

Contextual Misalignment and Meaning Distortion in Brand Use of Internet Slang

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Abstract

Internet slang has become increasingly common in brand communication, especially on social media where brands are expected to appear informal, responsive, and culturally aware. Yet the meaning of slang is rarely stable or self-contained. It is often tied to a particular group, moment, tone, or interactional setting. When brands move these expressions into commercial discourse, the original context may no longer hold, and the result can be a change in tone, meaning, or social position. This paper examines contextual misalignment and meaning distortion in brand use of internet slang. It focuses on the relationship between brand identity, the original social context of slang, and the commercial purposes that reshape its meaning after recontextualization. Particular attention is given to cases in which shared humor becomes promotional formula, ironic or attitudinal meanings are weakened, and community-based expressions are turned into marketing resources. The paper argues that the effectiveness of internet slang in brand communication depends less on whether a brand uses fashionable language than on whether the expression remains appropriate to the speaker, audience, and communicative situation. Misalignment can make brand language appear forced or intrusive, while careful recontextualization may preserve the social meaning that gives slang its communicative value in the first place.

Keywords: internet slang, brand communication, contextual misalignment, meaning distortion, recontextualization, digital discourse

1. Introduction

Brand communication on social media has become increasingly informal. Internet slang, memes, abbreviated expressions, and conversational language now appear frequently in promotional posts and brand–consumer interaction. This style is often used to reduce distance and make brands appear more familiar with online culture, especially when communicating with younger audiences.

Yet internet slang is strongly dependent on context. Many expressions carry meanings shaped by a particular group, event, tone, or shared experience. A phrase that works naturally in peer interaction may sound different when it is used by a commercial organization. The words remain recognizable, but the speaker, purpose, and relationship with the audience have changed. This shift can affect how the expression is understood.

The problem becomes more visible when brands

adopt popular language without fully considering its original social meaning. Some expressions may conflict with an established brand voice; others may lose their irony or become overly promotional once they enter advertising discourse. What appears to be a simple attempt at informality can therefore produce contextual misalignment or even change the meaning of the slang itself.

This paper examines these problems through the concepts of contextual misalignment and meaning distortion. It focuses on how internet slang is recontextualized in brand communication, why certain uses appear natural while others seem forced, and how commercial purposes can alter the attitudinal and social meanings carried by online expressions. The central argument is that effective use of internet slang depends less on following linguistic trends than on understanding the context in which those expressions originally gained meaning.

2. Internet Slang as Context-Dependent Communication

Internet slang is often treated as a set of fashionable words or phrases, but its meaning usually depends on much more than vocabulary. Many expressions become meaningful because users share a particular context, including a recent event, a popular meme, a subcultural reference, or a familiar way of speaking within a group. Without that background, the expression may still be understandable at the surface level, but part of its tone and social meaning is lost.

This is especially clear in expressions based on irony, self-mockery, exaggeration, or playful imitation. Their communicative effect does not come only from what is said. It also depends on who says it, to whom, and under what circumstances. A phrase used among peers may signal solidarity because both sides recognize the same joke. The same phrase can sound awkward or even condescending when it is used by a speaker who occupies a different social position.

Internet slang also carries identity meanings. Certain expressions become associated with particular age groups, online communities, occupations, or shared experiences. Using them can signal familiarity with a community, but that familiarity is not automatically created by repeating the words. A speaker who adopts the vocabulary without understanding the attitudes attached to it may appear to be imitating the group rather than participating in it.

The short life cycle of online language makes this dependence on context even stronger. A phrase can move quickly from a niche community to wider circulation, then lose its original meaning or become associated with a new event. Some expressions remain recognizable after their popularity fades, while others become outdated almost immediately. Meaning is therefore shaped not only by social setting but also by timing.

For brand communication, these features make internet slang a difficult linguistic resource. Brands often encounter slang after it has already developed meaning through user interaction. When the expression is moved into advertising, customer service, or promotional content, it enters a different communicative environment. The commercial purpose becomes part of the message, whether the brand acknowledges it or not.

This is why the use of internet slang cannot be evaluated only by asking whether a word is popular or grammatically appropriate. Contextual appropriateness matters just as much. The social position of the brand, the relationship with consumers, the original tone of the expression, and the moment in which it is used all influence how the message will be interpreted. These conditions provide the basis for understanding why contextual misalignment occurs in brand communication.

3. How Contextual Misalignment Occurs in Brand Communication

3.1 Mismatch Between Brand Identity and Slang Style

Internet slang carries assumptions about who normally uses it and in what kind of relationship. When a brand adopts such language, consumers do not respond only to the words themselves. They also judge whether the expression fits the identity and social position of the brand.

The popularity of *dagongren* (“打工人”) illustrates this point. The term became widely used online as a form of self-mockery among workers, combining fatigue, frustration, and a degree of collective humor. BMW China later used the expression in an official Weibo post that addressed users as *dagongren*. The wording itself was not difficult to understand, but the post attracted criticism because a luxury automobile brand was speaking from a very different position from the people who had originally used the term about themselves.

The change in speaker altered the pragmatic

effect. Self-mockery usually works because speakers place themselves inside the experience being joked about. Once the same expression is used by an outside commercial voice, the humor can sound less shared and more distancing. The problem is therefore not lexical accuracy but the relationship between brand identity and the social meaning of the slang.

McDonald's use of *dagongren* provides a useful contrast. Its related campaign placed the expression within familiar scenes of work, food, tiredness, and everyday consumption. The slang was connected to situations already associated with its original use, which made the transition into brand discourse less abrupt.

These cases show that slang style cannot be separated from brand voice. A fashionable expression may be widely understood and still feel inappropriate when it conflicts with the position from which a brand usually speaks. Contextual fit depends not only on what an expression means, but also on what it means when a particular brand chooses to say it.

3.2 Mismatch Between Original Context and Commercial Context

Some internet expressions depend less on who uses them than on the interaction in which they originally make sense. Phrases built around self-mockery, frustration, or shared hardship often work because speakers understand that they are joking from within the same experience. Once such language is moved into commercial communication, the relationship changes. A brand is not simply another participant in the conversation; it is also trying to sell something.

The 2025 controversy surrounding Taoli Bread's mooncake advertising offers a clear example. One elevator advertisement stated that people who disliked five-nut mooncakes were still too young and had not yet "suffered the blows of life." The phrase "生活的毒打" had long circulated online as a humorous way of talking about work pressure, setbacks, and adult life. Used among peers, it often carries a self-deprecating tone. In the advertisement, however, the expression was directed by a company toward consumers. Many responses interpreted the wording as didactic or condescending rather than humorous, and the advertisement was removed shortly after the controversy emerged.

The difficulty came from the change in interactional position. Online users saying that they have been "beaten by life" are usually

making themselves part of the joke. A brand telling consumers that they have not yet experienced such hardship does something different. The phrase shifts from shared self-mockery toward an evaluation of the audience. Its lexical form remains familiar, but its pragmatic force is altered by the commercial setting.

Taoli Bread's later apology continued to use expressions such as "背锅" and "挨打立正," keeping the same informal internet style. Some users accepted the humorous response, while others felt that the apology itself still resembled marketing. This reaction shows how difficult it can be to preserve the original tone of slang once commercial intent becomes highly visible.

The case is useful because the problem was not simply that the brand chose an unpopular phrase. The expression was already recognizable and widely used. What changed was the relationship between speaker and audience. Internet slang that depends on shared experience can lose that sense of equality when it is transferred into advertising. Contextual misalignment appears when a brand retains the surface form of informal language but changes the social relationship that originally made the expression acceptable.

3.3 Temporal Misalignment and Outdated Slang

Internet slang is closely tied to time. Many expressions become popular because they are attached to a recent event, meme, or shared online mood. Their communicative value may be strongest during a short period, after which the same phrase can quickly feel overused or outdated. Brands face a particular difficulty here because commercial communication usually moves more slowly than ordinary online conversation.

A meme can spread across social media within hours, while a brand message may pass through planning, copywriting, internal review, legal checking, and final approval before publication. By the time the content appears, the expression may already have lost part of its novelty. In some cases, users have moved on to a new joke; in others, the original slang has acquired a different meaning. The brand may technically be using a familiar phrase, but it is entering the conversation too late.

Timing also affects how audiences judge authenticity. Early use can suggest that a brand understands the language environment in which

consumers are communicating. Late use often produces the opposite impression. The slang begins to look borrowed rather than shared, especially when it has already become common in advertising. What once functioned as a sign of cultural awareness can then become evidence of distance from the culture being imitated.

This temporal problem is not solved simply by using newer expressions more quickly. Excessive speed creates another risk, since a brand may adopt a phrase before its meaning, origin, or possible connotations are fully understood. The relevant issue is whether the expression still belongs naturally to the communicative moment in which the brand intends to use it.

Temporal misalignment shows that contextual appropriateness has a time dimension as well as a social one. Internet slang does not remain equally meaningful throughout its circulation. Brands that treat it as stable vocabulary may preserve the form while missing the moment that gave the expression its value.

4. Meaning Distortion in the Commercial Recontextualization of Internet Slang

4.1 From Shared Humor to Promotional Formula

Internet slang often gains its force through repetition within a community, but that repetition is not originally commercial. Users repeat a phrase because they recognize the joke, the tone, or the cultural reference behind it. The pleasure comes partly from shared recognition. Once brands begin to adopt the same expression, however, repetition serves another purpose. The slang is no longer only a way of participating in a joke; it becomes a resource for attracting attention, naming products, or increasing engagement.

The 2025 popularity of “哈基米南北绿豆” offers a useful example. The expression developed through online remixes and short-video culture, where its unusual sound and repeated use gradually turned it into a recognizable meme. Jiuyang Soymilk later incorporated the phrase directly into the name of a new green-bean soy drink and extended the meme across packaging, short videos, livestreams, and related promotional language. The product quickly attracted attention and sold strongly after release.

What is interesting here is not simply that a brand used a popular meme. The expression changed function once it became part of a product name. Among users, “哈基米南北绿豆” had circulated

largely because of its absurdity, rhythm, and capacity for endless remixing. In commercial communication, those qualities were retained, but they were attached to a clear promotional object. A shared joke became something that could identify a product and make it easier to remember.

This kind of transfer can be effective, but it also changes the conditions under which humor works. Repeated brand use may gradually turn a flexible meme into a recognizable formula: a popular phrase is identified, connected with a product, and then reproduced through packaging, slogans, livestream interaction, and social posts. The original humor does not necessarily disappear, yet part of its openness is reduced. What users once reshaped freely begins to carry a more fixed commercial association.

The shift from shared humor to promotional formula is therefore a form of meaning change rather than simple linguistic borrowing. The slang still looks familiar, and consumers may continue to participate in the joke, but the communicative purpose has become more explicit. Its value now lies partly in its ability to convert cultural recognition into brand visibility. This is one of the clearest ways in which commercial recontextualization can alter internet slang without changing its surface form.

4.2 The Loss of Irony and Attitudinal Meaning

A large part of internet slang cannot be understood through literal meaning alone. Irony, exaggeration, self-mockery, and playful negativity are common features of online interaction. An expression may sound critical or pessimistic on the surface while actually signaling solidarity, humor, or emotional release. Its attitudinal meaning depends on shared knowledge between participants and on their ability to recognize that the words should not be read literally.

Commercial recontextualization can weaken this layer of meaning. Brands often borrow the most recognizable part of a popular expression, but the social relationship that supported its irony is harder to reproduce. The earlier example of “生活的毒打” illustrates the problem. Among internet users, the phrase commonly functions as exaggerated self-mockery about adult pressures and setbacks. When used by a brand to address consumers, the ironic distance becomes less clear. What was originally a way of laughing at one’s own situation can begin to sound like a judgment

made about someone else.

This change is important because irony depends heavily on positioning. Users who joke about their own exhaustion, financial pressure, or unsuccessful experiences place themselves inside the situation being described. The humor often communicates something close to “we know what this feels like.” A commercial speaker does not automatically occupy the same position. Even when the vocabulary is identical, consumers may read the message more literally because the brand has different interests and a different relationship with the audience.

Attitudinal meaning can also be reduced when a meme is repeated mainly for recognition. Expressions that originally carried frustration, resistance, embarrassment, or self-deprecation may be retained because their form is familiar while the emotional stance behind them becomes less important. In this sense, commercial use can flatten slang. A phrase that once allowed users to express a complicated attitude is turned into a general sign of being humorous, young, or “online.”

This does not mean that brands are incapable of using irony. Some brand accounts develop a stable conversational voice in which humorous and self-deprecating language feels consistent rather than borrowed. The difficulty appears when irony is treated as a property of particular words rather than a relationship between wording, speaker position, and audience knowledge. Copying an ironic phrase does not guarantee that the irony will survive.

The loss of attitudinal meaning is therefore less visible than obvious semantic misunderstanding. The expression may still be recognizable, grammatically appropriate, and connected with the correct meme. What changes is the stance carried by it. Once that stance is weakened, internet slang can retain its surface familiarity while losing much of the social meaning that made it communicatively effective.

4.3 From Community Expression to Commercial Appropriation

Some internet slang carries more than humor or attitude. It also marks participation in a particular community. Expressions may develop inside fan cultures, gaming communities, workplace groups, or short-video subcultures before they spread to a wider audience. Using them can signal familiarity with a shared experience. Once brands adopt these expressions,

however, the language moves from community interaction into a commercial setting.

The circulation of “哈基米” shows this shift quite clearly. Before brands began using the term, it had already gone through several rounds of remixing and reinterpretation online. Its meaning was not fixed, and much of its appeal came from repeated participation by users who understood the sound, references, and absurd humor surrounding it. When commercial actors later used related expressions in product naming and promotional content, the meme became attached to a more specific purpose: attracting attention and creating brand recognition.

This does not automatically make commercial use inappropriate. Internet language often moves between communities and wider public culture, and brands are part of that circulation. The tension appears when a brand treats a community expression as if it were simply a free-standing linguistic resource. The phrase may still be recognizable, but the sense of shared ownership can weaken once it is repeatedly used for sales, product launches, or promotional campaigns.

The change is especially noticeable when a term originally used to signal participation begins to function mainly as a marker of trend awareness. A brand may appear to understand the language of a community while engaging only with its most visible surface. Consumers who know the expression well may then read the commercial use differently from audiences who encounter it only as a fashionable phrase. What looks like successful localization from one perspective may look like appropriation from another.

Commercial appropriation therefore changes not only where internet slang appears but also what it does. A community expression can move from signaling belonging to signaling market relevance. Its cultural value is not necessarily erased, but it becomes entangled with promotional intent. The more clearly this commercial purpose dominates, the greater the risk that the expression loses the social relationship that originally gave it meaning.

The key issue is not whether brands should avoid community language altogether. It is whether they understand that such language already carries histories of use, group associations, and expectations about who has the right to speak in a particular way. Recontextualization becomes problematic when these social meanings are

ignored and only the recognizable form is retained.

5. Communicative Consequences for Brand–Consumer Relations

The use of internet slang can make brand communication feel more immediate, but informality does not automatically create closeness. Consumers still judge why a brand is using a particular expression, whether the tone fits the situation, and whether the language sounds natural coming from that speaker. When these conditions are not met, an attempt to appear familiar can expose the distance between the brand and the audience instead of reducing it.

One consequence is a loss of credibility in brand voice. Consumers usually encounter a brand across different forms of communication, and over time they develop expectations about how it speaks. If highly informal language appears only when a meme becomes popular, the change can look temporary or strategic. The brand may seem to be borrowing a style rather than developing a recognizable voice of its own. This is especially noticeable when the slang is disconnected from the brand’s usual tone or from the situation in which it is used.

Contextual misalignment can also change how consumers interpret communicative intention. The Taoli Bread controversy is useful here. The phrase “生活的毒打” was intended as humorous advertising, but many consumers read it as a judgment directed at them. Once that interpretation emerged, attention shifted away from the product and toward the brand’s attitude. The problem was no longer whether the advertisement was funny. It became a question of how the brand positioned itself in relation to its audience.

Similar problems appear when brands rely too heavily on slang to create intimacy. Repeated use of memes, trendy phrases, and exaggerated conversational language may initially make communication feel less formal, but it can also weaken informational clarity. Consumers may remember the joke while paying little attention to what the brand is actually trying to say. In this situation, informality becomes a style in its own right rather than a means of improving communication.

Brand–consumer relations are also affected by the perception of motive. Internet slang often develops through spontaneous interaction, while

branded use is usually tied to visibility, engagement, or sales. Consumers are aware of this difference. A brand does not need to hide its commercial purpose, but slang becomes less convincing when the promotional intention overwhelms the social meaning of the expression.

The effect is not always negative. Informal language can support a sense of familiarity when it is consistent with the brand voice and appropriate to the communicative moment. The broader point is that closeness is relational rather than lexical. A brand does not become more approachable simply by choosing more casual words. What matters is whether the language fits the speaker, the audience, and the situation well enough to be understood as participation rather than imitation.

6. Reconsidering the Use of Internet Slang in Brand Communication

The problems discussed above do not mean that brands should avoid internet slang. Informal language can make communication more flexible and can help a brand participate in conversations that already matter to consumers. The question is less about whether slang should be used than about how a brand enters the context in which the expression has meaning.

Adidas’s response to the 2026 “进城办事” meme offers a useful contrast to the earlier cases. The phrase originated from an awkward Chinese rendering of “errands around town” on a product page. Users noticed the wording first and began turning it into jokes and variations such as “阿迪办大事.” Instead of introducing a prepared slogan and asking users to accept it, Adidas responded to an interaction that had already developed around its own content. The brand joined the comment thread, produced further variations, and later released a “进城办事” T-shirt. The movement of the expression was largely user-led before it became part of official brand communication.

This distinction matters. In many unsuccessful cases, a brand identifies a popular phrase outside its own communicative setting and inserts it into advertising. The Adidas example moved in the opposite direction. Consumers first created a new meaning around an accidental phrase, and the brand then responded within that emerging context. Its participation did not require pretending that the expression had always belonged to the brand. Much of the humor remained visible as a shared joke about the

original wording.

Timing also helped. The brand responded while users were still developing the meme and extended it through comments, product references, and a quickly produced T-shirt rather than returning to it after the joke had already faded. Reports at the time noted that these posts generated substantially more interaction than routine product content. This does not provide a universal formula for successful meme communication, but it shows why contextual participation is different from simply borrowing fashionable vocabulary.

A more careful approach to internet slang requires attention to brand voice, speaker position, timing, and the social history of an expression. Some slang will fit naturally into a brand's existing style; other expressions may lose their humor as soon as they are spoken from a corporate position. Community language also deserves more caution when its meaning depends on experiences or identities that the brand does not share.

The broader issue is one of linguistic judgment. Brands do not need to sound exactly like their consumers in order to communicate with them. In fact, trying too hard to reproduce user language may make the commercial voice more obvious. Internet slang works best when the brand understands what kind of relationship the expression originally created and whether that relationship can still make sense after commercial recontextualization. The aim is not to imitate online speech as closely as possible, but to know when participation is appropriate and when leaving the language to its original users may communicate more effectively.

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