Emoji Use in Brand Communications: Social, Non-social, or None?

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Abstract:

While research has established that emojis can increase consumer engagement with brand communications, little attention has been paid to how different types of emojis perform on social media. Moving beyond the visual face vs. non-face distinction, we propose a functional categorization: social emojis that express emotions and build relationships (e.g., 😊 ❤️), and non-social emojis that add playful emphasis (e.g., 🌟 📱). Analyzing over 96,000 social media posts from nine major global brands, we find that emoji effectiveness depends on communication context. In broadcast messages to all followers, social emojis increase engagement relative to simple text while non-social emojis *decrease* it. In contrast, when brands reply publicly to individual consumers' messages (a phenomenon we term "public narrowcasting"), the effects are more subtle: non-social emojis lead to larger engagement increases than social emojis. We discuss the mediating role of emotionality as well as theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: Brand communications, social media, textual paralanguage

Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media