

Research Report

Textual paralinguistic and its implications for marketing communications ☆

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Abstract

Both face-to-face communication and communication in online environments convey information beyond the actual verbal message. In a traditional face-to-face conversation, paralinguistic, 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 paper, we conceptualize textual paralinguistic (TPL), which we define as written manifestations of nonverbal audible, tactile, and visual elements that supplement or replace written language and that can be expressed through words, symbols, images, punctuation, demarcations, or any combination of these elements. We develop a typology of textual paralinguistic using data from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. We present a conceptual framework of antecedents and consequences of brands' use of textual paralinguistic. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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A customer of Whole Foods tweets that he received a bad cupcake from the grocer, to which Whole Foods replies, “A bad cupcake?!?! Oh No!!! I’m so sorry. *sigh* Thank you for letting us know” (Whole Foods Market, 2013). How does communication on social media affect brand perceptions? Marketers are communicating with customers using a “shorthand, digital language” (Smith, 2015), yet the nature of these communications is under-investigated.

In marketing, research on linguistics has focused primarily on the effects of word choice, such as the effect of explanatory words on consumption experiences (Moore, 2012), refusal words on choice (Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012), and vowel sounds in brand names on brand preferences (Lowrey & Shrum, 2007). We also see evidence that imperative messages (e.g., “Buy Now!”) are more effective in uncommitted consumer–brand relationships

(Moore, Zemack-Rugar, & Fitzsimons, working paper), and assertive statements are more effective at garnering consumer compliance for hedonic products (Kronrod, Grinstein, & Wathieu, 2012). In contrast, our work focuses not on the words said, but on the way nonverbal information is conveyed in writing.

As computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become more prevalent, people have evolved new ways of communicating. Electronic messages are often imbued with nonverbal cues that signal individual characteristics, attitudes, and emotions. Indeed, various researchers recognize that people adapt to the limitations of CMC by creating surrogates for missing social cues (Byron & Baldrige, 2007; Ganster, Eimler, & Krämer, 2012; Walther, 1996). The primary goal of this paper is to provide a framework for the surrogates that people are using in digital communications.

We define *textual paralinguistic* (TPL) as *written manifestations of nonverbal audible, tactile, and visual elements that supplement or replace written language and that can be expressed through words, symbols, images, punctuation, demarcations, or any combination of these elements*. Expression of nonverbals in text typically differs from the verbal message in several ways: (1) the words are delineated by special characters (e.g., “*”) or

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styles (e.g., CAPS), (2) the words are not standard English but still possess meaning, (3) the words do not flow grammatically with the sentence, and/or (4) the nonverbals occur in the form of a visual image (e.g., emoji). The Whole Foods' tweet, for example, contains four instances of TPL: “?!?!”, “Oh”, “!!!”, and “*sigh*”.

In this paper, we take both an inductive and a deductive approach to the conceptualization of TPL, first exploring how linguistic theory informs the study of TPL, then analyzing how companies are using TPL in their online interactions. We theorize five types of TPL and conclude with a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications as well as avenues for future research.

In-person nonverbal communication and behavior

Nonverbal communication refers to communication effected by means other than words (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013). It is readily observed in all in-person interactions, yet the notion of what constitutes nonverbal communication online is not as clear. To understand the nature of nonverbals in text, we first explore nonverbals in face-to-face interactions.

Auditory nonverbal communication

One of the earliest theorists to study nonverbal communication was Trager (1958, 1960), who noted the depth and importance of information communicated by aspects of speech such as pitch, rhythm, and tempo. Trager (1958) described paralinguistic elements in terms of vocal qualities and vocalizations that qualify literal words. These vocal properties have been termed “implicit” aspects of speech (Mehrabian, 1970) since human speech is naturally imbued with vocal sounds. Communicating aspects of speech aside from literal words has been common among playwrights for centuries. In cinema and theater, paralinguistic elements are inserted into scripts to give stage directions, relay emotions, and facilitate interaction, guiding theatrical performance across languages, cultures, and time (Poyatos, 2008).

Visual nonverbal communication

Just as auditory aspects of speech are inherent in face-to-face communication, so too are visual elements of communication. Birdwhistell (1970) investigated kinesics, the conscious or unconscious bodily movements that possess communicative value, including human gestures and body language. An important bodily communicator is the human face; some scholars claim that it is the primary source of communicative information next to human speech (Knapp et al., 2013). Subtle changes in facial muscle movements can communicate emotional states and provide nonverbal feedback (Ekman et al., 1987). It is thus not surprising that visual textual paralinguistic elements exist in the form of facial emojis.

Nonverbal visual elements are not exclusively related to bodily movements. Visual presentational style conveys information in face-to-face communication through adornments, clothing, style, tattoos, and cosmetics (Barnard, 2001). Often referred to as artifacts, these stylistic choices possess nonverbal signaling

power that can communicate personality characteristics (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010) and are often the basis for initial judgments and impressions.

Haptic nonverbal communication

Touch is the most basic form of communication; indeed, at birth the sense of touch is the most developed of our senses (Hall, 1966; Knapp et al., 2013). Young children use touch to explore their environment, and later in life touch becomes an effective method for communicating with others. We know that individuals have differing preferences for touch in interactions with others, with some people seeking out touch while others avoid it (Webb & Peck, 2015). The meaning of touch in interaction is highly dependent on environmental, personal, and contextual factors. Recent research shows that the degree of relationship closeness influences the types of touch that are deemed appropriate (Suvilehto, Glerean, Dunbar, Hari, & Nummenmaa, 2015).

Nonverbal communication online and textual paralinguistic conceptualization

Given the importance of nonverbal communication in face-to-face interactions, it is reasonable to assume that nonverbals play an important role in textual communication as well. Various researchers have noted the presence of paralinguistic elements in text-based messages (e.g., Lea & Spears, 1992; Poyatos, 2008). Lea and Spears (1992) suggest that paralinguistic marks, which they define as ellipses, inverted commas, quotation marks, and exclamation marks, affect perceptions of anonymous communicators online. Although symbols and punctuation possess communicative value, a broader conceptualization of textual paralinguistic elements is needed. To this end, we propose a typology for categorizing and differentiating the various paralinguistic elements that occur in text. It is our hope that this typology will facilitate future research on TPL, its antecedents, and its consequences.

Combining theoretical perspectives on verbal and nonverbal communication, we assert that in-person paralinguistic and text-based paralinguistic elements vary in three consequential ways. First, face-to-face paralinguistic elements are typically superimposed on the message, whereas TPL is often decomposed. That is, in face-to-face communication, the verbal and nonverbal elements are combined; vocal aspects of speech are inherent in the production of speech, and gestures occur concurrently with the message (Key, 1975). In text-based communication, however, it is possible for the paralinguistic element (e.g., *wink*) to occur before or after the verbal component of the message.

Second, paralinguistic elements in face-to-face communication are more likely to be processed nonconsciously; that is, in-person gestures and nonverbals are encoded and decoded with varying degrees of awareness and control (Knapp et al., 2013). In text, however, encoding and decoding of paralinguistic elements is more likely to be a conscious process. Whereas in-person nonverbals may be incidental or automatically enacted (e.g., smiling while

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