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SHAPING THE STATUS TREND OF COVID VACCINES ON TIKTOK: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BLOGGERS' VIDEOS

During the coronavirus pandemic, social media platforms offered the young generation channels for communication and self-expression. TikTok is one of these online platforms that provided the youth with a tool to create online groups and to gain popularity by seizing the moment to present their discourse interpreted in the article as a communicative event that combines a complex unity of a linguistic form, meaning and action. The article argues that, in 2021, TikTokers in their messages to audiences capitalized on developing the vaccine culture and its inherent hierarchy and social divisiveness. The article explores bloggers' discourse by analyzing verbal and nonverbal means used to construct and maintain the elite status for the Pfizer vaccine. To carry out the research, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) were employed to uncover the relations of power, inequality and dominance expressed in TikTokers' videos. Consequently, the study reveals how semiotic relations between language and image shape the hierarchy of Covid vaccines where the Pfizer vaccine is placed on the top as the elite-status vaccine, with other vaccines being presented as markers of lower social standing. Besides, the research exposes strategies and tactics deployed by the TikTok bloggers to enhance the dominance of their discourse. Among these strategies and tactics are the image-building strategy and the "Us versus Them" tactic (ingroup and outgroup framing). The language means used to achieve this effect are lexical: the Pfizer superiority is verbalized with the help of adjectives 'classy', 'rich', 'expensive' that classify the vaccine as appropriate for the elite; the Moderna vaccine is presented as 'average', whereas the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is worse than Covid itself. Multimodality of the videos enables the bloggers to express their appreciation or contempt for the vaccines nonverbally: the means range from prosody (intonation) to facial expressions and visualized metaphors (equating the vaccines with mobile phone brands).

Key words: *Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse, TikTok, multimodality, verbal and nonverbal means.*

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УТВОРЕННЯ СТАТУСНОГО ТРЕНДУ КОВІД-ВАКЦИН У ТИКТОКУ: КРИТИЧНИЙ ДИСКУРС-АНАЛІЗ БЛОГЕРСЬКИХ ВІДЕО

ТікТок належить до платформ, які стали для молоді інструментом створення віртуальних груп та отримання популярності за допомогою звернення до актуального тем суспільного дискурсу, який розглядається у статті як комунікативна подія, що поєднує лінгвістичну форму, значення та дію. У 2021 році, під час пандемії коронавірусу, однією з таких тем була ієрархія ковід-вакцин, що набула популярності, зокрема, й на платформі ТікТок. У статті проаналізовано вербальні та невербальні засоби, які використовують блогери для створення та підтримки елітарного статусу одних та дискредитації інших вакцин. У дослідженні використано критичний дискурс-аналіз та мультимодальний дискурс-аналіз, які дозволяють розкривати такі відносини нерівності та домінування. Дослідження виявило, як семіотичні відносини між мовою та образом формують ієрархію ковід-вакцин, в якій вакцина Пфайзер посідає перше місце та вважається елітарною, тоді як інші вакцини розглядаються як маркери нижчого соціального статусу. У роботі також визначено стратегію побудови іміджу та тактику протиставлення «свій - чужий», за допомогою яких блогери просувають та підтримують свою домінуючу позицію. Виявлено, що реалізація такої комунікативної поведінки досягається лексичними засобами: перевага Пфайзер вербалізується прикметниками 'classy', 'rich', 'expensive', які визначають її як елітарну вакцину; Модерна характеризується як 'average', а Johnson & Johnson вважається гіршою за сам ковід. Мультимодальність відео дозволяє блогерам висловити схвалення чи презирство до вакцин невербально: для цього використовуються просодія (інтонація), міміка та візуалізовані метафори (прирівнювання вакцин до брендів мобільних телефонів).

Ключові слова: критичний дискурс-аналіз, дискурс, ТікТок, мультимодальність, вербальні та невербальні засоби.

Statement of the Problem. The Covid-19 pandemic has drastically affected interpersonal interactions shifting social activities into online communication, basically into social media that allow subscribers to participate in interactions, create and share media resources and self-created content with other users. Social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok) have played an important role in “youth resocialization in a pandemic society” (Ostrovsky, Chen, 2020) transforming the Internet into an effective tool of self-expression for millions of people. This helped users to visualize their representations and rituals of culture, to create new groups for socialization and to form their own agendas that influenced the public discourse.

One of the most influential platforms to build a community around is TikTok, which describes itself as “the leading destination for short-form mobile video” and declares as its mission to “inspire creativity and bring joy” (Our Mission). TikTok has rapidly overshadowed other social media platforms, especially among teenagers and young generations, due to its visual features and sound bites that allow for more accessible video creation. TikTok has “changed the world in 2020, its success is a refreshing revolution for meritocratic self-expression” which also has “changed an awful lot more than just how we consume media online”. Unlike other social media

platforms, TikTok’s algorithm facilitates the process for ordinary users to be creators by giving them “as much chance of going around the world as the next person’s, whether they have 0 followers or 100,000” (Galer, 2020). As a result, on TikTok, one rapidly gains large audiences and followers even without having any status background enjoyed by celebrities or social media stars (Kennedy, 2020).

Other appealing features of TikTok are the option to upload and download any content in video format which can be seen and followed by everyone on the app as well as the “For You” page that suggests most viewed, liked and shared videos that match the user’s preferences and interests automatically deduced from the user’s previous interactions and views. Such features of the app made teenagers nurture “the most powerful tool they had ever seen” (Galer, 2020).

Research analysis. Since “activities on social media primarily consist of language use” (Gnach, 2018: 195), social media have become the research focus of linguistics. Analyzing social media content adheres to the principles of language and discourse studies. The discursive environment generated with the help of information technologies and sociolinguistic aspects of the content shared online have motivated intensive linguistic research into communication on social media: researchers explore information and emotions in computer-mediated texts (Gründer-

Fahrer, Schlaf, Wiedemann, Heyer, 2018), linguistic performance in videos (Calhoun, 2019), pragmatic functions of hashtags and images (De Cock, Pedraza, 2018); scholars employ conversational analysis to interactions on social media (Paulus, Warren, Lester, 2016). There are also studies that view social media communication as a hybrid form that combines features of interpersonal and mass interactions. Some experts examine how social media influence the way people select, process and make sense of the news (Lee, Tandoc, 2017). There is also evidence of the power social media give their users to create new forms of self-expression and to influence opinions (Neubaum, Krämer, 2017). Moreover, social media have proved to increase the social capital, facilitate formations of communities and boost their connectedness (Ryan, Allen, Gray, McInerney, 2017).

To achieve the objectives of this study, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) are integrated to explore the content of TikTokers' discourse and their language. CDA approach aims at examining the language within certain contexts that influence communication, i.e., social practice, social power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995). Discourse is related to the concept of "communicative event" which combines a complex unity of a linguistic form, meaning and action (Van Dijk, 2001: 355). CDA helps to facilitate the procedures by employing semiotics, text linguistics, social theory and interactional sociolinguistics (Wodak, 2009). Thus, in order to investigate verbal units in TikTokers' discourse, a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach (Wodak, Meyer, 2008) is also applied.

The "multimodal meaning" of discourse is "realized through more than one semiotic code" (Kress, Leeuwen, 2006: 177), which requires MDA traditionally regarded as an approach appropriate to conceptualize inter-semiotic relations between language and image (O'Halloran, Pal, Jin, 2021). Hence, analyzing audio-visual discursive practices of TikTokers compels a multimodal approach that involves an 'internal' semiotic interpretation of texts (language, image and video processing) as well as an 'external' interpretation, i.e., the coherence of these texts with the environment surrounding them. In other words, the aim of MDA is "to elaborate tools that can provide insight into the relation of the meanings of a community and its semiotic manifestations" (Kress, 2012: 37). Therefore, the framework of our analysis involves both CDA and MDA and "can be top-down, where analysts begin with their understanding of the content; or bottom-up, where the starting point is the linguistic detail" (Hidalgo Tenorio, 2011: 198).

The purpose of the article. Recently, with the spread of Covid-19, vaccines have become a common topic on social media platforms, which has created a new 'vaccine discourse' in online communication. CDA focuses on dominance, inequality and power exercised by certain social groups over the discourse, which entails the assumption that language and its means are powerful tools that directly impact on social norms, ideologies, knowledge and beliefs (Van Dijk, 1993; Willig, 2014). The purpose of this study lies in that it aspires to unveil the hidden meanings within the language of TikTokers so as to clarify the mechanisms that enable the bloggers to influence the online public discourse and enhance dominance over their rivals' discourses. In other words, the study explores TikTok bloggers' videos and examines verbal and nonverbal means used to argue for the superiority of the Pfizer vaccine over others designed to curb the coronavirus pandemic.

Main text. In 2021, American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that many US jurisdictions had been distributing the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine specifically to the homeless, home bound populations, migrants as well as incarcerated individuals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Allocating the vaccine for the most disadvantaged social strata coupled with the vaccine's low-rate efficacy (66.9% compared to 95% attributed to Pfizer and 94.1% to Moderna) resulted in ranking the Johnson & Johnson vaccine as a "second-class option" (Tiffany, 2021). Simultaneously, it enhanced the "Pfizer superiority complex" picturing this vaccine as a marker of the "ruling class" in the public sphere (Schwedel, 2021). It is not surprising, therefore, to find Pfizer-elitism and superiority in TikTokers' videos: they have caught on with the external context of powerful institutional and public discourse.

The vaccine rivalry culture originated on TikTok has been noticed by a number of experts (Rosenblatt, 2021; Tiffany, 2021) who consider it to be one of the latest trends on the social media. TikTok video makers are said to have created a hierarchy of vaccine brands, cultures and identities: Pfizer versus Moderna versus Johnson & Johnson. In this hierarchy, Pfizer is presented as the "elite" and "ruling class" vaccine (Tiffany, 2021; Schwedel, 2021), Moderna is believed to be used by the "middle class" and Johnson & Johnson is looked down upon as an "inferior product" (Stanley-Becker, 2021).

The hierarchical nature of the vaccine rivalry culture that emphasizes social, cultural and even racial inequalities is found in the TikTok videos selected with the help of continuous sampling for the purpose of this study. For example, in a TikTok

page called “hotdaddyissues”, a young blogger posts the following video: “When they gave me vaccine they asked me which one I wanted because they had three. I was like... give me an option. And they told me, “Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson and Johnson”. Of course, I want Pfizer! It sounds rich, decadent, luxury. I’m not sure about science but that one sounds classy. Now I hear some of my friends got Moderna!... MODERNA!!! Naturally, I have to build a complex and shame them. MODERNA!? The poverty! Couldn’t be me. These T-cells are designer” (CHeck, 2021).

This blogger’s choice of the vaccine is based exclusively on the brand Pfizer, its effectiveness being neglected (*I’m not sure about science*). In fact, the blogger uses the vaccine as an image building device. Interestingly, the TikTok’s comments on the phonetic form ‘Pfizer’ as sounding *rich, decadent, luxury, classy, designer* unlike Moderna that, to his mind, gives off *poverty* confirm the efficiency of the Pfizer brand name, pointed out by Tiffany (2021) who tries to understand why “the internet has decided that Pfizer is significantly cooler than Moderna”. She argues that “the silent P gave the word *Pfizer* a luxurious feel, reminiscent of the silent H in *Hermès*”. The two syllables in *Pfizer*, just like in *Fendi, Prada, Kenzo*, give a “really fast sounding”. The upmarket status is enhanced with the fricatives F and Z turning the brand into a “cool word” (Tiffany, 2021). *Moderna*, in its turn, gives a “slow and plodding” impression as the word has “stops” (m, d, n) and, thus, the brand name doesn’t create a product associated with cutting-edge technologies.

Blogger Joshomz uploads his video about the vaccine: “Guess who got scheduled for the vaccine? Vaccinated Hoe... Pfizer only. Y’all know I’m a Bougie hoe. Pfizer just sounds expensive. She’s a classy girl, she’s the one for me. I swear if I pull up there & they talking about some...MODERNA?!! More like mediocre, average, we don’t do average... But if they try to give me Johnson & Johnson, I’m tell ’em to just give me Covid instead” (Joshomz, 2021). His choice of vocabulary displays similar linguistic devices that reaffirm the superiority of Pfizer: *it sounds expensive*, it is for *classy* people. Compared to Pfizer, Moderna is *average* and *mediocre*, while Johnson & Johnson is seen as worse than Covid itself. Besides, the TikTok’s use of the pronouns *I* and *we* aimed at positioning himself and his imaginary Pfizered-group as a ‘classy’ group (*I’m a Bougie hoe; we don’t do average*) is a technique within the image building strategy.

Tiktoker deserflake (SHER, 2021) labels Moderna *peasant* with the contempt on her face, so *peasant* can be regarded as a contextual synonym of *mediocre*,

average and *poor*. Her face expresses superiority and self-importance when she talks about Pfizer (Fig. 1).

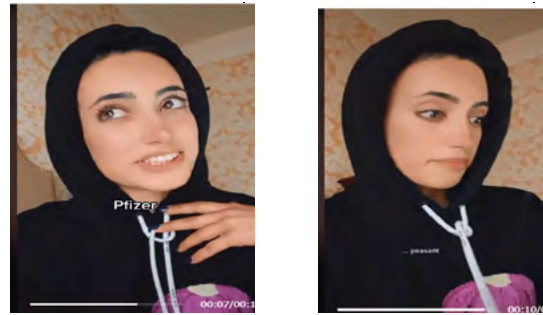


Fig. 1

This elitism of the vaccine culture is expressed by professor.corndog, yet in a different way: he compares vaccines to mobile phones (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2

The blogger shows the Pfizer vaccine as the latest iPhone, Moderna as an Android, Johnson & Johnson as an old Firefly phone of early 2010 and AstraZeneca is presented as backward as an ancient Nokia (Valentine, 2021). The metaphorical equivalence of medical and engineering technologies reflects hierarchical relations within each of them and implies the hierarchy of vaccine-users, the *Pfizer Gang* being its top.

Conclusions. Thus, TikTokers’ reference to the Pfizer vaccine as *the bougiest, cool, rich, stylish, hot, decadent, luxury*, their *Pfizer is iPhone* metaphor, the construction of the Pfizer-vaccinated people frame as *Pfizer Gang, Pfizer Pfairies* and *Pfizer Princesses* ride the trend wave in the public discourse that presents Pfizer as the elite vaccine. Moderna, on the other hand, is *middle-class, mediocre, average, peasant, android*. Feeling that their personal worth is threatened, Moderna-vaccinated people organize groups like “MODERNA GANG RISE UP” on social media. Finally, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is regarded metaphorically as a *Walmart vaccine*, as an *early 2010’s Firefly phone* and is more detrimental to one’s social status than Covid itself.

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