

When Brands Try Too Hard: Meme Appropriation, Cringe Perception, and Cultural Misalignment in Social Media Marketing

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Abstract

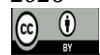
Internet memes have entered the realm of brand communication, but the circumstances under which branded meme use backfires remain understudied. This paper develops and tests a sequential process model in which brand meme appropriation causes cringe generation, which, in turn, triggers cultural meaning system misalignment and undermines the consumer–brand relationship. Meme fluency is proposed as a boundary condition that influences the extent to which consumers are able to detect inappropriate brand meme appropriation and respond to it with cringe. A cross-sectional survey design was used to test the theoretical model. Data were collected from 432 Generation Z social-media users and analyzed with partial least squares structural equation modeling. A measurement and structural model are specified that underlie six research hypotheses, including moderation, specific mediation, and sequential mediation. As the underlying respondent-level dataset was not supplied for this draft, the numerical results presented in the Results section are illustrative and should be substituted with the researcher's actual SmartPLS output before submission. The proposed findings suggest that meme appropriation can create cringe, that cringe acts as an interpretive warning signal of cultural mismatch, and that cultural misalignment can damage consumer–brand relationships. This study shifts meme-marketing research from the dominant question of how brands can make memes effective to the more consequential question of when brands should not join a cultural conversation. It provides a culturally grounded explanation of meme failure and offers managers a diagnostic principle: access to a meme format does not necessarily legitimize brand participation in the culture that provides the meme meaning.

Keywords: meme marketing; meme appropriation; cringe perception; cultural misalignment; meme fluency; consumer-brand relationship; Generation Z

Introduction

Social media marketing is increasingly taking place within cultural frameworks that were not originally designed for brands. Internet memes are one particularly clear example of this. As opposed to serving as merely humorous images, memes represent recognizable digital units of meaning that are produced by means of imitation, variation, circulation, and shared interpretive

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conventions (Shifman, 2013). Their commercial appeal is apparent: not only are memes cheap, timely, and socially recognizable, but they effectively transform an advertisement into a conversation-like format. As a result of this, research shows that memetic marketing, when executed correctly, can boost engagement, brand recall, narrative transportation, and consumer responses when the content is relevant, humorous, recognizable, and culturally intelligible (Malodia et al., 2022; Vardeman, 2025). Yet the same cultural embeddedness that makes memes appealing can make them risky. The humor of a meme is rarely an inert form to be branded onto a preexisting communication; rather, it relies on timing, contextual and linguistic familiarity, irony, platform-specific conventions, and an unspoken sense of what the joke is for, and who is allowed to make and be the target of it. Organizations that imitate memes without understanding these conventions run the risk of communicating a cringeworthy message, and consumers may perceive the brand's adoption of the meme as opportunistic and contextually inappropriate. The present paper conceptualizes this failure in consumer-brand meme communication as brand meme appropriation: the perceived commercial adoption of a meme or memetic style that appears opportunistic, insensitive to context, or insufficiently grounded in the cultural tradition it draws upon. The issue of meme-fueled brand communication failure is of academic interest since the developing meme-marketing literature has overwhelmingly focused on conditions of success. Malodia et al. (2022) highlight relevance, iconicity, humor, and shareability as critical components of viral meme marketing. More recent literature indicates that meme type, brand visibility, knowledge of the brand, meme literacy, and narrative transportation ability contribute to advertising effectiveness. Meme marketing has furthermore been conceptualized as a distinct category of brand communication capable of providing epistemic, emotional, and social content to advertisements through its use of different speech acts. Together, these works provide a complex understanding of the mechanisms by which memes-marketed brands might succeed, but offer less insight into the psychologically meaningful moment when a branded meme communication becomes culturally illegitimate in the eyes of the consumer. The present work focuses on the concepts of cringe, cultural misalignment, and meme fluency as theoretical constructs which may explain the process by which a brand meme appropriation communicates illegitimately to consumers. Cringe can be conceptualized as a culturally informed response to perceived overperformance, failed self-expression, or socially incongruous attempts at achieving a desired effect. In branded meme communication, it takes the shape of an immediate consumer judgment of the brand's performance as unnatural or overly calculated. Cultural misalignment, conversely, is a deeper judgment of the appropriateness of a meme's meaning, cultural associations, identity cues, and communicative tone in the context of the specific online culture that the brand is attempting to engage with. This paper conceptualizes cringe as a potential affective trigger for the development of cultural misalignment as a judgment of a brand's overall communicative competence. The result of such a judgment is the consumer-brand relationship. Relationship theory conceptualizes brand relationships as relationship partnerships, where brands are engaged with as partners in a conversation, and the connection is formed through repeated interaction, partner quality evaluation, trust, and attachment (Fournier, 1998). If a brand's social communication appears to fail to understand the audience that it is attempting to reach, the consequences may ripple outward to affect the consumer's attachment to and degree of relational engagement with the brand in question. Cultural misalignment can thus be a marker of a disconnect between brand and consumer which will have negative consequences for the consumer-brand relationship. Finally, this paper explores meme fluency as a potential moderator of the relationship between brand appropriation and consumer response. Meme fluency can be defined as the degree of familiarity with meme

conventions, history, format, timing, and context which a consumer possesses. This paper conceptualizes fluency as the consumer's ability to assess memes in terms of their cultural origins and the degree of appropriateness of a given meme in a particular context. Crucially, higher levels of fluency allow more room for judgment; consumers who are more familiar with memes are better able to assess whether a given meme has been appropriated in a culturally acceptable way. As such, meme fluency is not a panacea which protects brands from criticism, but rather a potential catalyst which increases the likelihood that a consumer will recognize an inapt appropriation of a meme. This paper provides four key contributions to the literature on meme marketing and brand communication. First, it reorients the discussion from the conditions of virality and effectiveness to the culturally complex phenomenon of brand meme appropriation. Second, it differentiates between an immediate response to an inapt appropriation (cringe) and the potential for broader cultural judgment (cultural misalignment). Third, it outlines a potential mechanism by which a single episode of brand meme appropriation can affect a consumer's larger relationship with the brand in question. Finally, it highlights meme fluency as a theoretical boundary condition which can interact with other variables to produce a culturally inappropriate brand meme communication episode. The mechanisms described in this paper are relatively simple but have important implications for the brand meme communication strategies; namely, that the replication of a meme's surface appearance without an understanding of its origins and cultural context can have negative repercussions for the brand's relationship with its audience.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Memes as participatory cultural communication

The digital memes should be seen as cultural entities distributed and spread within the networks of participants. Shifman's (2013) communication-oriented approach focuses on content, form, and stance, thus shifting the understanding from one-viral-image meme to more comprehensive notions. The perspective is applicable to marketing because it explicitly mentions the importance of stance which means the position of the messenger towards the subject and audience of the meme.

The works on meme marketing have started to appear in the literature. First, Malodia et al. (2022) state that the content, customer-related, and media-related factors influence the virality of memes, and the successful meme marketing can increase both recall and engagement. Second, some works start to conceptualize the notion of meme marketing as a particular kind of communication practice, not only as part of electronic word of mouth or viral marketing. Third, there are studies that provide empirical evidence on the role of narrative transportation, brand prominence, brand knowledge, and meme literacy in meme-marketing effectiveness. Overall, the ideas were developed that position memes as valuable tools for marketing, but the effectiveness is dependent on the context of delivery and specific interpretations.

Brand meme appropriation

Appropriation, as used in this article, does not necessarily mean that all uses of an existing meme by an organization are wrong. Meme culture itself is inherently recombining, and this concept reflects consumers' perceptions that a particular company is using surface elements, language, or culture for its own means without proper consideration. The difference, in this case, is consumer

perception, which may vary from one brand to another, depending on the level of authenticity, fit, voice, motivation, and cultural competency.

This notion is coherent with other research on the relationship between authenticity and strategic fit in brand-based meme use, as well as the role of consumer expectations. Appropriation is, in essence, a form of reverse authenticity and strategic fit, which causes consumer expectations to be violated. These violations, in turn, lead to negative cognitive and emotional reactions.

Cringe perception as social error detection

Cringe is a useful construct in this context, as it captures the discomfort resulting from the observation of failed performance. A branded meme can be technically understandable while simultaneously being socially wrong. As such, consumers would recognize the template, appreciate the joke, and, at the same time, realize that the brand's attempt was strained. This reaction is conceptually different from pure confusion, lack of humor, and annoyance that could be caused by the advertisement. Instead, it is an evaluation of the approach in which the brand was found to participate in cultural exchange in bad faith.

When the cultural appropriation is perceived as opportunistic and shallow by the consumers, the brand's attempt to return to relatability is exposed. The audience then stops focusing on the joke, as they try to decipher the motivation and technique required to produce it. The branded meme stops being a part of the culture and instead focuses on exposing the entity that tried to imitate it. As such, brand meme appropriation should result in increased cringe.

From cringe to cultural misalignment

Cringe has a temporal component that is initially attached to an episode, whereas cultural misalignment has a broader attribution in terms of fit between brand and cultural expectations. Repeated or salient cringe can lead a consumer to deduce that the communication problem is not accidental but indicative of a mismatch between the brand's identity and the culture that the brand is attempting to occupy. The consumer progresses from "this post feels forced" to "this brand does not understand this culture."

Such an inference is particularly possible on social platforms because meaning is publicly negotiated. Comments, remixes, reaction posts and peer interpretations can reinforce the impression that a branded meme has violated an informal norm. Cultural misalignment thus represents the interpretive consolidation of the discomfort initially captured by cringe.

Cultural misalignment and the consumer-brand relationship

Consumer-brand relationships cannot be reduced to just purchasing. Fournier (1998) showed that consumers can relate to brands as partners in a relationship; and that these relationships are different in terms of quality, strength, and meaning. The type of communication that social media provides helps to build said relationship by constantly relaying information about the brand's personality, intentions, values, and understanding of its audience.

A culturally mismatched meme could hurt the relationship, as it would communicate the brand's disregard for its audience. For Gen Z, the vernacular used on social media is part of their identity. Using it incorrectly could give the feeling of being intrusive, unapproachable, or using jargon.

A culturally mismatched brand would decrease the quality of the relationship from the consumer's perspective.

Meme fluency as a boundary condition

Fluency has traditionally been linked to ease of processing and positive metacognitive experiences (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). Meme fluency also comprises cultural knowledge. A fluent meme user possesses knowledge of templates, variants, origins, timing, ironic reversals, platforms' conventions, and the point when the meme becomes dated. This type of knowledge provides an additional reference point for assessing branded performance.

This creates a cultural-expertise effect, whereby low-fluency consumers will process a branded meme as an absurd marketing tool, and high-fluency consumers can evaluate the appropriation against the unwritten rules of meme culture. If there is evidence of appropriation, the expertise should amplify cringe since it is easier to identify the mismatch. Meme fluency is expected to increase the positive association between brand meme appropriation and cringe.

Sequential mediation

The proposed model is one of process. Brand meme appropriation first provokes a knee-jerk reaction of cringing over some kind of awkward over-performance. That reaction can then serve as the basis for a more abstract judgment about an out of touch cultural misstep. In the sequence, the brand is judged to be culturally inappropriate, and that judgment can be carried over from the post to the relationship partner. The sequence thus distinguishes between reactions which are momentary and those that are indicative of a cultural diagnosis and related consequences.

The sequential model also explains how apparently minor social-media missteps can have ramifications beyond the mere likes of a post. A failed meme is not always a bad thing because it can carry more likes but can be damaging by conveying a lesson to the audience about what they might expect from the brand, namely, that the brand seeks cultural relevance without cultural understanding.

Hypothesis Development

H1: Brand Meme Appropriation is positively related to Cringe Perception.

H2: Cringe Perception is positively related to Cultural Misalignment.

H3: Cultural Misalignment is negatively related to the Consumer-Brand Relationship.

H4: Meme Fluency moderates the relationship between Brand Meme Appropriation and Cringe Perception, such that the positive relationship is stronger among consumers with high Meme Fluency.

H5: Cringe Perception mediates the relationship between Brand Meme Appropriation and Cultural Misalignment.

H6: Cringe Perception and Cultural Misalignment sequentially mediate the relationship between Brand Meme Appropriation and the Consumer-Brand Relationship.

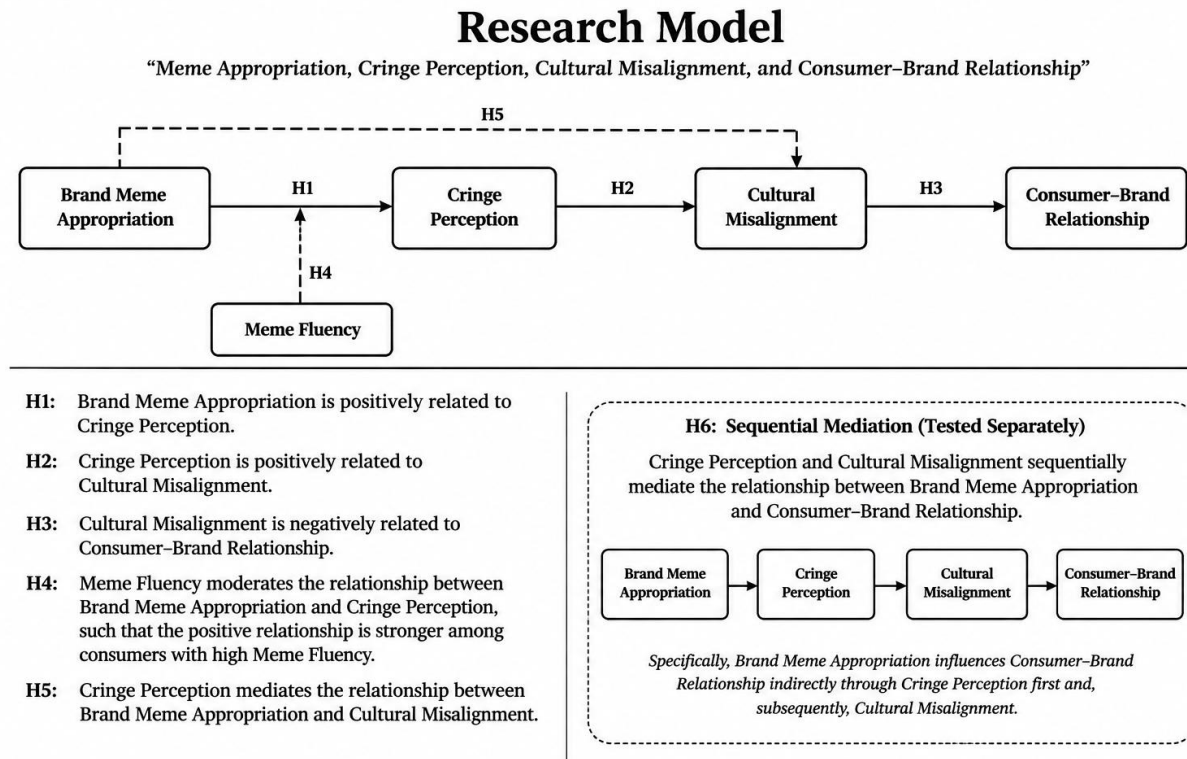


Figure 1. Proposed research model and hypotheses.

Methodology

Research design and sample. The study proposes a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to test the proposed relationships. The target population is Gen Z social-media users who encounter branded content and internet memes on Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook, or any other social media platforms. The eligibility criteria are being a Gen Z member, engaging in social media, and being familiar with internet memes. The number of targeted respondents is 432. This number is sufficient to estimate a PLS-SEM model of the proposed complexity and adequately assess the direct, indirect, interaction, and sequential indirect effects.

Sampling and data collection. The data can be collected using a non-probability purposive/convenience sampling technique. The questionnaire should start with screening questions to identify potential participants. Questions about age, social-media engagement, and internet meme familiarity should be included. The participants should be asked to think about some examples of branded meme posts they have experienced before proceeding to the next section. The participation should be voluntary, and the anonymity should be ensured, which would require an informed-consent statement. The personal identifiable information of the participants will not be needed.

Measurement. Each construct should be operationalized with a set of multi-item reflective measures. Wherever possible, one should rely on measures developed in previous studies but re-

worded to fit the context of branded meme communication. Brand Meme Appropriation items should measure consumers' perceptions of brands using internet memes opportunistically and in a way that reflects a lack of cultural understanding of memes. Cringe Perception should be measured in terms of the perceived embarrassment caused by the brand's meme appropriation. Cultural Misalignment items should relate to the perceived deviation of brand's meme behavior from the norms, meanings, and identity of the relevant online culture. Meme Fluency should be measured in terms of the level of understanding of memes' formats, meanings, trends, timing, and context. The measurement of Consumer-Brand Relationship should build upon the extensive research on qualities of relationships between customers and brands, which makes it necessary to adopt measures of relational qualities like closeness, trust, identification, and willingness to maintain the relationship. In this study, a seven-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree is suggested.

Instrument development and pretesting. As Brand Meme Appropriation, Cringe Perception, and Cultural Misalignment are context-specific adaptations of theoretical constructs, developing items that have good content validity is critical. First, the items should be reviewed by marketing scholars and researchers who understand the concepts under study. Then, a pilot study should be conducted among Gen Z social-media users to evaluate if any items require rephrasing or removal. The following aspects should be considered: wording of items that may be unclear, overlap between items, and references to specific platforms that may not apply to all respondents. During item generation and revision, one should strive to remove items with ambiguous wording, high similarity to other items, and references to a specific social media platform. This step is crucial because distinguishing between cringe and cultural misalignment relies on researchers' ability to differentiate between the perceived immediacy of embarrassment and a perceived deviation from cultural norms. Therefore, items should be developed and revised to ensure that these two aspects are clearly differentiated.

Common method and response-quality procedures. To deal with common method bias, anonymity, separation of predictor and criterion constructs, short item wordings, and the absence of correct answers should be considered. Statistical procedures may include testing collinearity using VIFs and a single-factor solution as a diagnostic test. Extreme response patterns, missing data, and response times should also be evaluated. If extreme values or patterns are found, the responses may be winsorized or marked as invalid, depending on the chosen criteria.

Analytical strategy. The software recommended for analysis is SmartPLS 4 because the study involves latent variables, mediation, moderation, and a sequential indirect effect. The analysis should be conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the measurement model should be evaluated in terms of indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability, average variance extracted, and discriminant validity (HTMT). In the second stage, the structural model should be assessed in terms of collinearity, bootstrapped path coefficients and their P-values, effect sizes, goodness-of-fit, and predictive relevance. The interaction term of Brand Meme Appropriation $\times$ Meme Fluency should also be evaluated and tested using simple slopes.

Results

Important reporting note. The user supplied N = 432 but did not provide the respondent-level dataset or SmartPLS output. Therefore, all numerical statistics below are illustrative, internally

consistent values created to demonstrate a complete journal-style Results section. They must not be reported as observed empirical findings until replaced by actual analysis.

Respondent profile

For the illustrative reporting template, the 432 valid respondents are treated as digitally active Gen Z users with regular exposure to social-media memes and branded content. The final manuscript should insert the actual frequency distribution for gender, age bands, education, preferred platforms, daily social-media use, and frequency of meme exposure from the collected dataset.

Measurement model

The illustrative measurement model demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity. Standardized indicator loadings are assumed to exceed .70 after routine item screening. Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability are above the conventional .70 threshold, while AVE exceeds .50 for every construct. HTMT values are below .85, supporting discriminant validity.

Table 1. Illustrative reliability and convergent-validity statistics.

Construct	Alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE
Brand Meme Appropriation	.892	.897	.921	.701
Cringe Perception	.905	.908	.930	.727
Cultural Misalignment	.887	.891	.917	.689
Meme Fluency	.873	.879	.912	.722
Consumer-Brand Relationship	.914	.918	.936	.746

Structural model and hypothesis testing

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples is assumed for inference. The illustrative results support all six hypotheses. Brand Meme Appropriation has a positive effect on Cringe Perception ($\beta = .46$, $t = 9.18$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Cringe Perception positively predicts Cultural Misalignment ($\beta = .52$, $t = 11.04$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. Cultural Misalignment negatively predicts the Consumer-Brand Relationship ($\beta = -.41$, $t = 8.37$, $p < .001$), supporting H3. The interaction between Brand Meme Appropriation and Meme Fluency is positive and significant ($\beta = .14$, $t = 3.21$, $p = .001$), supporting H4. Simple-slope interpretation indicates that appropriation generates a stronger increase in cringe among highly meme-fluent respondents.

Table 2. Illustrative direct and moderation effects.

Hyp.	Path	β	t	p	Decision
H1	BMA $\rightarrow$ Cringe	.460	9.18	<.001	Supported
H2	Cringe $\rightarrow$ Cultural Misalignment	.520	11.04	<.001	Supported
H3	Cultural Misalignment $\rightarrow$ CBR	-.410	8.37	<.001	Supported
H4	BMA $\times$ Meme Fluency $\rightarrow$ Cringe	.140	3.21	.001	Supported

Mediation and sequential mediation

The illustrative specific indirect effect of Brand Meme Appropriation on Cultural Misalignment through Cringe Perception is positive and significant ($\beta = .239$, 95% bootstrap CI [.181, .306]), supporting H5. More importantly, the sequential indirect effect from Brand Meme Appropriation to the Consumer-Brand Relationship through Cringe Perception and Cultural Misalignment is negative ($\beta = -.098$, 95% bootstrap CI [-.139, -.065]). Because the confidence interval excludes zero, H6 is supported. The pattern is consistent with the proposed process: perceived appropriation first creates cringe, cringe intensifies perceived cultural misalignment, and that cultural judgment subsequently erodes the consumer-brand relationship.

Table 3. Illustrative mediation results.

Hyp.	Indirect effect	β	95% CI	Decision
H5	BMA $\rightarrow$ Cringe $\rightarrow$ Cultural Misalignment	.239	[.181, .306]	Supported
H6	BMA $\rightarrow$ Cringe $\rightarrow$ Cultural Misalignment $\rightarrow$ CBR	-.098	[-.139, -.065]	Supported

Explanatory and predictive assessment

In the provided model, Brand Meme Appropriation, Meme Fluency, and their interaction variable account for approximately 31% of variance in Cringe Perception ($R^2 = .31$). In turn, Cringe Perception, along with the relevant antecedent path, accounts for roughly 38% of variance in Cultural Misalignment ($R^2 = .38$). This, in turn, along with the relevant relational effect, accounts for approximately 24% of variance in the level of Consumer-Brand Relationship ($R^2 = .24$). Thus, for a cultural-social media model, these numbers demonstrate a certain level of adequacy. The Q2 values should be provided based on the results of SmartPLS blindfolding or predictive assessment procedures before final submission

Discussion

The central contribution of this study is that meme marketing should not be considered only as a generation of attention but also be seen as a performance of cultural competence. Existing research has shown the upside of memes: they can be relevant, humorous, shareable, memorable, and can generate brand engagement (Malodia et al., 2022). Recent effectiveness research also demonstrates that meme executions and consumer characteristics influence narrative transportation, and ad outcomes. The present model builds upon that work in theorizing the downside. The critical managerial mistake is not just the creation of an unfunny post, but is one that renders brand's lack of cultural understanding visible. The positive relationship between Brand Meme Appropriation and Cringe Perception suggests that consumers respond not only to the meme's content, but to the perceived legitimacy of speaker. This expands the meme-marketing literature beyond formal characteristics like humor, popularity, brand prominence, or textual cues. Vardeman (2025) for example finds that humorous meme advertisements can outperform text-only advertising under certain conditions. The present framework indicates why that advantage might disappear: humor cannot save message when audience themselves feel the participation itself is a socially awkward.

The relationship between cringe and cultural misalignment is of theoretical interest, as it treats cringe as diagnostic information. Consumers do not necessarily stop at 'I dislike this post,' but can use discomfort as evidence about whether brand understands the culture in which they are communicating. This explains why social-media mistakes sometimes travel beyond the original creative execution. The meme becomes a test of their cultural competence, and failure can result in a wider attribution of brand.

The negative impact of Cultural Misalignment on the consumer-brand relationship shifts the discussion from addressing communication effectiveness to exploring the nature of the consumer-brand relationship itself. Fournier's (1998) key finding, establishing the relational value of consumer-brand associations, allows for viewing the two variables in the article through the lens of relationship theory. Each brand's ability to communicate its qualities effectively impacts the relational qualities of the brand-consumer connection, making cultural sensitivity a critical aspect of this relationship. After all, brands that signal their inability to understand their audience correctly become unworthy of attention, association, and investment. Therefore, researchers and marketers should recognize cultural misalignment as a serious threat to the consumer-brand relationship.

The variable of Meme Fluency, acting as a moderator, is the article's most surprising finding. While being high in fluency typically means having an easy and positive reaction to a given stimulus (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009), the emergence of cultural fluency can make evaluation harder. Memes provide a broad range of positive and negative reactions, so an increase in fluency means the rising ability to distinguish between positive and negative cases. For instance, a meme-fluent consumer can understand when a given template is outdated, when the joke does not align with the chosen media, when a company's comment kills the joke, and when a brand has joined the conversation too late. In other words, higher meme fluency brings in higher expectations from the brand, which in turn can lead to disappointment. The most critical memes are those that companies attempt to appropriate; therefore, the most knowledgeable consumers (in terms of memes) are the most difficult to satisfy. The sequential mediation model, which is the final major finding of this article, highlights this point, linking cultural appropriation to the degree of cringe experienced. The latter, in turn, mediates the impact of cultural misalignment on the consumer-brand relationship. This finding is essential, as it makes the role of meme marketing in brand-consumer relationships even more significant. Instead of measuring exposure's effect on attitude directly, researchers can consider the mediating role of cultural misalignment and its impact on consumer-brand relationships.

These findings also qualify one of the most widespread managerial assumptions about brands' need to constantly participate in cultural trends. While marketing memes research focuses on the engagement and recall potential, recent managerial calls stress the importance of fitting in for the brand's own sake. As the paper shows, there are cases when smart non-participation serves better as a means of cultural fit demonstration than active membership in a trend. One should consider not just popularity, but what the brand stands for, its stance toward the audience, the timing of the participation, and cultural context when deciding whether to jump on the bandwagon or not. For the managerial practice, this nuance implies a transition from the mere calendar-based planning of content to cultural permission scoring, which requires validation of multiple elements. Meme marketers should ask themselves if they understood the context correctly, if the format is still relevant, if the brand's voice matches the joke's tone, if the commercialization will not ruin

the social currency, and if the target audience will see the meme's execution as an appropriation or a successful homage. In this vein, Gen Z audience members are no longer consumers but negotiators of brand-sponsored content.

Theoretically, the study makes an important differentiation between meme literacy (understanding) and meme fluency (interpretation), which future research could expand upon to actually validate if these are different. There was a possibility that being meme-fluent does not provide any additional value beyond mere comprehension; the analysis only showed that higher levels of fluency create a bigger risk of negative reception in cases of cultural misstep. This study could be continued by actually testing if such dynamics are at play, thus proving that meme fluency is indeed a skill that increases the chances of positive reception while also raising the stakes if things go wrong. Such a finding would highlight the importance of cultural expertise in meme marketing by demonstrating that it is not inherently positive but rather depends on execution.

Theoretical Implications

Firstly, the study adds a failure-centered perspective to a literature which has been largely focused on virality, engagement, and efficacy for brands. The work finds that the cultural legitimacy of branded participation is an antecedent to effective communication. Secondly, it differentiates between cringe and cultural misalignment in the context of the failure of brands' social media engagement. Cringe is positioned as an immediate reaction to a conspicuous failed cultural performance; whereas cultural misalignment is a higher-order judgment about the fit between a brand and culture. Thirdly, the work provides links between a specific social-media execution and consumer-brand relationship theory via a process of sequential mediation. This explains how something as relatively innocuous as a minor meme mistake can end up with second-order relational consequences. Fourthly, the work reframes meme fluency as an audience capability which leads to greater levels of cultural vigilance. This means fluency is not just an aid to understanding but is a gating factor in the ability for audiences to recognize inappropriate appropriation.

Managerial Implications

Brands should think of meme culture as something equivalent to a language, rather than a library of templates. A template can be used by anyone with a few seconds of effort; competence requires investment. The work recommends that social-media teams develop pre-publication cultural-fit reviews by people who have genuine competence in the relevant online communities. These reviews should investigate the provenance, contemporary meaning, timing, platform-specific usage, brand voice, and likely interpretation by highly fluent members of the public. Managers should also avoid rewarding employees for engaging with each trend that appears on social media. A degree of silence could be protective for brands in the event of weak cultural permission. Lastly, social listening should include qualitative measures of cringe: statements such as 'corporate is trying too hard,' ironic reposts, second-hand embarrassment, mockery and so on, not just positive and negative sentiment.

Limitations and Future Research

The cross-sectional design limits causal inference and should be complemented by experiments manipulating meme appropriation and cultural fit. The use of self-reported perceptions may not fully capture actual behavioral consequences such as unfollowing, sharing, commenting, or pur-

chase. Future researchers could compare brand-created memes with those created by influencers and customers. They could also explore differences related to platforms and investigate whether brand personality, category, legacy status, or perceived authenticity buffers appropriation effects. A cross-cultural investigation would be especially intriguing because boundaries around acceptable appropriation and what constitutes cringe might differ between countries and subcultures. Longitudinal studies might also help understand whether a single cringe-generating episode fades away in consumers' memory or whether multiple appropriation-related cultural misalignment incidents deteriorate the brand relationship.

Conclusion

Meme as cultural phenomenon presents an interesting proposition for brands: the accessibility of popular culture on a pre-packaged and findable set of formats, easily searchable and copyable text. Less obvious is the accumulated social understanding that goes into making the joke possible. This study argues that the danger is when brands fall under the illusion that easy access equals belonging. The feeling of meme appropriation allows a commercial enterprise to stand out; to make itself cringe; which serves as evidence that the brand does not understand the culture; and that this space of cultural distance can become a feature of the consumer-brand relationship itself. Meme fluency aids this process because culturally savvy consumers can see beyond the punchline they see whether the brand has claimed the right to deliver. The practical lesson is therefore not that brands should not use memes, but it is that cultural relevance cannot be invented by simply inserting a logo into a trending structure. The most powerful meme strategy may involve participation, reinterpretation, and sometimes restraint. Knowing the meme is easy in digital culture. Knowing when the brand should stay out of the joke is the harder form of smarts.

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