

TO BUY OR NOT TO BUY: LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF PERSUASION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract. Modern means of digital communication and the abundance of offered goods and services demand the implementation of new techniques for attracting consumers and swaying their purchasing behaviour. The current article aims to identify and describe the most common linguistic means and tools of persuasion used by influencers on social media. The paper suggests theoretical background of the language of social media in general, as well as the phenomenon of influencers and their impact on brand awareness and purchasing decisions. The practical analysis is based on the video footages of Jeffree Star, who is one of the most famous influencers in the digital environment with more than 20 million dedicated followers. The descriptive linguistic method was applied for processing the collected examples and revealing the most common linguistic techniques of persuasion that were used by the famous influencer while promoting his beauty products online. The analysis showed that ubiquitous social media has become an inseparable part of contemporary human life and interaction. Nowadays brand recognition, awareness and choices mostly depend on the influencers, who try to create a favourable content and establish a sense of bond and trust with their audience. In order to achieve that they employ a number of persuasion techniques ranging from the extensive use of emotive words to the instances of inclusive language. The collected examples, their analysis and the findings drawn at the end of the research are extremely relevant to a contemporary consumer who might get lost with a huge variety of products and goods available on the market. Being aware of the linguistic techniques that are used for the purpose of influencing and manipulating one's purchasing behaviour a consumer might be able to identify true sincerity from the marketing gimmick.

Keywords: persuasion, social media influencer, linguistic means and techniques.

Introduction

Language has always been a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, beliefs and attitudes, as well as affecting choices and decisions to be made. In contemporary digital-media dependent world brand recognition, awareness and choices mostly depend on the influencers, who create a favourable content and establish a sense of bond and trust with their audience. This type of marketing is so common these days that sometimes a person does not even notice how he / she has made the purchase of the product or item. Being aware of the linguistic techniques that are used for the purpose of influencing and affecting one's purchasing behaviour a consumer might be able to identify whether that is true sincerity or merely the marketing gimmick.

The studies on the overall impact of influencers on their audiences from the psychological or social perspective have recently been quite extensive. For instance, a global market research company *GWI* (formerly *GlobalWebIndex*) and *Edelman Trust Barometer* have been constantly publishing reports on digital media consumption and personalization of social media (*GWI Trend Report 2019*; *Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report, 2019*). Various scholars, such as Lou (2019), De Veirman et al. (2019), Evans (2017), Lim (2017), Kadekova and Holienčinova (2018), Černikovaitė (2019) have researched why and how social media influencers

have persuasive power on various target groups from cultural, social and behavioural points of view. However, the linguistic aspect of their persuasion techniques still lacks some thorough research. Normally viewed by thousands of followers, social media influencers are believed to employ certain linguistic means which boost brand image and result in great consumer engagement with the advertised product (Hermenda et al., 2019). At this juncture, it is relevant to conduct a linguistic research particularly concerning the means of language used to establish a good rapport with the target audiences, to create some buzz and persuade them to make certain purchasing decisions.

The aim of the current research is to identify and describe the most common linguistic means and tools of persuasion used by influencers on social media. The subject matter is the language and its peculiarities of one of the most famous American influencers Jeffree Star used in his video footages on *YouTube*. The overview of theoretical references suggests theoretical background of the language of social media in general, as well as the phenomenon of influencers and their impact on brand awareness and purchasing decisions. The practical part is based on the descriptive linguistic analysis of the language of Jeffree Star while promoting various goods and products online.

Theoretical background

Communication has undergone a lot of development through the history of humanity – from stone pictographs, followed by the use of papyrus and the invention of a printing press to the latest and the most revolutionary innovations. Some of the latest breakthroughs in communication were invention of the Internet and smart devices which brought communication to a whole new level (Rufferty, 2017). The new media has opened bigger business opportunities and added an element of participation in order to engage audiences and give them a sense of membership.

Every time a new technology arrives, we see the growth of new kinds of discourse, reflecting the aims and intentions of the users (Crystal, 2014). Social media is one of those instances that have drastically changed the way people interact and communicate all over the world. Since its advent in the 1980s, it has gained many different forms and served various functions that aim to fulfil the types of services, such as forums, blogs, wikis, content sharing and virtual worlds. It is this inherent versatility that social media possesses that makes it so appealing to users (Jimma, 2017). The usage of social media around the world is ever-increasing, making it one of the most popular online activities that users engage in. The latest statistics on social media reveal that there are 3.6 billion social media users worldwide, which stands at about 49% of the current population and the number is projected to increase to almost 4.41 billion in 2025 (Clement, 2020).

The recent major popular social media platforms are *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *WhatsApp*, *Instagram*, *TikTok*, *Snapchat*, etc. (Fig. 1).

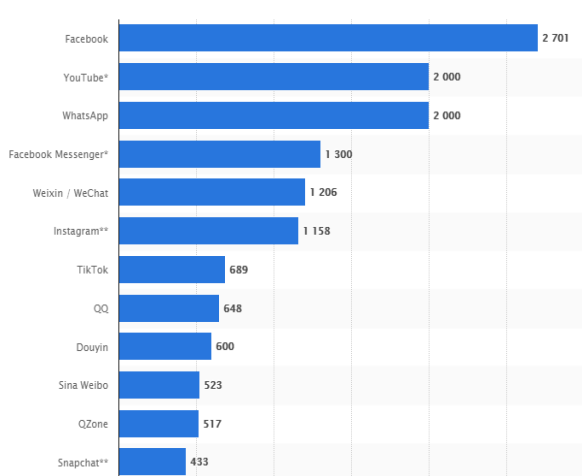


Fig. 1. Most popular social media platforms worldwide (in millions)

There is no doubt that social media networks are now a major source of news and information.

However, they are also unique in the way they allow the interaction with consumers.

Social media influencers, as a modern phenomenon, are winning over the Internet with their outstanding presence. Their opinions have a powerful impact on people, especially on the Millennials, who are obsessed with technology and comprise a massive, economically powerful group (Kadekova, Holienčinova, 2018).

Influencer communication is quite diverse and unique. As a new form of word-of-mouth marketing, it has to be both appealing and credible to the target audience. The aim of influencer communication varies in different situations but usually it is for creating more excitement about certain product or just trying to raise awareness about the brand they are representing (Raabe, Sundermann, 2019).

Every word has its own value that is why communication for influencer is the key to persuade as many followers as possible on all social media platforms. However, according to Romanova and Smirnova (2019), the techniques of persuasive language in advertising should subtly improve the message without limiting the choice of a person. Persuasive manipulations use a wide spectrum of rhetorical, lexical, syntactic and other linguistic devices in the creation of the promotional message (Vaičėnienė, 2006). Thus, while analysing the language of the influencers, the following categories of linguistic techniques will be focused on in the present article:

- 1) Emotive words
- 2) Rhetorical figures
- 3) Inclusive language

Emotive language is the deliberate choice of words to elicit emotion, usually for the purpose of influence or manipulation. Such linguistic elements as *emotive adjectives*, *catchphrases*, *exclamations*, and *colloquial vocabulary* are the attributes of a language capable of reinforcing the meaning as well as creating the desirable mood of the messages.

Figurative language is also used to convince the consumer. According to Smetonienė (2009), language of advertising and promotion employs a variety of rhetorical figures as they help to express ideas in an imaginative and more economical way, which contributes to enhancing the effect of persuasion. Figurative language represents ideas beyond the literal meaning of words. The use of figures of speech such as *simile*, *metaphor*, *personification*, *hyperbole* and so forth, in description, creates images, lays emphasis, evokes emotions and expresses fresh and vivid meanings (Torto 2016).

One more powerful technique of language manipulation is inclusive language, which appeals to human desire not to be ‘left out’ or regarded as ‘an outsider’ (Naphthine 2013). The use of *pronouns* like ‘us’, ‘we’, ‘you’, etc., direct address to the audience and the cases *analogy* make the person feel as part of a group or inspired to take certain actions.

Influencers use a variety of techniques to grab the attention of the audience, to establish credibility and trust, to stimulate desire for a product or service and to motivate consumers to act (Torto 2016).

Research methods and conditions

The practical analysis of the current research is based on the language peculiarities from a number of video footages by Jeffree Star, who is one of the most worldwide famous influencers on the digital platform with more than 20 million dedicated followers. The influencer’s success came with the development his own cosmetics brand – *Jeffree Star Cosmetics*, which received significant attention on video-sharing platform *YouTube* and helped to establish his name as a make-up mogul and a social media influencer. By providing his product reviews, makeup tutorials and masterclasses, as well as clothing and accessory bargains, vlogs on lifestyle, and much more, Jeffree’s channel has become the favourite destination for beauty and cosmetics lovers from all over the world. Namely, his high popularity and the number of followers led to the choice of this influencer for the analysis of the present article.

The descriptive linguistic method was applied for processing the collected examples, which were grouped and analysed according to three categories indicated in the theoretical part. The research performed enabled to reveal the most common linguistic techniques of persuasion that were used by the famous influencer while promoting various goods online.

Research results and their discussion

As it has been mentioned above one of the ways to persuade the audience is through the use of emotive appeal. To start with, *emotional adjectives* are widely employed in the speech of influences, which not only describe certain things but also reinforce the overall impression. According to Blažinskaitė (2004), the most frequently used adjectives in the Lithuanian advertising discourse are: ‘special’, ‘unusual’, ‘perfect’, ‘unique’, ‘incredible’, etc. The analysis of the language used by Jeffree Star reveals similar patterns, as well as the use of other similar descriptive adjectives, like *beautiful*, *amazing*, *pretty*. For example:

The perfect nude gloss... [5:41]

It’s very bizarre, it’s on the unique side... [9:32]

The formula is beautiful ... [5:22]

The glitter is so pretty... [10:05]

It feels amazing ... [23:37]

However, to strengthen the effect and manipulate the audience, the influencer frequently uses extremely emotional adjectives, such as *magical*, *insane*, *blinding*, *stunning*, *iconic*, etc.:

It is very magical ... [11:07]

The iconic Jeffree Star eyebrow brush ... [20:01]

It is really blinding ... [12:01]

I am unveiling something insane ... [0:25]

It’s time to get really glossy and really shiny ... [0:44]

Other individual examples of the use of adjectives in the speech of Jeffree Star include: ‘wild’, ‘icy’, ‘heavenly’, ‘cool’, ‘fresh’, ‘vibrant’, ‘aesthetically pleasing’, ‘obsessive’, etc.:

It is been a wild journey ... [0:37]

I know it’s like simple packaging but I just love how it looks, it’s aesthetically pleasing ... [7:26]

This smells so fresh and just smells really nice ... [4:43]

Most of the adjectives have been deliberately chosen in order to highlight the best features of the item promoted and distinguish it from other similar goods.

Another popular emotive technique of persuasion characteristic to this influencer is the use of exclamations. Jeffree Star likes to show how much he is affected by the new product or event. He usually tries to make it as big, bold and dramatic as possible, to make his followers or subscribers more curious. For example:

Oh wow, wow, look at her! [12:24]

Wow, that’s crazy ... [15:42]

Oh, it’s so pretty, so 90s ... [11:28]

I am so excited for these to come out oh my god! [12:45]

Oh, my gosh! [15:10]

Look at that colour though woo! [14:38]

Ok, now let’s see what this is. Whoa, oh, my god Matt-soft touch ... [3:52]

Oh, no, no, no ... [10:24]

From the examples above it can be noticed that exclamations are very common in the persuasive language of this influencer. The most common exclamations are ‘Oh!’ and ‘Wow!’ which usually show over-excitement, impatience and extreme surprise of the speaker. Exclamations are used every time Jeffree Star sees and tries out a new product. On the one hand their over-usage might become irritable and annoying, yet once the followers get used to Jeffree Star’s style of speaking, this technique evokes interest and at the same time makes his persuasion less noticeable.

The use of the features of spoken and colloquial language helps to create an intimate and close relationship with the addressee (Vaičėnienė 2006). A good example of informal language can be found in the following extracts from Jeffree Star's speech:

I've tried 'Cheetos' like once. Yes, I'm not kidding! [14:08]

My gut is saying don't put this on my mouth. So, I'm gonna follow my instinct and not do it. [20:50]

Listen, you guys, I just wanna thank every single person that purchased my first brush set with ... [1:50]

What's up everybody, welcome back to my channel! Hi, how are ya? [0:10]

The examples above include the use of contractions, informal words, such as 'kidding', 'gonna', 'wanna', 'what's up', 'ya', etc. The use of slang words is also a distinctive language feature of Jeffree Star. For example:

Y'all know the tea ... [2:10]

I am shook ... [5:18]

My skin isn't gagging and living ... [8:40]

This weekend I will be doing a HUGE giveaway!!! Buckle up! [11:05]

Although these words ('tea' – information, 'shook' – shocked) are understood only to a specific audience, they act as a powerful way to induce personalization and in-group identity. Colloquial or everyday language can make person seem to be relatable and down-to-earth (White 2018), which can create closer relationship between influencer and their audience. According to Romanova and Smirnova (2019), colloquial language reduces the distance between the advertiser and the prospective customer as if they were close friends.

Another big category of linguistic manipulation technique includes the use of figurative language, which is used in an exaggerated manner. One of the most common cases employed in the speech of Jeffree Star is *personification*. It is a figure of speech by which animals, abstract ideas, or inanimate things are referred to as if they were humans (Baldick 2008). According to Nordquist (2018), "because people have a tendency to look at the world in human terms, it's not surprising that we often rely on personification to bring inanimate things to life."

Personification is widely used as manipulation technique in marketing and advertising. Businesses take their products and try to give them human twist – create a special character specific brand creates that will be the representative face that people will recognize and start connecting with that specific brand.

As Jeffree Star promotes beauty products, personification is used extensively to show the

importance of a specific item, for instance a lipstick, lip scrub, eye shadow pallet, etc. The influencer refers to them by using the pronouns 'she', 'her':

Okay, she has some pigment ... [11:49]

Let's see what she looks like ... [13:46]

She is blinding ... [12:17]

Here she is in all her glory ... [4:53]

Let's open her up ... [3:02]

Oh wow, wow, look at her!" [12:24]

Personification allows audiences to sympathise with inanimate object and even have some feelings for it which could help when trying to persuade the audience into buying something (Nordquist 2018).

Hyperbole or *exaggeration* is also quite common in the product presentation by Jeffree Star. It is likely to be used with emotive words, which helps to create a dramatic effect on a person and get the response from them (Rutkauskienė 2014). The examples from the analysed examples are similar to the ones discussed above in the cases with adjectives:

The most iconic liquid lipstick formula on the market. [0:56]

I am on the ground like about to die of excitement. [10:27]

I have done some crazy things; I have tried some crazy products. [20:44]

In order to raise interest among his audience Jeffree Star uses *rhetorical questions*. These statements worded like questions do not need to be answered right away but are thought-provoking and make a person wonder. These questions are appealing for their dramatic effect and also allow audience feel like they are directly communicating with the influencer. For instance:

Are you ready? Let's dive in. [1:46]

You ready for this? [24:19]

Like what is that amaziness now? [3:12]

This type of persuasion technique is also intended to intrigue a person, trigger his / her imaginations and pull towards the viewpoint of the influencer.

To establish the familiarity within their followers and show their importance, influencers might employ the techniques from the third category related to the use of *inclusive language*. This type of persuasion is extremely popular among influencers including Jeffree Star. Firstly, he achieves that with the use of pronouns, such as 'you' and 'we':

Oh, you see how thick that is? [9:50]

Y'all know the tea [2:10]

Hi, how are ya? [10:01]

What do we think this retails you guys? [14:47]

The use of the phrase 'you guys' is also very common in his speech. For example:

Listen, you guys, I just wanna thank every single person that purchased my first brush set with 'Morphe' ... [1:50]

I'm dying to know you guys' thoughts on the packaging ... [12:50]

Thank you to you guys ... [2:34]

To show his personal involvement, Jeffree Star keeps repeating the phrases 'I am obsessed', 'I can't believe', 'I'm so excited', 'welcome to the family' almost in all his videos:

I'm obsessed now with this looks really [14:48]

I can't believe that these products are finally coming out ... [16:01]

I'm so excited to get these on everyone's lips ... [16:19]

Welcome to the family! I love you guys so much! [16:51]

Moreover, the influencer uses the imperatives to engage the audience and influence them to take action:

Smell this. That's gasoline! That is intense! [18:46]

Let's see what she looks like [13:46]

You guys will have to let me know. Let's watch the last shade ... [14:56]

Let's move on to shade taste buds ... [5:56]

To sum up, the speech of this eccentric but charismatic social media influencer is saturated with different linguistic elements that allow manipulating audience's feelings in favour of obtaining a particular beauty product.

Conclusions

1. Modern means of digital communication and the abundance of offered goods and services demand the implementation of new techniques for attracting consumers and swaying their purchasing behaviour. The advent of social

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media and its exponential growth brought in a relatively new phenomenon of the social media influencer.

2. Whatever the strategy the influencers employ in order to manipulate their audiences, language is still the main carrier of the message. Words, texts and sentences are attributes of a language capable of highlighting the meaning as well as enticing consumers to purchase a product.
3. The analysis of the language of one of the most famous and successful influencers Jeffree Starr revealed the most common persuasive and manipulative techniques. The extensive use of adjectives and exclamatory sentences reinforce the overall impression of the utterance, as well as trigger the interest and curiosity. Colloquial language, including slang words and expressions help to maintain a closer relationship between the influencer and his followers, thus creating the effect of trust and credibility. The instances of figurative language, such as personification, exaggeration or rhetorical questions helped to achieve a dramatic effect and get a favourable response from the consumers. Finally, in order to establish the familiarity within his followers, Jeffree Starr employed the techniques of inclusive language by using personal pronouns and direct address to his audience.

Research limitations

The current research was an attempt to see if the language of social media influencers contains certain persuasive elements. The findings prove their presence and extensive application. However, this research focused on the peculiarities of the language of only one among hundreds or even thousands of other opinion shapers. Thus, it would be reasonable to perform additional linguistic analysis which could bring new insights into the topic under the research.

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PIRKTI AR NEPIRKTI: KALBA KAIP ĮTAIGOS PRIEMONĖ SOCIALINIULOSE TINKLUOSE

Santrauka

Šiuolaikinės modernios bendravimo priemonės ir siūlomų prekių bei paslaugų gausa, sudaro prielaidas naujiems metodams ir priemonėms, siekiant pritraukti vartotojus ir paveikti jų pirkimo įpročius. Pastaruoju metu daug tyrimų yra atlikta analizuojant reklamų kalbą bei nuomonės formuotojų įtaką vartotojams psichologiniu ar socialiniu požiūriu, tačiau lingvistiniai jų įtaigumo aspektai vis dar mažai aprašyti.

Šiuo straipsniu siekiama nustatyti ir atskleisti labiausiai paplitusias kalbines įtaigos priemones ir būdus, kuriuos socialiniuose tinkluose naudoja nuomonės formuotojai. Straipsnyje apžvelgiami teoriniai socialinių tinklų kalbos aspektai, taip pat įtaigumą skatinantys veiksniai ir jų poveikis prekės ženklo žinomumui ir vartotojo sprendimams. Empirinis tyrimas atliktas analizuojant Jeffree Star, vieno garsiausių socialinių tinklų nuomonės formuotojo, kalbą „YouTube“ platformoje. Surinkti pavyzdžiai suklasifikuoti ir išanalizuoti pagal pasirinktus kriterijus.

Gauti rezultatai atskleidė, kad socialiniai tinklai yra neatsiejama kasdienio gyvenimo dalis. Šiais laikais prekės ženklo žinomumas ir pirkimus lemiantys sprendimai labai priklauso nuo nuomonės formuotojų, kurie sukuria palankų kontekstą, užmezga ryšį su savo auditorija ir pelno jų pasitikėjimą. Pagrindinės jų įtaigumo priemonės pasižymi būdvardžių, šnekamosios kalbos, žargono, išiktukų, įvairių retorinių priemonių bei įtraukios kalbos elementų gausa. Surinkti pavyzdžiai, jų analizė ir išvados yra labai aktualūs šiuolaikiniam vartotojui, kuris gali pasimesti tarp daugybės rinkoje siūlomų prekių ir paslaugų. Žinodamas kokios kalbinės priemonės yra taikomos siekiant paveikti ir manipuluoti, vartotojas gali apsisaugoti nuo rinkodaros triukų ir racionaliau priimti sprendimus.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: įtaigumas, socialinių tinklų nuomonės formuotojas, kalbinės priemonės ir metodai.

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