

Identity constructions in digital discourse: Between expertness and emotionality

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The success of social media influencers crucially depends on their ability to attract, extend and retain their audiences. While appearing natural, influencers carefully curate their persuasiveness: they engage in complex digital discursive performances that constructs their identity in terms of such positive and desirable characteristics as sincerity, truthfulness, expertise, uniqueness and originality. While influencers' personal identity oscillates between a stylized online persona and their seemingly authentic self, such identity work is inextricably linked to the existence of a community of followers, who share a degree of trust in the influencers' authority, i.e. their ability to appear legitimate and to hold power and influence over the collective ingroup of followers.

Grounded in a sociopragmatic approach to digital discourse analysis, this talk explores how identity work is performed by online influencers in the genre of YouTube reaction videos. First, it delineates the key platform affordances – the characteristic features of this genre – that enable specific communicative options for realizing the discursive practice of 'reacting'. Then, based on a set of reaction videos produced by professional musicians and vocal coaches, it analyses how such individuals construct their expert authority. The findings indicate that the sharing of knowledge, and one's ability to provide unpremeditated and insightful expert commentary, is crucial for demonstrating knowledgeability and professionalism and, thus, commanding respect and credibility among one's online followers.

At the same time, it appears that epistemic claims – whose power-based nature runs the risk of alienating the recipients – are counterbalanced by occasional acts of heightened performance of affect adding an air of apparent spontaneity and authenticity. It is argued that the influencers' authority thus consists in the ability to not only display their professional expertise in an off-hand manner but also appear ordinary thanks to their performance of emotional response to the content they react to in their videos.