Marketing Colloquia

Spring 2025 - Abstract

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Textual Paralanguage and Web Accessibility: How Text-to-Speech Technology Affects Social Media Engagement

Textual paralanguage (TPL), or nonverbal cues in text, are unique features of language that contribute significantly to the sentiment of a message. In marketing communications, textual paralanguage has been studied exclusively under the assumption of visual processing. For most individuals, and in many situations, text is consumed visually. Yet, many consumers when engaging with brands online use text-to-speech technology or screen readers for the consumption of text, in essence translating the text from visual to auditory outputs. The purpose of this work is to understand how the modality in which textual paralanguage is processed affects web accessibility. Specifically, this research investigates how those who are blind (or with low vision) interpret textual paralanguage while using text-to-speech technology. We document how the use of textual paralanguage impedes message comprehension for blind consumers through (1) sentiment erasure and (2) increased processing costs. In a field experiment with blind and low vision participants using a custom-built social media mobile application, we assessed the impact of TPL algorithmic alteration on social media navigation and post engagement. We find that the inclusion of TPL has a differential impact on blind vs. sighted consumers. TPL significantly decreases the amount of time a blind individual spends viewing a post and results in app abandonment. Implications for policy makers, platforms, and social media content creators are discussed.

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