

A Pragmatic Study of Persuasion Strategies in Chinese E-Commerce Live-Stream Sales Discourse

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In order to study the persuasion strategies in Chinese e-commerce live-stream sales discourse, this paper uses Aristotle's rhetorical theory of persuasion as the research framework, and applies the theory of discourse identity and discourse empathy to explore how the live streamer follows ethos, pathos, and logos to achieve the purpose of persuasion by analyzing the streamer's discourse from multiple perspectives. The streamer uses a professional and trustworthy discourse identity to gain the trust of viewers to achieve ethos; uses discourse empathy to establish a harmonious interpersonal relationship with viewers by using address words and greetings to achieve pathos; and uses a set of logical shopping discourse to reasonably persuade viewers to spend money to achieve logos.

Keywords: persuasion strategies, live-stream sales, streamer, discourse analysis

Introduction

The rapid development of the Internet has given birth to many new professions, and the live-streaming industry has been rapidly expanding under this trend. Streamers conducting persuasive selling on e-commerce live-streaming platform have becoming a bursting business. Live streaming has changed the sales model from the traditional "people looking for goods" to "goods looking for people", and people have changed from active consumption to passive consumption, in which the streamer plays a crucial role. The live-stream sales is a kind of persuasive behavior, in which the seller need to persuade the audience to stay in the live room and consume through their words, so the persuasive strategies in live streaming discourse are worth studying. This paper will analyze how streamers persuade viewers to consume and what persuasion strategies they use in their live discourse from the perspective of pragmatics.

Literature Review

Persuasion is not only a powerful means of communication, but also a speech act and a communicative form. Previous studies on persuasion have been conducted from the perspectives of rhetoric, communication, and communicative form. Persuasion as a speech act is well worth studying from the perspective of pragmatics. Tang (2009) explored the interpretation of the principles of cooperation, politeness, and face in the speech act of persuasion in pragmatics. Shen (2004) used association theory to explain persuasive behavior in advertising from the perspective of cognitive pragmatics. With the rise of e-commerce live streaming, live discourse has also gradually received attention. Wang Jinyu and Wang Xueyu (2021) explored the trust construction in live e-

commerce discourse and found that streamers gained consumers' trust from three latitudes: competence, quality, and goodwill. Wang and Pan (2022) investigated multimodal discourse interaction in live-streaming with goods.

In 1991, He Ziran proposed "pragmatic empathy", which refers to the understanding of each other's mind and intention by both sides of a verbal communication, including both linguistic and social aspects. The linguistic aspect refers to the encoding and decoding of the speaker and the listener from each other's perspective, such as the speaker's empathy with the listener by changing the perspective of the address. The social aspect involves the cultural background and interpersonal relationships of both parties, and refers to the respect for each other's thoughts and feelings and perspectives in the context of both parties.

The relationship between language and identity has also been a hot topic of research. Chen (2013) proposed that identity constructed through discourse can be regarded as a discursive resource that helps communicators accomplish specific communicative purposes. People's choice of language not only reflects but also shapes their identities. He and Chen (2015) examined how Taobao store owners use address words to construct identities and uncovered the reasons behind identity construction.

Aristotle proposed that persuasion can be realized through three aspects including logos, ethos, and pathos, and these aspects have been typical of persuasive discourse since ancient Greek times. This paper uses this theory as a research framework and combines it with discourse theory to analyze the persuasive strategies used by streamers from multiple perspectives.

Data and Methods

Data Collection

In order to study the persuasion strategy in live-streaming discourse, three live-streams from Taobao, an e-commerce platform, were selected as the corpus for analysis. The corpus comes from three livestreams with the highest viewership during the Taobao "618" Campaign in 2022. All three streamers were ranked in the Top 10 of the 2020 Live Streaming Celebrity List released by the Phoenix E-Commerce Research Institute. The successful streamers and the live streaming strategies used in the highly viewed live streams are representative, so the corpus is feasible for studying the persuasion strategies in live streaming discourse. The duration of the live broadcast selected for the study corpus is five hours and 57 minutes in total, and the transcription into text is about 130,000 words. Content analysis was conducted on the transcribed corpus to study how streamers use discourse resources to persuade viewers to consume.

Discourse Analysis

The application of ethos. Ethos refers to the majesty and credibility of the persuader's personality. Aristotle believed that ethos plays a dominant role in persuasion (Tan, 2009). Ethos generally refers to the persuader's possession of good character and credibility, both in terms of his or her own moral qualities and the traits expected by the audience that are displayed during the persuasion process. Ethos as a mode of persuasion can be interpreted in two ways: First, listeners are only willing to believe what the persuader says if the persuader himself has good moral qualities, including his or her personality, moral character, authority, social status, public image, and so on. Another aspect is for the persuader to portray a credible character in the corresponding persuasive situation.

Chen (2013) pointed out that pragmatic identity is the actual embodiment, use, or even fiction of a specific social identity in linguistic communication. The Internet is a virtual space for the public to present and construct identities, and because it lacks the various constraints of real communication, communicators can construct

identities that are most beneficial to them according to their needs (He & Chen, 2015). In a sales-based virtual communication like live streaming, the streamer's identity construction relies almost entirely on discursive practices. In order to increase persuasiveness, streamers often use a range of linguistic resources to portray themselves as professional and well-qualified streamers as a way to gain consumers' trust. In live-stream sales, the streamer's professional ability is not only reflected in his own professional skills and professional knowledge of the product, but also in his understanding of the operation of the live-stream platform.

First of all, the streamer's language output needs to be clear and strong, flexible in tone, simple and concise, as well as the speed of speech should be steady to fast. A flexible and changing tone of voice can attract the audience's attention. In order to maintain a warm atmosphere in the live room, streamers often use a high and rising tone to mobilize the audience's excitement. Due to the limited time and attention span of the audience, the streamer needs to introduce the product information in a simple and concise spoken language. At the same time, the speed will be fast; fast speed not only can output a lot of content in effective time, to ensure the efficiency of the live broadcast, but also can speed up the pace of the live broadcast, creating a sense of urgency and excitement to the audience, stimulating them to maintain a high level of attention to the live streaming, and compete for time to place orders.

The streamer will use terminology, jargon, data, and other language resources to show his understanding of the product, while using directive declarative sentences to reflect the authority and professionalism. In addition to the professional ability of the streamer, the good quality of the streamer is also the key to gaining the trust of the audience. By using greeting words and other discourse resources, the streamer constructs his own image of professionalism, integrity, kindness, responsibility, and other good character to improve the audience's trust in the him and thus enhance his persuasive power.

The application of pathos. Pathos refers to the speaker's ability to evoke emotions or elicit a desired emotional response from the audience. The speaker uses presentation skills to create an emotional environment conducive to the speech, thereby guiding the audience's emotions and ultimately achieving the purpose of persuasion.

Emotion is the persuasive force that guides or controls the audience's psychology, and only when the persuader understands the audience's psychology can he or she guide them in the desired direction. Pragmatic emotion refers to the ability of both parties to communicate with each other and to conceive and understand each other's intentions (He, 1991). It is to think from the other person's point of view, and the speaker achieves empathy through the use of language to shorten the distance between the two sides and establish intimate relations. The streamer uses linguistic means such as address words and greetings to achieve pragmatic empathy, thus closing the social and psychological distance between the streamer and the consumer, establishing a harmonious interpersonal relationship, and laying the foundation of affection. The choice of address words is a major means to achieve discursive empathy. Addressing refers to the name used by the speaker to address the other person in verbal communication and can reflect the speaker's self-positioning and his or her attitude towards the interpersonal relationship with the interacting person. In the service industry, address words are often used to build rapport with customers.

In live-stream shopping, the streamer will change the address to the consumer from "you" to the first person "we", and by changing the personal indicator, the streamer will put himself in the position of the audience to achieve the emotional convergence between the two parties, aiming to improve the acceptability and persuasiveness of the discourse and persuasiveness (Ran, 2007). He will use intimate terms such as "baby" and

“beauty” to address the audience, which can eliminate the identity difference in real life and establish a virtual relationship of equality and closeness. When selling low-priced products to girls, the name will become “piggy girl”, and when the price is more expensive, the name will become “noblewoman girl”. When the product audience is male, the name may be “brother”, “old iron”.

The use of greetings is also indispensable. The streamer will greet everyone when he starts the broadcast or when the audience enters the live room: on the one hand, to express the welcome and joy of the audience’s arrival, to maintain and enhance the audience’s face, and on the other hand, to activate the atmosphere of the live room. Repeated expressions of greetings do not bring any effective information to the audience, but they can make people feel respected and concerned, creating a warm and cordial atmosphere of the live broadcast.

The application of logos. Logos refers to “logical persuasion”, but in itself it has a broader meaning than logic. It is the logical reasoning based on facts or examples to reach a common position between the speaker and the listener. By rationally analyzing the internal logic of the matter, the listener thus makes a self-logical statement and finds reasons in his or her heart to support the persuader’s point of view and thus accepts the persuasion.

Different streamers have different speech styles and charisma, but they all have a set of logical words to prompt purchase, such as the need to say live benefits at the beginning of the live streaming to attract the audience to stay in the live room, to introduce the products to throw out the audience’s pain points, to stimulate the audience’s desire to buy, and then to introduce the selling points of the products, to build a scene experience, to compare prices, to further stimulate the audience to place orders, as well as the anchor needs to interact with the audience throughout the whole process, to retain the audience and increase the heat of the live broadcast. Therefore, all streamers’ discourse has function such as attracting the audience’s attention, prompting them to buy products, and increasing the heat of the live room.

One of the most important points is to find out the audience’s pain point according to the product’s utility, and tell why the audience needs the product, because only if they need it, they will buy it. The next step is to build the scenario of the product’s use, so that the product can be visualized in the consumer’s mind. By building a connection between the product and something that has a strong appeal to the audience, the streamer integrates the product into a specific scenario and gives the product connotation meaning. Sometimes what the audience buys is not the product, but the experience brought by the product described by the anchor.

Conclusion

The streamer uses discourse to build an identity, create a professional and trustworthy persona, and then realize pragmatic empathy through the use of terms of endearment and greetings, so as to close the social and psychological distance between the streamer and the consumer and establish a harmonious interpersonal relationship. Then, a set of live discourse is used to reasonably motivate viewers to consume and achieve the purpose of persuasion. This study explores the relationship between Aristotle’s rhetorical theory and pragmatics, which expands the study of persuasive discourse strategies and helps people understand persuasive strategies in live streaming.

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