

Rhetorical Strategies of Forbes' 2019 Most Valuable Brands

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Abstract

The use of social media has become an integral part of the branding strategies by today's major brands. By using Aristotle's theory of rhetoric as a theoretical foundation, this study examined how major brands use rhetorical elements to engage with consumers on social media. A content analysis was performed on 72 Instagram posts from four major brands. The four brands – Coca-Cola, Nike, John Deere, and Nivea – were chosen from Forbes' list of the 2019 world's most valuable brands. To determine which rhetorical elements are used in the Instagram captions of each brand, the researcher coded each post by its use of Logos, Ethos, and Pathos. This study found that each brand utilizes rhetorical elements, but the use of Logos, Ethos, or Pathos does not appear to directly affect consumer engagement. Furthermore, this study observed that one rhetorical element did not hold more influence than the others and the use of multiple rhetorical elements together did not improve engagement. Instead, it is found that brands consistently use similar rhetorical elements, consequently creating a consistent brand voice on Instagram.

I. Introduction

It's been said that a picture is worth a thousand words, but it's often the words beneath the visuals that make the impact. With the rise of social media and its emphasis on photography and video, the importance of persuasive word choice is often forgotten. The use of social media strategies has become ubiquitous in the field of communications (Myrick, Holton, Himmelboim, & Love, 2016). It is integral for organizations to know how to use social media to persuade and engage audiences (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008).

Over two millennia ago, Aristotle proposed his theory of rhetoric that uses language as an instrument for persuasion (Mshvenieradze, 2013). Aristotle claims that persuasive speech must embody three elements: Logos, Ethos, and Pathos. This study explores if, in a world of social media, these ancient principles still apply. According to Aristotle, the message must be clear, genuine, and emotional in order to be persuasive and effective (Aristotle & Roberts, 2004).

Scholars have studied the use of Aristotle's theory of rhetoric on language-centered platforms, like Twitter and Facebook (Myrick, Holton, Himmelboim, & Love, 2010). There is little to no research, however, that employs Aristotle's theory of rhetoric in order to examine Instagram. This study will examine the use of Aristotle's rhetorical elements, Logos, Ethos, and Pathos, on the photo and video-based platform Instagram.

Keywords: Aristotle's theory of rhetoric, content analysis, Instagram, consumer engagement, branding strategies
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This study will examine the power of the written word through a content analysis of Instagram posts from Coca-Cola, Nike, John Deere, and Nivea. The goal of the study is to investigate if word choice and rhetoric impact consumer engagement.

This study will contribute to the field of communications because the ability to create persuasive content on social media is essential to the success of any brand. Findings from this study can help brands enhance their linguistic content. As more companies are relying on multimedia content to promote their brand, more research needs to be done about the importance of effective writing.

II. Literature Review

Social media has become an integral tool for practitioners working in the field of communications. It has changed the way brands promote themselves and connect with their target audiences. While the visual nature of social media fosters the perception that photos and videos are the most effective marketing tools, the enduring need for written content remains an important consideration.

Social media

Social media is one of the fastest growing industries in the world (Musonera, 2018). In its beginning phases, social media was used as a socialization tool; it allowed users to communicate with other similar users (Kapoor et al., 2018). As social media experienced a steep rise in popularity, however, companies began to utilize it as a marketing tool. Consequently, social media transformed into a communication service that fosters relationships between diverse users (Kapoor et al., 2018). Companies could now communicate with their audiences in a way that felt more natural. Before social media, companies traditionally marketed themselves through mass media advertising. Producing print and television advertisements, however, was expensive. So, when social media emerged, it gave companies a low-cost solution to marketing. Companies started creating accounts across multiple social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube, to promote their products and services for free. Companies with social media could now interact with their audiences more frequently and on a personal level, as opposed to traditional advertising (Tang et al., 2012). Social media revolutionized marketing strategies and ultimately changed the industry (Kapoor et al., 2018).

Today, companies all around the world define social media as a necessary part of their marketing strategies and tactics (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017). Researchers have analyzed corporate social media policies to understand the trends of social media use in the professional world and shown that social media has become integrated as a pervasive tool. Organizations are now expected to engage with audiences on social media and implement campaign strategies on multiple platforms (Stohl, Etter, Banghart, & Woo, 2017).

One of the social platforms dominating the industry today is Instagram. In 2010, Instagram was launched as a photo-sharing application. Today, Instagram has over 1 billion active users around the world and has become a powerful tool for businesses and consumers alike (Musonera, 2018). Over 80 percent of users follow at least one business or brand account. Additionally, over 70 percent of users use the platform to find information about a particular brand or company. Instagram facilitates a unique relationship between brands and individual users that encourages a two-way conversation between the business and the consumer (Suciu, 2019).

Past research has looked at how brands communicate to their target audiences on Instagram. In one study, the researcher used a content analysis to examine how leading food brands market themselves through engaging visual content. Ginsberg found that food brands use Instagram as a way to portray brand personality (Ginsberg, 2015). Portraying a strong brand personality allows these food brands to connect with their audiences on a more personal level.

Another study examined the social media strategies of Google's Instagram campaign, *Made with Code*, applying Aristotle's theory of rhetoric to understand what drives engagement. The analysis found that using rhetorical appeals in Instagram captions positively impact social engagement (Saahko, 2017). This study will also expand on Saahko's findings by examining the rhetorical strategies of four major brands. By examining a sample of four brands, this study will explain how today's major brands employ language to

encourage brand success.

Social media is powerful because it allows brands to foster strong relationships with target audiences (Kapoor et al., 2018). Alalwan et al. (2017) defines social media marketing as a dialogue between consumers and businesses. While social media is mainly comprised of photo and video-based platforms, companies still must support this dialogue with written words. One study discovered a link between the quality of language and consumer perceptions, finding that when consumers engage with written content associated with a specific product, they evaluate both the product and the larger brand based on what they have read (Pedraz-Delhaes, Aljukhadar, & Sénécal, 2010). Ultimately, the language used in advertisements and other marketing materials influences consumer attitudes and buying behavior. Companies must not only create great visual content but also great writing in order to be successful (Pedraz-Delhaes, Aljukhadar, & Sénécal, 2010).

Overall though, there is surprisingly little research on the impact of written content on consumer perceptions through social media, even though it is rapidly becoming a primary communication channel for consumers and businesses (Manikonda, Hu, & Kambhampati, 2014). This study will attempt to advance the conversation of writing impact on Instagram.

Consumer engagement

When consumers interact with companies on Instagram through likes, comments, shares, and messages, they are actively engaging with that company. Brands that build relationships on social media generate trust and loyalty. When consumers develop brand loyalty, it impacts their engagement with the brand, buying behavior, and individual free promotion of the brand, all of which increase a brand's overall value (Kapoor et al., 2018). Past research has measured a brand's ability to successfully market itself on social media through consumer engagement (Barger et al., 2016; Rahman et al., 2016).

Researchers though have had inconsistent definitions of consumer engagement on social media. One study measures consumer engagement by the number of likes, comments, and shares each sample post received (Rahman et al., 2016). Researchers Lou, Tan, and Chen (2019), comparing influencer advertisements and brand-promoted advertisements posted on Instagram, measured consumer engagement by recording the number of likes and number of comments.

Aristotle's theory of rhetoric

Aristotle's theory explains how language can be used as a means to persuade (Aristotle & Roberts, 2004). In his work, "Rhetorica," Aristotle explains that the ability to be persuasive in any kind of speech is dependent on rhetoric. Aristotle defines three rhetorical elements that can be used in persuasive speech: Logos, Ethos, and Pathos (Mshvenieradze, 2013). Aristotle proposes that when all three elements are employed, the speaker has the power to be compelling, engaging, and effective (Aristotle & Roberts, 2004).

This study defines Logos, Ethos, and Pathos as follows:

- 1. Logos:** The use of logic to persuade. Aristotle defines Logos as rational and logical speech (Mshvenieradze, 2013).
- 2. Ethos:** The use of credibility to persuade. Ethos is a style of speech that allows the speaker to appear credible and trustworthy by the listener. Ethos ties back to Logos because in order to be trusted, the speaker must be intelligible and logical (Mshvenieradze, 2013).
- 3. Pathos:** The use of emotion to persuade. By engaging Pathos, the speaker's words have the power to influence an audience towards a favorable feeling (Mshvenieradze, 2013).

Aristotle's theory of rhetoric has been used to study a number of modern-day communications phenomena. Mshvenieradze found that U.S. presidential candidates used all three of Aristotle's elements of persuasion in their political discourse and each element strengthened their arguments (Mshvenieradze, 2013). Another analyzed the linguistic characteristics of Instagram posts by young adult cancer patients to measure which type of content is most effective for gaining social support. One important finding from this study was that the patients who used emotional language, appealing to Pathos, received the most support and engagement (Warner, Ellington, Kirchhoff, & Cloyes, 2018). Another study, examining how nonprofits use rhetorical techniques on Twitter to gain support and influence audiences, operationalized Logos with subcategories such as fact and statistics; Ethos with celebrity and public figure, and Pathos with motivation, humor, and love (Auger, 2014).

This study will expand on previous research by examining written content produced for Instagram. Since Instagram was launched in 2010, it has become the most popular photo-sharing platform (Manikonda, Hu, & Kambhampati, 2014). There is a lack of research, however, when it comes to specifically examining Instagram in terms of written language. This study will add value to the existing literature by conducting a content analysis of the written content produced for Instagram by four of today's major brands.

This study will examine two brands near the top of Forbes' list of the 100 most valuable brands of 2019, and two brands near the bottom of the list (The World's Most Valuable Brands, 2019). Coca-Cola and Nike were named the sixth and fourteenth most valuable brands, Coca-Cola with a brand value of \$59.2 billion, and Nike with a brand value of \$36.8 billion. Nivea and John Deere were named the ninety-second and ninety-eighth most valuable brands, both with a brand value of \$8 billion (The World's Most Valuable Brands, 2019). For the annual ranking, Forbes measures brand value by a brand's financial strength and consumer perceptions. Forbes' measurement of the perception of Coca-Cola, Nike, John Deere, and Nivea is applicable to the study because, according to Forbes, successful brand perception is a direct reflection of the content that brands produce (The World's Most Valuable Brands, 2019).

Research questions

RQ1: Which element of Aristotle's theory of rhetoric - Logos, Ethos, or Pathos - is most prevalent within the social media communications of each brand?

RQ2: Which subcategories of each theory appear most often in the Instagram posts of each brand?

RQ3: What is the overall impact of rhetorical element use on consumer engagement?

III. Methods

Unit of analysis for this study is a single post on Instagram. The captions written for each single post are analyzed to study the use of rhetorical elements and their subcategories, respectively (RQs 1 and 2). The number of comments and likes each post receives are counted to understand consumer engagement (RQ 3).

Four major brands including Coca-Cola, Nike, John Deere, and Nivea were chosen for the sample. The researcher proposed that because all four brands sell products directly to consumers, they may be trying to reach consumers in similar ways. The researcher reasoned that brands in non-direct-to-consumer industries would have different strategic goals and therefore, would not be easily comparable. Choosing brands with similar audiences allows the researcher to more easily examine the data for rhetorical elements.

Coca-Cola is a global company known all around the world for its iconic soft drink. Since Coca-Cola was first introduced into the market in 1886, it has been a part of everyday life. It transformed the non-alcoholic beverage industry and became a symbol of creativity, happiness, and fun ("Mission, Vision & Values"). Nike is a popular sports apparel brand with a strong identity. Nike's mission is to inspire its audience of athletes to be the best version of themselves ("Read Nike's Mission"). John Deere is a longstanding manufacturer of heavy equipment. Founded in 1837, John Deere sells products for agriculture, forestry, and construction ("Deere & Company"). Lastly, Nivea is a skin care products company committed to supplying high quality products for all skin types ("About Us").

The researcher first collected the total number of posts published within the timeframe of May 22 to November 22, 2019, resulting in a total of 157 (Nike=46, John Deere=38, Nivea=61, and Coca-Cola=12). Then, the researcher calculated the average number of posts published by each brand within the timeframe (40 posts), then chose half that number for analysis. The author assigned an ID number to each post and then used a random number generator to select the 20 posts for each brand. However, because Coca-Cola only published twelve posts within the timeframe, all of Coca-Cola's posts were analyzed. For the analysis, the researcher looked at a total of 72 Instagram posts from the four brands.

This study operationalized two main variables – rhetorical strategies and consumer engagement. The researcher coded for the rhetorical strategies by applying the coding categories listed below (see Table 1). The researcher coded for consumer engagement by measuring the number of likes and comments each post received.

In order to determine whether a post utilized Logos, Ethos, and Pathos, the researcher established seven identifying appeals for each element, building off the findings of numerous past related studies (Auger, 2014; Charland, Huang, Li, & Li, 2017; Mshvenieradze, 2013; Myrick, Holton, Himelboim, & Love, 2010). For Logos, the researcher looked for appeals to logic. The subcategories used to measure logic include efficiency, productivity, quality, utility, facts, statistics, and surveys. For Ethos, the researcher looked for appeals to credibility, which include trustworthiness, competence, honesty, respect, expertise, celebrities, and public figures. For Pathos, the researcher looked for appeals to emotion, which include love, happiness, passion, nostalgia, motivation, sadness, and humor. To operationalize consumer engagement, the researcher used the number of likes and comments recorded from each post (Ashley, & Tuten, 2014).

Table 1. Subcategories for each rhetorical element

| Logos (Logic) | Ethos (Credibility) | Pathos (Emotion) |
|---------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Efficiency | Trustworthiness | Love |
| Productivity | Competence | Happiness |
| Quality | Honesty | Passion |
| Utility | Respect | Nostalgia |
| Facts | Expertise | Motivation |
| Statistics | Celebrity | Sadness |
| Survey | Public Figure | Humor |

Data Analysis Procedures

A quantitative content analysis was used to analyze the sample of Instagram posts. The posts were first coded using a content analysis to answer which element of Aristotle's theory of rhetoric is most prevalent within the social media communications of each brand. The Instagram posts were categorized as one of the three variables, Logos, Ethos, or Pathos, based on if they exemplified any of the subcategories in Table 1. Once the data was collected, the researcher measured the frequency of each rhetorical element used in the Instagram posts.

The posts were then analyzed using a quantitative content analysis to answer how the use of rhetorical elements impact consumer engagement. The researcher measured the number of likes and comments for each Instagram post. The frequency of each rhetorical element was then compared to the number of likes and comments.

IV. Findings

RQ1: Rhetorical element use by brand

The first research question asked which rhetorical elements were most frequently used on Instagram by the brands. For each post analyzed, the researcher counted the number of times at least one subcategory of Logos, Ethos, or Pathos were used. Then, that number was used to calculate how often each brand used each of the three elements. The total number of times one particular element was used (n) was divided by the sample number of posts per brand and multiplied by 10 to find the percentage (%). Table 2 demonstrates how often each brand used Logos, Ethos, or Pathos, at least once, in Instagram posts. Three brands, Coca-Cola, Nike, and John Deere, mostly used Pathos (66.7%, 100%, and 85% respectively), while Nivea mostly used Logos (70%).

The study found that when Pathos is the most used rhetorical element, Logos is the least used. Coca-Cola, Nike, and John Deere, which favored Pathos in most of their posts, used Logos in the least amount of their posts (0%, 70%, and 40% respectively). Nivea, which mainly used Logos, used Ethos the least often (20%).

Table 2. Rhetorical elements used at least once by brand

| Brand | Logos | Ethos | Pathos |
|------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Coca-Cola | (n=0, 0%) | (n=2, 16.7%) | (n=8, 66.7%) |
| Nike | (n=14, 70%) | (n=17, 85%) | (n=20, 100%) |
| John Deere | (n=8, 40%) | (n=13, 65%) | (n=17, 85%) |
| Nivea | (n=14, 70%) | (n=4, 20%) | (n=11, 55%) |

RQ2: Sub-element use by brand

The study coded for seven subcategories for each rhetorical element by brand. The researcher calculated the number of times each subcategory appeared in a single post. Then, that number was used to calculate how often each brand used a particular subcategory. The researcher took the number of times each subcategory was used (n), divided it by the number of sample posts analyzed per brand, and then multiplied that number by 10 to find the percentage. These findings help the researcher determine which subcategories of Logos, Ethos, and Pathos each brand favored.

Table 3 highlights the subcategories used most by each brand. Coca-Cola did not use Logos in any of its posts, but when it used Ethos, honesty was incorporated into 16.7% of posts. When Coca-Cola used Pathos, nostalgia was incorporated into 33.3% of posts. Nike used facts (Logos) in 35% of its posts, mentioned celebrities (Ethos) in 20%, and incorporated motivation in 95%. John Deere used facts in 35% of its posts, employed trustworthiness (Ethos) and respect (Ethos) in 20%, respectively, and incorporated love into 40%. Finally, Nivea used facts (Logos) in 60% of posts, trustworthiness (Ethos) in 15% of posts, and happiness (Pathos) in 30% of posts.

Table 3. Rhetorical sub-element usage by brand

| Rhetorical subelements | Coca-Cola | Nike | John Deere | Nivea |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Logos | No Logos used (n=0, 0%) | Facts (n=11, 55%) | Facts (n=7, 35%) | Facts (n=12, 60%) |
| Ethos | Honesty (n=2, 16.7%) | Celebrity (n=12, 20%) | Trustworthiness and Respect (n=4, 20%, respectively) | Trustworthiness (n=3, 15%) |
| Pathos | Nostalgia (n=4, 33.3%) | Motivation (n=19, 95%) | Love (n=8, 40%) | Happiness (n=6, 30%) |

RQ3: Overall impact of rhetorical element use on consumer engagement

The third research question asked how the use of rhetorical elements impacts consumer engagement on Instagram. Based on the data, there appears to be no relationship between rhetorical strategy and consumer engagement. The study examined the number of likes and comments that each post received to measure engagement by brand. The researcher then compared the number of subcategories used in each post to measure overall use of rhetoric with engagement. Table 4 highlights the level of engagement for posts with the highest and lowest number of rhetorical elements, by brand.

Table 4. Number of rhetorical elements used and consumer engagement by brand

| | Total | Logos | Ethos | Pathos | #Likes | #Comments |
|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|---------|-----------|
| Coca-Cola | | | | | | |
| Highest | 5 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 14,298 | 1,136 |
| Lowest | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 49,990 | 158 |
| Nike | | | | | | |
| Highest | 9 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 455,044 | 1,803 |
| Lowest | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 504,484 | 3,147 |
| John Deere | | | | | | |
| Highest | 5 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 8,397 | 9 |
| Lowest | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 89,389 | 45 |
| Nivea | | | | | | |
| Highest | 11 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 719 | 0 |
| Lowest | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 533 | 9 |

V. Discussion

Three brands – Coca-Cola, Nike, and John Deere – mostly used Pathos, while Nivea mostly used Logos. The strong prevalence of one rhetorical element over the others indicates a connection between rhetoric and brand identity. Each brand chose to utilize specific persuasive elements in social media content because they portray the company's brand and brand values.

When looking at the core values of each brand, there is an apparent connection between brand values and rhetorical strategies used. Coca-Cola's core values include "leadership, collaboration, integrity, accountability, passion, diversity, and quality" ("Mission, Vision & Values"). These values are directly connected to the rhetorical element Pathos. Nike's core values of "inspiration, innovation, every athlete in the world, authentic, connected, and distinctive" are also closely related to the subcategories used to code for Pathos, like motivation and passion ("Read Nike's Mission"). John Deere's core values of "integrity, quality, commitment, and innovation," also appeal to Pathos ("John Deere"). Lastly, Nivea's core values include reliability and quality, connecting Nivea to the subcategories that make up Logos, such as quality and utility ("About Us").

The study also found that when Pathos is the most used rhetorical element, Logos is the least used. Within the three elements, Pathos and Logos are opposites. Pathos uses emotion while Logos uses logic. The brands studied did not concurrently utilize Pathos and Logos in most of their posts because the contrasting ideas would not create a cohesive message.

This finding contributes to the literature on persuasive writing by presenting a new definition of persuasion for social media. While Aristotle's theory of rhetoric argues that a well-rounded persuasive argument incorporates all three elements, the data suggests that Instagram is an exception to the rule. Instagram is a different medium than traditional writing and therefore, requires different guidelines for creating effective and compelling written messages.

When the brands utilized Logos, Ethos, and Pathos in captions, each brand consistently incorporated the same subcategories. For example, when Coca-Cola used Pathos in captions, it most often incorporated nostalgia. When Nike used Ethos, it mentioned celebrities in captions. When John Deere used Pathos, it referred to love, and when Nivea used Logos, it included facts in their captions.

The data shows that each brand consistently used the same rhetorical subcategories in Instagram captions. The findings suggest that the rhetorical strategies used are dependent on brand identity and brand values. Companies may favor using a limited variety of rhetorical strategies, instead of creating well-rounded arguments, because sticking to one or two of the rhetorical elements might help them solidify brand identity over time. These findings speak to the importance of crafting a strong and memorable brand identity.

Brands may want to decide which rhetorical strategies align best with their brand and utilize those persuasive strategies to strengthen their existing brand identity.

Based on the data, rhetorical strategy does not appear to directly affect engagement. The findings suggest that other elements have a deeper effect on engagement than the specific rhetorical elements used. Researchers Manikonda, Hu, and Kambhampati (2014) conducted a study that analyzed the defining characteristics of Instagram. According to their study, frequency of posting, photos used, comments, filters, hashtags, and geolocations affect consumer engagement on Instagram.

VI. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of Aristotle's theory of rhetoric on social media and its connection to consumer engagement. This study analyzed the rhetorical strategies of four major brands to understand how successful companies utilize written content on photo-based platforms and adds to the literature by applying Aristotle's theory of rhetoric to the study of Instagram.

This study is limited by its sample selection process. The process of selecting the four major brands to be analyzed was limited to Forbes' list of the top 100 most valuable brands. Similarly, the study was limited by the sample size. Instagram's privacy policy prevents researchers from scraping content from any account owned by a different source. The researcher had to collect and code the data by hand, limiting the sample size. Due to the small sample size, it will be difficult to generalize the findings to the entire industry.

The second limitation is that only Instagram captions were analyzed for this study. There are many aspects of Instagram that can affect consumer engagement, however, this study did not examine any of these additional characteristics. Instagram is different from other social media platforms because it is a visually based application used to share high-quality photos. The visual nature of Instagram influences how different aspects of the platform impact engagement. The third limitation is that this study was coded by only one researcher, so the coding scheme could not be validated by intercoder reliability.

For future studies, researchers may want to select their sample from a more representative source. Future researchers may want to choose their sample using Harris Fombrun's Corporate Reputation Quotient, a comprehensive tool for measuring brand reputation. Fombrun's model may give researchers a more accurate list of top brands with the strongest overall consumer perceptions (Fombrun, 2005).

Future researchers may also want to increase the amount of sample posts analyzed in order to better understand the characteristics of each brand. Similarly, researchers may want to increase the timeframe from which the posts are selected to create a more cohesive picture of each brand.

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