

Textual Paralanguage and Its Implications for Brand Communications  
in Online Environments

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Both face-to-face communication and communication in online environments convey information beyond the actual verbal message. In a traditional face-to-face conversation, paralanguage, or the ancillary meaning- and emotion-laden aspects of speech that are not actual verbal prose, gives contextual information that allows interactors to more appropriately understand the message being conveyed.

In this research, we conceptualize and test textual paralanguage (TPL), which we define as written manifestations of nonverbal voice qualities, vocalizations, and kinesics that supplement or replace written language in online environments and that can be expressed through words, symbols, punctuation, demarcations, or any combination of these elements.

We develop a typology of textual paralanguage and, using data from Twitter, investigate how its use affects the inferences consumers make about brands and brand communications. In our first study, we conduct exploratory analyses to see how brands are tweeting, both from their corporate Twitter handles and from their spokescharacters. In our second study, we conduct an experiment to determine the causal effects of TPL on perceptions of brand competence.

We find that textual paralanguage negatively impacts perceptions of brand competence, and this decrease is mediated by the informality of the communication. We also find that the negative effect of TPL on brand competence is avoided when the message is delivered by a brand's spokescharacter, which is already perceived as informal. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.