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COMMUNICATIVE AND LINGUISTIC DEVICES USED IN ELON MUSK'S PERSONAL BRANDING (BASED ON TWITTER AND ONLINE PUBLICATIONS)

This research is dedicated to the study of Elon Musk's personal brand. Communicative and linguistic devices used by Elon Musk to build, maintain and boost his personal brand, as well as to counter threats to its status, were analyzed on the basis of Twitter and online publications within the framework of the present research. The study traced the conflict between Elon Musk and short sellers with the participation of the US Securities and Exchange Commission and proved that regardless of the financial losses and legal challenges the businessman faced, the reaction of Elon Musk's followers was mostly positive due to the effective brand-building techniques employed by Elon Musk. The conducted Twitter analysis dealt with both Elon Musk's personal publications and the responses of his followers, and found that the main linguistic and communicative devices of Elon Musk's personal branding were provocative tweets, popular culture references, connotatively charged notions, irony, allusions, acronyms and wordplay. As part of the present research, we studied how the linguistic phenomenon shaped reality, as Elon Musk took a literary technique and used it as a real-life enhancement of his personal brand. According to the results of the research, these devices were aimed at reinstating the credibility and authority of Elon Musk's personal brand, attracting the attention of the followers, winning their support and counterattacking the opponents in order to re-establish a powerful personal brand. The research proves that these devices found positive response among Elon's followers and had a positive effect on his brand attracting attention and boosting popularity and recognizability of Elon Musk's personal brand.

Keywords: personal brand, personal branding, social networks, Twitter, brand promotion, brand boosting devices, linguistic and communicative devices.

Throughout the history, the general public has not followed abstract promises and ideological systems, but people. In recent years,

the phenomenon of a specialist's personal brand has been actively discussed [11]. There is currently no clear understanding of what a personal brand is. Moreover, the definitions of this concept proposed by scholars reflect different approaches to its study and, as a consequence, often contradict each other [1; 5; 10; 12; 13; 14]. The main reason for this is that the phenomenon of the brand in general and personal brand in particular is the subject of research in several disciplines and is analyzed from the point of view of different approaches: marketing, economic, socio-psychological, cultural-historical, legal.

Linguistic studies in the field of branding mainly concerned the formation of a sports brand on the basis of "Olympic texts" [4], travel brand [8], linguistic support of the naming process [2; 9], branding of cities [3]. However, the linguistic component of personal branding has not been covered in the scientific literature.

Kotler, Armstrong, Wong, and Saunders [16] formulate the definition of a brand as follows: "It is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". To date, there is no encyclopedically fixed concept of "personal brand".

For the first time the concepts of personal branding, self-positioning, individual branding, were described in 1937 in the book "Think and Grow Rich" by Napoleon Hill. More modern positioning techniques appeared in 1981 in the book "Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind" by Al Ries and Jack Trout, later popularized by Tom Peters [6]. The term "personal branding" is believed to have been first used and discussed in 1997 in the work of Tom Peters — one of the famous American writers, the creator of business management practices [17].

According to Peters, a personal brand is an idea of people about a particular person, these are the ideas and associations that a certain person evokes in the minds of members of the public [10].

Kotler considers personal branding as a process; in his opinion, personal brand can also be defined as a set of marketing activities aimed at promoting the person in the eyes of the target audience and informing the latter about the professional or personal qualities of the person [7].

The most recent studies of personal branding based on social and mass media were carried out by Smith [18], Hämäläinen [15] and Vallas and Cummins [19].

This research focuses on the linguistic and communicative devices used for promoting and strengthening the personal brand of Elon Musk — a business magnate, industrial designer, engineer, billionaire and philanthropist. Elon Musk owns shares of various companies, namely SpaceX, Tesla, Inc., The Boring Company, X.com, Neuralink, OpenAI, Zip2, SolarCity.

According to Forbes Real-time billionaires list [24], as of October 25th 2020 Elon Musk was ranked the 5th richest person in the world. Elon Musk has become a household name around the globe and is widely recognized separately from Tesla or Space X, which indicates that his personal brand is not overshadowed by the brands of his companies. Elon Musk is a public figure who regularly appears on the news, maintains constant presence on the media, often demonstrates provocative and eccentric behaviour, sparks controversy and scandals.

The present research follows the conflict of Elon Musk and US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) that was provoked by a tweet posted by Elon Musk and had long-lasting consequences for Musk's personal brand. The research traces the communicative repercussions of Elon Musk's tweet and linguistic peculiarities of the incident, as well as their effect on Musk's personal brand. The study is based on Elon Musk's tweets and relevant online publications, which were collected by means of continuous sampling method.

In this article, we researched the influence of the Elon Musk's Twitter publications related to the conflict with short-sellers on his personal brand. The incident was sparked by Elon Musk's tweet published on the 7th of August 2018: *"Am considering taking Tesla private at \$420. Funding secured."* [28]. This tweet lead to unfavorable consequences for Tesla, as the shares fell significantly and the company lost millions of dollars [21]. Several investors sued Elon Musk in connection with his announcement of plans to buy Tesla shares from shareholders and turn Tesla into a private company. Then the US Securities and Exchange Commission accused Musk of fraud and said that his statement misled investors. To resolve the conflict, Musk entered into a pre-trial agreement with the SEC and agreed to step down as chairman of the board of directors and pay investors \$20 million. Tesla paid another \$20 million [26].

As described above, one tweet from Elon Musk had drastic consequences and costed Elon not only \$40 in total, but also turned out to be a serious blow to his business position. A single tweet from Elon Musk

was enough to artificially increase the stock price of Tesla shares and to cause losses to short-sellers amounting to millions of dollars. As a result, Elon Musk's credibility was undermined, as his online statements had been proven misleading.

Nonetheless, Elon Musk's personal brand was found to avoid detrimental effects of this incident. In the tweet that started this crisis, Elon Musk made a reference to a popular culture phenomenon – semantically loaded number 420, which is commonly associated with smoking marijuana. On the 7th of September 2018 [23], with legal proceedings still ongoing, Elon Musk smoked weed live on web show with comedian Joe Rogan, which caused further plummeting of Tesla stocks and suspicions of substance abuse [22]. Regardless of the financial losses, our analysis of tweets proved that the reaction of Elon Musk's followers was mostly positive, as they joked about starting weed business: "*Would be cool if you started your own marijuana company*" [28], or paid more attention to Elon Musk's ideas rather than the smoking incident and generally expressed the good-natured support: "*THIS WAS AWESOME! Thank you @elonmusk @joerogan*" [28]; "*Elon is one of the few brilliantly minded people with good intentions for humanity. It would be nice to have this widely recognized & for him to not be demonized any time he does something surprising.*" [28], and even: "*@elonmusk for president 2020*" [28] etc. Elon Musk's personal brand coped with alleged accusations, and even though it provoked controversy, it also attracted attention of broad masses to Musk's figure and work and boosted recognizability and originality of his personal brand.

Regardless of the damage to his business, Elon Musk did not stop making allusions to potentially discrediting popular culture symbolic numbers. The research showed that on his birthday, 28th of June 2020, Musk tweeted: "*69 days after 4/20 again haha*" [28], making reference to both smoking marijuana and sexually connoted number. As can be seen from the abovementioned example, Elon Musk did not try to cover up his blunders and make the general public forget about the allegations against him. On the contrary, he kept making jokes about unfavorable incidents and thus turned the economic failures into personal brand boosters.

The research showed that one of the traits of Elon Musk's personal brand is eccentricity. His followers view him as a "big boss" and expect him to act boldly without fear of consequences. In continuation to his

conflict with SEC, on the 2nd of July 2020 Elon Musk tweeted: “*SEC, three letter acronym, middle word is Elon’s*” [28], making a mocking, disrespectful and even insulting comment towards US Securities and Exchange Commission possibly with damaging consequences for his business. However, his image of a fearless, careless and eccentric genius is more important for him than the possible danger. In terms of linguistics, he used abbreviation to create a play on words and used this device for branding purposes.

Central linguistic phenomenon within the scope of the researched incident was the tweet and subsequent events based on ironic play on words. The same day, on the 2nd of July 2020, Elon Musk announced that “*Tesla will make fabulous short shorts in radiant red satin with gold trim*” [28] and that he “*will send some to the Shortseller Enrichment Commission to comfort them through these difficult times.*” [28]. In this example, we see another variant of name-calling used by Elon Musk as he deliberately and ironically refers to Securities and Exchange Commission as to Shortseller Enrichment Commission. Thus, he indirectly accuses them of working to the benefit of short-sellers who are making money on selling and buying stocks by betting that the stock they sell will drop in price [20]. Elon Musk not only makes a reference to the unfavorable event that happened 2 years ago, but he also continues the old fight, willing to have the last word in it. He celebrates his victory, as Tesla stocks climbed and he thus makes his success vividly public, attracting attention to his success in the original and memorable manner.

Within the framework of the present research, we studied how the linguistic phenomenon shaped reality. Elon Musk took a literary technique and used it as a real-life enhancement of his personal brand. Interpreting literally “shortsellers” as “selling shorts”, he actually created a line of red satin shorts [25]. On the 5th of July 2020, Elon Musk tweeted “*limited edition shorts now available at...*”, “*Only \$69.420!!*” [28], using the price as another reference to both popular culture and his past scandalous episodes. The effect of this personal brand booster can be judged by the reaction of his followers – despite the quite high price of the shorts, a couple of minutes after posting the link to the shorts, Musk tweeted, “*Dang, we broke the website*” [28].

Another ironic acronym with double meaning used by Elon Musk for personal branding purposes was found to be “S3XY”, printed on the

back of the shorts — a reference to Tesla's Model S, Model 3, Model X, and Model Y vehicles.

The public reacted positively [27] and supported Musk in his victory as he pulled through all economic and branding challenges and came out a winner — with a profit and strengthened personal brand.

Conclusions. The research traced linguistic and communicative devices used by Elon Musk in order to boost his personal brand, save face and gain attention and support of the broad masses. The most commonly used means were found to be provocative tweets, popular culture references, irony, connotatively charged notions, allusions, acronyms and wordplay. The research proves that these devices found positive response among Elon's followers and had a positive effect on his brand attracting attention and boosting popularity and recognizability of Elon Musk's personal brand.

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**КОМУНІКАТИВНІ ТА ЛІНГВІСТИЧНІ ЗАСОБИ,
ВИКОРИСТАНІ В ПЕРСОНАЛЬНОМУ БРЕНДИНГУ
ІЛОНА МАСКА (НА МАТЕРІАЛІ ПУБЛІКАЦІЙ
У TWITTER ТА ОНЛАЙН-ПУБЛІКАЦІЙ)**

Дослідження присвячено вивченю особистого бренда Ілона Маска. На основі публікацій в соціальній мережі *Twitter* та онлайн-видань було проаналізовано комунікативні та лінгвістичні засоби, використані Ілоном Маском для побудови, підтримання, покращення особистого бренда та протидії загрозам, спрямованим проти нього. В ході дослідження було простежено конфлікт Ілона Маска та бізнесменів короткого продажу за участі Комісії США з цінних паперів і бірж та виявлено, що основними лінгвістичними та комунікативними прийомами персонального брендингу Ілона Маска були провокаційні твіти, посилання на популярну культуру, конотативно навантажені поняття, іронія, алюзії, абревіатури та гра слів. За результатами дослідження, ці засоби були спрямовані на підтвердження авторитетності особистого бренда Ілона Маска, привернення уваги підписників, залучення їхньої підтримки та на здійснення контр-атаки для утверждження сильного бренда та досягли зазначеної мети.

Ключові слова: особистий бренд, персональний брендинг, соціальні мережі, *Twitter*, просування бренда, лінгвістичні та комунікативні прийоми.

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