

The Effect of Different Internet Slang Styles on Brand Personality and Ad Persuasion

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Abstract. Internet slang, the product of computer-mediated communication, is being widely used in advertising in China. However, Chinese advertisers are still exploring appropriate methods to integrate this slang into their ads for positive effects. To this end, we conducted two experiential studies. The results reflected that different perceived styles of internet slang enhance the five dimensions of brand personality as discussed in this publication. Furthermore, the congruence between internet slang style and brand personality can lead to positive effects on consumers' attitude toward the brand and the ad itself. The findings of this research can help advertisers use the most suitable internet slang for building the desired brand personality and achieving the most positive outcomes.

Keywords. Internet Slang Style, Brand Personality, Ad Persuasion

Introduction

Internet slang is the product of computer-mediated communication [1]. In China, the prevalence of cyber culture has generated a significant amount of popular internet slang. People, especially the younger generation, use internet slang in their daily lives as an entertaining way to express themselves. Internet slang is also widely used in advertising in China. For example, McDonald used the internet slang "么么哒" (Muah, a mimetic word for kissing) to promote its "Ice-Cream Day". As internet slang has become a new trend, advertisers in China are trying to utilise this practice and are exploring a useful way to integrate internet slang into their advertisements to achieve more powerful effects on attitude toward the ad and the brand. A potential factor affecting the effectiveness of internet slang can be its style. Prior research by Gong [2] has identified seven styles of internet slang used in China: Overtness, Stylishness, Emotivity, Harshness, Candor, Amiability and Liberty. However, research on the impact of internet slang style in advertising, to-our-knowledge, is non-existent. This research seeks to fill this gap and further understanding of the effect of internet slang styles in advertising, by exploring how different styles influence both brand personality and advertising persuasion.

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1. Theoretical framework and hypothesis developments

1.1. The persuasive advantages of internet slang

Internet slang (a.k.a., internet language, cyber-slang) refers to “a variety of slang languages used by people in different communities in the cyber space” ([3] p. 232). People, especially the youth, invent internet slang by using acronyms (e.g., LOL: laugh out loud, [1]) or time-saving abbreviations (e.g., 4u: for you). Some internet slang comes from the news, movies, TV programs or online videos. For example, a recently popular online video, “cash me ousside, howbow dah” (catch me outside, how about that), originated from the mouth of a misguided girl in an American TV show and went viral due to her strong accent and rebellious attitude. In China, popular internet slang spreads via social media. It becomes a useful tool with which media and companies can build a closer relationship with the audience [3]. Cognitive neuroscientists have found that internet slang induced a delayed and extended N400 effect [4]. In this case, internet slang may be considered as a creative thinking process that is similar to that of verbal creativity such as metaphorical speaking [4]. Many studies have proven that proper message framing can increase persuasion (e.g., [5]). According to the similar-attraction theory, people tend to be attracted by people/things similar to them [3]. For internet users, internet slang is funny, trendy and expressive. Using internet slang can be seen as a behavior of in-group members. Thus, internet users may have positive attitudes toward ads with relevant internet slang. The research by Li and Mao [3] suggests that, by adopting a communication style aligning with the internet slang usage pattern of the user, a virtual advisory system can be perceived to be more credible, fun, engaging, informative and transparent.

1.2. Internet slang styles and brand personality

Internet slang styles (ISS) refer to the different traits of expressing an individual's thoughts on the Internet. Seven styles of internet slang are identified by Gong [2] based on the grounded theory: Overtness, Stylishness, Emotivity, Harshness, Candor, Amiability, and Liberty. Each style contains distinctive features. For example, the internet slang “么么哒” (Muah) is considered to be trendy and “Stylish”, while “矮穷矬” (to say somebody is a poor and ugly shorty) is “Harsh” and mean. Just as language styles can influence consumers' attitudes [6], different internet language styles may also have different effects on advertising persuasion and perceived brand personality. Brand personality (BP) consists of five dimensions [7], that is, Excitement, Sophistication, Competence, Ruggedness, and Sincerity. Prior research shows that many factors (e.g., advertising campaigns, communication styles) influence a brand's perceived personality [8]. For instance, message framing has an impact on brand personality. Brands using metaphorical ads are perceived to be more Sophisticated and Exciting, but less Sincere and Competent than those using non-metaphorical ads [9]. Similarly, a particular style of internet slang may work well in conjunction with a particular dimension of brand personality. For example, brands using Stylish internet slang may be perceived to be more trendy, charming, and delicate, which may enhance individuals' perceptions of the brand as being Sophisticated. Analogously, internet slang perceived as Overt may deepen the consumers' view of the brand dimension of Excitement; the perceived Candor of internet slang strengthens the dimension of

Sincerity; the perceived Emotivity of internet slang makes the brand more Competent and the perceived Harshness of internet slang reinforces the impression that the brand is Rugged. As such, we assume the perceived style of internet slang enhances the corresponding dimension of brand personality:

h1: The perceived Candor of internet slang enhances the Sincerity of a brand.

h2: The perceived Stylishness of internet slang enhances the Sophistication of a brand.

h3: The perceived Overtness of internet slang enhances the Excitement of a brand.

h4: The perceived Emotivity of internet slang enhances the Competence of a brand.

h5: The perceived Harshness of internet slang enhances the Ruggedness of a brand.

As a complementary style of internet slang may enhance the corresponding dimension of brand personality, an incongruent style of internet slang may damage the original brand personality, which induces negative effects. Schema-based expectancy theories can explain this process. A schema (i.e., “a learned, internalized pattern of thought-feeling that mediate both the interpretation of on-going experience and the reconstruction of memories”, [10]: 3) is organized through one’s experience [11]. One’s schemas influence his/her perceptual cognitive activities by generating the expectancies. For instance, individuals tend to use their existing schemas to process the congruency of new information [11]. When high Candor internet slang is used by a brand whose dominant brand personality is Sincerity, individuals will compare the nature of this internet slang with the existing brand attribute. The congruence between the new information (the internet slang style) and the existing information (the brand personality) results in a success of receiving the affect linked to the schema ([11] [12]), which produces positive attitude toward the ad (Aad) and the brand (Ab) [13]. As such, we propose the following hypotheses:

h6: *For brands whose brand personality is Sincerity, ads with high Candor internet slang lead to higher Aad and Ab than other styles of internet slang.*

h7: *For brands whose brand personality is Sophistication, ads with the high Stylishness internet slang lead to higher Aad and Ab than other styles of internet slang.*

h8: *For brands whose brand personality is Excitement, ads with high Overtness internet slang lead to higher Aad and Ab than other styles of internet slang.*

h9: *For brands whose brand personality is Competence, ads with high Emotivity internet slang lead to higher Aad and Ab than other styles of internet slang.*

h10: *For brands whose brand personality is Ruggedness, ads with high Harshness internet slang lead to higher Aad and Ab than other styles of internet slang.*

2. First study

2.1. pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to select the proper internet slang to represent the seven styles. A pool contained 920 pieces of internet slang that were collected from the search engine, relevant websites, news and the Baidu Library. Based on the popularity, the appropriateness for advertising, and the style of the internet slang, we screened out unsuitable ones and only kept 28 pieces for the next step. Twenty-eight pieces of slang

were pre-tested among 42 respondents. At last, we chose seven pieces based on their scores. Each piece of slang represented a particular style (see Table 1).

Table 1. The score of internet slang on the perceived level of each style.

| Internet slang | Stylishness | Harshness | Candor | Amiability | Overtness | Overtness | Liberty |
|---|-------------|-----------|--------|------------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| 么么哒 Luv ya/Muah | 3.53 | 1.57 | 2.63 | 2.46 | 2.61 | 3.02 | 2.26 |
| 买买买 Buy it! Buy it! | 2.47 | 3.57 | 2.87 | 2.53 | 2.24 | 2.79 | 2.63 |
| 哥吃的不是面，是寂寞 What I eat is not the noodle but sorrow. | 2.24 | 1.78 | 3.65 | 2.36 | 2.55 | 2.43 | 2.33 |
| 主要看气质 Focus on my aura. | 2.84 | 1.48 | 2.43 | 3.67 | 2.04 | 2.84 | 2.82 |
| 有钱就是这么任性 I am willful because I am rich. | 2.24 | 1.78 | 1.67 | 2.31 | 3.42 | 3.27 | 2.33 |
| 重要的事情说三遍 Important things are to be repeated for 3 times. | 2.55 | 1.86 | 2.22 | 2.46 | 2.24 | 3.04 | 2.51 |
| 给力 brilliant/awesome | 2.34 | 2.14 | 2.35 | 1.89 | 2.14 | 2.02 | 3.76 |

2.2. Methodology

Design and stimuli: Seven pieces of internet slang were used in ads for a high involvement product (i.e., a camera) and a low involvement one (i.e., a bottle of mineral water) from fictitious brands. Respondents were randomly exposed to one of fourteen ads (7 styles x 2 types of product) which had been designed using Photoshop. Each ad contained the product, the brand name, and the internet slang. **Participants and procedure:** We targeted young consumers as they are the main users of internet slang. Therefore, we handed out the questionnaire in Shenzhen University and Guangdong University of Technology for one week. Respondents were asked first to read the ad and then answer the question. Afterward, they were thanked and given a cash reward of 5 Yuan. In total 700 respondents completed the questionnaire (female: 293, 42%). Nearly 77% of the respondents were aged 23 to 30. Among the respondents, 85.4 per cent were a student. **Measures:** The perceived style of internet slang was measured as an independent variable by means of 32 items from the study of Gong [2]. Participants showed to which degree they felt the style of the internet slang was “straightforward”, “concise”, “arrogant”, “exquisite”, “lively”, etc. on 5-point Likert scales, with 1 = *completely disagree* and 5 = *completely agree*. Brand personality was measured using the Brand Dimensions Scale (BDS, [7]), a 5-point Likert scale containing 15 items.

2.3. Results

Reliability and factor structure: The reliability was tested by calculating the Cronbach α . The α of each dimension of perceived style of internet slang was as follows: Stylishness ($\alpha = .91$); Harshness ($\alpha = .81$); Candor ($\alpha = .68$); Amiability ($\alpha = .86$), Overtness ($\alpha = .88$); Emotivity ($\alpha = .90$); Liberty ($\alpha = .81$). As the α of the Candor dimension was below .70, two low loading items (self-mockery and rebellious) were dropped. The α of each dimension of brand personality was listed as follows: Sincerity ($\alpha = .71$); Excitement ($\alpha = .87$); Competence ($\alpha = .85$); Sophistication ($\alpha = .87$); Ruggedness ($\alpha = .83$).

Next, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with a varimax rotation to closely explore more closely the internal structure of the measure of the perceived internet slang style and the measure of brand personality. Based on the observed eigenvalues, a seven-factor solution was extracted for the perceived internet slang style,

accounting for 68.3% of the total variance. For brand personality, a five-factor solution was extracted, accounting for 72.8% of the total variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measures of sampling adequacy were .818 (ISS) and .864 (BP). For both scales, Bartlett's tests for sphericity were both significant at the $p < .001$ level.

Table 2. Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis.

| Factor 1 | | Factor 2 | | Factor 3 | | Factor 4 | | Factor 5 | | Factor 6 | | Factor 7 | |
|--|-----|-------------|-----|--------------|-----|--------------|-----|------------|-----|------------|-----|------------|-----|
| Emotivity1 | .85 | Overtness3 | .84 | Stylishness3 | .85 | Amiability1 | .82 | Candor5 | .86 | Harshness2 | .92 | Liberty2 | .91 |
| Emotivity4 | .84 | Overtness5 | .84 | Stylishness6 | .84 | Amiability 3 | .88 | Candor1 | .85 | Harshness1 | .92 | Liberty1 | .91 |
| Emotivity6 | .82 | Overtness6 | .80 | Stylishness1 | .82 | Amiability 2 | .87 | Candor4 | .81 | | | | |
| Emotivity2 | .82 | Overtness1 | .80 | Stylishness2 | .81 | | | | | | | | |
| Emotivity5 | .81 | Overtness2 | .78 | Stylishness5 | .79 | | | | | | | | |
| Emotivity3 | .81 | Overtness4 | .64 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Emotivity7 | | Overtness7 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Eigenvalue/ % Of variance accounted for following rotation | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4.40/ 15.16 | | 4.11/ 14.16 | | 3.41/ 11.74 | | 2.37/ 8.17 | | 2.13/ 7.34 | | 1.71/ 5.91 | | 1.70/ 5.33 | |

Table 2 showed items from the scale of internet slang style that loaded positively with loadings higher than .60. The factors extracted were consistent with the study of Gong [2]. Only Emotivity7 and Overtness7 had a loading smaller than .60 for the respective factor. For the measure of brand personality, five factors extracted were in line with the study of Aaker [7]. Only the item Sincerity2 had a loading smaller than .60. To assess the psychometric characteristics of our measures, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was also performed. The results indicated adequate fit. A χ^2 value was obtained ($\chi^2/df = 2.476$). Other fit indices were: CFI = 0.92; GFI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.054; IFI = 0.92. All factor loadings were significant. Both the EFA and CFA confirmed the internal structure of the two measures.

Hypothesis testing: In line with the pilot test, seven pieces of internet slang scored differently in different dimensions. To examine the relationship between perceived internet slang style and different dimensions of brand personality, SPSS 20 was used to perform related analyses. Simple linear regression analyses were performed to predict a dimension of brand personality based on each perceived internet slang style.

Table 3. Correlations, **: $p < .01$, *: $p < .05$.

| DV \ IV | Overtness | Stylishness | Emotivity | Candor | Amiability | Harshness | Liberty |
|----------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|--------|------------|-----------|---------|
| Excitement | .960** | .020 | -.377 | .140 | -.105 | -.123 | .164 |
| Sophistication | -.106 | .944** | .077** | .497** | -.038 | .025 | -.132 |
| Competence | -.069 | .103** | .955** | -.133 | -.217 | -.082 | -.193 |
| Ruggedness | -.057 | .110 | -.055 | .091 | -.046 | .924** | -.379 |
| Sincerity | -.178 | -.064* | -.147 | .956** | -.167 | .131 | -.158 |

We also added all the perceived styles of internet slang in a model to predict the specific dimension of brand personality. The results were similar to the previous step. We found the maximum variance inflation factors (VIF) were below 10, which meant multicollinearity was not problematic. The results showed that a particular perceived style of internet slang enhanced the corresponding dimension of brand personality (see Table 3): the perceived Overtness of the slang had a significant effect on perception of Excitement in the brand's personality; the perceived Stylishness of internet slang had a positive effect on the dimension of Sophistication; the perceived Emotivity enhanced the Competence dimension; the Harshness elicited a positive effect on the Ruggedness dimension of the brand; the perceived style of Candor was associated positively with the Sincerity dimension of brand personality.

3. Second study

3.1. Methodology

Design and stimuli: The second study consisted of 5 experiments. In each experiment, we tested the effect of seven styles of internet slang for ads with a real brand which already possessed a distinctive type of brand personality. In each experiment, there were seven groups (a treatment group containing a particular internet slang style and six control groups including the other six styles). **Participants and procedure:** For each experiment, we recruited 350 respondents from the same universities. After the respondents finished the survey, they were thanked and given a cash reward of 5 Yuan. **Measures:** Besides the perceived style of internet slang and brand personality, we also measured the attitude toward the ad (Aad) and attitude toward the brand (Ab). Aad and Ab were measured using a five-point Likert-type scales from the research of Campbell and Keller [14] and Friedman [15]. We measured respondents' knowledge about internet slang to control the potential influence of different levels of pre-existing knowledge. Follow-up tests showed there was no significant difference in the knowledge between different experiments and different groups. Additionally, the reliability and validity of the measure were checked by calculating the Cronbach alpha and by conducting EFA and CFA. The results suggested that the measures used in the five experiments all had acceptable reliability and validity (details are available upon request from the authors).

3.2. Experiment 1

In the first experiment, we selected the Chinese brand “Nongfu Spring” whose dominant brand personality was expected to be Sincerity. Ads contained the product (a bottle of mineral water) and one of the seven pieces of internet slang used in the first study. In total 350 respondents (female: 153) completed the questionnaire. The demographics of the respondents was similar to the first study. We first checked the manipulations. In accordance with our expectation, compared to other dimensions of brand personality, the Sincerity dimension had the highest score for Nongfu Spring ($M_{\text{sincerity}} = 3.6 > M_{\text{sophistication}} = 2.86$, $t = 9.8$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{sincerity}} > M_{\text{excitement}} = 2.91$, $t = 10.1$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{sincerity}} > M_{\text{competence}} = 2.71$, $t = 12.4$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{sincerity}} > M_{\text{ruggedness}} = 2.48$, $t = 17.7$, $p < .01$). In addition, the internet slang “what I drink is not water but sorrow” scored highest in the perceived style of Candor ($M = 3.17$, $F = 14.15$, $p < .01$). Thus, the manipulations were all successful. Furthermore, respondents exhibited more positive attitude toward the ad containing high Candor internet slang than the other ads which contained other styles ($M_{\text{Candor}} = 3.18 > M_{\text{stylishness}} = 1.99$, $t = 8.5$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{Candor}} > M_{\text{harshness}} = 2.05$, $t = 7.9$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{Candor}} > M_{\text{overtiness}} = 2.21$, $t = 7.0$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{Candor}} > M_{\text{amiability}} = 2.23$, $t = 6.9$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{Candor}} > M_{\text{emotivity}} = 2.14$, $t = 7.1$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{Candor}} > M_{\text{liberty}} = 1.95$, $t = 8.7$, $p < .01$). Compared to the ads containing other internet slang styles, the ad containing high Candor internet slang significantly enhanced respondents' attitude toward the brand.

3.3. Experiment 2-5

The luxury brand Dior was selected for the second experiment. We assumed that Sophistication would be the most prominent brand personality of Dior. For the

experimental materials, we replaced the brand name "Nongfu Spring" and the product (a bottle of mineral water) with the brand name "Dior" and another product (i.e., a bottle of perfume) while keeping other elements constant. We recruited 300 respondents (female: 158) from the same universities. The manipulation checks showed that Sophistication was the dominant brand personality of Dior ($M_{\text{sophistication}} = 3.79$). The score was higher than any of the other four dimensions at a significance level of .01. Consistent with the previous findings, the internet slang "Luv ya/Muah" had the highest score in the perceived Stylish style ($M = 3.33$, $F = 16.71$, $p < .01$). Respondents who were exposed to an ad with the Stylish internet slang style, showed higher Aad and Ab than respondents exposed to ads with any other internet slang styles ($p < .01$).

The third brand we tested was Coca-Cola whose main brand personality was expected to be Excitement. The product shown in the ad was also changed to a bottle of Cola. Data from 300 respondents (female:160) suggested that Excitement was regarded as the main brand personality of Coca-Cola ($M_{\text{excitement}} = 3.62$, $p < .01$ for all pairwise tests). The internet slang "I am wilful because I am rich" had the highest score in the perceived Overtness internet slang style ($M = 3.17$, $F = 3.68$, $p < .05$). Respondents displayed more positive Aad and Ab for the ad with the Overtness internet slang style (i.e., I am wilful because I am rich) than ads containing any other styles ($p < .01$).

In the fourth experiment, together with the internet slang, the popular mobile phone designed by Apple was used in the stimuli. Three hundred participants (female: 161) answered the survey. As was expected, the data showed that Competence was the key brand personality of Apple ($M = 3.72$) and the internet slang "important things are to be repeated for three times" got the highest score in the perceived Emotivity internet slang style ($M = 3.12$, $F = 10$, $p = .03$). Respondents' attitude toward the ad and brand were significantly higher when exposed to the ad with Emotivity internet slang than any other styles of internet slang ($p < .01$).

The international brand NIKE was chosen in the fifth experiment to represent brands that were adventurous and Rugged. A pair of sport shoes was displayed, and the internet slang was placed next to the shoes. Three hundred completed questionnaire were collected (female: 143). The results showed the principle personality of NIKE was Ruggedness ($M_{\text{ruggedness}} = 3.54$). Compared to other dimensions of personality, Ruggedness had the highest score ($p < .01$ for all pairwise tests). The internet slang "buy! buy! buy!" had the highest score in the perceived Harsh internet slang style ($M = 3.13$, $F = 14.5$, $p < .001$). Similarly to the prior experiments, respondents held more positive attitude toward the ad and the brand for the ad with the Harsh internet slang style (i.e., buy! buy! buy!) than ads containing any other styles ($p < .01$).

4. Conclusion, implications, limitations, and future research

By observing the correlation between different internet slang styles and the respective dimensions of brand personality, the first study suggests that certain styles of internet slang can enhance the corresponding dimensions of brand personality. For example, the perceived degree of Candor in internet slang is associated positively with the Sincerity dimension of brand personality, while the perceived Stylishness of internet slang has a positive effect on the dimension of Sophistication. In the second study, we apply the findings from the first study to existing brands. The results show that congruence between internet slang style and brand personality induces positive attitudes. For

example, for Dior, whose brand personality is Sophistication, using the Stylish form of internet slang leads to higher Aad and Ab than the other six available slang styles.

The language used in advertising influences the advertising effects [16]. The findings serve the purpose of contributing to the literature on use of language in advertising by exploring niche internet language. This research is also meaningful for the building of schema-based expectancy theories as it confirms that congruence between communication style and brand personality can lead to positive effects. As internet slang has been increasingly used in advertising, marketing managers can make use of this slang to build up a brand with the desired personality. Using a proper style of internet slang can increase consumers' brand attitude, while a style that is incongruent with the brand personality may induce negative perceptions of the brand.

This research has several limitations which may offer suggestions for further research. First, the scale measuring the style of internet slang was developed in 2014. Compared to the Brand Dimension Scale, this scale is less mature and additional research and tests are needed. The second issue pertains to the data. The participants are limited to the young consumers in two cities in China. To increase the generalizability of the findings, future studies may recruit respondents from different regions in China.

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