Managing rapport through persuasion: A multi-level analysis of COVID-19 in Chinese celebrity Weibo posts

Abstract

This study analyzes COVID-19 persuasive communication in the context of Chinese Weibo. Although COVID-19 is being investigated by linguistics scholars, little attention has been paid to how communication can help persuade and comfort people during the pandemic. Considering the exponentially augmented impact of digital platforms and their obvious public utility in the handling of future pandemics, it is worth studying the social media persuasive communication of COVID-19. Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, is an immensely popular platform where celebrity "influencers" shape views of the pandemic. From the perspective of relational acts and rapport management, this analysis of Chinese celebrity Weibo posts identifies persuasion at the lexical, syntactic, and discursive levels to elucidate how celebrities reassure the public and manage relationships with their audience during the pandemic. The findings reveal that the celebrities use interactional metadiscourse lexicons, syntactic rhetorical devices, and discursive framing strategies to maximize persuasion. This study broadens data sets of COVID-19 communications pertaining to the Chinese social media context, offers novel insights into rationales and frameworks of persuasion, and sheds light on the research of rapport management in celebrity discourse. Ultimately, it suggests that creating positive social media communication is an important goal during the pandemic.

1. Introduction

Since late 2019, the SARS Coronavirus 2 (henceforth COVID-19) pandemic has created a global public health crisis with accompanying widespread lifestyle disruptions (Starr et al., 2021). With more than 3.8 billion people using social media around the world, its massive impact during the pandemic cannot be underestimated. Since social media is, for most people, an important source of health information, studying how it reports on the virus is critical to understanding public responses to the pandemic. However, most previous research on COVID-19 representations in social media has been focused on the English world. Understanding the social reality of the COVID-19 pandemic requires careful comparisons between how the virus has been framed in different contexts (Jaworska, 2021) and nations. Exploring how COVID-19 is represented in social media discourse worldwide can reveal how attitudes to the pandemic are filtered through national lenses and reflected and reinforced in the linguistic choices that people make.

In the present study, Chinese celebrities were chosen as the research group due to their considerable influence. As Chinese celebrities often have millions of followers on Weibo, just one post can greatly affect people's attitudes toward the pandemic. Consequently, celebrities communicate with fans and other audiences as a means of interaction, self-presentation and rapport management. However, many preceding

studies of social media neglect celebrities' interactions (Wu & Lin, 2017), with exception of a few investigations in pragmatics and discourse studies on how celebrities handle their relationships with fans on social media (e.g. Valentinsson, 2018; Zhang & Wu, 2018; Wu & Lin, 2017). There is a scholarly consensus that celebrities use social media with a strong relational purpose, creating images and narratives that orient audiences towards affiliation and solidarity (Zhang & Wu, 2018). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic therefore offers celebrities further opportunities to interact with the public. Given that the first COVID-19 case appeared in China, the Chinese people experienced panic and uncertainty for a lengthy period, particularly before a vaccine was available. Many Chinese celebrities showed their concerns for society by posting microblogs on Weibo to reassure people and trigger alignment. These celebrities enhanced their persuasive messages by offering an array of effective rationales to make their claims credible and by making use of different strategies to influence people's attitude and behaviors. The purpose of this study is to investigate how celebrities use persuasion to interact with the public. The finding will shed light on the research of rapport management in celebrity discourse and raise celebrities' awareness of how to promote relationships and manage their image on social media platforms.

We begin by reviewing relevant research on persuasive communication on social media and approaches to celebrity discourse in order to clarify the objective of this study. Then we discuss the analytical framework and methodology applied for analysis. The next section presents the quantitative and qualitative results and concludes by discussing the research findings.

2. Background

2.1 Studies on persuasive communication on social media

Persuasion with different intentions is core to daily communication: convincing others to adopt certain behaviors, agree to a position, support a cause, trust in a decision, comply with a policy, or rally behind a value or entity (Lee, 2005). Oral and written persuasion dates to Greek classical rhetoricians (around the 4th century B.C.E) such as Plato and Aristotle (O'Keefe, 2002). From Aristotle's time, persuasion has been studied in various genres, languages, disciplines, and cultures (Pelclova & Lu, 2018). Academics have been particularly interested in how persuasive techniques are utilized to influence the attitudes of others (Perloff, 2017). Consequently, the notion of persuasion is a well-established area in the discourse analysis domain and has been employed in many discourse studies.

Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of studies on persuasive communication in social media context, including the topics of advertising (e.g. Huang et al, 2018), government policies (e.g. Wang, 2022; Lin & Chen, 2020), and marketing (e.g. Stepaniuk & Jarosz, 2021). For instance, Huang et al (2018) investigated the effectiveness of persuasion in social media communication for luxury brand advertising; Lin and Chen (2020) examined the effects of different persuasion interventions in social media (central route vs. peripheral route vs. no persuasion) on

attitudes toward professional sport policies. Furthermore, Stepaniuk and Jarosz (2021) analyzed how travel agencies utilize a number of emotional persuasive linguistic tricks in Facebook marketing communication to impact the behavior of content recipients. On the other hand, scholars mainly employ four theories related to persuasion strategies in their studies, that is, Aristotle's rhetorical theory (Murphy, 1981) (e.g. Chen et al, 2021; Yang et al, 2018), Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) (e.g. Lin & Chen, 2020), Cialdini's (1984) seven principles of persuasion (e.g. Wang, 2022), and Metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005) (e.g. Ngai & Singh, 2020). Previous studies are mostly based on the established theories above-mentioned. However, considering persuasion is largely a pragmatic and context-dependent phenomenon, more insights into persuasion rationales and frameworks also needs to be offered.

In this study, we will expand previous literature on persuasive communication on social media by extending the research scope to the COVID-19 persuasive communication on Weibo. Furthermore, we attempt to examine persuasion at different linguistic levels to offer a fuller understanding of persuasive communication in Weibo posts during the pandemic. Although COVID-19 communication is being investigated by linguistics scholars (e.g. Jones, 2021; Ogiermann & Bella, 2021; Starr et al., 2021), there is scant literature on COVID-19 persuasive discourse (AlKhawaldeh, 2021). Little attention has been paid to how communication can help persuade and comfort people during the pandemic or the power of language to heal public fear and uncertainty. Only a few articles concerning this topic have been published: Wang (2022) explored how the U.S. and Chinese governments employed strategies on social media to post persuasive messages encouraging healthy habits to the public during COVID-19 based on the theoretical framework of Cialdini's (1984) seven principles of persuasion; AlKhawaldeh (2021) employed a corpus-based discourse analysis approach to study the persuasive linguistic strategies (e.g. metaphor, repetition, and religious quotation) used by the Jordanian government to convince the public of the effectiveness of its COVID-19 related policies; Yang (2021) analyzed metadiscourse in Chinese letters of advice from governments and hospitals during COVID-19 to investigate the interactants' impacts on reader engagement; Using the lens of metadiscourse, Ho and Zhang (2021) investigated the way Hong Kong's Chinese newspapers persuaded citizens to perform certain behaviors during the pandemic.

In summary, previous research focuses primarily on the official and agency's persuasive discourse of COVID-19. However, other aspects of COVID-19 persuasive communication have not been adequately investigated. This gap is more problematic because of the established role of media among the most effective and powerful means of persuasion; media discourse possesses a unique potential to influence the minds and actions of viewers or readers (Van Dijk, 1996). The persuasive practices of media have become more powerful and ubiquitous due to the emergence of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (Perloff, 2017). Considering the exponentially augmented impact of digital platforms and their obvious public utility in the handling of future pandemics, it is worth studying social

media communication related to COVID-19. Since information is consistently controlled by transmitting invisible hands (Lewin, 1947), the ways in which social media choose words to frame the virus may itself lead the population to respond in more or less effective ways. The selection of persuasive linguistic terms can guide public opinion to focus on certain points or alter the emotional state of audiences.

2.2 Rapport management in celebrity discourse on social media

The popularity of social media has enormously raised the impact of celebrities online, many of whom now dominate social networking sites with tens of millions of followers (Zhang & Wu, 2018). These celebrities in turn discursively construct new identities in online interactions (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). However, as Wu and Lin (2017) addressed, many previous studies of social media do not consider personal interactions. To bridge the gap, they introduced the notion of "relational acts" (2017, p. 119) to emphasize the contribution of relation-oriented speech acts to the construction of celebrity digital self-identities. Wu and Lin (2017) analyzed the different relational acts that six Chinese celebrity figures engaged in to create their social identities and communicate with Weibo followers. However, research on celebrities' relational acts on social media is scarce, particularly in the Chinese online context: In Zhang and Wu (2018), the speech acts used by Chinese celebrities on Weibo were compared with those used by American celebrities on Twitter; Guo and Ren (2020) investigated the self-praise strategies used by Chinese celebrities on social media microblogs to retain a positive reputation.

According to Feng and Ren (2019), the purpose of utilizing relational acts is to manage rapport, which refers to "the use of language to promote, maintain or threaten harmonious social relations" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). The rapport management perspective has been applied in diverse contexts such as academic occasions (Zhu, 2014), aviation services (Paramasivam, 2011), business negotiations (Wang and Spencer-Oatey, 2015), and online tourism services (Ho, 2017a, 2017b). However, additional research on rapport management is required for insights into further domains, languages, and genres (Feng & Ren, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to analyze persuasion, a relational act, in terms of how it can serve to comfort people, heal public fear and trigger alignment in a Chinese social media context. In this study, rapport management is further adapted to refer to how celebrities use persuasion to construct interpersonal relationships with the public on social media platforms during the pandemic.

To conclude, there is a need for more exploratory studies of COVID-19 persuasive communication via social media and of the interactional aspects of celebrity communication. This study attempts to expand previous literature on COVID-19 by extending the research scope to the persuasive discourse on the Weibo platform and by critically evaluating the potential of social media during a pandemic. In addition, it will shed light on the research of rapport management in celebrity discourse and raise celebrities' awareness of how to promote relationships and manage their image on social media platforms. The research questions of the study are as follows:
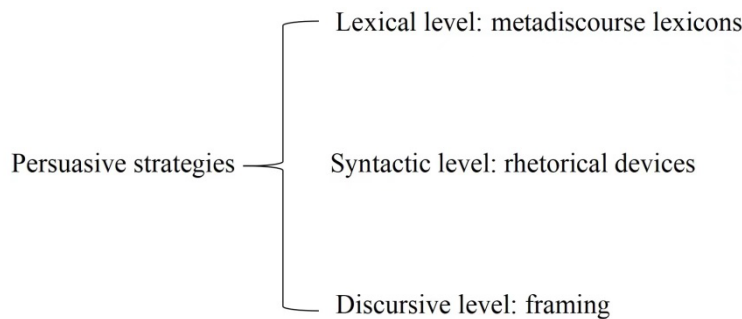
RQ1: What are the main features of celebrities' persuasive strategies at the lexical, syntactic, and discursive levels?

RQ2: How do celebrities attempt to use persuasion as a vehicle for managing rapport with the public?

3. Analytical Framework

Researchers can draw on different theoretical and methodological positions to focus on the "interpersonal or relational side of *language in use*" Locher and Graham (2010, p. 1). Persuasion can also be achieved by different strategies and devices. Given persuasion is largely a pragmatic and context-dependent phenomenon, this study will identify the celebrity's persuasive strategies from the perspective of rapport management and will investigate persuasion at different levels to provide a more comprehensive analysis (See Figure 1).

Persuasive strategies
— Lexical level: metadiscourse lexicons
— Syntactic level: rhetorical devices
— Discursive level: framing

Figure 1 Analytical Framework

At the lexical level, we will apply Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse to search for metadiscourse lexicons. Metadiscourse is a critical component of persuasive discourse, and a crucial tool in facilitating communication, improving readability of a text, and building rapport with readers (Ngai & Singh, 2020). Hyland (2005) proposes an interpersonal model of metadiscourse consisting of two main categories: interactive and interactional. Interactive metadiscourse helps readers navigate the text and provides various signposts; Interactional metadiscourse involves readers in the text and provides them with the opportunities and channels to actively participate in making meaning together with the writer (See Table 1).

Table 1 Functions of metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005, p. 49).

Category	Function
Interactive	**helps to guide the reader through the text**
Code glosses	elaborate propositional meanings
Endophorics	refer the reader to information in other parts of the text
Evidentials	refer to information from other texts
Frame markers	signal discourse acts, sequences or stages
Transitions	express relations between main clauses
Interactional	**involves the reader in the text**
Hedges	withhold commitment and open dialogue
Boosters	emphasize certainty or close dialogue
Attitude markers	express writer's attitude to proposition
Self mentions	refer explicitly to author
Engagement markers	explicitly build relationship with reader

205

206 However, previous studies on persuasion have focused on metadiscourse
207 lexicons to a large extent. Less attention has been paid to persuasion at the syntactic
208 level and beyond, which echoes Fahnestock (2011) that "language of persuasion"
209 studies frequently discuss word choice, but sentence components, types and patterns
210 are rarely noticed. Therefore, we will also analyze the use of various syntactic
211 rhetorical devices by celebrities to persuade audiences. Rhetoric determines how
212 people convince others and narrow their choices on different issues (Hart, 1997), and
213 is concerned with how language influences the way in which an audience thinks, feels,
214 or acts (Higgins & Walker, 2012). In *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in*
215 *Persuasion* (2011), Fahnestock explores the persuasive power of sentence patterning.
216 Sentence variety in openings, type and length can reinforce the argument. For instance,
217 parallel structure "equalizes or coordinates content, and this equalizing can have
218 persuasive consequences as listeners and readers 'consume' statements formed into
219 similar units (Fahnestock, 2011, p. 224)." In addition, sentences of questions can also
220 achieve the purpose of persuasion. For example, Blankenship and Craig (2007)
221 examined how tag questions affect persuasion and message processing. Therefore, we
222 will analyze the use of various rhetorical devices on the syntactic level given that
223 rhetoric's attention is paid to structures at the sentence level to a large extent.

224 At the discursive level, our approach to investigating will focus on the discursive
225 framing strategies (Starr et al., 2021) employed in celebrity posts that contribute to the
226 process of persuasion. In unpacking these strategies, we will primarily address the
227 framings of the virus and life of people during the pandemic in celebrity discourse.
228 "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient
229 in a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing explains how people tend to
230 emphasize some aspects of reality while concealing others (Goffman, 1974, p. 21).
231 Particularly, framing allows celebrities to manage meaning, persuade people, develop
232 collective aspirations, and construct a meaningful shared identity to the public
233 (Fairhurst, 2005).

4. Data and Methodology

4.1 Data collection

The study was based on data collected from Weibo. The analysis was of a 24,573 word corpus based on posts by 100 Chinese celebrities (50 males and 50 females) with the greatest number of followers ranked according to Weibo's public data. The distribution of the occupations of the celebrities is shown in Table 2. All posts on Weibo are publicly available. Posts were included in this data set if they addressed themes related to COVID-19, as determined collaboratively by two native Chinese speakers. The time frame on which the analysis focused was from January 20th 2020 to January 20th 2021, since January 20th 2020 was the date of the official announcement in China that the COVID-19 was the source of a potential epidemic, which caused tremendous panic. In total, 500 posts of this period were collected and stored in plain text format.

Table 2 Distribution of occupations among celebrities selected.

Gender	Occupation	Number	Number of words
Male	Actor	25	12,999
	Singer	14	
	Host	3	
	Writer	3	
	Stage Performer	2	
	Musician	1	
	Businessperson	1	
	Stylist	1	
Female	Actor	33	11,574
	Singer	11	
	Host	5	
	Model	1	
Total		*100*	*24,573*

4.2 Data analysis

The analysis was conducted in several stages. In the first stage, two coders worked together to apply Hyland's (2005) model to the data set. Due to a lack of a Chinese coding scheme, we referred to Yang's (2021) metadiscourse coding scheme. We read the texts together and manually identified the lexicons that belong to the metadiscourse types. We also referred to the concordance lines of each lexicon in AntConc3.5.8 to examine its meaning and function in context, given the necessity of studying metadiscourse in its sentential co-text (Hyland, 2005). By scrutinizing half of the posts for their metadiscourse lexicons, we finally reached consensus and produced our own code scheme (See Table 3). Later, we coded each post manually according to our scheme via repeated annotations and discussions.

Table 3 Coding scheme adapted from Yang (2021).

Category	Chinese examples	Translation
Interactive		
Code glosses	（也）是，也即，这（就）是，比如；	is known as, namely, which means, for example;
Endophorics	在（此/...），以下；	in (some part of the text), following;
Evidentials	按照/根据；	according to;
Frame markers	首先，最后， 当下正是， 总之；	primarily, finally, at this stage of..., to sum up;
Transitions	因为， 因此， 尽管， 但， 即使， 如果， 另外；	because, consequently, even though, yet/but, even if, if, additionally;
Interactional		
Hedges	尽量，可， （减）少， 非必要；	try to, could, do less, not do if unnecessary;
Boosters	特（别）/尤其， 最，就， 坚决/一定， 一直（都）， 坚信；	especially/in particular, the most, specifically, definitely/certainly, always, believe;
Attitude markers	重大/紧迫/严峻的，感动的，令人兴奋的，感到荣幸的；	essentially/urgently/seriously, moving, to our excitement, feel honored;
Self mentions	我（的）， 我们（的）；	I/my, we/our;
Engagement markers	我们， 你/你们， 让.../一起...， 难道...吗？ 请， 向你们表示感谢/敬意	we, you, let's/let.../do together, shouldn't, please, (we will) appreciate (you)

263

264 In the second step, we manually identified the syntactic rhetorical devices that achieve
265 the purpose of persuasion based on the categorization of Fahnestock (2011). The last
266 step was identifying discursive strategies. We employed a bottom-up qualitative
267 analysis for each post. We first completed a pilot study that scrutinized the data set
268 and identified some discursive framing devices frequently used by the celebrities. It

was not a straightforward process, but we can be confident in the repeatability of coding. After we agreed on the comprehensiveness of pre-identified strategies, we coded the rest of the texts according to the devices we previously identified via repeated discussions.

5. Results

This section will begin by presenting the way in which metadiscourse lexicons are used to signal positive interactions in order to enhance the effect of persuasion (Section 5.1), which will be followed by examining rhetorical devices on the syntactic level to strengthen the force of the argument (Section 5.2). Finally, the discursive framing strategies that frame close relationships will be analyzed (Section 5.3).

5.1 Signaling positive interactions on the lexical level

Table 4 shows that the celebrities use interactional metadiscourse at far higher frequencies than they do interactive metadiscourse — 92.18% for the interactional vs. 7.82% for the interactive. The following subsection will account for the high frequency of use of two interactional metadiscourse markers (engagement markers and boosters) in celebrity posts by discussing how they could contribute to signaling positive interactions to enhance the effect of persuasion.

Table 4 Distribution of metadiscourse lexicons.

Category	Frequencies	Percentage of total markers
Interactive		
Code glosses	1	0.11
Endophorics	1	0.11
Evidentials	0	0.00
Frame markers	4	0.43
Transitions	66	7.17
Interactional		
Hedges	7	0.76
Boosters	306	**33.22**
Attitude markers	8	0.87
Self mentions	97	10.53
Engagement markers	431	**46.80**
Total	*921*	*100.00*

5.1.1 Enhancing persuasion with engagement markers

Engagement markers are linguistic devices used to "explicitly address readers, either to focus their attention or include them as discourse participants" (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). The highest percentages of engagement markers indicate that the celebrities make great efforts to take readers' perspectives into account. Consider the following two examples:

Example 1: *大家*做好防护，*我们*一起加油

[Translation]: Take care, *everybody*. *Let's* work together.

Example 2: 武汉加油，*咱们*一起，打赢这场防疫战！

[Translation]: Come on, Wuhan, *let's* work together to win this battle against the epidemic!

From Examples 1 and 2, we can see that the celebrities use first-person plural pronouns as engagement markers quite often. Muhlhausler and Harre (1990) determined that first and second person pronouns index social relations discursively. For instance, in English first-person plural pronouns have an inclusive function. Hamamura and Xu (2015) found that Chinese pronouns evinced similar trends. The frequent use of first-person plural pronouns - "大家/我们/咱们" - triggers alignment and signals readers that celebrities and the public combat challenges together. By doing so, the celebrities intend to construct a sense of commonality, which fosters involvement and association with the public. This could then help appeal to the readers' emotions and trigger solidarity, which can further magnify the effect of persuasion and build harmonious relationships.

5.1.2 Enhancing persuasion with boosters

The most frequently used boosters adopted by celebrities is "每"- "every". For example, "向*每一位*医者致敬"- "Pay tribute to *every* medical worker", "愿*每个*人都能健康平安"- "May *every*one stay healthy and safe", which show the celebrities' concern for medical staffs and citizens. Furthermore, the superlative marker in Chinese - "最" is also frequently employed, such as "*最美的*白衣天使" - "*The most beautiful* angel in white", "*最美的*逆行者" - "*The most beautiful* hero in harm's way", "健康平安才是*最重要*" - "Health and safety are *the most important*", "一线的医护人员承担了*最多的*辛苦, *最大的*风险" - "The front-line medical staff have undertaken *the hardest* work and *the greatest* risk", and "*最艰难的*时候" - "*The hardest* time". These expressions either show respect to medical workers or remind people to take care in this hardest situation. The following examples provide the context for these two booster markers:

Example 3: 关注疫情从我做起，面对疫情身边的*每个*人都在尽一份绵薄之力，这场战役中我们都是参与者，*每一个*数字、*每一段*故事都与我们息息相关。

[Translation]: Paying attention to the epidemic starts with me, and *every*one around is doing their part in the face of the epidemic. We are all participants in this battle and *every* number and *every* story is closely related to us.

Example 4: 疫情防控正处于*最*吃劲的关键阶段！大家不能放松警惕，戴好口罩，不聚集，做好自我防护，科学战胜疫情！*最*简单的防护要点，看三遍也不嫌多！

[Translation]: Epidemic prevention and control is at ***the most*** strenuous and critical stage! We must not relax. Wear masks, do not gather, perform self-protection, and defeat the epidemic with science! ***The simplest*** point of protection is not too much to read three times!

Boosters in these two posts amplify the amount ("每一个"-'every') and the intensity (the superlative form "最吃劲"-'the most strenuous' and "最简单"-'the simplest'). They demonstrate the conviction of celebrities for certain propositions and value positions, conveying authority and confidence to readers (Ho & Zhang, 2021). Abdi (2002) concluded that boosters could be used to establish credibility. The use of boosters in these two instances indicate that the celebrities are willing to be held accountable for the propositions put forward. They are able to confirm to the public that the pandemic is highly impactful to everyone and everyone should take actions, which helps them establish a desirable character and further enhance persuasion. With the consistent use of boosters, the celebrities also position themselves as a caring and responsible person and thus promote positive relationships with the public.

5.2 Strengthening the force of argument on the syntactic level

Apart from metadiscourse lexicons, celebrities also employ a variety of syntactic rhetorical devices to persuade the public. According to Holmes (1984), there are many syntactic structures which can be used to upgrade a speech act. In this subsection, we will focus on parallel sentences making contrast and the use of questions, which are the two most frequently used devices (See Table 5).

Table 5 Distribution of syntactic rhetorical devices.

Category	Frequencies
Parallelism	48
(Rhetorical) question	10
Repetition	2
Total	***60***

5.2.1 Parallel sentences making contrast

"Parallelism based on grammatical similarity and repetition can produce an impression of coordination, leveling, or similarity between phrases or clauses. Given this coordination, parallel clauses can express comparison quite effectively." (Fahnestock, 2011, p. 226). The parallelism in the structures of Example 5 and 6 is observed in the symmetric presentation of arguments and counterarguments:

Example 5: 隔离病毒*而不是*隔离爱，传递正确信息*而不是*传递恐惧。

[Translation]: Contain the virus ***instead of*** love and send the right message ***instead of*** fear.

Example 6: 致敬所有抗疫英雄们。恐惧是人性*而*勇敢是人格。

[Translation]: Pay tribute to all anti-epidemic heroes. Fear is human nature *while* bravery is human character.

Examples 5 and 6 contrast pessimism at the pandemic with optimism resulting from the collective efforts of the public. These parallels empower readers to actively fight the pandemic, boosting confidence in themselves and the future. The celebrities introduce the first contrast with the transition token 'instead of' and the second one with 'while'. Each token signals readers to the contrast and offers a framework to perceive and interpret authorial intention, contributing to the writer's rationality and promoting a positive image. These transitions are clear features of arguments that help readers to understand and persuade them of the author's logic (Hyland, 2005). The further use of parallelism entails forcefulness, which strengthens the persuasive argument.

5.2.2 Asking questions

According to Hyland (2002), questions are key dialogic involvement strategies that invite engagement and bring interlocutors towards the author's perspective. Consider Examples 7 and 8:

Example 7: 当你祈祷能看见奇迹，你是否相信，那答案就是你？

[Translation]: When you pray to see a miracle, do you believe that the answer is you?

Example 8: 谁不想漂漂亮亮舒舒服服的过日子？然而很多人却为了更多人的健康与平安坚守与付出。

[Translation]: Who doesn't want to live beautifully and comfortably? However, people persevered and worked for the health and safety of a greater number.

In Example 7, the significance of a question is that it creates an effect that engages listeners and encourages them to think. By asking such a question, the public will begin to think about what they can contribute to the control of the pandemic. Soliciting interaction feedback allows the writer to position readers as active participants (Vásquez, 2015). The question in Example 7 shows concerns for readers and contributes to further rapport building (Xia, 2020).

In Example 8, a rhetorical question is employed. The obvious answer to the question in this example is that 'everyone wants to live beautifully and comfortably.' However, by using a rhetorical question, the celebrities' persuasive argument is manifested in an even stronger tone than a counter assertive statement could achieve. In addition, Spurgin (1994, p. 303) mentioned that a rhetorical question "invites assent, can provide a persuasive conclusion to the argument." Users are induced to either answer the question themselves or to perceive and interpret propositions and value positions from the writer's viewpoint (Ädel, 2006). Here, the rhetorical question employed enables the celebrity to raise citizens' awareness of the sacrifice that other

439 people made in order to trigger more actions and achieve persuasion, which can make
440 effective appeals to readers' emotions.
441
442 **5.3 Framing close relationships on the discursive level**
443 In the data set, it can be seen that the celebrities employ different discursive strategies
444 to frame their persuasive arguments. These discursive strategies are
445 relational-oriented and work to frame close relationships while fostering affiliation
446 between the interlocutors. The following subsections will analyze the effect of the two
447 most employed strategies.
448
449 *5.3.1 Framing through metaphors*
450 Metaphorical mappings, in which the elements of one domain are figuratively mapped
451 onto another domain, are one means through which framing is realized in text (Lakoff
452 & Johnson 1980; Semino et al. 2018, p. 628). In this study, the celebrities employ
453 different layers of metaphors in achieving framing in order to construct their
454 persuasive arguments, of which war metaphors are the most frequently employed.
455 However, war metaphors have attracted significant criticism from various social
456 agents (Olza et al., 2021). Additional metaphorical frames can present the other
457 dimensions of the pandemic to help reflect critically on how figurative language
458 shapes the virus and its complex impacts (Olza et al., 2021). Hence, war metaphors
459 and other alternative metaphors that refer to COVID-19 will be analyzed in this
460 subsection.
461   We identified whether a metaphor was included in the posts based on the
462 Metaphor Identification Procedure proposed by Pragglejaz Group (2007). Each
463 metaphorical expression was further allocated to a semantic field such as War,
464 Natural Phenomena on the basis of its basic meaning. The distribution of metaphors is
465 presented in Table 6.
466
467 Table 6 Metaphor distribution.

Target domain	Source domain	Number of posts
COVID-19	**Natural forces/Natural Phenomena**	**6**
	Examples: 风雨–storm 黑夜–darkness	

The process of controlling COVID-19	War	**163**
	Examples: 打赢/战胜-defeat 征服-conquer 对抗-confront 奋战/奋斗-fight 奔赴/冲-rush 一线/前线- front line 后盾-backing 守卫-guard 硝烟-gunpowder 勇士-warrior 战士-soldier 战友-comrade 战斗-combat 拼命-risk life 铠甲 -armor 投降-surrender	
The life after COVID-19	**Natural Phenomena/Seasons**	**28**
	Examples: 彩虹-rainbow 蓝天-blue sky 黎明 -dawn 白昼-daylight 春天-spring 花 开-blossom	

Examples 9 and 10 show the celebrities' invitation for cooperation to fight against the virus as they think everyone can make a contribution to the control of the pandemic.

Example 9: 这场全民*抗*疫行动，人人都是*勇士*，宅家亦是*战斗*，我们可以*胜利*!

[Translation]: In this national ***anti***-epidemic action, everyone is a ***warrior***. Staying at home is also ***battling***. We can ***win***!

Example 10: 我们都是*前线*坚强的*后盾*，大家一起努力！

[Translation]: We are all strongly ***backing*** the ***front line***, let's work together!

According to Cox (2012), the use of metaphors in the development of discourse is to persuade the reader of a particular argument or idea. Metaphors are common persuasive devices that guide the addressee to understand and react to public issues in a certain way. Some scholars assert that messages containing metaphors yield greater attitude changes than messages without metaphors (Perloff, 2017). In these two examples, war metaphors are used. Fighting the virus has been compared to fighting a war on the front line. War metaphors frame the pandemic as a struggle between two opposing and mutually exclusive sides. The virus becomes a foreign invader against "the public" who fight against the enemy to protect themselves. This evokes the vivid and grim imagery of real war to convince the public that collective assistance, personal sacrifice, and patience are necessary to "win" against the pandemic. The emergency situation of early 2020 created an urgent need to take decisive and confrontational action. This way of framing asked the public to defend the community

from new attacks from the pandemic. The frame of war metaphors raised people's awareness of COVID-19, enhanced persuasion, and boosted public collaboration.

Once the pandemic moved into a stage with lower death and infection rates and less imminent emergencies, some alternative metaphors were employed by celebrities. See Examples 11, 12 and 13:

Example 11: 等到*春暖花开*时，一起平安健康的相聚。

[Translation]: When the **spring blossoms** appear, we can gather together safely and healthily.

Example 12: *黑夜*无论怎样悠长，*白昼*总会到来。

[Translation]: No matter how long **the dark** is, **the dawn** will always come.

Example 13: *风雨*过后定有*彩虹*。武汉加油！中国加油！

[Translation]: After **the storm**, there will be a **rainbow**. Come on, Wuhan! Come on, China!

In Example 11, the communicator looks forward to the appearance of spring blossoms, a time when people can come together. The use of the metaphor of spring blossoms attempts to erase people's unpleasant experiences during the pandemic. Gathering together in spring is the wish of the speaker, but is "not matched by the state of affairs" (Ronan, 2015, p. 36). However, through wishes the celebrities address the current concerns of potential audiences and at the same time portray themselves as caring and render their message heartfelt (Ogiermann & Bella, 2021). Moreover, in Examples 12 and 13, the Light and Darkness/Storm and Rainbow metaphors conceptualize the COVID-19 outbreak as darkness and storms, carefully framing the events and actions of the pandemic (Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020). However, dawn and the rainbow that refer to the life after COVID-19 generate hope and positive feeling among the public, allowing celebrities to reassure people and manage rapport with the public. Just as Firth (1964, p. 112) suggested, "promotion, establishment, and maintenance of communion of feeling is perhaps four-fifths of all talk".

5.3.2 Framing through humorous address form

Apart from metaphors, the celebrities also resort to humor to frame their messages. Humor can inject an element of surprise (Levine 1969, pp. 4–5), display creativity and daring (Mulholland, 1994, pp. 127), and invite interpersonal involvement (Norrick, 1994). Humor's psychological benefit of relieving tension is also well established, especially in tragic situations (see e.g. Martin, 2007). Humor is capable of reframing the source of negative experiences and/or emotions (such as suffering, worry and fear) as a source of positive emotions (Martin, 2007), which is evident in online humor about tragedies and crises (e.g. Demjén, 2016; Dynel, 2021). Therefore, humor that

generates shared amusement is powerfully persuasive, making it an ideal vehicle to create interpersonal involvement and build rapport during the pandemic. Consider the following examples:

Example 14: 美丽的**小光头**，没有你和战友们的坚守和无私奉献，就没有全国人民的健康和幸福生活。

[Translation]: Beautiful **little bald head**, without the perseverance and selfless dedication of you and your comrades, there would be no healthy and happy life for the people of the whole country.

During the pandemic, many female medical workers had their hair cut for the sake of hygiene to avoid cross infection. Moreover, to avoid wasting time washing long hair, medical workers volunteered to have their heads shaved. The label "little bald head" appears to be mockery given that a bald head is not a typical hairstyle of females and even not considered beautiful. However, the celebrities noticed the sacrifice that female medical workers made during the pandemic. Addressing this directly reveals intimacy and generates relief. As personal address reflects the way people position themselves in relation to others (Bresin, 2019), intimate forms of address indicate closeness in relationships (Tracy and Robles, 2013, p. 65). The celebrities' use of this humorous and intimate form of address generates relief, shows concern and boosts their interpersonal solidarity (Holmes & Schnurr, 2005).

Example 15: *炸酱面*一定行！

[Translation]: ***Fried sauce noodles (Beijingers)*** are sure to go!

In Example 15, the food is used to refer to "Beijing people". Fried sauce noodles are a typical food in Beijing and signify Beijing's identity. As several new cases began to appear in Beijing in June 2020, the celebrities attempted to erase the unpleasant experiences and boost confidence in fighting against the virus by using such a humorous way of addressing, which triggered optimism. Finding the same thing funny is often the first step to the formation of bond and friendship (Lorenz, 1996, pp. 293–294). The humorous address form employed here serves as a vehicle for fostering solidarity (Paton, 1988), and this humorous frame can be taken to signal alignment (see, e.g., Hay 2001, p. 60).

6. Discussion

A careful analysis of Chinese celebrity Weibo posts reveals that the celebrities persuade people by employing different strategies during the pandemic. With respect to the first research question, the findings show that the celebrities use engagement markers and boosters, parallelisms of contrasts and questions as well as metaphors and humorous address forms to reassure the public and manage rapport, which

broadens data sets of persuasive strategies and offers novel insights into persuasion rationales and frameworks.

Regarding the second research question, the goal of the celebrities' use of persuasive strategies is to manage their rapport with the public. According to Shi (2010), the collectivistic ideology influences various aspects of Chinese interpersonal communication. The celebrities in collectively-oriented Chinese culture demonstrate high group membership and collective solidarity in this study, just as Wu and Lin (2017) have noted. People from Asian cultures are more prone to see themselves as more connected and less differentiated from others (DeAndrea et al, 2010). Consequently, behavior is guided by a desire to fit in with other people (DeAndrea et al, 2010), especially for celebrities who strive to align their opinions, attributes, and goals with the general public. That is also the reason why celebrities may achieve rapport management through persuading people to take collective actions to fight against the virus since it is the common goal of the public. As the pandemic greatly influences people's lives, celebrities attempt to address these concerns directly to trigger alignment, in which the pandemic offered many opportunities to manage rapport as well as cement their facade.

On the other hand, studies have also identified that national cultural trends greatly impacted how Chinese people perceived the virus and behaved during the pandemic (Xing et al., 2021). The result that Chinese celebrities tend to present more positive information may relate to the fact that suffering in life is construed more positively by the Chinese, corresponding to themes in East Asian Buddhism and Taoism (Ji et al., 2010). Instead of dwelling on the dark side of the COVID-19 pandemic, celebrity reporting of COVID-19 focused more on the positive spirit of people in COVID-19 prevention and control, aiming at dispelling the tragic nature of COVID-19 to stabilize people's minds and boost morale (Zhang et al., 2021), which affects the attitudes of their fans towards their endorsements (Teng et al., 2020). Furthermore, celebrities are significant others who can activate norms that individuals hold in order to influence their attitudes and behavior (Cialdini et al., 1991). People who identify with a celebrity want to be like the celebrity and thus are prone to adapt the celebrity's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior (Kelman, 1961). In this vein, the celebrities played a very important role in how to report the epidemic, reduce public panic, trigger public's action and maintain social stability.

To summarize, celebrities' selves can be interpreted and conceptually represented in a variety of ways, frequently in ways that are impacted by cultural influences and made evident in communication (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Compared with offline communication, social media allows celebrities to access larger audience more easily and quickly. This sheer size of one's audience can increase the effectiveness of persuasive appeals (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2020) given that people are likely to view these parasocial connections with celebrities as 'friends', and be less guarded to persuasive attempts, thus enhancing celebrity influence (Chung & Cho, 2017). On the other hand, the effective use of persuasion during the pandemic on social media is a practical approach for celebrities to engage with and retain their fans, which helps celebrities to expand their visibility to the general public and draw

in new fans, allowing for social and economic expansion. According to previous research (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012), celebrities need certain positive exposure to maintain and advance their commercial value and favorable image. Through persuasion, celebrities' ultimate aim in managing rapport is to obtain more social and financial value (Guo & Ren, 2020).

7. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped our public lives, and we should not underestimate the power of language to persuade people in a time of crisis. Language constantly influences social development in myriad ways. For public audiences, language pushes people to experience the world in a particular way (Zhang et al., 2021). As social media facilitates new kinds of connection and intimacy between celebrities and fans (Zhang & Wu, 2018), celebrity in the Web 2.0 era becomes an ongoing process in which public personas are continually constructed, disclosed, consumed, and reconstructed (Zhang & Wu, 2018). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic offers celebrities further opportunities to interact with the public. The study contributes to previous literature on COVID-19 by extending the research scope to the persuasive discourse on the Weibo platform, offers novel perspectives and frameworks to analyze persuasion, and sheds light on the research of rapport management in celebrity discourse and in social media contexts. Practically, the study raises celebrities' awareness of how to promote relationships and manage their image on social media platforms. Finally, the findings suggest that creating positive social media communication is an important goal during the pandemic.

However, practical constraints created some limitations in this study. The first limitation was the size of the sample, since some celebrities only revealed posts published within the last six months and others selected did not post about issues related to COVID-19. The data set only consisted of 500 posts, which can only lead to tentative conclusions instead of applicable generalizations. In addition, it is necessary to address the fact that celebrities' blogs may not be authored by the celebrities personally and may be the result of collective authorship by their marketing teams (Page, 2012). Therefore, follow-up interviews with celebrities may help reveal their real attitudes towards the pandemic. Furthermore, since this study examined only a single context, the generalizability of the findings regarding language and social reality of COVID-19 should be compared with other genres, national contexts as well as other modes of communication as part of future research on the topic. Finally, additional methodological and theoretical frameworks should be employed in judging the relational aspects of persuasion, which will benefit future research and create new understandings of the connection between interpersonal pragmatics, rapport management, and identity construction.

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