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SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGIES IN RUSSIAN COMPUTER-MEDIATED ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the actual problem of online communicative genres' development. The purpose of the study is to explore the variability of strategic self-presentation in Russian digital discourse environment by applying Goffman's theory of self-presentation. The study content-analyzes 20 most popular Russian food blogs and 20 political blogs. The study draws on Bhatia's analytical model of genre analysis that focuses on textual, socio-critical and socio-cognitive perspectives of discourse. The results of the study have shown that *blog* genre has a complex structure and is aimed at a complex influence on a recipient combining verbal and visual form. The results of the study indicated that food blogs serve a platform for crafting positive online identity. More precisely, Russian food bloggers pay closer attention to the need to be part of the group, making wide use of positive politeness strategies (self-presentation, competence, solidarity with a target reader), aiming at friendliness with their followers. Whereas Russian political bloggers are more likely to use self-promotion strategy by showcasing directly their personal views and indirectly criticizing political views of their opponents. The research also highlighted that Russian political bloggers demonstrate competence through sound arguments, providing advice, making wide use of terminology and adverbs of frequency and time. Russian bloggers construct their online identities aiming at attracting readers' attention through direct address, including elements of the dialogue and questions into the monologue and appealing to different sensory modalities.

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Keywords: Food blogging, political blogging, self-presentation strategies, computer-mediated communication.



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1. Introduction

1.1. The role of food blogging and political blogging in modern computer-mediated environment

Computer-mediated environment is a continuously developing system of interrelated communicative genres. E-mail and Chat were the first traditional online genres. They undergone little change in the last few years. In contrast, blogs, having emerged in the 1990s, display a dynamic and vibrant nature, evolve gradually and unite bloggers in one blogosphere. By blogosphere we mean a communicative milieu which facilitates the function of digital discourse to produce new role identities and create online narratives. As a result, over the past few years we have become witnesses of the growing number of blogs, which can be classified according to content (food blogs, political blogs, educational blogs, etc.) and form (text, videoblogs, photoblogs).

Food blogging and political blogging have become increasingly popular in Russia in recent years, so much that the national award of the Russian Federation, the Runet Prize, has a separate category for the Best Blogs. The inevitable interest to the personalities who create content has grown significantly in the recent years: celebrities and politicians have their own blogs, write openly about their goals, needs, views. They craft their online identities so masterfully, that they have millions of followers. Thus, blogs have become an effective platform for creating online narratives, i.e. stories of users' life experience. One of the most popular platforms of Russian blogosphere are Live Journal and Blogs.Mail.ru. Russian language diaries currently account for 5 percent of the world blogosphere. By March 2009, the number of blogs in the Russian-language Internet has reached 7.4 million (of which 6.9 million accounted for Live Journal) (Technorati Report, 2008). In order to understand how members of blogosphere construct their identities and communicate effectively in the digital environment online users should pay special attention to fostering their strategic self-presentation skills.

2. Problem Statement

This study is based on Goffman's theory of self-presentation, who stated that "each time a person enters the presence of others, self-presentation arises" (Goffman, 1959, p. 27). Goffman's thesis is that "self-presentation is the intentional component of identity and serves the goal of impression management" (Goffman, 1959, p. 27). Therefore, researchers consider these two concepts to be inseparable. According to Walther (1993) the opportunity to manage impressions has been advanced by new communication technologies. In the Internet era, people can easily craft and recraft their identities, highlight certain aspects of themselves (Marwick, 2013), manage the impression they make through social media in different ways. These impression management opportunities came with the visual anonymity of the social media, providing users much greater degrees of freedom (Joison, 2003).

Blogs present a significant topic of study because they are characterized by "social psychology of self-disclosure" (Calvert, 2002, p. 57). According to Jones and Pittman (1982) there are five self-presentation tactics that individuals use: self-promotion, ingratiation, supplication, intimidation and exemplification. Dominick (1999) found that the five impression management tactics proposed by Jones and Pittman (1982) in offline communication can be also applied to the online setting of personal home

pages. Similar to Jones and Pittman (1982), Jung, Youn, and McClung (2007) singled out four self-presentation tactics in blogs: 1) demonstration of competence revealing that the bloggers showed their abilities, performance, and qualifications indirectly; 2) supplication indicating that the bloggers deprecated themselves indirectly and showed weakness to others; 3) exemplification showing that the bloggers tend to be self-disciplined and devoted to others; and 4) ingratiation demonstrating that the bloggers showed humor and familiarity in the blogs. Russian researchers also pay close attention to online self-presentation. Bagenova and Ivanova (2012) describe semantic and stylistic characteristics of blogs. Rafikova (2017) studies functions and forms of social media gluttony discourse. Elkina (2011) states that “user-nicks are the main means of self-presentation on blog entries” (p. 88). Kozlova (2015) examined cross-cultural differences based on Russian and German blogs. In fact, the problem is that there is very little empirical evidence to indicate the extent to which Russian food bloggers and political bloggers use the same strategies to present themselves online.

3. Research Questions

3.1. Analytical model of blog genre analysis

The study draws on Bhatia’s (2018) analytical model of genre analysis that focuses on investigating instances of conventionalized textual artefacts in order to understand how members of specific discourse construct, interpret and use these genres to achieve their goals and why they write the way they do. The model provides the following perspectives of discourse: textual, socio-critical and socio-cognitive. The textual perspective is concerned with the analysis of language use, mainly focusing on lexical features of written digital discourse. The socio-critical perspective views discourse as a social practice. Mainly, we will focus on the variability of strategies bloggers use online. The socio-cognitive perspective views discourse as genre, text interpretation in specific contexts.

Based on the previously reviewed literature, the following research questions are asked: What are the key characteristics that make food-blog and political blog genre stand out from other types of online genres? What strategies do food bloggers and political bloggers use to craft their online identities? Do Russian food bloggers and political bloggers use the same repertoire of strategies to present themselves online?

4. Purpose of the Study

In recognition of the rapid development of digital discourse and the opportunities it provides for self-expression users are continuously encouraged to upgrade their knowledge and skills of self-presentation. However, is it possible to determine which self-presentation strategies food bloggers and political bloggers employ to self-express? What strategies are the most frequent? What is the core set of strategies food bloggers might use to craft their online identities? The aim of this study is to address the above questions. To achieve this aim we target the following tasks: 1) to highlight food-blog’s and political blog’s genre characteristics; 2) to analyse the existing research in the sphere of food and political blogging in the context of online-presentation; 3) to determine and analyse self-presentation communicative strategies and tactics Russian food and political bloggers use to craft their online

identities; 4) to determine whether Russian food bloggers and political bloggers use the same repertoire of strategies to present themselves online.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Methodological settings for this study

The study draws on Bhatia's (2018) analytical model of genre analysis that focuses on textual, socio-critical and socio-cognitive perspectives of discourse. A thematic analysis of 20 Russian food blog entries and 20 Russian political blog entries was conducted using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach, with each blog entry serving as the unit of analysis. Grounded theory methodology involves a microanalysis of data by using a "detailed line-by-line analysis to generate initial categories and to suggest relationships among categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57).

According to the nature of the study there was used descriptive research method consisting in "observation and description of a research subject without influencing or manipulating the variables in any way" (Kramer, 1985, p. 3). Furthermore, the main objective of this study predetermines resorting to inductive analysis, i.e. an approach that primary uses "detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher" (Thomas, 2006, p. 10). According to its purpose this research belongs to applied studies, which means that the research methods forming the body of research methodology are applied to the collection of information about various aspects of the issue under consideration "so that this information might be used for better understanding of the phenomenon" (Kumar, 2011, p. 5). From the point of view or research design this study is conclusive since it "provides conclusive answers to research questions" (Chawla & Sodhi, 2011, p. 10).

5.2. Material

The study was performed on Russian food and political blogs (Nika Belozerkovskaya's Blog, Olga Malysheva's Blog, Andrey Rudkov's Blog, Nina Tarasova's Blog, Sergey Nikitsky's Blog: Ilya Varlamov's Blog, Sergey Elkin's Blog and others). The study content-analysed 40 top Russian food and political blogs ranked by popularity and influence listed in the online magazine *Khleb Sol* (2018). It should be noted that few studies to date have examined the extent to which food bloggers and political bloggers use the same repertoire of strategies to present themselves online.

6. Findings

6.1. The main aim of the blog genre and key self-presentation strategies

To answer the first research question we first focused on general descriptive genre elements of food and political blogs. The results have shown that blog genre has a complex structure. It is realized in the written form and aimed at the blogger's self-actualization, self-expression, desire to share knowledge, attract the reader's attention, promote the blog and inspire the followers to act in a certain way. Moreover, this genre presents a written monologue, written by one or a group of authors on specific topics – food, politics. Finally, it is aimed at a complex influence on a recipient combining verbal and visual form.

Having content analysed 40 most popular Russian food blog and political blog sentries we can state, that social identity in the computer-mediated environment is constructed through actual and virtual self-presentation. When real social characteristics of users (gender, age, nationality, profession, etc.) are transferred to the online environment, we deal with actual self-presentation. If users construct their online identity themselves and create a certain image in the eyes of others, then we deal with virtual self-presentation.

Given the universal nature of the list of semantic primes among languages (Werzbicka, 1972), the main aim of the blog genre can be described as follows: I am writing to you because I want to share my thoughts, achievements, views on life; I am writing because I want to share something interesting that may be interesting for you.

To answer the second and third research questions the entries of 40 Russian food and political blogs were content analysed. The study showed that Russian food bloggers use three types of self-presentation strategies to craft their online identity: self-promotion, ingratiation and inspiration. The study also revealed that Russian political bloggers besides the above mentioned strategies use discrediting tactic.

Self-promotion strategy is aimed at “convincing people of our competence, trying to get people to think we are capable, intelligent or talented” (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2018, p. 5). The study showed that 67 % of Russian food bloggers tend to make use of self-promotion strategy, which is realized by means of the following tactics: self-presentation, competence and solidarity with a target reader.

Food bloggers as well as political bloggers explicitly describe their own attributes in order to be seen positively in the eyes of their online readers. They add personal information to their Profile Section including their name, surname, date of birth, education, etc. An example of this is illustrated in a number of Profile Sections:

(1) *Vsem privet! Menia zovut Ania, ia beskonechno uvlechennyi kulinar I fotograf. Gotovliu dlia svoego liubimogo muzha I dvukh dochek, snimaaiu dlia bloga, stokov, zhurnalov, nu I prosto dlia dushi [hereinafter the translation is done by the author of the article: Hello to all! My name is Anya. I am a lifelong passionate culinary specialist and a photographer! I'm cooking for my beloved husband and two daughters, shooting for the blog, stocks, magazines and just for the soul!]* (Pustinnikova, 2018);

(2) *Zdravstvuite. Menia zovut Sergei Nikitskii. Zhivu v Moskve. V bloge pishu pro stranu svoei sudby – Rossiiu, a takzhe na politicheskie, ekonomicheskie I obshchestvenno-znachimye temy. Nakhodiat v bloge otklik I moi uvlecheniia: avtomobili (kakoi russkii ne liubit bystroj ezdy, vertolety I samolety, vysokie tekhnologii, sport I konechno puteshestviia po Russii I miry. Rekomenduiu k prochteniuiu posty pro Arktiku. U menia svoboda slova v bloge. Ia ne razdeliaiu vashikh ubezhdanii, no gotov umeret za vashe pravo ikh vyskazyvat, poetomy baniu tolko sovsem buinykh, kotorye perehodiut na oskorbleniia [Hello! My name is Sergey Nikitsky. I live in Moscow. I write in my blog about the country of my fate – Russia, as well as on political, economic and socially significant topics. My hobbies also find a response on the blog: cars (which Russian doesn't like to drive fast?), helicopters and airplanes, technology. Sports, and of course traveling around Russia and the world. I recommend reading posts about the Arctic. I have freedom of speech on my blog. I don't share your convictions, but I'm ready to*

die for your right to express them, therefore I ban only quite violent users whose comments are insulting (Nikitskiy, 2019).

The authors of food blogs present themselves as personalities who are passionate about cooking and capable of studying their personal Selves. In the above examples, the adverb “lifelong” in the phrase “lifelong passionate culinary specialist” and the adjective “passionate”, meaning “capable of, affected by, or expressing intense feeling”, underline the idea that the bloggers are interested and highly motivated in what they are doing.

The close analysis of the information presented in the Profile Section helped us to identify the motivational reasons why food bloggers started food blogging: to chronicle their family’s lives, goals and accomplishments, to self-present, to share information and their passion for cooking.

Interestingly, 90 % of the Russian food bloggers described themselves positively on their food blogs choosing direct way of self-expression. Both Russian food and political bloggers rarely used negative emotional tone for self-presentation as that could make them appear less attractive.

There is a strong reason behind political bloggers’ use of competence tactic: people generally want to be perceived as skilled, qualified and competent. The research highlighted that Russian political bloggers demonstrate competence through sound arguments, providing advice, making wide use of terminology (political terms) and adverbs of frequency and time (never, always, often). Competence tactic is introduced by the words: As I think..., I believe..., I always..., I never..., I want to point out, that ..., etc. as in the following example:

(3) *S interesom nabliudal za diskussiei na Valdaiskom forume, gde segodnia govorili pro mirovoe ustroistvo, Vostok I Rossiiu. Ia khochu otmetit, chto globalnye problem nevozmozhno reshat bez Azii, eto delaet li gitimnost takikh reshenii somnitelnoi. Rossiia schitaet spravedlivym zhelanie stran regiona igrat bolee znachimuiu rol v mirovoi politike I ekonomike* [I watched with interest the discussion at the Valdai Forum. A lot was said about the world order, East and Russia. I want to point out that global issues cannot be solved without Asia, this makes the legitimacy of such decisions dubious. Russia considers fair the desire of the countries of the region to play a more significant role in world politics and economy] (Nikitskiy, 2019).

The results have shown that competence and discrediting tactic can be considered as the main strategies of Russian political bloggers. Discrediting tactic is often used by the Russian blogger Ilya Varlamov, as in the following example:

(4) *V Saratove prodolzhaetsia kakaia-to zhest. S momenta strashnogo ubiistva 9-letnei Lizy ne proshlo I nedeli, kak chinovniki reshili vse zapretit. Nu a kak eshche reshat problemu? Mer Saratova Mikhail Isaev sobiraetsia izbavitsia ot kustov. On dal zadanie vypilit vse. Koshmar! Zapomnite: chtoby sdelat gorod bezopasnee, nado ne ukhudshat gorodskuii sredu, a naoborot. Vysazhivat derevia, delat khoroshie obshchestvennye prostranstva, ustanavlivat osveshchenie* [Something horrible is going on in Saratov! Not even a week has passed since the terrible murder of the 9-year-old Lisa, as officials decided to ban everything! Well, is it the only way to solve the problem? The mayor of Saratov, Mikhail Isaev, is going to “get rid of the bushes”. He ordered to cut everything down. It is a nightmare? Remember: to make a city safer, you mustn’t worsen the urban environment, but vice versa! You should plant trees, make good public spaces, install lighting] (Varlamov, 2019).

Russian food bloggers tend to resort to solidarity tactic through “We” pronoun, emphasizing collective identity whereas political bloggers focus on self-interests and are more likely to use “You” pronoun while addressing their readers:

(5) *Bezuslovno, pri vozmozhnosti, chizkeik nuzhno gotovit s syrom Filadelfiia, no v usloviakh sanktsii, my s vami oboidemsia tvorozhnym syrom liuboi marki [Of course, if possible, a cheesecake should be prepared with Philadelphia cheese, but with the imposed sanctions, we will manage with any cheese]* (Rudkov, 2018).

The example 5 illustrates the blogger’s attempt to create unity with his target readers by making them feel involved. Bloggers feel an underlining sense of unity and coherence, which may be traced back to the concept of Self.

The main aim of ingratiation strategy is to exert influence over another by becoming more attractive or likeable to their target. Russian bloggers construct their online identities wishing to present a favorable image of themselves to readers. The following ways of attracting readers’ attention were frequent in the data: direct address and including elements of the dialogue and questions into the monologue.

The main aim of inspiration strategy is to motivate target readers for further actions. Food bloggers, for example, use both non-verbal (beautiful step by step photos) and verbal means of motivation. Different ways of motivating readers were frequent in the data: exclamatory, conditional and imperative sentences. The following speech acts are often used by both food and political Russian bloggers on their entries: instruction, advice, suggestion.

7. Conclusion

Content analysis of food and political blogs revealed the importance of self-promotion strategy to Russian bloggers as it helps them to stand out amid a range of many other bloggers. The following characteristics of blog genre were identified: complex structure; subgenres: narrative story, food recipe, instruction, recommendation, advice; a written monologue on specific topics (food, politics); creolized text. The study showed that Russian food and political bloggers use three types of self-presentation strategies to craft their online identity: self-promotion, ingratiation and inspiration. The results have shown that competence and discrediting tactic can be considered as the main strategies of Russian political bloggers. 67% of Russian food bloggers tend to use self-promotion strategy, which is realized by the following tactic: self-presentation revealing that 90% of the Russian food bloggers described themselves positively on their food blogs choosing direct way of self-expression. 72% of Russian political bloggers demonstrate competence as they want to be perceived as skilled and qualified; through sound arguments, providing advice, making wide use of terminology and adverbs of frequency and time. The most striking observation to emerge from the data was that Russian food bloggers tend to resort to solidarity tactic through “we” pronoun, emphasizing collective identity whereas political bloggers focus on self-interests and are more likely to use “You” pronoun while addressing the readers.

Blogs have become an effective platform for creating online narratives. They are a powerful self-presentation tool. Driven by anonymous nature of digital discourse Russian food and political

bloggers construct their identities and openly express their views on social and political issues. As such, online environment will continue to offer a rich source of data for researchers.

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