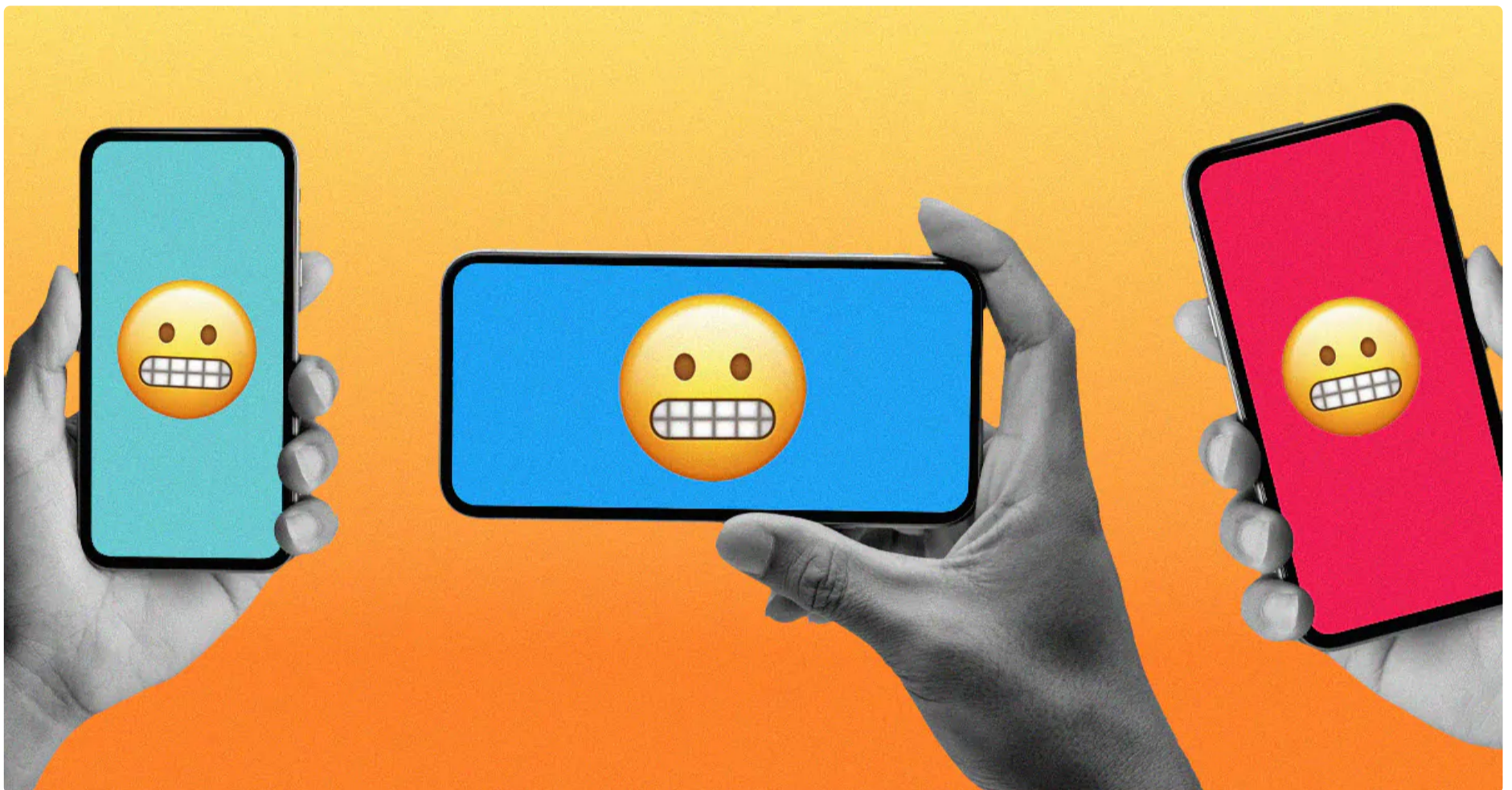


PLATFORMS

'Silence, Brand': How to Avoid Corporate Cringe on Social Media

As consumers beg for authenticity, brands recycle the same stale humor



Half of Twitter users believe brands that rely on humor feel outdated, according to a 2022 report. Photo Illustration: Adweek



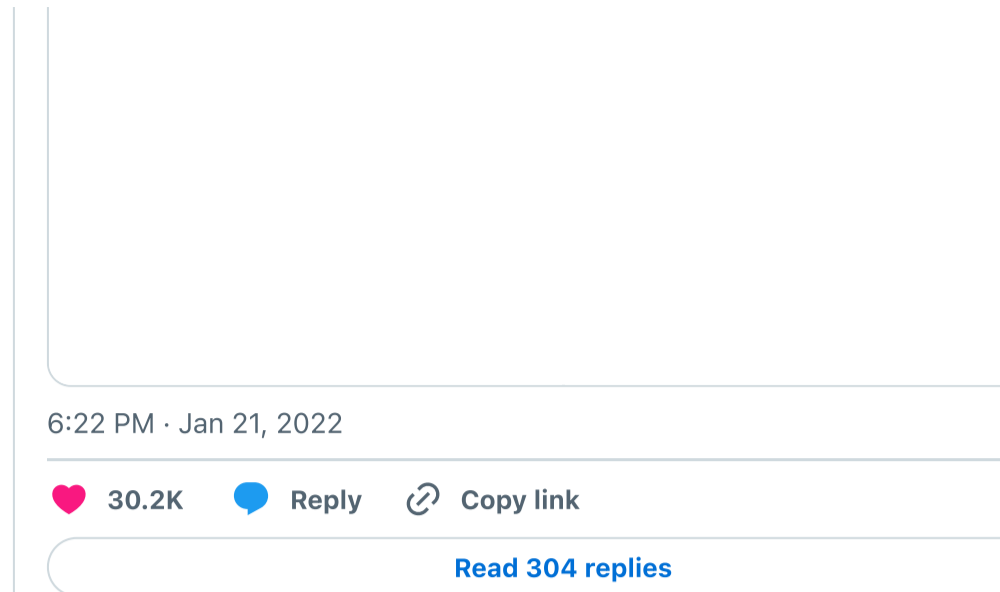
By Emmy Liederman & Catherine Perloff

JANUARY 26, 2022

Last week, New York-based 20-somethings banded together on TikTok to share their dating horror stories about a guy named Caleb, who apparently designs furniture at **West Elm** and has a track record of showering women with attention and then ghosting them. And whether viewers believe that the trending topic is an **invasion of privacy** or justified skewering, there is an overwhelming consensus on social that reactions from brands like **Hellmann's**, Ruggable, **Daily Harvest** and the many other brands that chimed in were self-promotional, awkward and overall cringe-worthy.

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this shit is so fucking weird



Ruggable posted a TikTok with the captions “We don’t design furniture. But at least our rugs will never ghost you” and “None of these rugs were designed by West Elm Caleb.” The brand has since deleted the video.

“It is capitalizing on a person that the internet is going after, and it’s a cheap shot,” said Jorien Evans, a social strategy director for Deutsch L.A. who works on **Taco Bell’s social media** accounts. “There’s no strategy to it. It’s a really easy grab for attention, and I think people are getting tired of that.”

In today’s social media landscape, brands are desperate to outdo each others quirkiness and finally win over a generation of socially-conscious consumers that are often at war with big corporations. But when brands participate in fleeting trends to which they have no connection and are overly reliant on humor as a social strategy, many experts believe they do more harm than good for their image.

Twitter’s 2022 “Real Talk” report on the state of brand behavior found that nine in 10 users value brands that have a strong sense of who they are. Half of users also answered that brands that rely on humor and jokes can feel outdated today. In the 18 to 34 age group, this number was even higher.

There has been a push for brands to act less like corporations and more like people on social media, but enforcing a humor-centric image that doesn’t align with a central brand purpose can leave consumers feeling like the brand is trying too hard, according to Evans.

“Brands need to foster who they are, as opposed to going after who they want to like them,” she said.

The return of ‘Silence, brand’



Alessandro Bogliari, co-founder and CEO of The Influencer Marketing Factory, believes that when brands are hyperactive on social media, it is often followed by a period of lessened activity—as people are frankly tired of hearing from them.



“After a period of brands ‘killing it’ on TikTok, we will have again another phase of ‘Silence, brand’ because now it’s almost too much,” he said. “When brands are commenting on posts all the time, it becomes less about the content and more about themselves. It’s short-win, cheap marketing that in

The counter-movement that Bogliari is referring to surfaced on Twitter in 2019, a time when brands had a particularly strong presence on the platform. This influx of activity led to consumers lashing out by replying with "Silence, brand" memes on Twitter posts. According to Bogliari, we will see the same thing happen today, just on another platform—TikTok.

"It's a never-ending story," he said. "Brands get somewhere and play it cool, but after a while, they start to get outdated."

Avoiding sameness on social

Consumers have a hard time telling the difference between brand voices on social media, which makes it easier for them to create an overarching negative sentiment toward corporate accounts in general. After noticing that brands in the same product categories were starting to mimic each others' tone on Twitter, the platform decided to test this trend. After selecting tweets from well-known brands all around the world, Twitter removed any identifiable names, logos, keywords and hashtags. The platform found that only a third of respondents could identify the correct brand from a list of five options.

"Brand Twitter is at a tipping point, and consumers are becoming much more savvy," said Twitter Next creative lead Tom Chirico, who stressed that consumers are quick to deduce the intentions behind brand posts.



This sameness of brand voice is what often fosters the cliché, overplayed and cringe-worthy content that consumers loathe. While effectively utilizing humor has become the blueprint for how brands should act on social, experts agreed that an over-reliance on humor could be an unsustainable model, especially when account managers begin to push boundaries.

According to Evans, there is a real opportunity for brands to find other ways to build community on TikTok, a platform where users are celebrated for their niche interests and hobbies.



"Why do all brands have to gravitate toward humor on social?" she said, adding that the strategy is running out of gas. "The nice thing about TikTok is there's such a wide breadth of things that people are interested in. Twitter cultivated this 'one size only' type of thing, and there's this real opportunity with brands on TikTok to be somebody else."



1:51 AM · Jan 4, 2022

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Choosing your moments

While it is tempting to jump on viral moments as quickly as possible, social media managers must take a moment to consider whether hopping on a certain trend **aligns with the values of their entire organization.**

"Is everyone, from the C-suite to the board, going to be on board with what you're deciding to communicate?" said Chirico, who emphasized the importance of "philosophical alignment" across an organization.

That doesn't mean there are never opportunities for brands to speak up. Paige Leidig, CMO at social listening firm NetBase Quid, said that there was a "no poo" trend of people admitting on social media to using shampoo and deodorant less often during the pandemic, which was the perfect moment for a personal care brand to step in. It's the bigger moments on social media that take more consideration.

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"Have they been involved in ubiquitous topics before? Now when they're engaging it feels authentic," Leidig said. "Or does it feel that something becomes ubiquitous and the brand is just jumping in to be part of the party?"



The best way social media managers can gut check their decisions is by considering how a comment or participation in a conversation would feel if it played out offline. This is a tactic that Karen Freberg, professor in strategic communication at the University of Louisville, often emphasizes with her students.



It also helps to consult with lots of voices, said Natasha Suri, social media supervisor at Proof Advertising, who has worked with clients like Travelocity and SkinnyPop.



"Do we have something interesting or poignant to add to that conversation?" Suri said. "A lot of the days your answer is no, but when it's yes, you have to see what the larger group thinks about it."



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