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Video blogs and persuasion. A multimodal analysis of argumentation strategies of YouTubers

The dissertation aims to investigate the phenomenon of *persuasion* in video blog communication and to determine the communication-based and multimodal conditions for persuasive success by identifying persuasion-promoting and persuasion-inhibiting processes in the argumentation of video bloggers. Subscriber numbers, number of views or "likes" are considered used to measure the persuasive success of the video bloggers.

Due to their quantitative growth potential and qualitative possibilities of seemingly transparent, participatory and non-hierarchical communication, video blogs developed into a constant communicative (as well as economic) influencing factor, which in turn developed into a very prominent form of advertising, influencer marketing. This form of advertising involves so-called *influencers* (including video bloggers) drawing attention to products or services on various platforms on the internet, such as YouTube. This creates an intersection between video blogs and *persuasion*, which is also practised in video blogs. A look at various frequently watched videos revealed that one German video blogger is particularly successful in realising this type of text, because she achieves an above-average number of views compared to other bloggers. It is therefore obvious that she must be doing "something" differently and that this "something" is a factor in her success. Given this, the present study sets itself the task of investigating the communication-oriented reason for her success as well as the failure of one of her YouTuber peers (compared to her). The thesis is put forward that persuasion success depends on the quality of the multimodally constituted persuasion and that a persuasion constructed on the basis of argumentation strategies (content), which influence the conscious as well as the subconscious through a coherent, harmonious, strongly coordinated interplay of different semiotic resources (form) instrumentalising them, promotes the authenticity and credibility of the persuader and consequently increases the chances of a persuasion event. Since video blogs are not advertising per se and instead of direct communication between the company and the recipient, a triangle is created consisting of the video blogger, the company and the recipient, a further thesis is put forward here that video bloggers, in addition to using argumentation strategies typical of classic advertising, also use their own strategies which enable them to mask the advertising intention and thus support the potential effect of persuasion.

Since the work examines the medially conditioned and mediated use of language, it is strongly anchored in the linguistic sub-discipline of *media linguistics*. Given that media-mediated persuasion is a semiotically complex phenomenon, the **method of multimodality**

forms a starting point for this work. In order to realise this holistic project, the media linguistic conception is enriched with theoretical-methodological insights from several other linguistic domains as well as other research directions, such as the instruments of conversation analysis, phonetics, rhetoric, as well as concepts from communication science, psychology, film analysis, gesture and facial expression research and empirical gaze analysis. In order to interpret the persuasive performance with regard to what causes the persuasive effect or is even decisive for it, and to identify the persuasion-promoting and persuasion-impeding procedures in video blog communication, the **method of contrastivity** is also applied as a supplementary pillar in the methodological procedure. The thesis examines the multimodal persuasion constitution of two video bloggers, one of whom is persuasively successful as measured by the above-average number of views (Mrs. Bella), and the other of whom has comparatively less success and a much lower number of views (Madametamtam).

In order to substantiate the hypothesis and to achieve the main objective described above, the following secondary objectives are set in the dissertation:

- Production of a multimodal analysis model for film-like (audiovisual, technology-mediated) forms of communication with a focus on semiotic resources and their qualities that could be relevant in the persuasion context;
- Exploring the specificity of the multimodal persuasion constitution of two female video bloggers by identifying the argumentation strategies they use and examining their multimodal instrumentalisation along the designed analytical model;
- Determining the points of contact and differences between the persuasion procedures of the video bloggers with regard to the content of their argumentation, i.e. the deployed argumentation strategies and their form, i.e. their multimodal design.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, a theoretical part covering chapters one to three, an empirical part in chapter four and a concluding part with the evaluation and interpretation of the research results in chapter five.

The theoretical part of the dissertation is opened by a chapter that constitutes an introduction to the multimodality of technically mediated audiovisual texts. Since forms of communication that operate with spoken language, various sounds and running images have sometimes received little attention in research, theoretical and methodological guidelines for dealing with such forms of communication are only rudimentary. In addition, new forms of communication with new combinations of expressive resources have developed within the last few years, to which many of the previous discussions on multimodality have limited applicability or which no longer seem appropriate in this context. Video blogs combine two

aspects: a new form of communication and moving image. In order to analyse persuasion in video blogs in an appropriately multimodal way a conceptual, research-theoretical basis for capturing technically mediated audiovisual forms of communication had to be created first, and this is the overarching goal of the first chapter. The second chapter examines the relationship between rhetoric and digital communication. Specifically, it analyses the connection between the proprium of rhetorical action, i.e. persuasion, and the digital form of communication that has recently enjoyed particular popularity - the video blog. The focus is therefore on the phenomenon of persuasion, its concepts and how it works in practice (especially with regard to argumentation strategies) as well as on videoblogs and their specifics. Given that video blogs are a technically mediated manifestation of persuasive action, rhetoric and persuasion encounter a new technical medium. The chapter examines how this expands or limits the means, argumentation strategies and techniques that can be used for the purpose of persuasion and, consequently, what the theory of rhetoric should be expanded to include. In this chapter, the multimodal quality of videoblogs is examined in relation to the theoretical foundation created in the first chapter for the study of technically mediated audiovisual forms of communication. The semiotic resources potentially found in them are explored, recorded in the form of a network of modalities and explained with regard to their persuasive relevance. Based on these findings, the third chapter sets out the framework for an empirical multimodal analysis of persuasion in video blogs with a specific set of analytical tools for each individual modality of relevance to the work, along which the investigation is conducted in the second part of the dissertation.

Once a theoretical framework for a sufficient investigation of multimodal persuasion constitution in videoblogs has been established in part one, the second part of the work is dedicated to the practical multimodal investigation of the persuasion process of the two video bloggers. It begins with a separate examination of the two vloggers, in which the argumentation strategies they use are identified, described in terms of their multimodal design and interpreted in terms of their effect. It discusses both the specific design of the individual semiotic resources, i.e. the contribution they make individually for the purpose of persuasion, and the combination of these resources, i.e. how they influence each other in their persuasive meaning potential.

In the final part of the dissertation, a relational analysis is undertaken in which the persuasion constitution of the video bloggers is compared, evaluated and interpreted. In the course of the analysis, the two theses are substantiated and conclusions are drawn with regard to factors (argumentative strategies and their multimodal design) that make the persuasion event more successful or hinder it.

Due to the fact that the dissertation takes a holistic view of persuasion and thus requires an interdisciplinary methodology, theoretical-methodological achievements from various research fields are linked, giving them a new dimension. Furthermore, there is a deficit of academic research in the relatively new areas of multimodal analysis, media linguistics, internet linguistics, image linguistics as well as media language and, more precisely, its media manifestations, such as the language of video bloggers, whose characteristics are identified in the present work. Another way in which the dissertation adds value to this field of research is that it uncovers and analyses the persuasion of the inconspicuous video bloggers and the functioning of *influencer marketing*, as well as factors that determine their success and thus also the success of this form of advertising. On the one hand, this can contribute to a more conscious and critical reception of video blogs while, on the other hand, it reveals the preferences, needs and demands of the contemporary recipient enabling, e.g., advertisers to create a multimodal communication that is perfectly tailored to them. Finally, the dissertation's contribution to the field is the model established here with categories and criteria for analysing technically mediated multimodal texts that operate with a moving image and integrate the human body as a medium. These parameters can be applied to other similar types of texts to show their multimodal distinctiveness or to identify contrasts between text types.

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