

# Meme Meals: Exploring the Potentials and Pitfalls of Memes in Promoting Healthy Eating among Filipino Gen Z

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## ABSTRACT

Amid the growing ubiquity of memes in digital culture, several studies have explored their role in health promotion; however, limited research has specifically examined their potential to influence health information-seeking behaviors among Filipino Generation Z. This study investigates the perceived potential and limitations of internet memes in promoting healthy eating habits among this demographic. Anchored in Memetic Theory, which conceptualizes memes as cultural units that evolve and spread through imitation, and the Health Belief Model, which explores the cognitive processes influencing individuals' health-related decisions, the research employs a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative survey data with qualitative analysis. Findings indicate that memes are widely perceived as effective in enhancing engagement with nutritional messages. The highest level of agreement was recorded for the statement, "*Memes make the topic of healthy eating habits more engaging, that is why I appreciate them,*" highlighting memes' appeal and relevance to Gen Z. While several limitations were proposed—such as the risk of trivializing serious messages or the possible lack of credibility—only one concern was affirmed: the need for regular content updates to maintain relevance and accuracy. Neutral responses to other limitations suggest that Gen Z may not view humor and informality as inherently detrimental to message credibility, reflecting their nuanced digital literacy and familiarity with online content. The study concludes that memes can serve as supplementary tools in digital health communication, particularly when strategically aligned with evidence-based content

and health behavior frameworks. The integration of Memetic Theory and the Health Belief Model offers a comprehensive understanding of how humorous and shareable content can function not only as a cue to action but also as a mechanism for increasing perceived relevance and accessibility of health information. These insights contribute to more adaptive and youth-centered approaches in public health messaging, particularly in addressing dietary behaviors among digital-native populations.

**Keywords:** *Internet memes, Health communication, Filipino Gen Z, Healthy eating habits, Digital media, Social media engagement*

## INTRODUCTION

Memes are images, photographs, or videos shared on digital platforms juxtaposed with text that uses the emotion, meaning, or joke behind the original meme to communicate the author's message (Brown, 2020). Memes are often user-generated content created to provide humor and entertainment. They are particularly popular among younger generations, with 48% of Millennials (as of June 2025, ages 29 - 44) and over 50% of Generation Z (Gen Z) (as of June 2025, ages 13 - 28) reporting they send memes regularly to their social circle (Ypulse, 2019). Having combined text and images to create complex messages infused with cultural and social symbols, memes resonate with audiences by reflecting shared experiences and cultural references (Akhther, 2021). These elements make memes relatable and engaging as they leverage popular cultural references to connect with audiences on a deeper level (Aslan, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital media platforms were agog with memes (Fafowora & Salaudeen, 2022). They have evolved into a distinct form of language and a more frequent means of nonverbal communication, particularly among Gen Z (Lamba & Jain, 2025).

However, despite their potential appeal to Filipinos who value humor, limitations exist. Young audiences, as noted by Ngo (2021), tend to exhibit negative attitudes toward the commercial use of memes, which may also influence their perception of meme-based health communication. This shift in attitudes was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Botelho, 2023), raising questions about the effectiveness of memes as a medium for promoting health-related behavior. These mixed findings allow for an exploration of the potential and limitations of memes in promoting health-related behaviors among young individuals.

Furthermore, the use of memes in health communication is a strategy to keep people informed about their health and influence their behavior so they can live healthier lives (Health communication: Effective strategies, 2023). Approximately, 74% of Filipino children aged 13-15 consume fewer than three servings of vegetables daily, while over 38% consume at least one soft drink each day (Philippine food environment is failing children, 2023). There is a need to promote healthy eating habits among Filipino youth who consume fruits and vegetables less and whose intake of sugary and salty products is high.

Strong pieces of evidence have been generated by research studies in major areas of health communication, such as e-health communication, that strategic health communication may improve the quality of life (Kreps & Neuhauser, 2015). Moreover, several studies have examined the relationship between the use of memes and health promotion (Kostygina et al., 2020; Msugther & Iman, 2020; Wasike, 2022;

Myrick et al., 2022; Occa, Chen, & Teffeteller, 2025; Headley, Jones, Kanekar, & Vogelzang, 2022; Wang, Balapal, Ankem, Shyamsundar, Balaji, Kannikal, & Chong, 2023; Hong & Low, 2024; Griffith et al., 2025; Weckend & Chandra, 2024; Moya-Salazar et al., 2021; Wagner & Temmann, 2025). However, the use of social media for health communication requires adapting and reshaping content, such as memes, to various audiences and incorporating multimedia formats for convenience. There is a need then to investigate how memes may influence health information-seeking behaviors among a specific demographic.

This research that zeroes in on the Filipino Gen Zs aims to better understand how memes can be used for the promotion of healthy eating habits among this demographic by looking into their perceived potential and limitations. Specifically, it will answer the following question: *To what extent do the perceived potentials and limitations of memes promote healthy eating habits among Filipino Generation Z?*

It is important to consider the potential of humor as an information-spreading tool within the collaborative medium of social media (Burkley, 2022). Since memes are endemic on social media (Kostygina et al., 2020), they can be strategically used for the promotion of healthy eating habits, which is an important issue among the Filipino Gen Zs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Hair et al. (2017) and Lelutiu-Weinberger et al. (2015) highlight the growing importance of social media in health promotion, emphasizing how memes, as cultural elements in social media messages, present a promising strategy to enhance outreach and interaction in health interventions (Kostygina et al., 2020). Internet memes have emerged as powerful tools for promotion, capable of addressing a wide array of social, cultural, and public concerns such as health. The fact that memes are endemic to social media makes them promising as a strategy to improve health campaign interest and engagement (Kostygina et al., 2020).

In the realm of public health, health institutions use memes to promote hygiene measures, disseminate correct information, and encourage disease prevention, showcasing the versatility of memes in health promotion activities. Moya-Salazar et al. (2021) note that memes served as personal communication channels during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study of Fafowora and Salaudeen (2022) finds that memes have the potential to create awareness, highlight the negative impacts of, say for example, COVID-19, and convey criticism about how the government handles the pandemic. Memes were also used to attack, share sensitive

information, and derail a topic during the pandemic, according to Msughter and Iman (2020).

The relatable and humorous nature of memes makes them particularly effective in promoting behaviors and engaging audiences. As Malodia et al. (2022) explain, humorous content in memes enhances message recall and fosters a deeper connection with the audience. While their research focuses on brand engagement, the findings also emphasize how memes can be used to promote awareness and reinforce ideas, such as advocating for healthy eating habits or supporting social causes.

The effectiveness of memes relies heavily on humorous punchlines to capture attention and achieve their intended result, provided they are understood within the shared context of the audience (Lee et al., 2019). Humor entertains and fosters emotional connections, making the audience more receptive to the message (Dolan et al., 2019). It fosters positive attitude and greater social media engagement, as their reliability encourages sharing, amplifying the message's spread and impact (Yang, 2022).

Memes can pull a prank (Msughter & Iman, 2020), but Chou, Iles, Gaysynsky, and Klein (2025) warn that memes whose humor is disparaging may create polarization instead of establishing a common ground among people about contentious health topics. Consequently, it may not foster greater trust in science and evidence-based health information.

Zannettou et al. (2018) and Kiela et al. (2020) share the idea that although memes are often shared for entertainment purposes, they can also be created and distributed with malicious intent, targeting individuals based on attributes such as ethnicity, race, sex, gender identity, disability, disease, nationality, and immigration status. While some scholars, such as Yoon (2016), emphasize the importance of examining the potential seriousness of internet memes, it has also been noted that some memes may contain offensive content. Therefore, it is important to recognize that not all memes are positive (Rathi & Jain, 2023).

Memes also tend to quickly lose relevance or become outdated, demanding careful selection and utilization by brands. Without a thorough understanding of meme culture, brands may inadvertently offend or alienate consumers, leading to negative publicity (Arie Bowo, Anisah, & Marthalia, 2024).

While existing literature highlights the effectiveness of memes in enhancing audience engagement, raising awareness, and facilitating emotional connection in health communication, most studies have primarily focused on their role during

public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or in broader health campaigns involving hygiene, disease prevention, and mental health. Scholars have extensively examined the entertainment value, virality, and even the potential risks of humor-based or offensive content in meme communication. However, despite these developments, there remains a notable gap in research specifically addressing how memes influence health behavior change, particularly in the context of promoting healthy eating habits. Moreover, few studies explore how Filipino Generation Z—digital natives who consume and interact with memes daily—perceive both the potential and limitations of memes in shaping their dietary choices. This underexplored intersection of meme culture and nutritional health communication presents an opportunity for inquiry. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the field by examining the extent to which internet memes are perceived by Filipino Gen Z as effective tools in promoting healthy eating habits, while also identifying the limitations that may hinder their impact.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Memetic Theory**

This research study is anchored on the Memetic Theory. The term *meme* was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins defines meme as a unit of cultural transmission - an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture.

Just as genes replicate biologically, memes replicate culturally, evolving as they are shared, altered, and spread. In the context of the internet and social media, memes have evolved into short, humorous, often image-based messages that convey ideas quickly and memorably. Memes typically exhibit four key characteristics that contribute to their effectiveness as communication tools: reproducibility, as they are easy to copy, modify, and re-share; relatability, as they align with shared experiences or emotions; simplicity, as they convey messages using minimal words or visuals; and virality, as they spread rapidly through social networks, particularly among members of Generation Z.

Given the goal of the research study, which is to understand how memes can be used effectively, and what limits their influence in promoting healthy eating habits among Filipino Gen Z are, the Memetic Theory helps to explain the anatomy of virality. This helps in identifying: what memes about food and health are being widely shared, which ones spark engagement, positive reactions, or behavioral reflections, and what memetic elements (humor, visuals, trends, language) make health messages more effective. It also helps identify why memes might fail. Memes

are often humorous and casual - which can be both a strength and a weakness; important health messages might be oversimplified or misunderstood; memes can also trivialize serious health issues; a meme's message might get distorted as it is reshared and remixed.

Filipino Gen Zs are highly active online, and meme-sharing is part of their digital language. The Memetic Theory can help analyze how local humor, language, and trends affect meme effectiveness. It can also help explore how Filipino Gen Zs use memes for peer validation, identity formation, and everyday conversations, especially about food and lifestyle.

### **Health Belief Model**

The Health Belief Model (HBM) is a psychological framework developed in the 1950s by social psychologists Hochbaum, Rosenstock, and Kegels, working within the U.S. Public Health Service. It remains one of the most widely utilized models for understanding health behavior and guiding health communication strategies. The model was originally formulated to explain why individuals fail to participate in disease prevention and health promotion programs, even when such interventions are freely available. Since then, it has been adapted and extended across various public health domains, including nutrition, vaccination, exercise, and chronic disease management.

At its core, the Health Belief Model posits that individual behavior regarding health is influenced by a set of key beliefs and perceptions. These include perceived susceptibility (an individual's belief about the likelihood of contracting a health condition), perceived severity (the belief about the seriousness of a condition and its consequences), perceived benefits (the perceived effectiveness of taking a recommended health action), and perceived barriers (the perceived obstacles to taking such action). The model also incorporates cues to action—external or internal triggers that motivate behavior change—and self-efficacy, or the confidence in one's ability to successfully perform the desired health behavior.

In the context of promoting healthy eating habits among Generation Z, the Health Belief Model provides a valuable lens through which to assess the psychological and cognitive dimensions that drive or hinder dietary behavior. It allows researchers to explore not only the awareness of health risks associated with poor nutrition but also the motivations and deterrents influencing an individual's choice to adopt healthier habits.

The intersection of the Health Belief Model and Memetic Theory offers a compelling framework for examining how health messages—particularly those

disseminated through memes—can influence the behavior of Gen Z. Memetic Theory, which views memes as units of cultural transmission capable of evolving and spreading rapidly across digital networks, accounts for the popularity, shareability, and resonance of health-related content in online environments. While Memetic Theory explains the mechanisms of message dissemination and virality, the Health Belief Model provides insight into the internal cognitive processes that determine whether individuals accept and act upon these messages.

When integrated, these theories allow for a nuanced understanding of health communication. Memes that align with the constructs of the Health Belief Model—by highlighting susceptibility, conveying severity, emphasizing benefits, addressing barriers, and offering clear calls to action—have the potential to function as persuasive health messages. They may serve as effective cues to action, prompting reflection and motivating behavior change. However, the limitations of memes, such as their brevity, reliance on humor, or potential for misinterpretation, underscore the importance of balancing virality with message clarity and psychological relevance. By combining the Memetic Theory's focus on content spread with the Health Belief Model's emphasis on individual perception and behavior, researchers can better evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of memes in health promotion efforts aimed at Gen Z.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design, which integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), to investigate the perceived potential and limitations of internet memes in promoting healthy eating habits among Generation Z. The quantitative component of the study utilized a survey administered to 170 Filipino Generation Z individuals, aged 11 to 27, with 10 respondents representing each age group. A survey is a structured method of data collection commonly used to gather self-reported information on attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors from a large population (Fink, 2017). The survey was designed to assess participants' perceptions regarding the potential and limitations of internet memes in promoting healthy eating habits. To complement and contextualize the quantitative data, qualitative insights were obtained through focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 20 survey respondents. The researchers assigned a pseudonym to each participant. An FGD is a qualitative data collection technique that facilitates in-depth exploration of shared experiences, attitudes, and interpretations within a group setting (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The FGDs offered a deeper understanding of how Filipino Gen Z interprets and engages with health messages embedded in memes. Data saturation was observed with the 20

informants, as recurring themes and insights emerged consistently across the discussions.

The study was conducted entirely online, allowing researchers to reach a digitally fluent population that is naturally exposed to meme culture across various platforms. The researchers ensured ethical compliance by seeking informed consent from all respondents. This was achieved through a formal consent form that outlined the study's purpose, procedures, and the rights of participants. A purposive sampling technique was employed to deliberately select participants who had prior exposure to health-related memes and to ensure diversity across age groups and backgrounds, as this method allows researchers to identify and include individuals who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). The researcher-made survey instrument has a content validity index of 0.96. It was divided into three parts: demographic profile, the potential of memes in health promotion, and the limitations of memes in influencing behavior, with respondents rating their agreement on a five-point Likert scale. Meanwhile, FGDs used semi-structured interview guides to facilitate open-ended discussions, encouraging participants to share how the memes influenced their perspectives and habits. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics – frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for the quantitative part, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative responses to identify patterns and insights.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1**

*The Perceived Extent of the Potential of Internet Memes to Promote Healthy Eating Habits Among Filipino Gen Z*

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Descriptive Equivalent
1. Memes used in health campaigns that promote healthy eating habits are more likely to catch my attention and engage me compared to traditional approaches like flyers and brochures.	4.38	0.737	Agree
2. Memes are effective in raising awareness about healthy eating issues and in promoting positive health-	4.31	0.738	Agree

related behaviors.

3. Memes about healthy eating habits seen by individuals increase the likelihood of individuals to choose healthier lifestyle choices, such as healthier food options, nutrition, and exercise.	4.36	0.743	Agree
4. Memes combine information with entertainment that is why they are effective at enhancing individuals' perceptions of healthy eating.	4.36	0.758	Agree
5. Memes make the topic on healthy eating habits more engaging that is why I appreciate them.	4.41	0.717	Agree
6. Memes about healthy eating resonate with me and encourage me to think more positively about nutrition.	4.25	0.775	Agree
7. Memes can increase engagement of individuals with health campaigns on social media.	4.32	0.709	Agree
8. Memes used to promote healthy eating habits are memorable and leave a lasting impression.	4.32	0.751	Agree
9. Memes have evolved into a quick and effective tool for disseminating ideas and emotions.	4.35	0.717	Agree
10. The use of memes is a promising strategy to promote healthy eating habits among Filipino GenZ.	4.27	0.820	Agree
<b>Overall</b>	<b>4.33</b>	<b>0.747</b>	<b>Agree</b>

*Descriptive Equivalent: Mean values are interpreted as follows:*

1.00–1.50 = Strongly Disagree	(No Potential At All)
1.51–2.50 = Disagree	(Low Potential)
2.51–3.50 = Neutral	(Uncertain Potential)
3.51–4.50 = Agree	(High Potential)

4.51–5.00 = *Strongly Agree* (Very High Potential)

With an overall mean of 4.33, Table 1 indicates that internet memes are perceived to have high potential to be used as tools to promote healthy eating habits among Filipino Gen Z. The highest mean score (4.41) corresponds to the statement, "Memes make the topic on healthy eating habits more engaging that is why I appreciate them." Conversely, the lowest mean score (4.25) corresponds to the statement, "Memes about healthy eating resonate with me and encourage me to think more positively about nutrition."

**Table 2**

*The Perceived Extent of Limitation of Internet Memes to Promote Healthy Eating Habits Among Filipino Gen Z*

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Descriptive Equivalent
1. Constant monitoring and updating of memes is required when using memes to promote healthy eating habits.	3.54	1.094	Agree
2. Memes used in promoting healthy eating habits quickly lose their relevance.	3.14	1.034	Neutral
3. Memes about healthy eating habits often lack reliable information.	3.12	1.033	Neutral
4. Memes about healthy eating habits often contain unrelated text and images, complicating their effectiveness.	3.19	1.111	Neutral
5. Memes simplify complex nutrition facts too much, which can cause people to misunderstand healthy eating.	3.18	1.092	Neutral
6. The entertainment focus of memes can undermine the seriousness of promoting healthy eating habits.	3.12	1.042	Neutral
7. Memes promoting healthy eating habits are often shared primarily for entertainment rather than educational	3.30	1.166	Neutral

purposes.

8. Memes about healthy eating can sometimes be created and shared with malicious intent.	3.26	1.232	Neutral
9. Not all healthy eating habit memes are positive, and some may spread harmful or misleading information.	3.48	1.173	Neutral
10. Healthy eating memes may contain offensive content, which can undermine their positive impact.	3.19	1.202	Neutral
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.25</b>	<b>1.202</b>	<b>Neutral</b>

*Descriptive Equivalent: Mean values are interpreted as follows:*

1.00–1.50 = Strongly Disagree (No Limitation At All)

1.51–2.50 = Disagree (Low Limitation)

2.51–3.50 = Neutral (Uncertain Limitation)

3.51–4.50 = Agree (High Limitation)

4.51–5.00 = Strongly Agree (Very High Limitation)

With an overall mean of 3.25, Table 2 reveals a perceived uncertain limitation of memes as used to promote healthy eating habits. The highest-rated statement, with a mean of 3.54, "Constant monitoring and updating of memes is required when using memes to promote healthy eating habits." sets a high limitation in the use of memes to promote healthy eating habits among Filipino Generation Z. The lowest-rated statements with a mean of 3.12, on the other hand, are "The entertainment focus of memes can undermine the seriousness of promoting healthy eating habits." and "Memes about healthy eating habits often lack reliable information." are either seen as a limitation or not.

### Themes about the Potential of Memes for the Promotion of Healthy Eating Habits Among Filipino Gen Z

Based on the focus group discussion with 20 Filipino Gen Z informants, several key themes emerged regarding the potential of memes in promoting healthy eating habits. These themes were: (1) **Engagement and Attention-Grabbing**, (2) **Relatability and Humor**, (3) **Shareability and Virality**, (4) **Influence on Behavior and Mindset**, and (5) **Accessibility and Simplicity**.

## 1. Engagement and Attention-Grabbing

Informants emphasized that memes naturally draw attention due to their humor and digestible format. As Pablo said, *"Makatuon ka dayon, maka-catch kag attention ate kay funny baya..."* (You learn immediately. It catches your attention, sister, because it's funny.). These attributes make memes effective in capturing Gen Z's interest, particularly in contrast to more traditional health communication methods.

The high mean score of 4.33 from the quantitative findings reinforces this perception, supporting the assertion of Hair et al. (2017) and Lelutiu-Weinberger et al. (2015) that social media plays a significant role in health promotion. Memes, as cultural elements, enhance outreach by engaging audiences in non-traditional yet impactful ways (Kostygina et al., 2020). Their humorous appeal boosts message recall and connection, as argued by Malodia et al. (2022), aligning well with Gen Z's content preferences.

## 2. Relatability and Humor

Memes are seen by the informants as highly relatable and reflective of Gen Z's lived realities, making them ideal vehicles for delivering meaningful messages through humor. As Delia said, *"Mas makarelate kaayo mi... kay relatable sya para sa amoa nga generation."* (We can relate. It's relatable for our generation.). Daniel explained, *"Their humorous or catchy nature can simplify complex information, making healthy choices feel more accessible."*

This mirrors the views of Dolan et al. (2019) and Yang (2022), who noted that humor not only entertains but also strengthens emotional bonds between content and audience, resulting in higher levels of social media engagement. Humor, therefore, becomes more than an entry point; it builds a sustained connection to the message.

## 3. Shareability and Virality

The informants frequently discussed how memes are embedded in their daily digital habits and how quickly they can be shared, enhancing their viral potential. Narcisso shared, *"Everytime nga mag-open ka sa Facebook, naa jud kay makita nga memes."* (Every time you open Facebook, you always see memes). Furthermore, Mariela said, *"Easy to share, which helps find the message quickly, especially among young people."*

This resonates with Moya-Salazar et al. (2021), who observed how memes were widely utilized by institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic to disseminate critical health information. Their versatility lies in their ability to blend education with entertainment, making them a potent medium for spreading health messages rapidly and organically.

#### **4. Influence on Behavior and Mindset**

Several participants recognized the persuasive power of memes to influence decisions and subtly nudge behavior toward healthier choices. Juanita said that *"It reminds me to eat healthier foods... and boost my mood."* Diyesabel added that *"Maigo jud mi and maka realize na tama sad no na we should balance our diet."* (It resonates with us and makes us realize that it's true: we should balance our diet). *"It has something to do with influence... Gen Z kay more on awat-awat man gud ta..."* (It has something to do with influence because Gen Z tends to copy others.), Emmanuel explained.

This aligns with the idea that memes can function as behavioral prompts. Informants' acknowledgment that Gen Z often mimics online content supports the idea that memes are persuasive tools, capable of shaping behavior and mindset. This further validates Moya-Salazar et al.'s (2021) insights into the power of meme culture during public health crises.

#### **5. Accessibility and Simplicity**

Informants appreciated how memes can be created and understood easily, with low resource requirements and high accessibility via social media platforms. Pedro said that *"Dali ra sya mabuhat... then maka-post dayon ka sa social media."* (It's easy to make, then you can post it right away on social media.). Francisco added that *"Accessible ra sya tanan as long as naka-connect ka sa internet."* (It's accessible to everyone as long as you're connected to the internet.).

These features echo Malodia et al.'s (2022) view that simplicity in messaging, especially when combined with humor, facilitates better understanding and stronger connections with audiences. The use of memes democratizes content creation and advocacy, allowing even grassroots actors to participate in public health promotion.

In conclusion, the thematic analysis, supported by both informant insights and literature, affirms the role of memes as effective tools for promoting healthy eating habits among Filipino Gen Z. With a high mean score of 4.33 validating their positive reception, memes stand out for their ability to engage, relate, spread, influence, and simplify health messages. These findings align with Memetic Theory, which suggests that ideas—like memes—act as cultural units that replicate, evolve,

and spread within a population much like genes, making them powerful carriers of behavior and beliefs in the digital age. When crafted with humor, relevance, and clarity, memes become memorable and easily shareable, facilitating the rapid transmission of health-promoting messages. Moreover, the effectiveness of memes in subtly influencing dietary behavior can also be explained through the Health Belief Model (HBM). This model posits that behavior change is influenced by perceived susceptibility, severity, benefits, and barriers. Memes, through relatable content and humor, can reduce perceived barriers to healthy eating by making it appear more achievable and socially acceptable, while also increasing perceived benefits and cues to action in a light, non-threatening way. Thus, memes do not merely entertain—they function as digital prompts that align with both memetic and health communication frameworks to encourage healthier lifestyle choices.

**Table 3**

*Summary of Themes of the Potential of Memes for the Promotion of Healthy-Eating Habits Among Filipino Gen Zs*

Theme	Brief Description
<b>1. Engagement and Attention-Grabbing</b>	Memes capture Gen Z's attention with humor and visual appeal. Their digestible format makes them more engaging than traditional health messages.
<b>2. Relatability and Humor</b>	Humor makes memes feel personal and reflective of Gen Z's experiences. This emotional connection enhances message retention and makes complex ideas simpler.
<b>3. Shareability and Virality</b>	Memes fit naturally into Gen Z's digital habits. Their ease of sharing enables fast, organic dissemination—ideal for reaching a wide audience quickly.
<b>4. Influence on Behavior and Mindset</b>	Memes can influence attitudes and encourage healthy behavior change. Informants noted that memes prompted

reflection on their food choices.

## 5. Accessibility and Simplicity

Memes are low-cost, easy to create, and accessible via social media. Their simplicity allows even non-experts to participate in public health communication.

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## Themes about the Limitations of Memes for the Promotion of Healthy Eating Habits Among Filipino Gen Z

Based on the focus group discussion with 20 Filipino Gen Z informants, several key themes emerged regarding the limitations of memes in promoting healthy eating habits. These themes are: (1) **Ephemerality of Trends and Need for Constant Updating**, (2) **Difficulty in Establishing Clarity and Connection Between Meme and Message**, (3) **Risk of Misinterpretation or Misinformation**, (4) **Subjectivity of Humor and Relatability**, and (5) **Uncertainty Due to Lack of Familiarity with Meme-Based Campaigns**.

### 1. Ephemerality of Trends and Need for Constant Updating

Memes are highly trend-dependent and quickly become outdated. To stay effective, they require constant monitoring and updating to match current internet culture and Gen Z interests. Mariela emphasized that *"Trends change fast. So, updating memes keeps them fresh and relatable."* Juan added that, *"It needs an update for it to stay relevant and also engaging and para pod nga naay impact."* (It needs to be updated to stay relevant and engaging, and also so it will have an impact.). Vico is worried, saying, *"Using outdated memes might make the message feel less relatable."*

These responses highlight the short-lived nature of meme trends. If not regularly updated, memes can lose relevance and fail to engage the Gen Z audience. This implies a high maintenance cost for health campaigns relying on meme-based communication.

This study also underscores limitations identified in previous research. While Fafowora and Salaudeen (2022) highlight memes' ability to create awareness and spark public dialogue, Msughter and Iman (2020) caution that memes can derail discussions or spread sensitive content—a concern echoed by respondents who emphasized the need to constantly monitor and update meme content. The

observation that meme relevance is fleeting aligns with the warning by Arie Bowo et al. (2024) that outdated or poorly understood memes can backfire, leading to alienation or miscommunication. The data from this study confirms these concerns, suggesting that meme-based health communication must be agile and culturally attuned to avoid becoming ineffective or counterproductive.

## **2. Difficulty in Establishing Clarity and Connection Between Meme and Message**

Several participants found it difficult to link the meme to the intended health message. This disconnect weakens the educational or persuasive power of the meme. *"There were some statements that felt vague or lacked real-life context, which made it hard to decide,"* Vico said. *"Dili nako makita btaw unsay connection sa memes ug sa product."* (I really can't see the connection between the meme and the product.), Pedro added. Narcisso explained, *"Naay uban memes nga imbis na simplify siya, imoha siyang gina lisod... murag lisod siya sabton."* (There are some memes that, instead of simplifying the message, actually make it more complicated. They're quite hard to understand.).

These quotes show a recurring issue: if the humor or structure of a meme overshadows the message, it leads to confusion or misinterpretation. Clarity and contextual relevance are key, especially for health-related topics. This reinforces Msughter and Iman's (2020) warning that memes can derail discussions or distort sensitive messages when the meme's form or humor overpowers its function as a health communication tool.

## **3. Risk of Misinterpretation or Misinformation**

Because memes are informal and often rely on irony or exaggeration, they are susceptible to being misunderstood or misused. This can potentially spread misinformation rather than promote healthy habits. Narcisso said that, *"Basin maka spread siyag misinformation so ang mga tao baya ang Pinoy kay dali ra baya mag tuo-tuo."* (It might spread misinformation because, you know, Filipinos tend to believe things easily.). Furthermore, Emmanuel said, *"Memes are funny... pero usahay pud gina make sya sa content nga kanang very serious so ddto ga gaka unstable."* (Memes are funny, but sometimes they're used for content that's serious, so that's where it becomes unstable.).

This theme suggests that memes, if not properly contextualized, can mislead rather than educate. Participants were cautious of humor's dual-edged nature—memes may engage, but they may also trivialize or distort complex health issues. Again, this reflects findings from previous studies (e.g., Msughter & Iman, 2020) warning of the risks involved when meme content is not adequately curated. If left unchecked or misunderstood, memes can amplify misinformation or alienate

audiences, especially if they rely too heavily on sarcasm or obscure internet references.

#### **4. Subjectivity of Humor and Relatability**

What is humorous or engaging to one person may not resonate with another. This is especially true across demographic lines, making memes less universally effective. As Emmauel said, *"It is somehow... not relatable sakoa pero naa syay context... so mao lage to ganina maybe it's not effective to me or maybe effective to some."* (It's somehow not relatable for me, but it has context. So, like I said earlier, maybe it's not effective for me, but maybe it is for others.). Narcisso added, saying, *"Depende gyapon sa imo kung muigo sa imo ang meme bitaw."* (It still depends on you if the meme hits you or not.). Vico shared a personal note, saying, *"Lisod paka taw on... I can easily tell if the meme is effective kung like nakuha niya akoang giti."* (There are people who are hard to please, but I can easily tell if the meme is effective if it makes me smile).

These responses underscore the subjective nature of humor and meme effectiveness. A meme's success depends heavily on audience-specific relevance, which challenges its use for broad public health campaigns. The risk that Arie Bowo et al. (2024) identified—of memes alienating audiences when they're poorly understood—is evident here, especially when the humor doesn't land or the audience doesn't relate to the meme format.

#### **5. Uncertainty Due to Lack of Familiarity with Meme-Based Campaigns**

Some informants expressed confusion or indecision because meme-based health promotion is a novel idea for them. This reflects a gap in understanding how memes can be used strategically beyond entertainment. Narcisso expressed, saying, *"Galibog ko ate kay feel man gud nako naa syay limitations pero feel sad nako wala."* (I'm confused, sister, because I feel like it has limitations, but at the same time, I also feel like it doesn't have limitations.). Delia added, saying, *"Dili ko sure sa iyang limitations nga side... bag-o paman jud sya nga idea saakoa."* (I'm not sure about its limitations because it's a new idea for me.). And Pedro said, *"Neutral ko since... makakita ko'g memes, naa man gyud uban pud memes nga dle sya connected."* (I'm neutral because when I see memes, there are some that aren't connected at all).

These statements reflect a conceptual barrier: some Gen Z respondents, despite being digital natives, are unfamiliar with meme-based advocacy in health. This unfamiliarity may hinder message reception and campaign success. It suggests that even when the format is native to the platform, its purpose (beyond entertainment) is not always clear, especially if the meme doesn't strike a balance between humor, clarity, and health education.

This theme reveals an important insight: many Gen Z individuals haven't encountered memes as structured tools for health promotion, resulting in **indecisiveness or neutral responses**.

In conclusion, while memes offer a unique and engaging avenue for health communication among Gen Z, this study reveals several critical limitations that must be addressed for their effective use. From the perspective of Memetic Theory, memes function as cultural replicators—units of information that spread through imitation. However, this very characteristic makes them vulnerable to rapid obsolescence; their value and virality depend on current trends and cultural relevance. As such, health campaigns must continuously update meme content to ensure ongoing resonance, a task that requires significant creative and cultural agility. Moreover, when humor overtakes substance, the meme's educational function may be compromised—leading to confusion, misinterpretation, or the unintentional spread of misinformation. This issue also connects with the Health Belief Model (HBM), which emphasizes that health behavior is influenced by individuals' perceptions of severity, susceptibility, benefits, and barriers. If the health message in a meme is unclear or misunderstood, it may fail to influence these perceptions or provide effective cues to action. The subjectivity of humor and varying digital literacies across audiences further complicate the use of memes as a universal tool for health advocacy. Participants' unfamiliarity with meme-based health campaigns suggests a gap in both digital health literacy and in the perceived credibility of informal media. These limitations echo prior research that, while memes can trigger dialogue and awareness, their misuse can derail discourse or dilute message clarity. Therefore, while meme-based strategies hold potential, they must be carefully designed, frequently refreshed, and sensitively tailored to the audience to maximize impact and avoid unintended consequences.

**Table 4**

*Summary of Themes of the Limitations of Memes for the Promotion of Healthy-Eating Habits Among Filipino Gen Zs*

Theme	Brief Description
1. Trend Dependency	Memes must be constantly updated to stay effective and relevant.
2. Message Clarity Issues	Difficulty linking meme content

	clearly to health messages.
<b>3. Risk of Misinformation</b>	Memes may spread false or confusing health information.
<b>4. Humor is Subjective</b>	Relatability and humor vary, reducing universal appeal.
<b>5. Unfamiliarity with Memes as Health Tools</b>	Limited prior exposure to meme-based campaigns leads to confusion or neutrality.

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## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the potential and limitations of memes in promoting healthy eating habits among Filipino Gen Z. The findings highlighted the engagement power of memes, using humor and relatability to capture attention and influence behavior. However, challenges such as the ephemerality of meme trends, potential for misinterpretation, and varying humor perceptions were identified. Additionally, some participants lacked familiarity with meme-based health advocacy, impacting the overall effectiveness.

Memes, as informed by Memetic Theory, act as replicable cultural units that spread and evolve within populations, making them a powerful tool for health communication. However, their rapid obsolescence and potential for misunderstanding challenge their effectiveness in promoting healthy eating habits. The Health Belief Model (HBM) further underscores this, suggesting that health behaviors are influenced by individuals' perceptions of the severity, susceptibility, benefits, and barriers related to health actions. If memes are unclear or misinterpreted, they may fail to trigger the necessary cues to action or shift these perceptions.

To maximize the impact of meme-based health campaigns, content should be frequently updated to remain relevant and ensure clear communication. Policymakers should incorporate meme strategies into public health frameworks, ensuring that memes are grounded in accurate, evidence-based information. Promoting digital health literacy among Gen Z will help them critically engage with memes and reduce the risk of misinformation. Furthermore, additional research is needed to refine the intersection of Memetic Theory and the Health Belief Model, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of digital health advocacy.

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