

“Humanizing” the medical expertise: Identity construction of doctor influencer on YouTube

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1. Introduction

The rise of the internet and social media has led to a global trend in online health communication. People now turn to the internet for health information, medical support, and healthcare services. While this has brought numerous benefits, it has also introduced concerns. Many individuals without formal medical qualifications or expertise contribute to sharing health information online. While some content is authentic and useful, there is a significant amount of unauthentic and unreliable information (Li et al., 2020). The dissemination of health misinformation may pose potential danger to public health (Lyons et al., 2019; Zhang & Lu, 2023).

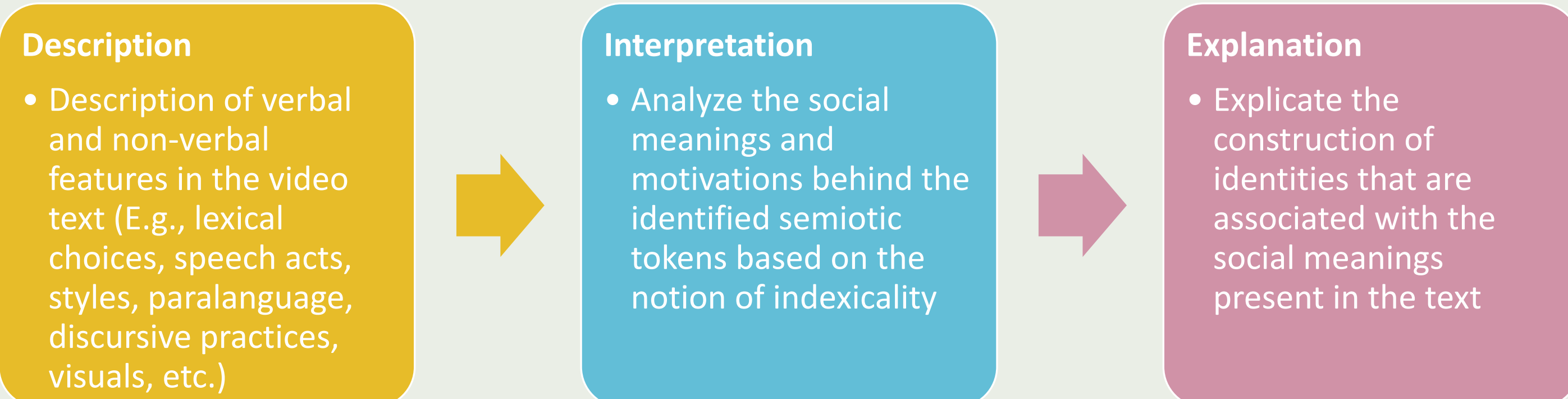
In recent years, a group of popular doctor influencers have emerged on YouTube. They actively debunk health misinformation and have amassed large followings. Succeeding on social media requires not only disciplinary knowledge, but also maintaining rapport with online audiences (Riboni, 2017). These doctor influencers not only present their medical expertise, but also cultivate an identity that aligns with their target audiences' expectations and creates a personal touch and emotional connection. This highlights the importance of understanding how popular doctor YouTubers strategically construct and manage their “contradictory” personas to gain prominence.

2. Aim

This research aims to explore how influential doctor YouTuber strategically employs various verbal and non-verbal resources in their videos to construct an identity that presents their professionalism while also aligning with online audiences' expectations and preferences. Specifically, the study examines how doctor YouTuber creates an authentic and relatable human persona while conveying their authoritative medical expertise identity.

3. Methodology

This study specifically examines the doctor influencer, *Doctor Mike*, who has the largest number of followers on YouTube. A total of 30 of his videos across different genres, including reactions, collaborations, educational videos, etc., are collected through purposive sampling. Adopting a critical discourse analytical approach, the study utilizes Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model as below to analyze the process of identity construction through discourse.



4. Selected findings



More powerful side – Doctor face:

● Medical jargons

E.g., lactose intolerant, peristalsis, scapula, pneumonia, benign prostatic hyperplasia, macroglossia;

Demonstrate the speaker's understanding and familiarity with medical terminology and showcase his knowledge and expertise in the field.

● Evaluative language

E.g., ... are good for ..., It's truly..., one of the most important things...;

Allow the speaker to draw on his medical knowledge to critically evaluate the effectiveness of certain medical phenomena and challenge incorrect information or misconceptions regarding medical issues.

● Imperatives and directives

E.g., “Keep it away from your mouth”, “Don't use Q-tips in your ears!”, “Trust me on this”;

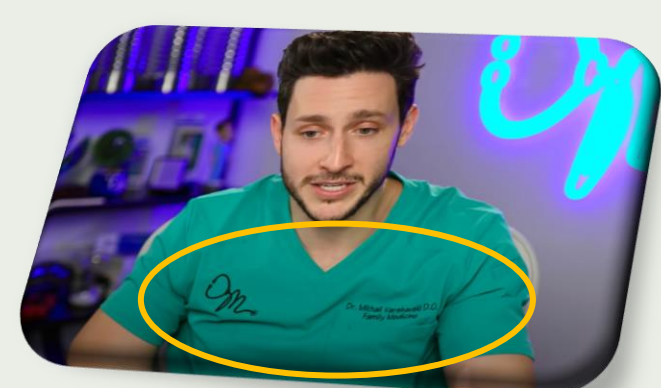
The speaker positions himself as an authoritative role and guide for the audience, who has medical knowledge and expertise to guide others and is confident in giving instructions.

● Sharing medical encounters

By sharing experiences from their clinical encounters with patients, the speaker demonstrates his firsthand knowledge and medical expertise, which helps establish their credibility and authorities in the medical field.

● Wearing scrubs

It serves a visual marker of medical expertise, conveying a message that the person presenting the information is a medical professional, which can enhance their credibility and viewers' trust in their knowledge.



Less powerful side – Human face:

● Colloquial language

E.g., “what's up”, “buddy”, “bro”, “I'm gonna...”, “gotcha”;

Create a sense of familiarity and informality, which can contribute to building rapport with the audiences and making the interaction more personal and friendly.

● Inclusive pronouns

E.g., guys, we, us, you;

Foster a sense of inclusivity and community with the viewers, mitigate the power hierarchy between the doctor and the viewers.

● Expressing emotions and reactions:

E.g., “No! What?”, “I hate these questions.”, “This is weird”, “I'm freaking out”, “Oh my God”, “Thank God”, “Oh no”.

Convey genuine emotional responses, such as surprise, astonishment, making the speaker's emotional state more apparent and relatable to the audiences, and creating an emotional connection with the viewers.

● Exaggerated paralinguistic

E.g., changing pitch, screaming, grunting, loud laughter;

Amplify the emotional reactions and enhance the comedic effect, making the video less formal and more entertaining.

● Parody and jokes

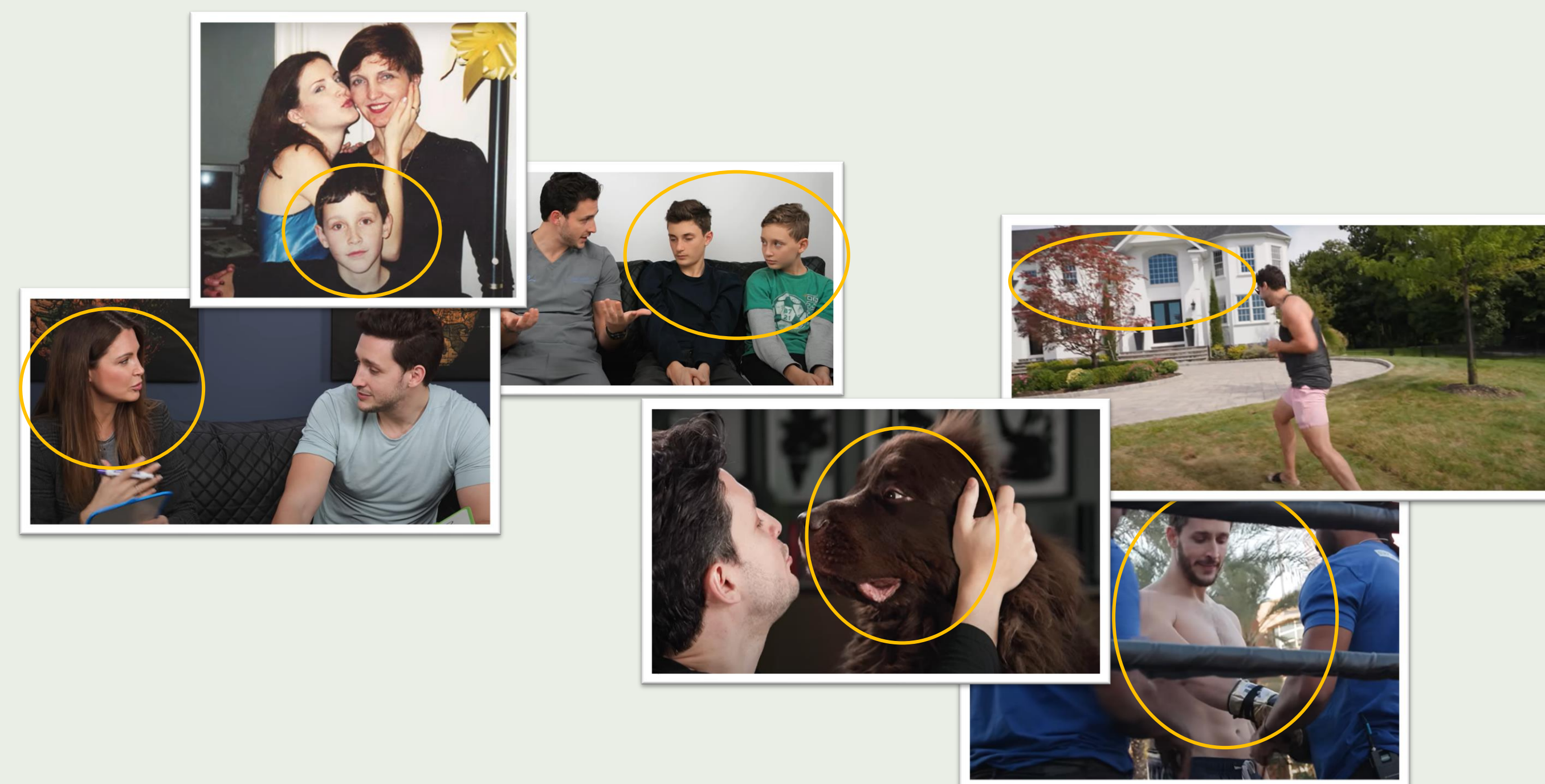
E.g., Imitating digestive movements, voice imitation;

Display a sense of humor and the ability to engage with the audience on an entertainment level; create a lighthearted and playful atmosphere, fostering a connection with the audiences.

● Revealing personal aspects

E.g., Sharing his pet, family members, his house, childhood stories and interests;

Create a sense of intimacy and connection; invite viewers to see the speaker as a fellow human other than a serious authoritative medical professional.



5. Conclusion

- ✓ The doctor influencer attempts to construct a personal and grounded human image to build and maintain rapport with the audiences while also presenting an authoritative medical doctor persona. This personal identity construction humanizes *Doctor Mike* and reminds viewers that he is an ordinary fellow person outside of his expertise, challenging the notion of an elite persona. Such humanization makes the doctor influencer more approachable, authentic and relatable, helping him foster the relationships with audiences.
- ✓ Online personas presented by health professionals are not completely different and separable from their offline identities. Instead, online identity is the extension of offline identity by sharing personal aspects in the digital context.
- ✓ It enriches our understanding of how doctor influencer curates and balances a less powerful human face, and a more powerful doctor face in the construction of the health influencer. It also demonstrates how doctor successfully manages the blurring of human and expertise identities and power dynamics between the doctor and the viewers on social media platform, without undermining their professionalism and reputation.

6. References

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