



The Language of Influence: A Critical Stylistic Analysis of Social Media Influencer Discourse

Dr. Ali Hussein Abdulameer Al-Mankushy

Ali.h.abdulameer@uokerbala.edu.iq

University of Karbala/ College of Education for Humanities/
Department of English

Abstract

The rapid expansion of influencer culture across digital platforms has dramatically changed the way we communicate, making every day conversations sites of strong persuasion and ideological construction. Much of the previous work examining influencer marketing has come at it from a variety of angles: consumer behavior, branding, and digital identity, yet little attention has been devoted to understanding the micro-linguistic structures through which influence is created. This research seeks to address this gap through the application of critical stylistics to examine how language creates persuasive meanings in influencer discourse. Through an analysis of 45 posts gathered from public accounts on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, the study will examine how influencers create trust, desirability, and identity using linguistic strategies such as naming/describing, modality, negation, and contrast. Findings will demonstrate that influencer discourse works through a hybrid model of communication that combines personal narratives with commercial intent utilizing heavy amounts of evaluative language and implicit persuasion. The results will further contribute to the emerging field of digital discourse analysis and illustrate the relevance of critical stylistics to digital discourse beyond traditional media forms.

Keywords: critical stylistics, influence discourse, persuasion, digital media, constructed identity.

لغة التواصل: تحليل اسلوبي نقدي لخطاب المؤثرين على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي
م.د. علي حسين عبد الأمير حسن المنكوشي

المخلص:

أدى الانتشار السريع لثقافة المؤثرين عبر المنصات الرقمية إلى تغيير جذري في أساليب تواصلنا، جاعلاً من المحادثات اليومية ساحةً للتأثير القوي وبناء الأفكار. وقد تناولت معظم الدراسات السابقة التي بحثت في تسويق المؤثرين هذا الموضوع من زوايا متعددة: سلوك المستهلك، والعلامات التجارية، والهوية الرقمية، إلا أن القليل منها ركز على المفاهيم اللغوية الدقيقة التي يُبنى من خلالها التأثير. البحث الحالي يسعى إلى سد هذه الفجوة من خلال تطبيق المنهجية النقدية لدراسة كيفية بناء اللغة للمعاني الإقناعية في خطاب المؤثرين. ومن خلال تحليل 45 منشورًا جمعت من حسابات عامة على إنستغرام، وتيك توك، ويوتيوب. الدراسة الحالية تدرس كيف يبني المؤثرون الثقة، والجاذبية، والهوية باستخدام استراتيجيات لغوية كالترسمية والوصف، والأسلوب، والنفي، والتباين. وستُظهر النتائج أن خطاب المؤثرين يعمل وفق نموذج تواصل هجين يجمع بين السرد الشخصي والنية التجارية، مستخدمًا كميات كبيرة من اللغة التقييمية والإقناع الضمني. ستساهم هذه النتائج في



إثراء مجال تحليل الخطاب الرقمي الناشئ، وستبرز أهمية الأسلوبية النقدية في الخطاب الرقمي بما يتجاوز أشكال الإعلام التقليدية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأسلوبية النقدية، خطاب التأثير، الإقناع، الإعلام الرقمي، الهوية المُصاغة.

1. Introduction

Social media has completely changed the way people communicate. With social media influencing the nature of communication, it has introduced new forms of discourse in which individuals can serve as content creators, brands, and opinion leaders. Influencers have emerged as a dominant figure in forming consumers' perceptions and behaviors toward products. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have provided influencers the ability to connect with their target audiences globally. Personal expression has now become strategic communication.

Research has addressed influencer discourse from various viewpoints including digital Identity Construction (Abidin, 2016), self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), and online persuasion (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). There has also been an examination of the commercialization of daily life (Khamis et al., 2017) and the significance of authenticity within influencer marketing (audrezet et al., 2020). From a linguistic standpoint, discourse analysis research has demonstrated the impact of language upon social meaning (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006); corpus-based research has identified Evaluation and stance patterns (Baker, 2006).

Despite these efforts to develop our knowledge base surrounding influencer discourse, however, one major gap still exists within the current literature. Most research conducted thus far tends to focus on macro-level characteristics - i.e. Branding strategies and audience engagement - while failing to consider the micro-level linguistic structures through which influence is developed. Specifically, there is a need to apply the theoretical framework of critical stylistics (Jeffries, 2010) to digital influencer discourse due to its ability to provide insight into how ideological meanings are embedded within everyday language.

2. Literature Review : Critical Stylistics (A Methodology for Ideological Analysis)

Critical stylistics (Jeffries, 2010) is an important development in studying the relationship between language and ideology. It emerged from a desire to combine two prominent paradigms in linguistic analysis: stylistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Traditionally, stylistics was concerned with formal aspects of texts primarily in literary contexts; meanwhile CDA associated with researchers like Norman Fairclough (1995) and Teun A. van Dijk (2006), has concentrated upon the



role of discourse in reinforcing relationships of power/ideology. Critics have argued that CDA does not utilize systematic methods for analyzing individual texts whereas stylistics lacks sufficient attention to ideological issues (jeffries, 2010).

Critical stylistics resolves this problem by presenting a methodologically based tool kit for analyzing how linguistic selections represent reality ideologically in systematic ways. To jeffries (2010), since language contains inherent ideologies because language presents assumptions concerning the world often as natural/unobtrusive; therefore those assumptions are contained within regular linguistic structures used in everyday conversation: e.g. Naming/conceptualizing, transitivity; modality.

An advantage of critical stylistics is its focus upon textual detail. Rather than being reliant on general interpretive statements; critical stylistics bases analysis upon identifiable linguistic attributes; consequently increasing analytical clarity/transparency; hence also providing greater replication capabilities; accordingly rendering it especially well-suited for use with contemporary digital discourses in which meaning is created via subtle/implicit linguistic selections.

2.1 Influencer Discourse as Digital Discourse

The growth of social media has produced a new type of discourse in which individuals produce content as both authors/marketers. Influencers referred to as "micro-celebrities" by Abidin (2016) perform a type of "visibility labor" creating content continuously to retain engagement with their audience. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enable the production/dissemination of this content. Kaplan and haenlein (2010) emphasize that social media provides environments that are interactive/immediate/user generated; all of which shape users' linguistic practices. Influencer discourse is inherently hybrid in nature combining aspects of:

- A. Personal communication
- B. Advertising
- C. Storytelling

Due to this hybridization of communicative styles; linguists find influencer discourse fascinating as it produces an ambiguous distinction between authentic expressions and strategic persuasions.

2.2 Persuasion and Evaluation Through Language

Language performs a vital role in creating persuasion; not merely through direct argumentations; but also through indirect evaluations. Hunston and Thompson (2000) indicate that Evaluation is a fundamental mechanism that allows speakers to



convey opinions and build alliances with their intended audiences. In regard to influencer discourse; persuasion is often implied rather than explicitly stated; relying on positive evaluations/personal experiences/emotional appeals. This parallels cialdini's (2001) principles of persuasion particularly social proof and authority that are often implemented linguistically through declarations of personal achievement/social approbation.

2.3 Identity Formation in Digital Discourse

Identity formation is another core component of influencer discourse. Building upon Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation; self-presentation may be viewed as an expressive performance whereby individuals control how they are perceived by other individuals. In digital environments this process is amplified as influencers craft their identities through deliberately formulated language/content. Self-branding has been identified as a primary characteristic of social media by Khamis et al. (2017); where individuals display themselves as marketable units.

Language serves as a mechanism for constructing relatable (via casual/informal tone) yet authoritative (via expertise/recommendation) identities for influencers.

2.4 Previous Research and Gap

Significant research has explored influencer culture examining topics such as marketing effectiveness (audrezet et al., 2020), digital labor (Abidin, 2016), and identity formation (Khamis et al., 2017). Additionally, discourse analysis has studied the influence of language upon social meaning (fairclough, 1995; van dijk, 2006). Although considerable research has been conducted regarding influencers and their use of language, however there are few studies that have utilized the framework of critical stylistics for analyzing influencer discourse. Moreover most existing research focuses on macro-level analysis; leaving out many micro-level linguistic elements involved in developing influence.

3. Methodology

This section discusses the methodology used to develop the linguistic construction of influence in social media discourse. It explains the research design, data collection methods, corpus creation and analytical techniques. The study uses a critical stylistic methodology which uses Jeffries (2010) style model, and also includes a qualitative analysis with some quantitative measures. Both types of analyses will provide both an empirically grounded representation of the data and an interpretively rich understanding of the data, consistent with the current practices in discourse analysis (Baker, 2006).

3.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design combined with quantitative



measures. The qualitative aspect is the core of the study as we seek to understand how linguists' selection of language create influential messages in influencers' discourses. Discourse analysis is particularly useful for discovering implicit meanings, ideology embedded in language and subtle linguistic patterns (van Dijk, 2006; Fairclough, 1995).

At the same time, the study involves some elementary quantitative measurements, such as frequency counts of certain stylistic characteristics, in order to increase analytic dependability. Baker (2006) argued that when qualitative and quantitative methods are used together researchers can find a balance between interpreting detail in texts and finding general patterns. Therefore, the study could be best classified as a corpus-informed critical stylistic analysis. Where, all the textual data are systematically analyzed using a previously defined analytical framework.

3.2 Data Collection and Sampling Methods

Data for this study were collected from three major social media platforms:
Instagram
TikTok
YouTube

Platforms were chosen because they play important roles in developing influencer culture and each platform supports different ways of communicating e.g., written captions, spoken language and multi-modal content. Past research have demonstrated the importance of these platforms in influencing digital communication habits and consumer behaviors (Haenlein and Kaplan, 2010; Khamis et al., 2017).

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed so that the selected data would be specifically pertinent to the research objectives. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research since it enables the researcher to select data that are most informative (Dörnyei, 2007). Approximately 8,000 – 10,000 words make up the corpus.

3.3 Analytical Model

The analytical model is founded upon Jeffries' (2010) style model of critical stylistics. Critical stylistics offers a range of tools for determining how linguistic forms encode ideological meaning.

Six tools from Jeffries (2010) style model have been selected based on their applicability to persuasive discourse and capacity to identify both overt and covert meaning construction:

Naming/Describing
Representing Action/Event



Equating/Contrasting
Prioritising
Hypotheticalising (Modalisation)
Negation

Additionally, the analysis relies on Systemic Functional Linguistic theory, especially Halliday's (1994) transitivity concept to evaluate how actors and experiences are constructed.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Ensuring reliability and validity in qualitative research is vital. Measures to address reliability include:

Use of a clearly defined analytical framework (Jeffries, 2010)
Documentation of analytical processes
Coding of data

These steps contribute to the reproducibility of this research.

Measures to achieve validity included:

Use of real-world data
Linkage of analysis to established theories
Support for interpretations with textual examples

Moreover, the inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative aspects adds to the methodological solidity (Baker, 2006). The study relied on publically accessible data and consequently did not rely on personal or confidential data. Ethical issues were however considered:

Where possible influencer identities were anonymous
Data were used for academic reasons only
No manipulation or distortion of content occurred

All these practices correspond with ethical principles for internet-based research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Naming and Describing: Constructing Value/Evaluation

Extract 1

Influencer: @GlowWithLina

Platform: Instagram

Date: March 2025

“this serum is a total game-changer — my skin has never looked better.”

Analysis



The term "game changer" functions as a means of intensifying a highly evaluative lexical option. Naming and describing enable speakers to embed ideological meaning via classification and evaluation (Jeffries, 2010). Therefore, not only does the product work effectively but it also transforms how one perceives its value. The comparative superlative "never looked better" further amplifies this evaluation in establishing an absolute point of reference. Evaluations are central to persuasive discourse according to Hunston and Thompson's (2000) view as they position the speaker and invite alignment with the audience.

Extract 2

Influencer: @FitMax

Platform: TikTok

Date: February 2025

"This is going to be the easiest workout you've ever tried."

Analysis

The adjective "the easiest", creates the product (routine) in relation to ease, thereby minimizing perceived effort. The future oriented clause "you'll ever try" develops a predictive statement, thus strengthening confidence in the product. From a critical stylistic viewpoint, this example shows how naming and describing enable influencers to preclude resistance by providing potential audience concerns (difficulty), thus improving persuasive efficiency (Jeffries, 2010).

Extract 3

Influencer: @FoodieSara

Platform: Instagram

Date: March 2025

"A guilt-free dessert that tastes simply amazing."

Analysis

The compound noun "guilt-free" encodes moral positioning along with evaluating whether consuming this dessert is pleasurable and ethical. This illustrates Fairclough's (1995) observation about values being ideologically embedded into ordinary language. The adverb "simply" intensifies the positive evaluation and serves as an instance of lexical amplification which is typical in influencer discourse.

4.2 Modality: Softening Persuasive Statements

Extract 6

Influencer: @FitMax

Platform: TikTok

Date: February 2025

"This might be exactly what you need to get going!"



Analysis

As reported by Jeffries (2010), the use of modality, specifically "might", allows the speaker to reduce their level of certainty or obligation with respect to the statement being made. Therefore, when expressing a hypothesis instead of a certain proposition, the speaker can avoid appearing overly direct or coercive; thus facilitating the ability to persuade indirectly.

Additionally, Khamis et al. (2017) noted that due to its low-key approach, indirect persuasion is often found to be successful in online platforms where consumers resist overt advertisements.

Extract 7

Influencer: @HealthDaily

Platform: Instagram

Date: March 2025

“You could start seeing results within a couple of weeks.”

Analysis

Similarly, as seen in Extract 6, the use of modality ("could") also weakens the claim being made. However, in addition to weakening the claim, the use of the timeframe "a couple of weeks" presents an incentive based upon time. In this way, two levels of desire creation occur simultaneously.

4.3 Equating and Contrasting: Creating Perceived Quality

Extract 8

Influencer: @TechZone

Platform: YouTube

Date: January 2025

“Unlike many smartphones available today, this phone really delivers on performance.”

Analysis

Using a comparative structure to establish a distinction between better and worse items ("many...this"), as stated by Jeffries (2010), provides a method to help the consumer distinguish among various options and create a more simplified evaluative framework. Furthermore, by stating that competitors fail to deliver ("fail to live up"), the advertisement reinforces the idea that the advertised item is superior.

Additionally, as reported by Jeffries (2010), comparative structures can also function to reinforce a particular aspect of quality as well as emphasize how some qualities are better than others. In this case, it appears that "performance" has become an important criterion for evaluating smartphones.



Extract 9

Influencer: @GlowWithLina

Platform: Instagram

Date: March 2025

“This is not simply skin care – It’s self care.”

Analysis

This example illustrates both negation ("not simply") and equating ("It's self care"). Through these means, the promotion establishes that the item at hand does not fit within a narrow category (skin care). Instead, it argues that it is part of something larger (self care). As observed by Khamis et al. (2017), a common feature of influencer discourse is transforming the act of consuming goods and services into acts of identity.

Thus, although not explicitly stated, there is evidence suggesting that influencing involves constructing identity through the products we consume.

4.4 Negation: Addressing Objections

Extract 10

Influencer: @HealthDaily

Platform: Instagram

Date: March 2025

"No chemicals, No side effects – Only natural results."

Analysis

To counter anticipated audience resistance, the creator employs negative assertions ("No chemicals," "No side effects") to eliminate possible concerns. As pointed out by Jeffries (2010), negative statements are ideologically relevant since they indicate what aspects are considered unacceptable enough to reject.

5. Conclusion

Influencer communication is much farther removed than we would expect from being completely unstructured and based solely upon personal preferences. Instead, it represents a very deliberate and strategic form of discourse. Language construction plays a central role in the way in which influencers communicate with one another and ultimately build credibility through the use of both evaluation and narrative. Most importantly, however, they create a desire for the product itself through careful selection of the lexicon used to describe those products.

The primary contribution made by this study is evidence that the ability to influence others exists at the micro-level of language. All prior studies related to this topic have examined either marketing/branding strategies or audience engagement. As a result, while there are many other areas that could be studied relative to the subject matter of this dissertation, the focus should remain on



examining the relationship between the language used by influencers to persuade and the persuasive potential of those languages.

Additionally, this study reveals an ideological component of influencer communications. When influencers present their products as solutions, ways of life, or requirements, they are contributing to the development of a larger cultural context surrounding consumption. Therefore, the language used by influencers not only reflects existing realities — it creates new ones.

Therefore, this study supports the value of using critical stylistic methods to analyze contemporary forms of discourse. Additionally, this study illustrates that even though communication is becoming less formalized and more decentralized due to technological advancements, the mechanisms of influence have not disappeared. Rather, they exist today in the same manner — albeit in a much more subtle, pervasive, and linguistically embedded manner.

References

- Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1), 86–100.
- Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 557–569.
- Baker, P. (2006). *Using corpora in discourse analysis*. Continuum.
- Cialdini, R. B. (2001). *Influence: Science and practice* (4th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. Edward Arnold.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). Edward Arnold.
- Hunston, S., & Thompson, G. (2000). *Evaluation in text*. Oxford University Press.
- Jeffries, L. (2010). *Critical stylistics: The power of English*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68.



- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, ‘micro-celebrity’ and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191–208.
- Thompson, G. (2014). *Introducing functional grammar* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society*, 17(3), 359–383.