the figures to the text
Comic meme	Consecutive images are combined to create a story that creates cause and effect
Comparison meme	Two consecutive images showing a facial expression or change in body language that indicates the reaction to two ideas
Conversation meme	Two or more identities converse, followed by an image representing the response
Description meme	Text appears with the image or superimposed to contextualise what the image is meant to represent
Reaction meme	Used to express a reaction to the content of the video
Lip Sync meme	A user uses the lyrics of a song to describe a situation, whether funny or sad, using text to describe the situation more accurately

Source: Authors own work, 2025.

Memes function as a vernacular language within digital culture, governed by their own semiotic and pragmatic conventions. Their meaning does not reside solely in isolated images or textual elements, but rather emerges from the interaction between these components and from the shared cultural knowledge that users bring to their interpretation (Shifman, 2014). Memes operate through intertextuality, continually referencing other cultural texts, including films, television series, news events and other memes, while relying on recognisable formats that users appropriate, adapt and transform (Petrova, 2021).

Beyond their playful and humorous dimensions, memes perform significant communicative and social functions within the digital environment. These functions extend beyond entertainment and are central to processes of expression, connection and meaning making in online contexts, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Communicative-social functions of memes

Communicative/social function	Description
Expression of opinions and emotions	They allow users to articulate points of view, feelings or reactions quickly, concisely and often indirectly or ironically
Community building and belonging	The use and understanding of certain memes can act as a marker of belonging to an online group or subculture, reinforcing social ties around shared values, experiences or knowledge
Social or political criticism	The humour and distorting power of memes make them a powerful tool for satire, parody and criticism of public figures, institutions or social norms
Participation in cultural conversation	Memes allow users to comment on and take a stance on current events, trends or social debates, becoming a form of participation in the digital public sphere
Transmission of information	They can act as a quick source of information on trends or events, although their reliability varies and the information is often presented in a simplified or biased way

Source: Authors own work, 2025.

The rapid pace at which memetic trends emerge and decline requires participants in this cultural environment, including brands, to maintain constant awareness of contextual dynamics and to respond with agility. This phenomenon has been described in the literature as meme jacking, a practice that involves identifying an appropriate moment to intervene in an ongoing memetic exchange in a manner that is contextually relevant and, ideally, humorous (Castellanos, 2023).

3.2. Memevertising as a Brand Strategy

Given the central role of memes within digital culture, brands have increasingly explored their strategic use in commercial communication, leading to the emergence of the concept of *memevertising*. Musicco (2023) conceptualises memevertising as a form of commercial discourse in which brands deliberately employ memes as a core rhetorical device with the objective of persuading consumers and stimulating engagement with branded content.

Memevertising is grounded in the recognition that memes constitute a distinctive communicative language through which advertising and marketing messages can be constructed (Surya et al., 2024). Its purpose is to capitalise on the familiarity, humour and viral potential inherent in memetic content in order to connect with audiences in a manner that is perceived as less intrusive and more organic than traditional advertising. By adopting the language and cultural codes associated with memes, brands aim to foster engagement, enhance brand awareness and cultivate a brand image that appears closer, more authentic and more relevant, particularly for younger audiences (Surya et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this strategy entails certain risks, as forced, inauthentic or contextually inappropriate uses of memes may provoke negative reactions and ultimately harm a brand's reputation.

3.3. Humour in Digital Communication

Humour represents another pervasive and strategically significant element within digital communication, particularly on entertainment-oriented platforms (Zuo and Wang, 2019). Its capacity to capture attention, elicit positive emotional responses and facilitate social connection renders it a valuable communicative resource for brands.

Humour in digital contexts can manifest in multiple forms. Although no single, universally accepted typology exists, certain humour types appear recurrently in online environments and are especially prevalent in brand communication on social media platforms. These forms are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Taxonomy of humour in digital media

Type of humour	Description
Self-aware or self-deprecating humour	The brand laughs at itself, its perceived flaws or the criticism it receives. This type of humour can generate perceptions of honesty, transparency and closeness, defusing potential criticism and humanising the brand.
Sarcasm and irony	Saying the opposite of what you mean, often with a critical or mocking intent. Sarcasm can be effective in generating complicity with an audience that shares certain codes or attitudes, but it can also be misinterpreted if not handled carefully.
Absurd/nonsensical humour	This is based on illogical, unexpected or incongruous situations. This type of humour is particularly popular with Generation Z and can be very effective in generating surprise and virality, although its connection to the brand's objectives may be tenuous.
Relatable/everyday humour	This is based on identification with common situations, problems or experiences shared by the audience. This humour seeks to generate empathy and closeness, making the brand seem more human and understanding.
Bold or provocative humour	Deliberately seeks to generate a reaction, sometimes bordering on the politically incorrect or challenging conventions. It can be very effective in capturing attention and generating conversation, but it also carries a greater risk of offending or alienating part of the audience.

Source: Authors own work, 2025.

4. Generation Z and the Reinterpretation of Conceptual Frameworks

Generation Z is the first cohort of true digital natives. They have grown up immersed in a technologically saturated environment characterised by ubiquitous access to the Internet and mobile devices. This context has profoundly shaped the ways in which they communicate, consume information, and relate to the world and, by extension, to brands. They constitute the dominant demographic group on platforms such as TikTok, representing 41% of users (Silverio, 2024), and are commonly described as hyperconnected and highly critical of the messages they encounter.

Members of Generation Z value immediacy, personalisation and active participation (Prakash Yadav and Rai, 2020). They show a strong preference for visual and ephemeral forms of communication and employ distinctive linguistic practices that include the intensive use of emojis, abbreviations, acronyms and, most notably, memes (Siagian and Yuliana, 2023). Social media platforms function not only as tools for maintaining social relationships but also as key spaces for entertainment, identity exploration, community formation and the pursuit of authenticity. In some cases, these spaces serve as a counterbalance to the pressures associated with offline life (Boffone, 2022). With regard to media consumption, entertainment represents a primary motivation (Fanjul et al., 2025b). Generation Z seeks content that is engaging and creative and that allows for moments of disengagement, while also using these platforms to follow trends, remain informed in a fragmented manner, and fulfil social needs related to belonging (Zuo and Wang, 2019). Their attention patterns are highly volatile, which requires content creators, including brands, to make sustained efforts to capture interest rapidly and effectively.

The relationship between Generation Z and brands is complex and often ambivalent. This cohort exhibits a high degree of scepticism towards traditional advertising, which is frequently perceived as intrusive or lacking authenticity (Briones, 2022). They place value on transparency, honesty and brands that present themselves as approachable and human (Fanjul et al., 2025). Rather than polished corporate messaging, they tend to favour communication that aligns with their own cultural references and linguistic codes. Humour, particularly in ironic, absurd or self-critical forms, constitutes an important element in how they interpret the world and engage with content (Morrone et al., 2021; Partlow and Talarczyk, 2021). Finally, Generation Z users are willing to follow brands on social media when these brands provide entertaining and high-quality content and when a perceived alignment with their values exists (Cristófol et al., 2021).

4.2. Humanised Communication, Co-Creation and Value in Use

The human-to-human (H2H) marketing approach emphasises the need to reconnect brand communication with fundamental human qualities, including emotions, needs and the search for meaning, as a response to growing perceptions of dehumanisation and mistrust (Kotler et al., 2021). This perspective promotes the adoption of humanised forms of communication that seek to dismantle corporate distance and foster relationships that are perceived as closer and more authentic.

In a complementary manner, service dominant logic, developed by Vargo and Lusch (2004), provides a theoretical framework that shifts the understanding of value away from tangible goods towards service, defined as the application of competences such as knowledge and skills for the benefit of others (Kuzgun and Asugman, 2015). Within the context of communication on platforms such as TikTok, two concepts derived from service dominant logic are particularly relevant.

The first is value co-creation. In participatory digital environments, users are not passive recipients of communication but active contributors who reinterpret, remix and participate directly in the generation of communicative value alongside brands and other users (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). The second concept is value in use. While brands may propose value through their communicative actions, the realisation and assessment of that value ultimately occur through users' individual experiences and social practices within specific contexts (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Kotler et al., 2021).

4.3. The STEPPS Framework for Analysing Virality

In order to analyse the factors that contribute to the dissemination of content on social media, the STEPPS framework proposed by Jonah Berger (2014) identifies six key principles associated with the spread of viral content. The first principle is social currency, which refers to the tendency of individuals to share content that enhances their self-image or confers a sense of status. The second principle concerns triggers, as people are more likely to share content that remains salient in their minds due to contextual cues or frequent exposure. The third principle relates to emotion, since content that elicits highly activating emotional responses, whether positive or negative, such as amazement, humour or anger, is more likely to be shared.

The fourth principle is public visibility. When behaviours or the use of products or ideas are easily observable, they are more likely to be imitated and disseminated. The fifth principle involves practical value, as information perceived as useful, practical or beneficial to others tends to encourage sharing.

Finally, the sixth principle focuses on stories. Narratives function as effective vehicles for communicating information or messages in a memorable and easily shareable form.

Together, these principles offer a framework for evaluating the viral potential of content. Nevertheless, their application and relative significance must be understood within the specific cultural and platform related contexts in which communication takes place (Berger, 2014).

5. Methodology

5.1. Methodological Approach and Design

To address the research questions and fulfil the proposed objectives, this study adopts a mixed methodological design. Two principal techniques are applied sequentially. First, a content analysis is conducted on a representative sample of posts (n = 50) published on Ryanair Spain's official TikTok account, @ryanair_es. This phase aims to systematically identify the predominant communication strategies, thematic patterns, and tonal characteristics of the content, drawing on coding frameworks informed by human-to-human marketing and STEPPS principles.

Second, an online survey is administered to a sample of Spanish TikTok users belonging to Generation Z (n = 282). The survey is designed to examine participants' perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of the brand's communication strategy. The integration of these two methodological approaches enables the triangulation of findings with existing literature, allowing the communication strategy implemented by the brand to be contrasted with its reception and perceived impact among the target audience.

5.2. Content Analysis

The material analysed consisted of the 50 video posts published on the official Ryanair Spain TikTok account, @ryanair_es, during 2023. This corpus was considered representative of the brand's communication activity on the platform in recent years. Given the audiovisual and ephemeral nature of TikTok content, the analysis encompassed the visual, textual, and auditory components of each post, as well as the contextual information available, including descriptions, hashtags and featured comments where applicable.

A systematic content analysis was conducted using a predefined coding framework derived from the theoretical review (Schreier, 2014). The coding scheme was organised into two principal analytical blocks aligned with the research objectives and theoretical foundations of the study. The first block focused on human-to-human marketing and examined the extent to which the analysed content reflected the core principles of this approach. Indicators included interaction metrics such as likes, comments, and views, as well as content type, including meme based, humorous, or informative formats. Additional variables considered tone, including humorous, sarcastic and self-aware expressions, the degree of personalisation towards the target audience, transparency of communicative intent, the appropriateness of humour and evidence of community building practices.

The second analytical block was based on the STEPPS framework and assessed the presence of the six principles of virality identified by Berger (2014) within each post. This involved evaluating whether the content encouraged discussion, evoked strong emotional responses, capitalised on current trends, generated positive emotions, facilitated ease of sharing, offered practical or useful value and incorporated an engaging narrative structure.

Each of the 50 posts was systematically coded according to these categories and indicators. For each variable, the analysis recorded the presence or absence of the relevant element or classified its manifestation according to predefined criteria, thereby ensuring consistency and analytical rigour across the dataset.

5.2. Survey

To complement the content analysis and examine audience reception of the communication strategy, an online survey was designed and administered. The target population comprised individuals belonging to Generation Z, defined as those born between 1997 and 2012 (Observatorio GenZ, 2025), who resided in Spain and were active users of the social networking platform TikTok. A final sample of 282 participants who met these criteria was obtained.

The questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative data on the perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of this population regarding the communication strategy under study. The items were designed to capture respondents' evaluations of the brand's digital communication practices and their overall reception of the content disseminated on TikTok.

The survey was distributed online during April and May 2024. A non-probabilistic sampling approach was employed, specifically snowball sampling, in order to reach participants within the defined target group. All respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, and the anonymity of their responses was guaranteed.

6. Results

6.1. Analysis of Ryanair Spain's Communication Strategy on TikTok

Below, the detailed results of the content analysis conducted on a sample of 50 posts from the official Ryanair Spain TikTok account (@ryanair_es) are presented. The posts were coded in accordance with the theoretical frameworks of H2H Marketing, presented in Table 4, and STEPPS, presented in Table 5.

Table 4. Results of the content analysis (H2H Marketing coding)

H2H Marketing	Category	Definition	Indicators	Results
Digitalisation	Impact	How do audiences interact with videos?	Number of likes Number of comments Number of views	Max. 105.5K, min. 354 Max. 834, min. 4 Max. 865.7K, min. 13.4K
Design Thinking	Topic	Type of content?	Memes, humour, information about destinations and offers	64% Humour 36% Memes
		Tone?	Formal, humorous, sarcastic or self-aware	4% Sarcastic 48% Humorous 48% Self-aware
Service-Dominant Logic	Content personalisation	Is this video personalised for Ryanair Spain's target audience?	Yes / No	100% Yes
	Transparency	Is the video transparent about Ryanair Spain's intentions?	Yes / No	54% Yes 46% No
	Appropriate humour	Does the video use humour in a way that is appropriate and relevant to its audience?	Yes / No	100% Yes
	Community building	Does the video foster a sense of community?	Yes / No	66% Yes 34% No

Source: Authors own work, 2025. *Note*: The results of the thematic category are not mutually exclusive, so the same content may have more than one component. For the analysis, the predominant one was recorded.

From an H2H marketing perspective, the findings indicate a high level of audience interaction, reflected in peaks of up to 105.5K likes and 865.7K views. The content is predominantly based on humour (64%) and memes (36%), and adopts mainly humorous (48%) and self-aware (48%) tones, which are consistent with the brand personality that Ryanair seeks to project. All analysed posts (100%) demonstrate clear personalisation for the Spanish audience. Although transparency regarding commercial intentions is not complete, with only 54% of posts explicitly acknowledging them, the humour employed is considered appropriate and contextually relevant in all cases (100%). Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the content (66%) actively promotes community building.

Table 5. Content analysis results (STEEPS coding)

STEPPS principle	Category	Definition	Indicators	Results
Social currency	Conversation potential	Does the video encourage discussion and exchange?	Yes / No	94% Yes 6% No
Triggers	Emotional triggers	Does the video evoke strong emotions?	Yes / No	42% Yes 58% No
	Leveraging trends	Does the video use current trends to increase interaction?	Yes / No	52% Yes 48% No
Emotion	Positive emotions	Does the video create positive emotions in viewers?	Yes / No	80% Yes 20% No
Advertising (Public)	Advertising (shareability)	Is the video easy to share?	Yes / No	100% Yes
Practical value	Practical value (usefulness)	Does the video create useful value for viewers?	Yes / No	4% Yes 96% No
History (Stories)	Story (narrative structure)	Does the video have an easy-to-understand and engaging narrative structure?	Yes / No	98% Yes 2% No

Source: Authors own work, 2025.

In relation to the STEPPS principles of virality, Ryanair's strategy is particularly notable for its high potential to stimulate conversation, reflected in the strong presence of social currency (94%), as well as for its clear and engaging narrative structure, with Stories identified in 98% of the posts analysed. All content is easily shareable (100%), facilitating its circulation within the platform, and the majority of posts evoke positive emotions (80%), thereby enhancing their appeal and likelihood of dissemination. By contrast, the use of strong emotional triggers is less consistent, appearing in 42% of the sample, primarily through the deployment of unusual content and unconventional vocabulary for a corporate brand. Similarly, the direct exploitation of current trends is present in just over half of the posts (52%). Finally, the practical value of the content is minimal (4%), indicating a strategic emphasis on entertainment and social connection rather than on the provision of direct informational utility.

6.2. Generation Z's Perception of Ryanair's Strategy

The survey, conducted with 282 individuals belonging to Generation Z, residing in Spain and active users of TikTok, provides insight into how this audience perceives and interprets the communication strategy of Ryanair Spain analysed previously.

First, a high level of exposure to the brand's content is confirmed, as almost all respondents (99.2%) reported having seen at least one Ryanair Spain video on TikTok. Furthermore, a substantial majority of participants (67.2%) recognised the image of the plane with a face (Figure 1) as a distinctive element of the airline's content on the platform. This finding supports the results of the content analysis, validating the successful construction of a recognisable and consistent visual identity within Ryanair Spain's TikTok communication strategy.

**Figure 1.** 'Flying face' meme and other examples analysed

Source: Ryanair Spain, 2024. *Note*: From left to right, according to tone: humorous, sarcastic, humorous and self-aware.

Regarding the perception of tone and humour, the survey results corroborate the findings of the content analysis. When asked to characterise the tone of Ryanair Spain's TikTok content, respondents most frequently selected bold (84.1%), sarcastic and self-deprecating (77%), and light-hearted and funny (57.1%). Notably, a clear majority of participants (65.9%) considered this use of humour to be appropriate and relatable.

Moreover, the most highly valued aspects of the brand's content were precisely the humorous and self-aware tone (54.8%) and the fact that the brand makes jokes about itself and its customers (52.4%). These findings indicate a broadly positive reception of Ryanair Spain's self-deprecating humour strategy and reinforce its effectiveness in resonating with Generation Z audiences (Figure 2).

Figure 2. What aspect of Ryanair Spain's content on TikTok appeals to you the most?
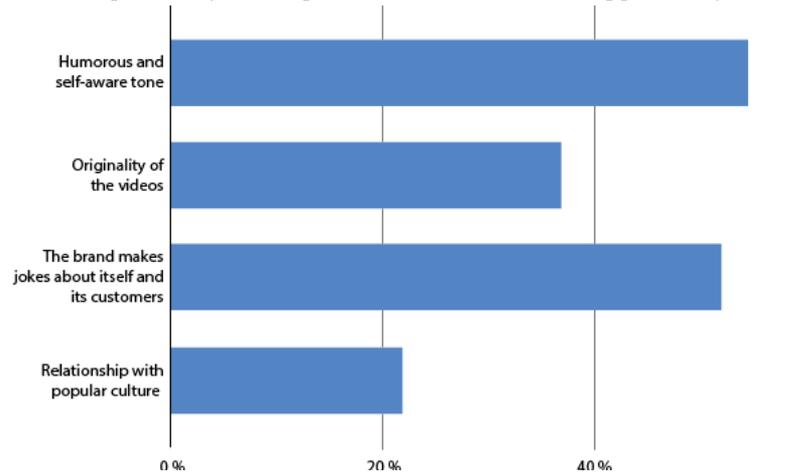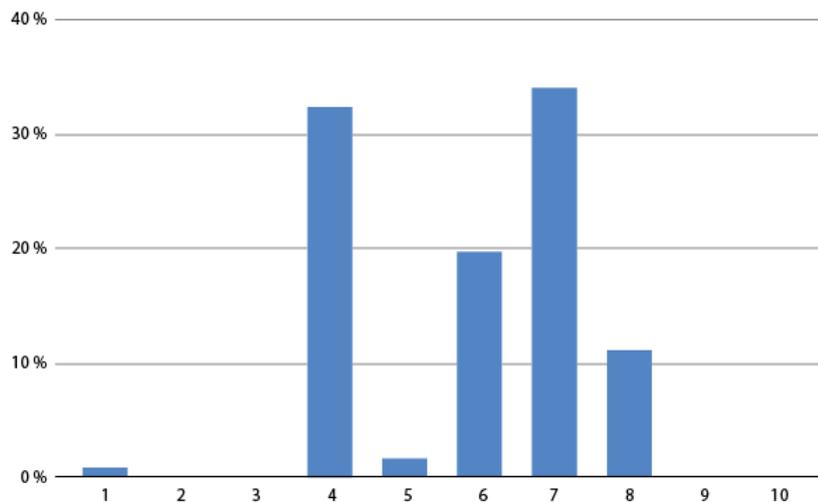

Source: Authors own work, 2025.

The strategic use of memes is likewise validated by the survey results. Two-thirds of respondents (66.7%) consider the use of memes in Ryanair Spain's TikTok content to be beneficial for the brand. More broadly, the audience exhibits a predominantly positive or neutral attitude towards the use of memes by brands, with 41.3% indicating 'I like it', 23% 'I really like it', and 35.7% expressing a neutral position.

In addition, Ryanair Spain's memes are perceived as culturally relevant to the Spanish context, with 73.8% of respondents rating them as 'somewhat relevant' and a further 25.4% as 'very relevant'. This perception reinforces the role of memes as a vehicle for cultural resonance and symbolic connection between the brand and its audience.

Finally, although 67.5% of respondents consider Ryanair Spain's videos to be effective in promoting the brand and its services, the likelihood of booking a flight based solely on this content is concentrated around two points on the scale (Figure 3): 7 out of 10 (34.1%) and 4 out of 10 (32.5%). This distribution suggests that, in line with the low level of practical value identified in the content analysis, the communication strategy is more effective at generating brand awareness and engagement than at directly driving conversion. Overall, the findings support an approach centred on entertainment, irony and cultural connection rather than immediate transactional outcomes.

Figure 3. How likely are you to book a flight with Ryanair based on its content on TikTok from 1 to 10?

Source: Authors own work, 2025.

Overall, the quantitative data confirms that Ryanair Spain's communication strategy on TikTok, characterised by daring, self-deprecating humour and the intensive use of culturally relevant memes, is positively interpreted by Spanish Generation Z. This audience prioritises perceived authenticity, cultural resonance and entertainment over traditional forms of corporate communication.

7. Discussion

Ultimately, Ryanair's success on TikTok can be attributed to its use of humour and a bold, sarcastic and self-deprecating tone, which validates the need to adapt communicative style to the expectations of Generation Z (Prakash Yadav and Rai, 2020; Siagian and Yuliana, 2023). Self-criticism regarding the brand's own weaknesses contributes to its humanisation and generates a perception of authenticity that is particularly valued by this audience (Boffone, 2022). This entertainment-oriented strategy (Zuo and Wang, 2019) suggests that humorous honesty can, in certain digital contexts, be more effective than traditional corporate discourse.

The strategic use of memes, which account for 36% of the analysed content, together with the adaptation of trends through meme jacking (Castellanos Velasco, 2023), constitutes a fundamental element of this approach, as memes function as a central communicative language within digital culture (Shifman, 2014). Memes allow the brand to express its personality, foster a sense of community (Newton et al., 2022), facilitate digital conversation (Surya et al., 2024) and construct a recognisable and memorable visual identity, as evidenced by the recurring image of the 'airplane with a face' (Figure 1). This memevertising strategy (Musicco, 2023) has proven effective in enabling the brand to connect with its audience using their own cultural and linguistic codes (Surya et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, Ryanair's strategy reflects a particular interpretation of H2H Marketing (Kotler et al., 2021), in which an authentic relationship is built through ironic complicity rather than through conventional forms of trust (Kotler et al., 2021). In line with Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), value co-creation plays a central role in the case analysed, as the brand actively incorporates and responds to user-generated content and memes. This dynamic enhances communicative interaction and distances the brand from the explicitly commercial objective typically associated with an airline, namely the sale of flight tickets. Finally, the application of the STEPPS framework (Berger, 2014) confirms the predominance of social currency, public visibility and memetic storytelling in driving virality on TikTok, while relegating practical value and underscoring the importance of contextual relevance on this platform.

8. Conclusions

This study has analysed in depth the distinctive digital communication strategy implemented by Ryanair Spain on TikTok, characterised by the intensive use of memes, self-aware humour and calculated transparency, and has evaluated its impact and perception among Spanish Generation Z users. The results confirm the central hypothesis of the research: this communicative approach, which departs

markedly from traditional advertising and marketing conventions, achieves notable resonance and engagement with its young target audience, consolidating the brand's visibility within this digital ecosystem.

The findings empirically demonstrate that the adoption of digital vernacular language, particularly humour in its self-deprecating, sarcastic and daring forms, together with memetic culture, constitutes an effective means of connecting with Generation Z. This audience values perceived authenticity, even when it borders on cynicism, as well as entertainment and the brand's capacity to participate credibly in contemporary cultural conversations. Ryanair Spain achieves this by openly laughing at itself and at commonly voiced customer complaints, thereby humanising the brand and generating a sense of rapport based on shared experiences and mutual cultural understanding. This dynamic is reinforced by the high level of cultural relevance attributed to the brand's memes by survey respondents.

This research contributes new insights to the fields of brand communication and digital visual culture by demonstrating, first, that counterintuitive communication strategies that prioritise notoriety and ironic connection over the construction of a conventionally positive brand image can be effective in specific digital niches such as TikTok. Second, it shows that communicative effectiveness on such platforms depends less on the direct promotion of products or services and more on the capacity to generate entertainment and social value, in line with principles of value co-creation. Third, it highlights that a deep understanding of platform-specific digital culture and generational sensibilities, particularly Gen Z humour and memetic language, is more decisive than the application of generic formulas for virality.

In conclusion, Ryanair Spain's communication strategy on TikTok illustrates how eudaimonic content that makes intelligent and culturally resonant use of humour, especially in its self-aware and sarcastic forms, together with memes, can generate high levels of visibility, engagement and brand awareness among Generation Z, even for a brand with a controversial service reputation. The findings emphasise the importance of entertainment, perceived authenticity, even when expressed through irony, and active participation in vernacular digital culture as key elements for connecting with young audiences. Although the direct impact on conversion appears limited, the strategy proves highly effective in terms of branding and the construction of an online community with its own shared codes. As such, it provides relevant empirical evidence for research on brand communication, digital visual culture and communicative dynamics on platforms such as TikTok.

This study is subject to certain limitations inherent in its focus on a single case, platform and time period, which restrict the generalisability of the findings. In addition, the survey data are based on self-reported perceptions and may therefore be affected by response bias, while the rapidly evolving nature of TikTok implies that trends and user attitudes can shift quickly. Furthermore, the relative scarcity of academic literature on the communicative impact of memes limits the depth of theoretical contextualisation.

Future research should therefore pursue comparative analyses involving different brands, platforms and cultural contexts in order to assess the transferability of the observed model. The use of qualitative methodologies, such as interviews or netnography, is recommended to explore in greater depth the meanings that Generation Z attributes to brand humour and memes, as well as the community dynamics that emerge around such strategies. Finally, further theoretical and empirical development is needed to advance understanding of the semiotics, persuasive functions and cultural impact of memes across different demographic groups.

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