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The Emotional Labour of Beauty Standards: The Case of YouTube Beauty Gurus

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Abstract

Contemporary research in the field of media and communication underlines the importance of ‘subcultures of consumption’ (Schouten/McAlexander 1995), ‘brand communities’ (Muniz/O’Guinn 2001), or ‘consumer tribes’ (Cova et al. 2007) in addressing potential buyers. These studies additionally acknowledge that one of the most important and successful strategies adopted in selling specific products is represented by the creation in buyers of a desire for belonging that “may be satisfied through social interaction surrounding products or services” (Mardon et al. 2018: 1–2). Such feeling of belongingness is based on the discursive creation of ‘tribes’ whose members are bound together by “shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs and consumption practices” (Cova/Cova 2001: 67). And nowadays, online platforms and social networking sites (SNSs) have increasingly provided digital ‘spaces’ where tribe members may construct and experience a collective identity which is conveyed predominantly via discursive cues and genre constraints that allow members to recognise each other and be recognised as belonging to that community and, most notably in the case of consumption practices, in the products that are being sold to them. On the basis of this background, the present study wants to investigate the particular case of YouTube beauty gurus, an online consumer-centred community that focuses on beauty-related matters addressed via vlogs (García-Rapp 2017; Riboni 2020). In particular, the specific evaluative resources and generic constraints will be highlighted that define the contours of the linguistic practices adopted by the online beauty community embodied in the ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild 1983) that manages and regulates viewers’ feelings so as to enhance interpersonal relationships, resulting in ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild 1983; Fuoli/Bednarek 2022), that is, the commodification of feelings of belongingness. Therefore, the ensuing investigation will examine the generic structure and discursive ‘tribe’ construction found in beauty product reviews uploaded by the most popular and influential beauty gurus on YouTube.

In analysing such data, special attention will be paid to the construction of digital landscapes for culture-specific communities of affective practice in order to better understand how people forge alignments and negotiate meanings through digital practices (Zappavigna/Martín 2018).

Keywords

genre analysis, corpus linguistics, consumer tribes, beauty gurus, emotional labour, moral emotions

