Brands, Don’t Try Too Hard: How Internet Slang Impacts Evaluations of Brand Messages

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ABSTRACT

Brands can strive for relevance by incorporating internet slang into their social media messages, but how much internet slang should they use? Building on identity signaling and persuasion knowledge, the current research combines text analysis of thousands of Twitter data with controlled experiments to study the effect of internet slang on consumers’ evaluations of brand messages. The findings illustrate an inverted U-shaped relationship between internet slang intensity and message evaluations. This relationship is flattened by higher brand trust and non-promotional message intent. Furthermore, the studies demonstrate that the negative effect of high internet slang intensity on message evaluations is driven by consumers’ heightened persuasion knowledge. That is, high internet slang intensity increases the salience of brands’ manipulative intent. These results assist marketers in crafting successful marketing messages while leveraging internet language trends such as internet slang.

Keywords: Brand linguistics, identity signaling, persuasion knowledge
Track: Advertising & Marketing Communications

1. Objectives of Research

Within the upcoming five years, brands are expected to allocate 23.5% of their marketing budgets to social media spending (Moorman, 2022). Having an effective social media presence helps brands to generate social media engagement that, in turn, can drive favorable brand evaluations and increase sales (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019; Liadeli, Sotgiu, and Verlegh, 2023; Marchand, Hennig-Thurau, and Flemming, 2021). Still, few social media managers are able to compose successful marketing messages that get consumers' attention (Villarroel Ordenes et al., 2019), highlighting the need to identify factors that might make communications more appealing.

Recent academic theorizing has demonstrated that textual cues play a central role in this regard. For instance, consumers engage more with brand messages that contain negations (Pezzuti and Leonhardt, 2022), words expressing certainty (Pezzuti, Leonhardt, and Warren, 2021), and repetitions or alliterations (Villarroel Ordenes et al., 2017). But while these results provide valuable insights into brand linguistics (Carnevale, Luna, and Lerman 2017), much remains to be known about the language used by brands on social media specifically.

Social media communication differs from traditional marketing channels in many ways, including its relationship-building nature (Liadeli et al., 2023). The language used on social media by both consumers and brands is thus much more casual, spontaneous, and conversational compared to the one used in other marketing contexts. In particular, with the goal of fitting into internet culture and pursuing brand relevance (Keller 2000), brands often incorporate internet slang into their messages (Hoover, 2023). Building on existing research (Barseghyan, 2013), we define internet slang as a *set of various forms of casual language that emerge, evolve, and are used online to reflect internet trends and culture*. Examples of internet slang are acronyms (e.g., "LOL"), abbreviations (e.g., "thx"), emoticons (e.g., ":)"), and keyboard symbols (e.g., "<3"). We consider emojis (e.g., "😊") as expressions of internet slang too.

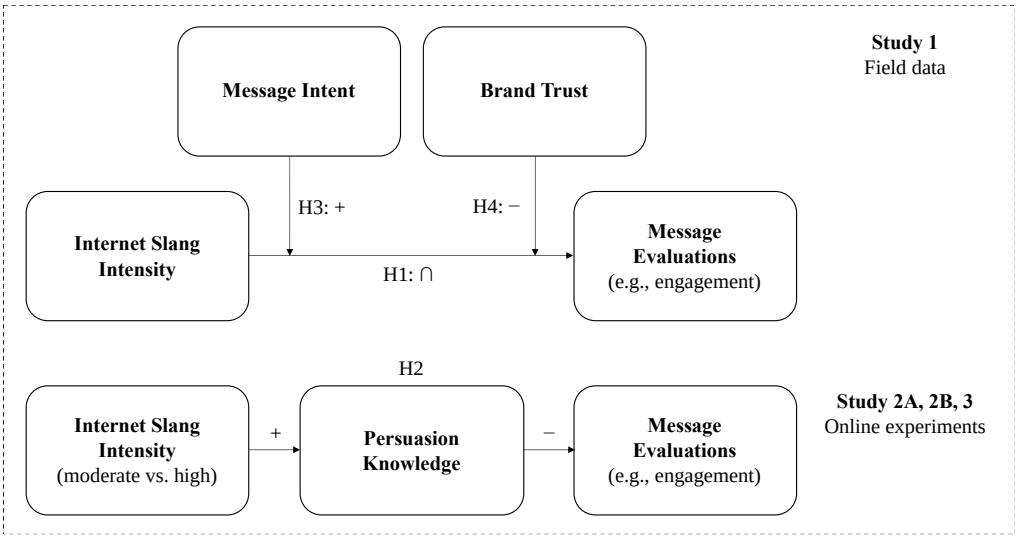
The different sub-categories of this online casual language exhibit distinctive characteristics. For instance, facial emojis can convey emotional information (Smith and Rose, 2020), non-facial emojis might be used to decorate one's communication message (Fadhil et al., 2018), while abbreviations are sometimes employed to save keystrokes (Barseghyan, 2013). However, despite these differences, we are interested in one characteristic that makes them similar. We argue that all the sub-categories of internet slang are imbued with symbolic meaning and serve as signals of identity (Gal 2015). First, this type

of language is usually associated with younger generations (Li, Chan, and Kim, 2019). Second, internet slang elements vary significantly in popularity over time, with some being highly trendy and others extremely outdated, depending on the specific period (Yurieff, 2021). Hence, senders might use this form of language as a signal to self-present as youthful, in touch with the latest trends, and knowledgeable about internet culture. Thus, we propose that brands use internet slang in their communications to signal a trendy and up-to-date identity to consumers. The question then is, how much internet slang should they use in order to elicit favorable responses?

Our main prediction is that there should be an inverted U-shaped relationship between internet slang intensity in a brand social media message and message evaluations (e.g., engagement with a social media post; H1). We are particularly interested in the difference between a moderate and high intensity, and we draw upon the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994) to explain the negative effect of high internet slang intensity. We posit that greater use of internet slang results in more negative evaluations because it heightens consumers' persuasion knowledge, the belief that brands are trying to manipulate them (Kirmani and Zhu, 2007). Essentially, given the signaling value of internet slang, consumers exposed to brand messages with high internet slang intensity should be more likely to think that the brand is trying to ingratiate and manipulate them (H2).

We further hypothesize that message intent (promotional vs. non-promotional) and brand trust moderate the negative effect of internet slang intensity on message evaluations. First, using high internet slang intensity in a non-promotional message, compared to a promotional message, should reduce the perceived manipulativeness of brands (H3). Similarly, higher brand trust should make consumers less skeptical of brands' ulterior motives, leading them to tolerate a higher internet slang intensity before perceiving the brand as manipulative (H4). To sum up, non-promotional messages and high brand trust should flatten the inverted U-shaped relationship between internet slang intensity and message evaluations. Figure 1 below shows our conceptual model with associated studies.

Figure 1. Conceptual model and associated studies.



2. Research Method

We test our theorizing in a multimethod investigation. In Study 1, we perform textual analysis of more than 18,000 brand tweets. We show that there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between internet slang intensity and engagement, and that such relationship is flattened by brand trust and message intent. Study 2A and Study 2B replicate the inverted U-shaped effect in a controlled setting by manipulating internet slang intensity for two different product categories and using different internet slang elements. Study 3 focuses on the difference between moderate and high internet slang intensity to test mediation by persuasion knowledge. In this study, we also rule out two alternative explanations of the negative effects of high internet slang intensity (i.e., processing fluency and brand competence).

3. Major Results

3.1. Study 1: Field data

Data description. Our dataset includes 18,074 brand tweets posted between November 2021 and November 2022 by the official Twitter account of 26 international brands. We selected part of the brands from Forbes' *Most Valuable Brands 2021*, and part of the brands from Twitter's *Best of Tweets 2022*. Thus, our sample includes brands belonging to a variety of industries (e.g., food, tech, entertainment), and having diverse social media presences.

Dependent measure. We measured engagement as the sum of the number of likes, retweets, and replies each tweet received (Pezzuti and Leonhardt, 2022).

Main predictors. Our main predictors are the linear and quadratic terms of internet slang intensity. We calculated internet slang intensity as the sum of emojis, emoticons, abbreviations, acronyms, slang words, etc. We assessed the presence of these elements using LIWC (Pennebaker et al., 2015). The other two relevant predictors are brand trust and message intent (moderators). We measured brand trust by recruiting a sample of participants on Prolific and asking them to evaluate the brands of our dataset on a measure of brand trust. For message intent, we created a custom-made dictionary including words related to sales promotions (Cascio Rizzo, Berger, and Villarroel Ordenes, 2023).

Control variables. We accounted for twenty covariates that could be responsible for the effects of internet slang intensity on engagement (e.g., word count, positive and negative emotions, social words, cognitive processing, readability). Given the nested structure of the data, we also included random effects for brands. Finally, we controlled for time fixed effects.

Estimation approach. Our DV, engagement, is count and over-dispersed (M_{eng} = 4,113.46, Var_{eng} = 483,515,723), making negative binomial regression the most appropriate estimation method.

Key results. Consistent with H1, we found a significant positive linear and a significant negative quadratic term of internet slang intensity on engagement (linear: β_1 = .133, $p < .001$; quadratic: β_2 = -.077, $p < .001$), even after accounting for the list of controls previously described (linear: β_1 = .151, $p < .001$; quadratic: β_2 = -.069, $p < .001$). Further, as predicted by H3 and H4, non-promotional brand messages attenuate the negative effects of internet slang intensity on engagement (β_3 = -.170, p = .016), as well as higher brand trust (β_4 = .139, $p < .001$). To increase the reliability of our findings, we conducted various robustness checks and found consistent results across all the robustness checks.

3.2. Study 2A: Main effect, soda brand

The main goal of Study 2A is to test H1 in a controlled context by manipulating internet slang intensity, and examining its effect on message evaluations. The pre-registration of Study 2A can be found here: https://aspredicted.org/RC2_3KY.

Participants and design. We recruited 210 participants on Prolific. Seventeen participants failed the attention check. Thus, the final sample included N = 193 participants (M_{age} = 40.08, SD = 12.38; 49.2% female).

Stimuli and procedure. First, we introduced all participants to Jamu, a fictitious non-alcoholic soda brand. Their task was to read and evaluate the tweet Jamu prepared to promote

the new soda. Then, we randomly assigned participants to three experimental conditions in a single-factor (internet slang intensity: absent, moderate, high) between-subject design. In the absent condition, participants read a tweet that did not include any internet slang element. In the moderate condition, participants read a tweet that included three internet slang elements (two emojis and one netspeak term). In the high condition, participants read a tweet that included six internet slang elements (four emojis and two netspeak terms). We selected these numbers based on the distribution of the data collected in Study 1.

Measures. After showing participants the tweets, we measured the dependent variable. Participants were asked to evaluate the message on a 3-item bipolar scale adapted from Thompson and Malaviya (2013; $\alpha = .97$). Then, we checked for our manipulation by asking participants their perceptions of the internet slang intensity included in the tweet. Finally, participants completed an attention check and some demographic questions.

Key results. First, a one-way ANOVA with internet slang intensity as the dependent variable confirmed the effectiveness of our manipulation ($F(1, 190) = 93.95$, $p < .001$). Second, consistent with our theorizing, a one-way ANOVA with message evaluations as the dependent variable showed a significant linear effect ($F(1, 190) = 16.54$, $p < .001$) and a significant quadratic effect ($F(1, 190) = 6.18$, $p = .014$) of internet slang intensity. Participants in the high condition evaluated the brand message significantly more negatively than participants in the moderate condition ($M_{high} = 3.81$ vs. $M_{moderate} = 4.92$; $p < .001$), and participants in the absent condition ($M_{high} = 3.81$ vs. $M_{absent} = 4.90$; $p < .001$). Finally, the difference between the moderate and absent condition was directional but not significant ($M_{moderate} = 4.92$ vs. $M_{absent} = 4.90$; $p = .994$).

3.3. Study 2B: Main effect, cosmetics brand

The main goal of Study 2B is to show the robustness of the previous finding (H1) in different domains. The pre-registration of Study 2B can be found here: https://aspredicted.org/BXB_NSZ

Participants and design. We collected a sample of 210 participants on Prolific. Six participants failed the attention check. Hence, the final sample included N = 204 participants ($M_{age} = 42.53$, $SD = 12.53$; 48.5% female).

Stimuli and procedure. We followed the same design and measures from Study 2A. The differences from Study 2A are that (1) we used a fictitious cosmetics brand that aimed to promote a lip gloss line, and (2) we used different internet slang elements in the tweets.

*Key results***.** First, a one-way ANOVA with social media slang intensity as the dependent variable revealed the effectiveness of our manipulation ($F(1, 201) = 46.26$, $p < .001$). Second, consistent with our prediction, a one-way ANOVA showed a significant linear effect ($F(1, 201) = 6.93$, $p = .009$) and a marginally significant quadratic effect ($F(1, 201) = 7.63$, $p = .064$) of internet slang intensity on message evaluations. Participants in the high condition evaluated the tweet significantly more negatively than participants in the moderate condition ($M_{high} = 4.28$ vs. $M_{moderate} = 5.03$; $p = .020$), and participants in the absent condition ($M_{high} = 4.28$ vs. $M_{absent} = 4.95$; $p = .018$). The difference between the moderate and absent condition was directional but not significant ($M_{moderate} = 5.03$ vs. $M_{absent} = 4.95$; $p = .945$).

3.4. Study 3: Mediation and alternative explanations

Study 3 has two main goals. First, to test the hypothesized underlying process (H2). Our prediction is that a high (vs. moderate) internet slang intensity activates more consumers' persuasion knowledge. Second, to test two possible alternative explanations of the negative effects of high social media slang intensity on consumers (i.e., processing fluency and brand competence). The pre-registration of Study 3 can be found here: https://aspredicted.org/FTH_5B3

Participants and design. We collected a sample of 150 participants on Prolific. Five participants failed the attention check. Thus, the final sample included N = 145 participants ($M_{age} = 37.07$, $SD = 11.18$; 48.3% female).

Stimuli and procedure. We used the same design and stimuli from Study 2A. We randomly assigned participants to two experimental conditions in a single-factor (internet slang intensity: moderate, high) between-subject design.

Measures. After showing participants the tweets, we measured the dependent variable, message evaluations ($\alpha = .97$). Next, we collected process measures. First, we measured persuasion knowledge ($\alpha = .88$). Second, we measured brand competence ($\alpha = .94$). Third, we measured processing fluency with one item. Finally, participants completed the same manipulation check, attention check, and demographics used in the previous studies.

Key results. First, a one-way ANOVA confirmed the effectiveness of our manipulation ($M_{high} = 5.10$ vs. $M_{moderate} = 3.05$; $F(1, 143) = 62.48$, $p < .001$). Then, a set of one-way ANOVAs showed that high vs. moderate internet slang intensity decreased message evaluations ($M_{high} = 4.39$ vs. $M_{moderate} = 4.84$, $SD = 1.19$; $F(1, 143) = 3.84$, $p = .052$), and activated higher persuasion knowledge ($M_{high} = 2.61$ vs. $M_{moderate} = 1.84$; $F(1, 143) = 16.27$, $p < .001$). Brand competence did not vary by condition ($p = .127$). However, participants in the

high vs. moderate condition rated the tweet as marginally more difficult to read (p = .059). To test the mediating role of persuasion knowledge as the underlying process, we conducted a mediation analysis (model 4, PROCESS macro) with 10,000 bootstrap samples. We found a significant indirect effect of persuasion knowledge on message evaluations (95% CI = [-.81, -.24]). Indicating full mediation, including persuasion knowledge as the mediator led the direct effect of internet slang intensity to be reduced to non-significance (95% CI = [-.37, .45]). Then, to assess the possible alternative processes, we estimated a parallel mediation analysis with persuasion knowledge and processing fluency as competing mediators. Results showed that, even after including processing fluency as a parallel mediator, the indirect effect through persuasion knowledge remained significant (*95*% CI = [-.75, -.19]). In contrast, the indirect effect through processing fluency was non-significant (95% CI = [-.17, .00]).

4. Implications

With the current research, we contribute to prior literature in several ways. First, we deepen our understanding of how brand language in social media messages influences consumers. We contribute to this emerging research area by focusing on internet slang, the language that reflects internet culture and trends. We show that the intensity of internet slang used can have an important effect on message evaluations (e.g., engagement). Specifically, we find that it is heightened consumers' persuasion knowledge to drive its negative effects, even when controlling for two alternative explanations previously investigated by the literature (i.e., processing fluency and brand competence).

Second, we contribute to the literature on identity signaling and self-presentation. While prior research in this area has mainly focused on material products as signals of identity (Gal, 2015), we add to this work by examining language as a specific form of non-physical signal that brands might use to self-present online. Existing theorizing demonstrates that a signal must be visible to be effective (Spence, 1978; Veblen, 1899/2017), thereby suggesting a positive, linear association between number of signals and impression formation. However, we find a curvilinear relationship between internet slang intensity and message evaluations. Our results seem to suggest that too many identity signals might backfire.

Finally, our findings might have practical implications too. Marketers often leverage internet language trends with the intention of crafting more appealing social media posts, but they do not always succeed. Our findings might offer new insights. In our field study, we found that, on average, for a 37-word post, engagement starts decreasing when the post

includes 2.5–3 elements of internet slang. This turning point changes depending on the level of trust toward the brand, and the post intent.

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