

RHETORIC AND HEALTH: HOW FITNESS TRAINERS PERSUADE PUBLIC ON A SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE?

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Abstract: Obesity is a global phenomenon which is caused by unhealthy lifestyles. The rise of social networking site, such as Facebook, enables fitness trainers to easily reach out to the public and promote healthy lifestyles. This paper aims to provide insights into how fitness trainers, craft their posts on Facebook in persuading public to live a healthy life. Adopting an ethnographic approach to research, three Facebook Pages belong to Malaysian fitness trainers were observed for six months. These fitness trainers were purposely chosen as they often promote healthy lifestyles in their Status updates. Altogether, 147 health-related Status updates were gathered throughout the six-month observation period. Data analysis reveals that the fitness trainers are well-versed in using ethos, pathos, and logos to persuade their audience. This paper concludes that social networking sites can be an effective medium to promote healthy lifestyles, however fitness trainers need to be highly persuasive in their postings in reaching out to the public.

Keywords: Facebook, fitness trainer, persuasion, rhetoric, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Many countries around the globe suffer from obesity phenomenon. Malaysia is no exception. Nghiem (2014) highlights that Malaysia has the highest obesity rate among all the countries in Asia. This is mainly due to unhealthy lifestyles in terms of food intake and body exercise. The obesity problem has become a national concern where various campaigns and health programmes, such as ‘Let’s Get Slim’ and ‘Fit Malaysia’ have been carried out by the government to raise awareness among the public to live a healthy life. Many fitness trainers, such as Kevin Zahri and Joanna Soh support this awareness effort by volunteering persuading public to keep fit. Since Facebook is the most widely used social networking sites in the country (see Rashid, Rahman & Rahman, 2016), the fitness trainers use this site as the medium of communication.

This study was carried out to explore how the fitness trainers persuade their audience. The three fitness trainers involved in this study are Kevin Zahri, Joanna Soh, and Wong Yu Jin. They were chosen based on their popularity on Facebook Page where they have huge followers. Given the high number of followers, it is hypothesized that they have their own strategy and special credibility to persuade the public. These three personal trainers also have a good education background

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and ample experiences which qualify them to talk about healthy lifestyles on Facebook. Despite having huge followers, how they persuade the public have yet to be documented. This paper aims to fill in this gap by examining the ethos, pathos and logos elements in their Facebook postings.

Ethos, Pathos, and Logos are the three elements in the Aristotle's rhetorical framework. Ethos is a kind of appeal that establishes the credibility, good-will and knowledgeable ability of the persuaders in the attempt to persuade others (Borchers, 2013). Authors or speakers who utilize this appeal would be trustworthy, as well as considerate of his or her thought and opinion. Pathos is associated with the emotions and feelings of the audience. Sprout, Driscoll, and Brizee (2012) refer to Pathos as the components of a speech that appeal to audience's sensibilities. When using pathos, the persuader expresses his/her own "emotional commitment to the positions he is advocating, then he/she adjusts the tone of his/her argument accordingly" (Kumar & Meenakshi, 2009, 344). Some writers use figurative language to deepen the emotional associations readers make to the subject (Rashid, 2016). Logos is the logical appeal where the persuader provides evidence, facts, and logical thoughts to support his or her points. The possibility of the audience being persuaded is high as the author can prove an argument through logical and sound reasoning (Riaz, Buchanan, & Ruebottom, 2016).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Ethnographic Design

This research adopted an ethnographic approach in its design in which a natural phenomenon was observed for six months. The phenomenon observed is the use of Facebook Pages by Malaysian fitness trainers in persuading their audience to practise a healthy lifestyle. Despite employing an ethnographic approach, this study is not a fully-fledged ethnography as that would require "living with and living like" the individuals being studied for a long period of time, often for at least a year" (Van Maanen, 1996, 263). Since this study involved the observation of networking site, it falls within the realm of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), webnography (Puri, 2007) and digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008) which refer to observation of online platforms.

Participants

This qualitative study involved three fitness trainers: Kevin Zahri, Joanna Soh and Wong Yu Jin. They were purposely chosen as they often post health-related Status updates on their Facebook Page and have many followers. Kevin Zahri has 410,474 followers, Joanna Soh has 97,265 followers and Wong Yu Jin has 23,607 followers.

Data Analysis

A total of 147 health-related Status updates were recorded throughout the six-month observation period (May-October, 2015). These Status updates were analysed using simple descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage) combined with a micro-analysis approach, whilst the Aristotle's rhetorical framework was adapted as analytic lens.

RESULTS

Throughout the six-month period, Wong Yu Jin posted 57 health related Status updates whilst Kevin Zahri and Joanna Soh posted 49 and 41 updates respectively. Subsections that follow present the results on the use of ethos, pathos and logos in the postings.

The use of Ethos

Ethos is mostly used by Wong Yu Jin ($n = 80$, 54%). This is followed by Joanna Soh ($n = 30$, 20%) and Kevin Zahri ($n=27$, 18%). An example of the use of ethos is shown in Extract 1.

Extract 1: Hi my name is Kevin Zahri, and most of you know me as Cikgu Fitness, but above all, I am a Malaysian who is fighting for a healthier and "lighter" Malaysia. In this fight, I need YOUR help. We are all leaders and we must lead by example. This is not a fight of the government or school teachers alone; it is a fight in which we all must participate. Whether you are a political leader, corporate figure, parent, sibling, or a person of faith, we all represent other individuals who look up to us. We must show them the right path. We cannot preach health and wellness if we cannot help ourselves first
(Kevin Zahri, SU1)

Ethos is about the establishment of credibility, good-will and knowledgeable ability of the persuaders. The ethos appeal in this Status update is achieved by using the word 'Cikgu Fitness' (Teacher of fitness) to show that he has the credibility to talk about healthy lifestyles. By claiming that he is a teacher of fitness, the fitness trainer is suggesting that he is knowledgeable in the subject matter so the audience should listen to his advice. By highlighting that he is 'fighting for a healthier and "lighter" Malaysia, he made his good will transparent that he wants to help Malaysian to live a healthy life.

The use of Pathos

Ethos is mainly used by Kevin Zahri ($n = 40$, 27%) and this is followed by Joanna Soh ($n = 37$, 25%) and Wong Yu Jin ($n = 30$, 20%). An example of the use of pathos is shown in Extract 2.

Extract 2: My job this time around was as a photographer. Photography is such a powerful tool to capture emotions. These photos almost made me cry. The JK1M participants' are really committed and that makes this fitness program so undeniably powerful. (Kevin Zahri, SU5)

Pathos is a persuasive strategy which appeals to emotions and feelings of the audience. In Extract 2, the fitness trainer appealed to his audience's emotion by highlighting that commitments from the JK1M participants mean a lot to him that he almost cried. JK1M in Extract 2 refers to *Jom Kurus 1 Malaysia* (Malay for Let's Get Slim 1 Malaysia) which is a programme carried out by the government to raise the public awareness in living a healthy life.

The use of Logos

Logos is mainly used by Joanna Soh ($n = 35$, 23%), followed by Wong Yu Jin ($n = 33$, 22%) and Kevin Zahri ($n = 30$, 20%). An example of the use of Logos is shown in Extract 3.

Extract 3: As much as I can, I avoid drinking coffee late in the afternoon because caffeine does affect my sleep. So I've been getting my friends to try the Nescafe Mountain Wash decaf coffee and they absolutely love it! Did you know that this coffee was inspired by Vietnamese traditions found in Tri-An Village, where the caffeine is removed from the coffee beans by soaking in all natural mountain waters? It's decaf but the flavour and aroma taste just as good as a normal cuppa.

Has anyone tried Nescafe Mountain Wash yet? (Joanna Soh, SU8)

Logos is the logical appeal where the persuader provides evidence, facts, and logical thoughts to support his or her points. In Extract 3, the fitness trainer argued for the negative effect of drinking coffee in the afternoon that it affects her sleep. She used factual argument that it is caused by the presence of caffeine in the coffee. Thus, she persuaded her audience to drink healthier coffee, which is the decaf coffee, the Nescafe Mountain Wash.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this paper contribute to the existing literature on the roles of fitness trainers in promoting healthy lifestyles. There are several studies which focus on fitness trainers (e.g. Bennie, et al., 2016; Nie & Beach, 2016; Efi & Anastasia, 2013) nonetheless, none of these studies focus on the trainers' persuasive skill in raising the public awareness to live a healthy life. This study, on the other hand embarks on a less explored research area by scrutinizing how the fitness trainers make use of the affordance of a social networking site in reaching out to the public. In this sense, this study has put forth novel insights into this emerging phenomenon.

The analysis of the fitness trainers' posting is meaningful as it contributes to our understanding of how the public at large can be persuaded to practise healthy lifestyles. The three fitness trainers managed to attract huge Facebook Page followers. We argue that one of the factors which contribute to this success is their linguistic skill where they persuasively craft their posts. They use the elements of ethos, pathos, and logos in the postings and this makes them appear persuasive when giving advice and encouraging the audience. As pointed out by Efi & Anastasia (2013), trainees' satisfaction of fitness training experience is crucial in determining their continuous involvement in any fitness programme. By using persuasive language when communicating with the trainees, it is likely that the trainers will increase the trainees' satisfaction level.

It is crucial for the fitness trainers to make their postings engaging so that they can maintain the huge number of followers whom will be notified every time they share useful tips and guidance in their Status updates. Constant exposure to motivational words, tips and guidance is useful for the audience as this will act as a driving force for them to improve their fitness level. Maximova et al. (2015) point out that individuals who suffer from obesity require continuous motivation from people around them to engage in body exercise activities. As shown in this study, the fitness trainers do not use the Facebook Page to ramble about something pointless, but they persuasively give motivations and share useful tips to the audience. Kevin Zahri for example motivates his audience not only to care about themselves, but also to inspire other people around them whilst Joanna Soh shares a useful tip for the audience to consume decaf coffee instead of the caffeinated coffee. The trainers carefully craft the postings to retain the trust of their audience and convincingly persuade them that they have the credibility to give advice on how to live a healthy life.

This study also brings to the fore the positive side of a networking site promoting healthy lifestyles. Previous studies mainly focus on the negative effects of the site on various aspects of life (see Fox, & Moreland, 2015; Maier et al., 2015) including obesity and other unhealthy behaviour (e.g. Sampasa-Kanyinga, Chaput, & Hamilton, 2015). In contrast, this study puts forth another perspective that networking site can be useful to the public at large as they can easily communicate with the fitness trainers to get useful tips and guidance without having to face geographical, financial and time constraints.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines how fitness trainers, craft their postings on Facebook in persuading the public to live a healthy life. It is found that they are well-versed in using the elements of ethos, pathos, and logos in their Status updates. They strategically craft the postings as to establish their credibility as a fitness trainer, and to appeal to the audience's emotions and thoughts that they need to stay healthy.

It is this engaging postings that makes them being followed by thousands of followers on the Facebook Page. These followers benefit from the postings in the sense that they are exposed to motivational words and useful tips and guidance on a daily basis for them to stay healthy.

There are two main implications that can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, effective fitness trainers are not only those who are knowledgeable in fitness training, but also highly persuasive in communicating with the trainees. They need to be able to convince the trainees that they have the credibility to train and also to appeal to the trainees' emotions and thoughts to overcome any resistance to living a healthy life. Second, fitness trainers should make full use of the affordance of social networking site in reaching out to the public as it has been integrated in users' daily life. It is hoped that the findings presented in this paper are useful in providing insights into the emerging phenomenon of fitness trainers reaching out to the public using a networking site.

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