Persuasion in social media

A study of Instagram influencers’ usage of persuasive speech acts

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how different fitness Instagram influencers use persuasive speech acts in their marketing posts. Another aim is to look at the similarities and differences between the influencers’ use of linguistic strategies and speech acts. A study was conducted on 200 Instagram posts from four different fitness influencers. A total of 638 speech acts were coded using a typology by John Searle (1979). The typology consists of the speech acts representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. Two speech acts were also added by the researchers; inquires and quotations. Furthermore, the speech acts were also coded for sentence forms (declarative, imperative and interrogative) and also whether they were direct or indirect speech acts. The study also discusses the different aspects of online communication and how these might affect someone’s marketing decisions. This shows that the language someone uses online might affect his or her online identity. There was also a comparison of the results to identify similarities and differences among the selected influencers. The results show a variation of usage of Searle’s (1979) speech acts. All speech acts were used at least once but directives showed the highest frequency among all influencers since they would often command or request their followers to perform a certain action. Another result was that many of the speech acts had a certain sentence structure but a different intention or function, namely, they were indirect speech acts. The intention and function of these speech acts were often to persuade the audience and were therefore persuasive speech acts.

Keywords: persuasive speech acts, John Searle, online marketing, Instagram influencers
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1. Introduction

For many, social media have become a part of their everyday lives. Today younger generations have shown to have the highest Internet usage since the late 1990s (Herring et al 2015: 1). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2017 [www]) defines *social media* as ”websites and applications, which enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking”. When social media started to grow, they brought new aspects and ways of using the platforms.

Something that grew together with social media was *social media marketing*. *Social media marketing* is when social networks are used to market brands, people, services or products. Brands as well as people use social media to market themselves or other brands. However social media posts have a couple of limitations depending on the platform used. Communication on these platforms and on the Internet is also referred to as online communication (Crystal 2004: 28).

Instagram was founded in the US, in 2010. It provides a mobile application for sharing photos and videos on social networks. The application allows users to capture moments and upload them either as photographs or videos on Instagram. Instagram users can also share the location of their photos and share them on other social network sites like Facebook or Twitter. On Instagram a user can also choose to be public or private; in the latter case a private user has to accept to be followed by others (Nationalencyclopedia, 2017 [www]). What makes Instagram a strong social media platform is the visual aspect combined with the textual. People are often very visual but a picture without a text can lose its meaning. A simple picture can become humorous or meaningful if textual content is added. Instagram is used by millions of people who want to share their photos and videos. Statistics show that as of September 2017, Instagram has around 500 million active daily users and that Instagram is the platform with the most engaged users (Statista, 2017 [www]). With the growth of Instagram, several people such as *social media influencers* saw a possibility to further their brands. An influencer is defined as “a person who has the power to influence many people, as through social media or traditional media” (Dictionary, 2017 [www]). Basically Instagram is vastly used by male and female influencers who try to sell or persuade their followers of their own quality and the quality of brands they try to promote. These influencers have often established their online persona with a specific brand such as fitness, beauty, lifestyle and more. It is therefore important to know how to catch your
followers’ attention, not just through picture but also by their textual content. A picture without a
description might be confusing to a follower and therefore it is important to use the appropriate
strategies to persuade and capture your followers’ attention. The job of social media influencers
is to persuade and affect their followers to the point that they either purchase or interact with
what an influencer is promoting. One huge trend during the past few years has been fitness.
People are more interested in fitness and healthy living and often look for social media
influencers for motivation and persuasion. This is therefore an important topic since it is mostly
younger generations who follow these influencers and decide their popularity. It is also important
for the different brands since they invest money in these influencers. Influencers are often selling
their brands or are sponsored by other brands and must therefore use different linguistic strategies
to market their services or goods. According to Omnicore (2017) an influencer can receive up to
100.000 dollars for a sponsored post. Therefore, it is important for these social media influencers
to use the right language or more specifically the right linguistic strategies to persuade their
audiences of their quality and credibility.

Through different linguistic actions known as speech acts these influencers can reach and
persuade large audiences. Searle defines (1965: 1) a speech act as “a speech situation involving a
speaker, a hearer and an utterance by the speaker where the speaker will have performed some
acts, which includes informing, irritating or boring his hearers”. Basically, an act is performed
whenever someone makes an utterance. Speech acts can also be persuasive.

According to Taillard (2000: 145) the purpose of persuasive language is to try to influence
peoples’ “desires, beliefs and actions”. By persuading, a person performs one or several speech
acts that could also be defined as perlocutionary acts or effect (Taillard 2000: 145). The way we
discuss speech acts today is mostly based on the work of John Austin (1962) and John Searle
(1965, 1979, 1985), who found new ways of defining and describing speech acts.

1.1 Aim, research questions and scope
The aim of this study is to investigate the linguistic strategies social media influencers use in their
posts. More specifically this study looks at the use of different speech acts and persuasive
language that fitness influencers use in their marketing posts to reach out to their audiences.
This study answers the following research questions:

1. What kind of speech acts do the selected fitness influencers use to persuade their
followers?
2. What are the differences and similarities, if any, between these individual fitness influencers in their use of persuasive speech acts?

Although the material consists of two female and two male influencers’ Instagram posts, this paper does not investigate in great detail gender differences but instead only focuses on the textual content of each individual’s profile. The individual influencers’ use of speech acts is compared, irrespective of their gender. This study focuses only on one social media site and only examines the data results from Instagram. This study does not investigate the outcome of the influencers’ strategies in their marketing posts and whether they have managed to persuade their followers but instead focuses on their use of persuasive speech acts.

2. Theoretical Background

This section presents different theories about speech acts. This section discusses two language philosophers Austin and Searle and their speech act theories, with a focus on Searle. It mainly focuses on Searle’s speech act theories and his typology. There is also a discussion of persuasive language within the use of social media and a comparison of online and offline communication.

2.1 Online communication vs. offline communication

The Internet is an interactive tool with a particular use of language. Crystal (2004: 24 – 25) also refers to it as Netspeak. Netspeak refers to the qualities of the language used on the Internet. Crystal (ibid: 28) differentiates the qualities of spoken and written language but also online and offline communication. One difference between spoken and written language is that in spoken language the communication is face-to-face, unlike in written communication. Written language and online communication can therefore lead to more misunderstandings since a person cannot always tell the tone or intention of someone’s message such as a humorous tone or sarcasm (ibid). Crystal (ibid) also discusses that Netspeak has features that contain both the spoken and the written aspects of language. An example of the spoken aspects is that people will sometimes write the way they speak, especially on social media. However, in online communication a person cannot always get feedback simultaneously like in spoken communication. It is therefore important to think about the structure of the message someone wants to send to their consumers or followers.
Janoschka (2004: 84) also compares what she calls “mass communication” and “interpersonal” communication. Mass communication is often the case of the Internet, where a person’s message can reach out to the masses, while interpersonal communication is often an interaction or dialogue between individuals. Janoschka discusses (ibid: 96) that in online communication the writer’s online message is shared through the Internet and then to the audience, making it “mass communication”. She compares this to “online advertising” which is related to “persuasive communication”. Online advertising aims to sell and persuade the consumer so it is therefore important to use “persuasive communication”. When a person uses the medium of online advertising to persuade, it is important to think about the choice of language and the linguistic qualities, such as specific persuasive phrases, words or speech acts (ibid).

2.2 History of Speech Acts
The study of speech acts was developed by two language philosophers John Austin and John Searle. They discussed how to use language to obtain the wanted effect or reaction (Jucker et al 2008: 9). It was Austin who started giving lectures at Harvard, which later became a book. Austin discussed (1962: 1-3) how discourse, language and utterances could actually be seen as performing actions. He explained than an utterance does not need to be true or false but that it can sometimes be something he called “a performative”, short for a performative sentence or utterance (ibid: 6). All the other utterances were referred to as “constatives”. Austin also discussed that he had difficulties in deciding when sentences or utterances were in fact performatives or not. He decided therefore to split the utterances into three acts; locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts (1962: 108). A locutionary act can be described as what a person says while illocutionary act is what a person does such as “ordering, warning or informing”. Lastly perlocutionary acts are what a person wants to achieve by performing a speech act (Austin 1962: 108).

Austin might have been the first language philosopher to develop the study of speech acts in this particular way but it was his student, John Searle, who further developed it into the Speech Act Theory, which today is a known linguistic theory.
2.2.1 Searle’s Speech Act Theory

Searle (1979: 1) states that one of the biggest questions when studying a language is “How many ways of using language are there?” but he points out that the real question should be “How many categories of illocutionary act are there”. According to Searle (1979: 1) the basic unit of human communication is the illocutionary act. Searle found inspiration but also flaws in Austin’s (1962) taxonomy of speech acts, so he decided to develop his own taxonomy (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Searle’s (1979) Speech Act Taxonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPEECH ACTS</th>
<th>FUNCTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representatives</td>
<td>asserting, concluding, describing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directives</td>
<td>requesting, questioning, ordering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissives</td>
<td>promising, offering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressives</td>
<td>thanking, apologizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaratives</td>
<td>excommunicating, declaring war</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Representatives are basically when something can be either true or false. Searle explains them (1979: 10) as ”committing the speaker to something being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition”.

(1) My mom makes the best cookies in town.

The speaker (1) claims that their mother has the best cookies, which could be true or false. However, the speaker is still committed to the truth of the utterance, which makes it a representative (ibid).

Directives are simply described as “attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something” such as ordering someone or questioning someone (ibid: 11). They can either be straightforward utterances as ordering someone or used in a more indirect way such as suggesting something to get the hearer to act. Directives are basically speech acts that express what a person wants and desires, which is different from commissives.

(2) Turn the music up.

With the sentence in (2) the speaker wants the hearer to do something and the hearer can choose
to obey or not. Unlike representatives, a directive cannot be true or false but instead the hearer decides if he or she will obey the directive (ibid).

A *commissive* is a speech act that “commits the speaker to some future course of action for example making a promise (ibid). Searle discusses (ibid: 10) that both directives and commissives consist of future actions but with directives it is the hearer that performs the action and with commissives it is the speaker that performs the action.

(3) I’ll buy you that ring.

The speaker in (3) commits to a future action by making a statement or a promise to buy something for the hearer.

Expressives are what they sound like. Searle (ibid: 12) explains them as “to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content ”. Searle describes (ibid) them as expressing emotions or feelings such as apologizing, thanking or congratulating someone. These are expressives since they show that a person is feeling remorse, showing appreciation for something, showing gratitude or showing that they are happy for someone (ibid).

(4) I am so happy for you!

In sentence (4) the speaker expresses a feeling or an emotional state where he or she expresses happiness for someone’s accomplishments, which makes it an expressive.

Declaratives are facts or statements of sorts that, if there is a “successful performance, it guarantees that the propositional content corresponds to the world”, such as excommunicating someone, declaring war or firing someone (ibid: 13). In some ways it changes the reality of a social world.

(5) I now pronounce you husband and wife.

The speaker declares in (5) the official commitment to matrimony between two people by uttering a simple sentence and thus changing the reality for these two people.

Some speech acts are more persuasive than others. A directive would be the most obvious persuasive speech but in reality, they can all be persuasive in their own way. For instance, representatives are for example statements but they can indirectly sell something or persuade
someone. As in sentence (1), the speaker is making a statement that their mother makes the best cookies and this could be used as a way to persuade someone to buy them. The same goes for *commissives*. A *commissive* can be structured in a way that it persuades someone like for instance if a speaker promises that their product is the best on the market. This can persuade their consumers to buy the product. What this shows is that although the structure of the sentence might express a certain direct speech act, it can still have an indirect presumed intention behind it, like persuasion. *Expressives* show appreciation and emotion. A person could for instance express that they are in love with a new product and thus use *expressives* to persuade their audience. A *commissive* can also be persuasive in its own way. If someone the audience deemed trustworthy promises or guarantees that a product has great quality, this might lead to the audience purchasing the product.

*Declaratives* are not as persuading as the other speech acts since they consist of life changing acts like for instance excommunicating someone or declaring war. These also tend to be rare in for instance social media posts.

### 2.2.2 Direct and Indirect Speech Acts

Searle’s (1985: 29) five speech act categories can also be further divided into two sub-categories: direct and indirect speech acts.

Searle states (ibid) that the simplest form of a speech act and the meaning of a speech act is when a person voices a sentence and means exactly what they say. This would be a direct speech act. Basically the speaker knows the effect they want to achieve and the speaker wants the hearer to understand their exact intention (ibid: 30). A direct speech act illustrates exactly what the speaker wants to convey in hopes of no misunderstanding. Some might even feel that some direct speech acts can be considered impolite or even blunt, since direct speech acts can be face-threatening, which is when someone offends a person’s “face” or self-image (ibid: 37).

Direct and indirect speech acts can also be divided into three types of sentences: declarative, interrogative and imperative (Kaburise, 2012: 36). A declarative is a statement, so the speaker asserts something. An interrogative is when the speaker questions or asks something and an imperative is a command, request or warning

(6) Direct Speech Acts:
(a) *She got lost on her way back* (Declarative)
(b) *Did Maria get lost on her way back?* (Interrogative)
The indirect speech acts show that the surface forms are not the same as the functions of the sentences. Both the declarative (a) and the interrogative (b) in example (7) have the indirect functions of requests, while the sentence in (7) (c) has the form of a declarative but the function of a command or warning. The choice of the speech act depends on what the speaker wants to convey. As mentioned before a direct speech act and imperative can be perceived as impolite but this depends on the context and situation (Searle 1985: 37). If there were a situation where someone is in danger, like in a fire, and a person shouts “Get out!” then a direct speech act and imperative would not be perceived as impolite. Therefore the speaker has to choose the right speech act to express their intention depending on the situation, time and place. Searle discusses (ibid: 30) how the sentence form and meaning are somewhat separated when the speaker chooses an indirect speech act, since a speaker can say something but mean something else. He mentions (ibid: 31) that even if indirect speech acts can be the more polite way of requesting, ordering or asking, they can still lead to misunderstandings. If the speaker tries to make their intention known by using an indirect speech act but the hearer does not understand, then the speaker will not get their point across.

(8) Can you reach the salt? (Searle 1985:31)

In sentence (8) the speaker requests for the hearer to pass the salt in an indirect way. This could lead to a misunderstanding if the hearer takes this question literally. According to Searle (ibid: 32) the speaker has to know that the hearer has the social and linguistic knowledge to understand an indirect speech act. Basically, to express the appropriate meaning, a speaker has to know or assume that their audience or participants have the social ability to understand indirect requests, inquires or commands (ibid).

2.3 Previous studies of persuasive language

Persuasive language is something that we encounter everyday in human interaction. According to several researchers all language use can in some ways be considered persuasive (Halmari & Virtanen 2005: 3). However, there are different ways of defining persuasive language and
therefore it is important to look at the linguistic characteristics of persuasive language. According to Halmari and Virtanen (2005: 3), persuasive language is a process where people aim to change or affect their audience’s opinions or beliefs. The reason why it is considered a process is because the audience has to accept what someone tries to advertise. Within advertising the textual content of an advertisement often has limited space (Bruthiaux 2005 in Halmari & Virtanen 2005: 135). It is therefore important to use the limited space to create a textual content to persuade an audience. According to Bruthiaux (2005) in Halmari & Virtanen (ibid: 137) the writers often have presupposed notions about their readers’ backgrounds and interests and will therefore adapt the language in their texts to convince their readers.

Asemah et al (2013: 951) explains that advertising is often seen as a tool or a ”force” that has a persuasive nature. Some would say that due to the forces of persuasive language, consumers often buy unnecessary products or services (ibid). Persuasive language contains different strategies such as appealing to someone’s emotions, which often affect the consumers and persuades them to purchase or consume. The usage of the appropriate language is therefore vital when constructing an advertisement or a social media marketing post (ibid).

Asemah et al (2013: 953) discusses that persuasive language is linked with the psychological needs of human beings. The people who write advertisements or marketing posts use different textual and visual ways to sell or persuade their consumers and followers. They try to convince their consumers and followers to buy products and to “adopt a specific lifestyle”. Language has different elements, such as words, phrases and sentences that can influence the meaning of marketing messages or posts. In social media, this often leads to a user adopting a consistent use of language to create a consistent social media image. The user or influencer might for instance use specific speech acts to reach out to their followers but also to strengthen their social media presentation (ibid).

Flergin (2014: 62) argues that a person can analyse persuasive language by looking at different levels, one of which is speech acts. He discusses how certain speech acts such as representatives or directives can be used as strong “persuasive techniques” since they create different patterns or repetitions. This can reinforce a brand’s position since the consumers will recognize the phrases (ibid). The language used online is in many ways interactive and there are different functions of language in online communication that can persuade the audience such as certain speech acts.
2.3.1 Previous studies of persuasive speech acts

Online persuasive language has the goal to reach out to a specific audience by using certain strategies. These strategies can be viewed through a linguistic perspective. Often the writers or senders of the different online marketing posts use similar language in their posts or use similar speech acts (Janoschka 2004: 122). According to Janoschka (ibid: 123) some rhetorical or linguistic features such as “questions, repetitions or exclamation” are tools of persuasion. These features also belong to different categories of speech acts like for instance *representatives, commissives* and *directives*. Within advertising texts common speech acts are often *directives* or interrogatives (*inquires*). Within social media it is common for users or influencers to “instruct” their audiences or followers, by using phrases such as “tag a friend”, “get yours today” or “download now on my page”. By using these kinds of speech acts, the sender addresses an audience and tries to persuade them to follow their instructions (ibid: 124 – 126). Although they are *directives*, they are not face–threatening to the audience since they are not considered as too strict or rude. They are however, in this case, more effective than using indirect speech acts since they instruct the audience directly. Interrogatives (*inquires*) can also be useful when someone tries to interact with their audience or if someone wants them to contemplate a certain subject (ibid: 125). Often these influencers or speakers use certain linguistic strategies to reach out to their specific audiences. Some influencers interact more by using *directives* while others try to persuade by appealing to the emotional side of the audience via *expressives*. The strategy or speech act a person chooses depends on the reaction they want to accomplish. Users of social media sites, more specifically influencers, often have the goal to create an interpersonal relationship with their followers in order to persuade and interact with their audience (ibid: 130).

Another important aspect of social media is the creation of a certain online identity. When creating your brand it is often important to be consistent since this shows your “identity or personality” and a way to do this is through language (Carr et al 2012: 179). A way to build an online identity could be to use similar sentences and speech acts in one’s posts. If influencers use a certain language, their followers are more likely to recognize or relate to them. Influencers could for example use *directives* often in their post to motivate their followers or use *commissives* to promise them a service or brand quality (ibid).

Social media platforms are also used to create interpersonal relationships. It is a way to reach out and contact other users that might not be located in the same city or country. It allows
users to create an interpersonal relationship with several people at once. To create and maintain these relationships, users on social media platforms use different speech acts to inform, demand or express emotion (Carr et al 2012: 180).

3. Material and Method

This section presents the material used in this study but also the method. It shows how the researcher found the collected data and how this data was analysed.

3.1 Material

The primary material of this study is a data sample that consists of 200 posts from 4 different profiles of fitness influencers on Instagram. More specifically the study examined two female influencers and two male influencers to explore different kinds of persuasive speech acts and strategies. A total of 638 speech acts were analysed. All the influencers are either sponsored by a brand or sell their own brands and merchandise. This is important since this study looked at the persuasive language and speech acts used in marketing posts. The material consists of 50 posts from each influencer making it a total of 200 captions and a total of 6207 words. These particular posts often have longer textual content since the intent of these posts is often to sell or persuade their followers to consume. The average word usage per post for the users was around 29-35 words and average number of sentences per post was around three. The participants or influencers are between the ages of 29-43 and are all public figures. This means that their profiles are not private and anyone has access to their posts. This study looks at their self-reported gender as well as age. It does not assume or create its own definition but instead looks at the self-reported information that the influencers have given. This study follows the online self-presentation of the influencers and does not investigate if this mirrors their true self.

The first participant chosen was Female Influencer 1 (FI1), who is 31 years old and from California. Besides being a social media influencer with 10,7 million followers, she also owns different businesses and writes fitness eBooks. The second female participant was Female Influencer 2 (FI2) with 1,2 million followers, 43 years old and also from California. She also works with her own brand and often collaborates with different brands and people. The third influencer chosen was Male Influencer 1 (MI1), 35 years old and from New York City. Besides being active on social media where he has 4,3 million followers, he is also a body builder and
writes his own fitness eBooks and health publications. The last influencer was Male Influencer 2 (MI2) with 2.9 million followers, 29 years old from Spain. He founded his own line of training apparel and also collaborates with other brands. The reason for choosing these different influencers was that they are all popular and active on Instagram. One thing they also have in common is that they have created their own brands and often work with other brands as well. Three of the influencers are English native speakers. Although MI2 is Spanish, his sites are all in English and so are all his posts. They are all located and working in the U.S.

The reason for choosing Instagram was because it has grown into an important social media platform in marketing. Instagram is a predominantly visual social media site that was intended for more personal use, but influencers and different brands are now using it to sell products and services and also connect and interact with their followers. This makes Instagram a strong marketing tool for brands and influencers since it is easier for the consumers and followers to visualize the product or service.

### 3.2 Method

The data collection used in this study was a convenience sampling of posts with focus on marketing and selling. This means that all personal posts were ignored since this study only focuses on the textual aspect of marketing posts. The posts went through a speech act analysis, where the patterns of the speech act usage were analysed. After compiling the data from the influencers, each post was examined separately. First it was important to look at how many sentences a post consisted of to see how many speech acts a post had since not all sentences are speech acts which was something taken in account when conducting the analysis. Some posts had no punctuations and instead had an emoji between two sentences and therefore emojis were sometimes seen as endings of sentences. When the different sentences were divided, they were then coded following the taxonomy of speech acts created by John Searle (1979). The reason for choosing this typology is due to its vast classification of speech acts. However, some speech acts were also added by the researcher due to some limitations in Searle’s taxonomy. The two added speech acts were *inquires* (questions) such as “Have you guys seen this amazing product?” and also *quotations* (motivational quotes) such as “99 PROBLEMS BUT THE GYM AIN'T ONE!”. The reason why these were added to the taxonomy was because they were sometimes used in a persuasive way. One speech act from Searle’s taxonomy was however excluded, namely *declaratives*. The reason is that this type of speech acts was not found in the data and is not a
particularly persuasive speech act in this context since they are acts that “change the reality of the world” such as declaring war or marrying someone. These were not found anywhere in the collected data and were therefore excluded.

The sentences were not only coded for their speech act types but also coded by sentence types (forms) such as declarative, imperative and interrogative. It is important to separate Searle’s speech act *declaratives* from the sentence form declarative. Another aspect was also to see if the speech acts were direct or indirect speech acts, since it is often common to use indirect speech acts to persuade. Some sentences occasionally had a certain form but a different function, such as some declaratives had the form of a statement but the function of a demand.

The different influencers’ posts were first looked at separately and each speech act was identified and quantified. After analysing the influencers’ posts separately, a comparison was made between the four influencers to see if they follow certain patterns or if it comes down to personal choices. This was then compared to the findings of previous studies and theories about speech acts and persuasive language.

This study consists of a qualitative analysis with quantitative aspects since it shows numbers and statistics of how many utterances and speech acts were used in each post. However, it mainly focuses on the qualitative aspect of the study since it examines the context of the persuasive speech acts in the posts instead of their frequency.

### 3.3 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The influencers chosen for this study are public and anyone can access their online content and posts. The participants have chosen to have a non-anonymous online presence and to access their sites no registration or log in was necessary. However, since the focus of this study is their language use, their names were removed from this study. They are instead referred as Female Influencer 1 (FI1), Female Influencer 2 (FI2), Male Influencer 1 (MI1) and Male Influencer 2 (MI2). Their posts often contained the names of their personal brands and therefore these were excluded as well. Their self-reported gender, age and origin are included in the research.

The material consists of data from only one social media site, namely Instagram and therefore only shows results from this platform. Other social media sites could be taken into account but the study’s intention was to focus on the increase and development of Instagram *influencers* and their newfound success on today’s media society. One limitation was that this study only looked at fitness influencers’ posts. Other influencers such as fashion or lifestyle influencers might use
different strategies than fitness influencers. This study focuses on speech acts usage and persuasive language in influencers’ posts. However it does not show if these influencers actually succeeded in persuading their followers to consume their products or services.

Due to some limitations of using one typology, the researcher also added two extra speech acts: inquires and quotations. These could not be found in Searle’s taxonomy and are somewhat important since the influencers used them in some of their marketing posts.

Note that one sentence can also express different speech acts and it can have more than one function. Therefore it is up to the researcher to identify and classify the type of speech act in that particular context. This study is therefore interpretative and dependent on context.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the analysis. It shows the results of each influencer and their usage of speech acts. It also examines the similarities and differences between the different individual influencers and their use of persuasive speech acts.

4.1 Female Influencer 1 (FI1)

Female Influencer 1 used 159 speech acts in 50 posts. The three most used were representatives, directives and commissives. These were almost always used in a persuasive way.

Table 2. Female Influencer 1’s speech act usage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF SPEECH ACTS</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representatives</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directives</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissives</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressives</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiries</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was common for representatives to be indirectly persuasive, as seen in (9) below:
The sentence form of this speech act is a statement or claim and therefore a representative but the intention is to indirectly promote the vitamins and protein shakes. The sentence is a declarative that informs the audience about the quality of the product. Although representatives are not always persuasive in their structure, the intention of this utterance is to persuade. The speech act type with the highest frequency was directives, as in (10):

(10) Download it now at femaleinfluencer1.com and start building that body!! (Directive)

In (10) FI1 uses a directive. The utterance is an imperative in form and a direct speech act. The probable intention of this speech act is for the audience to carry out an action. Some speech acts were hard to classify since they could belong to more than one speech act category, such as (11):

(11) If you want to get abs, get stronger, get a booty, then download my Get Fit Ebooks at femaleinfluencer1.com!! (Directive)

This utterance in (11) starts as a commissive since it promises the audience something but the sentence ends as a directive. It promises or guarantees that the audience will get abs and get stronger but it also tells the audience to buy the product. Since the presumed intention of the speech act is to sell a product, it is classified as a directive.

Expressives are rarely used as direct persuasive speech acts in these kinds of marketing posts. However, in some ways there is still a persuasive tone in some of them, as in (12):

(12) Thank you to everyone who bought my first workout program Ebook, Get Fit: Foundation!! www.FemaleInfluencer1.com (Expressive)

The utterance in (12) is used to show gratitude (expressive) to her audience and at the same time to promote her brand. This is also according to Searle’s taxonomy (1979), an expressive and also an indirect speech act since the form of the utterance does not align with the function. Inquires and quotations were the least used speech act types in FI1’s posts. However, when they were encountered, they were often used to persuade, as in (13):

(13) Who else is ready to do the @be_more_athletics 30 Day Challenge?? (Inquire) Get your tickets now! (Directive)
The form is an interrogative but it is also an indirect way of advertising her gym and challenge. The questions were often structured to complete other speech acts and the whole marketing post. They were often used to interact with the audience and therefore in their own way they were persuasive.

4.1.1 Female Influencer 2 (FI1)
Female Influencer 2 used 186 speech acts in 50 posts. The three speech acts with the highest frequencies were representatives, directives and inquires.

Table 3. Female Influencer 2’s speech act usage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF SPEECH ACTS</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representatives</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directives</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissives</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressives</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiries</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotations</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>186</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frequency of directives was especially high. See for ex (14):

(14) For fun and easy recipe ideas go to Femaleinfluencer2.com/app NOW! (Directive)

(14) is categorized as a directive since the presumed intention of the utterance is for the audience to carry out an action. The sentence form is an imperative and its functions are commands or requests for the followers to act. When FI2 uses a directive, it is always a direct speech act and she always requests something from her followers. However, it is not in an impolite way since she is not performing a face-threatening act. Her second most frequently used speech acts are representatives, illustrated by (15) below:

(15) Organic Cheetos, I've waited 40 years for this @nameofcompany (Representative)
The form of this utterance is a declarative and representative speech act since it is a statement, which gives the audience information about a product. However, it is still indirectly selling a product of a brand that she promotes, making it a somewhat persuasive speech act. FI2 also had a high frequency usage of the speech acts classified as inquires, such as (16):

(16) Whose coming to workout and hangout with us?? (Inquire)

The form of (16) is an interrogative and an inquire but its function is to persuade her followers to purchase a service. FI2’s questions were often structured in a similar way where the indirect intention of the speech act was to interact and persuade her followers. She also used speech acts to promise her followers something, as in (17):

(17) But don’t worry I made sure that all meals on my app are made with easy to find ingredients NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE (Commissive)

This utterance is a declarative in form and also a commissive since it informs her followers but also guarantees and promises them something. It is a persuasive marketing post since the purpose of the post is to sell her app. FI2 barely used quotations compared to some of the others influencers and expressives were used to show excitement over something, as in (18):

(18) So excited to announce that @nameofcompany is now at select @target Stores across California, Nevada, and Arizona (Expressive)

In (18) FI2 expresses excitement over a brand she promotes. The form is a declarative and expressive but the goal is to notify and inform her followers about the availability of a brand.

4.1.2 Male Influencer 1 (MI1)

Male Influencer 1 used 180 speech acts in 50 posts. The three speech acts with the highest frequencies were representatives, directives and quotations. Directives were the most used speech acts and had the highest frequency throughout.
Table 4. Male Influencer 1’s speech act usage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF SPEECH ACTS</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representatives</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directives</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissives</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressives</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiries</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotations</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>180</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MI1 used repetitive phrases in many of his posts, illustrated in (19) and (20):

(19) Download my 12 Week "NAME" eBook! *(Directive)*
(20) Get a complete Program and diet plan when you Download my NEW eBooks! *(Directive)*

These two examples of *directives* in (19) and (20) were used quite often (37%) and the audience was constantly reminded of the availability of his services and products. His *directives* often functioned as demands or requests and would often follow *representatives*. The *directives* have the form of imperatives, where their function was to command the audience but not in a face-threatening manner. The second most frequently used speech acts were *representatives*, as seen in (21):

(21) Good Chest Session today powered by @nameofcompany *(Representative)*
Order it here! *(Directive)*

MI1’s posts often consisted of *representatives* like the one in example (21), where he introduced his training or eBooks and then followed this with a *directive*. The *representatives* always had the form of declaratives since they were informative statements but they also contained a brand name. These *representatives* were often used in an indirect way since the presumed intention was to advertise the brand mentioned in the posts. He also started some of his marketing posts with *quotations*, as in (22) and (23):
These *quotations* were often used in the beginning of posts to inspire or motivate. They were often followed by a *directive* or a *representative* where a product or service was brought to attention. These actual sentences or quotes were used in many of the marketing posts even if they did not contain a direct mention of any brand or service. They were used in a way to interact or encourage the followers. *Commissives, inquires* and *expressives* were often used in similar way as in examples (24) and (25) below.

(24) Want Results? *(Inquire)*  
(25) Then this is the only eBook you will need! *(Commissive)*

The questions would often be followed by a *commissive* where a promise was made or something was guaranteed, as in (25).

4.1.3 Male Influencer 2 (MI2)  
Male Influencer 2 used 113 speech acts in 50 posts. The three speech acts with the highest frequencies were *representatives, directives* and *quotations*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF SPEECH ACTS</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representatives</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directives</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissives</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressives</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiries</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotations</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>=113</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The speech act with the highest frequency of these three was *directives*, as seen in (26) and (27)

(26) Check my last video in my #YouTube channel!! *(Directive)*
(27) get yours before they are finished! (Directive)

The directives were often imperative in form and direct speech acts. They would often instruct the followers to a webpage or another Instagram site. Directives were used purely for advertising brands or services. The functions of these directives were often to request or advise the audience to perform a certain action. There is no presumed hidden intention because the structure of the utterance makes it clear for the followers what the writer’s intention is with the speech act. Representatives such as (28) and (29) below were also vastly used by MI2:

(28) Always taking my @1upnutrition BCAA's to Increase muscle endurance & post-workout recovery.
(29) Prepping for a high intensity workout with @1upnutrition pre-workout to increase energy and performance.

A majority of the representatives had the structure and form of a declarative. They were often used to describe or inform the audience about something fitness or health related. The examples in (28) and (29) show that although the forms of the speech acts are representatives, they still describe and inform about a specific brand and the presumed intention is to advertise this specific brand. The utterances would often suggest or assert something, which can affect the followers’ opinions about a product or service. The third most used speech act was quotations. These would often “introduce” a marketing post, as seen in (30):

(30) "My goal is to bring back the great physiques of the golden era" (Quotation)
Check my last video in my #YouTube channel!! @Maleinfluencer2_lifestyle (Directive)

In example (30) the quote introduces a video that MI2 wants to promote. This was often how quotes were used in marketing posts (14%). In the collected data the quotations never had a source and MI2 would never refer to the authors of the quotes. Directives were also often combined with other speech acts, such as quotations or sometimes expressives, as seen in (31):

(31) You just have to try these! (Directive)
The're incredible (Expressive)

In example (31) the expressive is used as a way to complete the directive and product by giving it extra qualities such as “incredible”. This promotes the product and “explains” why the audience has to try or buy what someone is selling.
4.2 Similarities and differences in the influencers’ use of persuasive speech acts

The usage of speech acts by the influencers had many similarities but also some differences, as seen in Figure 1 below:

![Figure 1. Differences and similarities between FI1, FI2, MI1, MI2’s speech acts usage.](image)

One thing the influencers had in common was their usage of directives. **Directives** had the highest frequency usage between all the influencers with the percentage being between 34 – 44. They were also used in similar ways. **Directives** were used to command, advise or request that their followers should perform or carry out an action. This shows that the influencers have a preference to directly tell or urge their followers to purchase or consume their services and products. The two male influencers also had a slightly higher percentage of **directives** than the two female influencers.

Another similarity was that the second most used speech act was **representatives**, where the percentage was around 22-27 per cent. The selected fitness influencers often combined **representatives** with **directives** (example 21). **Representatives** were used to inform the audience about a certain brand or service. This affects the followers since it gives them information that may lead them to click on what the influencers propose.
Another thing in common was that expressives, inquires and quotations were often used to complement the directives and representatives (examples 13, 30, 31). They were often used as introductory speech acts to give the directives more substance and to make them more effective. Expressives were used similarly by all the influencers, where the percentage was between 7-12 per cent and the usage between the selected fitness influencers was quite alike without substantial variation.

Besides directives, representatives and expressives, there were other speech acts that were used similarly but also somewhat differently among the selected fitness influencers. The two male influencers had quotations as their third most used speech acts. MI1 had a percentage of 18 while MI2 had 14 per cent, which is higher than the female influencers who both had 2 per cent. Both of the male influencers would often use quotes to motivate, interact and also to add something more to the post than just a directive. The quotations used by MI1 and MI2 never had a source and they did not refer to any of the authors of the quotes. The female influencers used inquires more where the percentage was 9-19 compared to the male influencers who had 2-3 per cent. These questions were also used to interact with their followers, similar to quotations.

For all influencers, it was rare for a post to only consist of one sentence and one speech act. All speech acts might not have been directly persuasive but they completed the marketing post by adding extra information or interactive qualities. This could be because people are not always receptive to be told what to do or how to act. Therefore it is important to add something extra to create an interpersonal relationship and persuade the audience, such as expressives or quotations. This was also true for the usage of commissives. The female influencers used commissives more (12–17 %) and would often promise and guarantee the quality of a product or service and then sometimes follow this with a request or demand.

All the marketing posts had a mixture of indirect speech and direct speech acts. Directives would often be direct while all the other speech acts were used in an indirect way to persuade their followers. Another similarity was that all influencers had a certain preference or pattern in their language usage and speech acts use since a speech act was never by itself. They had a pattern where one speech act such as expressives would complement the other such as directives or they would use repetitions of the same phrase.
5. Discussion

In online communication it is easy for misunderstandings to arise if the followers do not know what an influencer tries to convey. Crystal (2004) explains that the audience has to understand the tone and intention in someone’s message or post. He mentions (2004: 28 – 29) that it is important to consider the language use to “save face”. It is therefore vital to be careful what tone someone uses in his or her social media posts. Some speech acts such as directives are considered more face-threatening than others.

There is also the matter of mass communication versus interpersonal communication. Janoschka (2004: 84) discusses that mass communication is commonly used on the Internet since one message can reach out to countless people. One could say that influencers use mass communication, meaning that they try to reach out to all their followers but they are also try to create interpersonal relationships with their followers. Instagram is a platform used for many things, one being online advertising. Influencers must then think about their persuasive communication and how they interact with their audiences. Janoschka compares (2004: 96) online advertising to persuasive communication, since the goal of online advertising is to sell and persuade. It is therefore important to use persuasive communication and to think about different linguistic elements such as persuasive speech acts.

The usage of speech acts of the four influencers varied between representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, quotations and inquires. Some had a higher frequency usage of speech acts than others. The only speech act from Searle’s (1979) taxonomy that was not found in the data was declaratives. This could be because none of the marketing posts found in the collected data for this study “changed the reality of the world”.

Directives had the highest frequency of all speech acts among the influencers. Searle mentions (1975: 37) that directives are often direct speech acts that depending on context can be considered offensive to someone’s self-image. However, the directives used by the influencers did not seem to be offensive to the audience since they were not face-threatening acts. They were “milder” request and commands. An influencer would not write for instance “YOU NEED TO LOSE WEIGHT NOW!” since a directive like this would be too forceful and face-threatening to the followers. A directive in advertisements needs to be a motivational command or request, especially in fitness-related posts. They cannot be harsh in any way because this leads to people feeling self-conscious and eventually ignore the advertisement. One way all the four influencers
diminished the “harsh” qualities of a *directive*, was adding another speech act such as *expressives* or *quotations* to “introduce” or “conclude” the posts.

*Representatives* were used frequently as well. *Representatives* are often simple statements or claims but they can also sell and persuade someone. A positive statement or claim about a certain product or service can persuade the audience to purchase these things. *Commissives* and *expressives* were used in a similar way by the influencers. The *commissives* were often structured in a way that they promise or guarantee the quality of something and therefore try to persuade their followers. Although the influencers did not use *expressives* that frequently, when they were used it was often to give positive feedback about a brand or service.

Indirect speech acts were commonly used by the four fitness influencers, meaning that some speech acts often had one “surface form” but their function was different. Often speech acts had a certain form like a declarative but the function of the declarative was a request or demand. This result coincides with Searle’s (1985: 30 – 35) claims that although the structure of the sentence might show a certain speech act, it can still have an indirect persuasive meaning. This was true for interrogatives and imperatives as well. They had the forms of interrogatives and imperatives but would often have a different function. Searle discusses (1975: 29 – 30) that indirect speech acts can lead to misunderstandings if the hearer does not understand what the speaker tries to convey. However, these kinds of influencers often know their own audiences and use their language to reach out to them. They often use what is referred to as “persuasive language”.

Asemah (2013: 953) states that persuasive language is connected to a part of the human brain, which affects the consumers and their decision-making. These influencers use language to convince and persuade their followers to adopt a lifestyle, which in this case is fitness. Asemah’s results (ibid) also suggest that it is common in social media to “adopt” a certain use of language to construct a certain social media image. An influencer might for instance use repetition of some speech acts to strengthen their online self-presentation. This was found throughout the data, where all four influencers would use repetitions of the same phrases and speech acts. When constructing advertisements or marketing posts it is important to keep in mind that the textual content of an online advertisement or marketing post has limited space (Bruthiaux 2005 in Halmari & Virtanen 2005: 135). The writers or influencers of these marketing posts must then have a presupposed notion about their readers’ or followers’ backgrounds and interests and can
then adapt the language in their texts to persuade their followers and readers. FI1, FI2, MI1 and MI2 seem to have adapted their use of language to reach out to a certain kind of audience whose interests are fitness and health. The appropriate language use is then a “key factor” of persuasive language (ibid: 136).

Flergin (2014: 62) mentions that the use of speech acts is a certain persuasive technique, which reinforces a person’s connection to their audience. This coincides with Janoschka’s (2004: 123) view that Internet users often try to create interpersonal relationships online, which is true for these influencers. These influencers often used repetitions and exclamations, which are also referred to as “tools of persuasion” (Janoschka 2004: 123). They would for instance use and repeat phrases like “Go to my page! or “Download my app now!” These techniques often result in a strengthening of the influencers’ online personas since their textual content together with their visual context creates a recognizable online presence, which often draws the followers’ attention. Carr et al (2012: 179) also mention that a way to create a strong online identity is to establish interpersonal relationships with your followers by the use of consistent language such as similar sentences or phrases, which the influencers seem to have implemented in their posts.

6. Conclusion
This study examined the usage of speech acts and persuasive language on one social media platform. More specifically, it researched the usage by fitness influencers on Instagram. This study investigated the kind of speech acts fitness influencers use to persuade their audiences and followers. It also looked at the differences and similarities among four influencers to see if their usage of speech acts and persuasive language differs. The study used Searle’s taxonomy (1979), where he defines representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. This taxonomy has a quite broad classification of speech acts, which made the analysis achievable.

The results show that directives were the most common speech act used. The influencers tried to persuade their followers by requesting or encouraging them to purchase their services. These were often used in similar ways among the influencers and the percentages showed little differences in the usage of directives. Other speech acts were also used in persuasive ways such as commissives, expressives, quotations and inquires. Often a speech act would have the form of a direct speech act but its indirect function would be to persuade, such as representatives. Although representatives are claims or statements, the influencers would often use them to their
advantage to persuade their followers. This could be applied to the usage of many of the speech acts, since the selected fitness influencers used them to advertise their brands in an indirect way. Indirect speech acts were therefore important since they were a prominent strategy that all the selected influencers in this study used.

Although this study did not focus on gender differences, some minor variations in the influencers’ usage of speech acts were still found. The two selected male influencers had a somewhat higher percentage of directives but also quotations. The male influencers would often start a post with a quote. The two selected female influencers showed a higher percentage of commissives and inquires. They would either promise their followers something or ask questions to interact with the audience. Even if there were some differences between the selected influencers, they were still small. Overall the fitness influencers showed more similarities than differences in their speech act usage. A reason could be that some speech acts are simply known as more persuasive such as combinations of representatives and directives (example 21) or expressives and directives (example 31).

This study was mostly qualitative and focused on the context of persuasive speech acts. It focused on a more detailed study of how persuasive speech acts are used in social media marketing posts but it did not investigate if these marketing posts actually succeeded. One future study could be to find research and results to actually prove that these strategies work. A researcher would then gather more data and focus on the statistics of social media marketing and on the quantitative aspect of this topic. Another suggestion could be to examine other social media platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook, to see if the results would actually differ depending on the social media platform. This would be a more extensive study and would require more data.
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