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COMMUNICATIVE AND LINGUISTIC TRENDS IN ELON MUSK'S PERSONAL BRANDING (BASED ON TWITTER PUBLICATIONS IN 2020)

This research is dedicated to the study of the main communicative trends and linguistic specificities of Elon Musk's personal branding. The paper analyses over 500 Tweets posted by Elon Musk in his personal Twitter account throughout 2020 and classifies them into 7 categories according to their communicative aim with regard to brand-building. According to the results of the analysis, informative, advertising, self-promotion, provocative, entertaining, bonding and saving face Tweets were singled out. We examined each group separately, tracing their influence on building, maintaining or boosting Elon Musk's personal brand, as well as on countering threats to its status. The study analyses the most representative examples of each group and explains their role in Elon Musk's personal branding. As part of the present research, we studied linguistic devices employed by Elon Musk within the brand-building effort and concluded that irony, code-switching, quoting, play on words, slogans, slang abbreviations / netspeak and extralinguistic signs are the main linguistic trends of his personal branding. The research proves that Elon Musk's personal brand is consistent, competitive and shows high resistance to the attacks of adversaries on its status and to various challenges that could undermine its authority. The paper traces how Elon Musk uses his Twitter account to present himself as a visionary for space colonization and robotization, a member of geek and meme communities, to reinforce his image of bold, charismatic and influential businessman, who appreciates real talent and does not distance himself from common people and popular culture. The study reveals Twitter to be a powerful branding source, as it has wide outreach, real-world repercussions and global significance.

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

In recent years, the phenomenon of personal brand has been actively discussed by specialists of various fields [12]. As of yet, there is no unified universally accepted definition of a personal brand.

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; 10], branding of cities [3]. However, communicative and linguistic aspects of personal branding have not been covered in the scientific literature.

Kotler, Armstrong, Wong, and Saunders [7] 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 encyclopaedically fixed concept of "personal brand".

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 [11].

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 [6].

For the purposes of this study, we will adhere to these definitions.

The most recent studies of personal branding based on social and mass media were carried out by Smith [13], Hämäläinen [5] and Vallas and Cummins [16].

This paper aims to explore how Elon Musk's personal brand is formed through discourse, linguistic and rhetorical tools, manifested in his personal Twitter account.

Social media seem to be an appropriate platform for the study of personal brand, because they are perceived as a direct manifes-

tation of person's identity, and bring the research object as close as possible to the target audience.

Twitter has been chosen as a source of research data as it has become a popular social media channel among business professionals and managers. It is a platform where managers show their experience and professionalism, as well as private life, hobbies and areas of interest.

The research focuses on the personal brand of **Elon Musk – a business magnate, industrial designer, engineer, billionaire and philanthropist**. Elon Musk owns shares of various companies, namely he is the founder, CEO and lead designer of SpaceX; CEO, product architect of Tesla, Inc.; founder of The Boring Company and X.com (now PayPal); co-founder of Neuralink, OpenAI, and Zip2; chairman of SolarCity. In 2018, he became also a Fellow of the Royal Society. The same year, Elon was ranked 25th on the Forbes list of The World's Most Powerful People [14], and was ranked joint-first on the Forbes list of the Most Innovative Leaders of 2019 [1]. According to Forbes Real-time billionaires list [15], as of October 25th 2020 Elon Musk was ranked as the 5th richest person in the world. Elon Musk has become a household name around the globe and is widely recognized separately, alongside with 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. He has 39.5 million followers on Twitter, and is known to be an active user of this social network – he tweets regularly and often replies to both fans' and haters' Tweets. High level of popularity, publicity and social engagement makes the personal brand of Elon Musk, in our opinion, a fitting material for the research of the personal brand.

The present research focuses on the Tweets posted by Elon Musk in 2020. The tweets were collected by means of continuous sampling method and were subsequently divided in various categories depending on the communicative aim and linguistic

devices employed as tools of boosting the personal brand. The research covered the overall amount of approximately 500 Tweets and analyzed linguistic and communicative means of brand-building, maintenance and counteracting the threats to one's image and status.

In the course of the study, the Tweets were classified according to their **communicative aim** into the following groups:

1) informative Tweets (meant to share the updates on the achievements of Musk's companies, information on employment offers, details on the new projects etc.)

A thread of Tweets presenting Starship SN8 read *"Starship SN8 with rear body flaps"* [9] with an attached image. The follow-up Tweet stated *"Nosecone & front flaps next week. SN9 next month."* [9]. This is the typical example of informative Tweet, which pursues the objective of keeping the followers and potential customers, investors and supporters informed about the new products of Elon's companies and outline when the next updates should be expected. Another similar example is successive tweeting about the return of the Space X's Crew Dragon after a 64-day test flight with two NASA astronauts on-board. Elon Musk tweets with short intervals updating his audience in real-time about the entry of the spacecraft into the atmosphere and its successful landing, allowing his followers to feel the involvement and first-hand participation in this significant event. By informing the followers personally, Elon Musk connects his personal brand to the successful operation and assumes the honor of this achievement.

Another example is linked to an employment offer by Neuralink: *"If you've solved hard problems with phones / wearables (sealing, signal processing, inductive charging, power mgmt, etc), please consider working at engineering@neuralink.com"* [9]. This way Elon Musk personally invites specialists to try to get the job in his company. It makes the job-seekers feel more appreciated and valued, and attracts more qualified professionals to the company. In the threaded Tweet Elon Musk adds: *"If you feel Neuralink might have incorrectly overlooked your resume or declined to make an offer, please lmk in comment below"* [9],

stressing fairness and equal chance of getting a job at Neuralink. Elon Musk thus positions himself as just and benevolent supervisor who makes sure that no good candidate is accidentally overlooked.

Another type of informative Tweets is formed by Tweets containing links to more extensive sources of information like articles, podcasts, webcasts and websites: *"Neuralink product demo in 3 hours. Webcast at neuralink.com."* [9]. This group allows Musk to post short informative updates with a possibility of receiving further information if the reader is interested in the introduced topic.

2) advertising Tweets (meant to promote upcoming and ongoing projects, events, presentations, praise achievements and boost public appreciation)

One of the peculiarities of advertising Tweets is that they usually feature Tweets by other authors or pages, relevant to Musk's companies or achievements. This way Elon Musk not only promotes his projects or achievements, but also gives credibility to his personal brand by backing up his claims with external sources of information and reliable authorities. For example, Musk retweeted Business Insider's Tweet: *"Tesla's Model 3 received top marks from safety organizations in North America, Europe, and Australia"* [9]. It is clear that Elon Musk could have posted this information himself, but sharing news from a respectable American financial and business news website gives more weight to the news, let alone wider reach.

Another trait of the advertising Tweets consists in mentioning other Twitter accounts in order to attract attention to them and thus use the power of his own personal brand to boost their popularity. For example, Elon Musk tweeted *"Tunnels under cities with self-driving electric cars will feel like warp drive/ First operational tunnel under Vegas almost done/ The @BoringCompany"* [9]. In this Tweet, Elon Musk mentions The Boring Company's page and posts a direct link to it. As was mentioned before, Musk is a shareholder of this company. Its page counts with 449K followers (as of December 24, 2020) whereas

Elon Musk has 41M. By posting an advertising Tweet about the enticing qualities of the future underground tunnels and updating the target audience on their construction progress, Elon Musk creates a positive image of this project in the minds of the public. At the same time, Musk attracts new followers to the company's page and spreads the word about its projects. Not all people who follow Elon Musk on the Twitter follow closely all of his projects. This is why tweeting about various undertakings may add to people's understanding of Musk goals and actions and therefore boost his personal brand as well as that of his companies.

The third subtype of advertising Tweets consists in quoting relevant Tweets. For example, NYC's gamer, streamer and creator house "368" tweeted: "JESUS @Tesla and @elonmusk just putting their hands in our wallets at this point" [9] along with the video showing a man playing a built-in computer game in a Tesla car. Elon Musk replied to this Tweet by saying "More fun games coming soon to ur Tesla" [9]. This way Elon Musk covertly brings up advantageous topic – he quotes a popular page, which specializes in gaming, in order to advertise his upcoming gaming additions to Tesla cars. In so doing, Elon Musk boosts his credibility and trustworthiness, as well as specifically targets the part of audience who will be most interested on the update.

3) self-promotion Tweets (meant to boost the popularity of Musk's vision, goals and personal brand; they tend to reveal Musk's ideology).

One of the most important ideology and self-promotion Tweets is the pinned Tweet posted on August 16th "*We must pass The Great Filter*" [9]. One of the crucial aspects of Musk's personal brand is his role of a visionary and the advocate of human expansion into space. He argues that a single-planetary species is doomed, as there are multiple ways the life on Earth can be destroyed – by a rogue asteroid, eruption of a supervolcano, nuclear war, climate change etc. The Great Filter is a hypothetical solution to the Fermi Paradox, an event or a challenge in development of the civilization. If a civilization fails to pass The Great Filter, it eventually dies out. The concept of The Great Filter is used to

explain, why space hasn't been colonized by other intelligent species – there was a destructive event or a natural limit to their advancement which prevented sentient life to spread across the galaxy. There is no consensus among the scientists if the humanity has already passed The Great Filter or is about to face it. Elon Musk as a futurist and technician views the mission of his business to contribute to the progress of the human civilization – Tesla promotes sustainable transport, Solar City exploits alternative energy sources, SpaceX works towards colonizing Mars and making space travel sustainable and affordable. By tweeting this short slogan-like phrase, Elon Musk covertly promotes activity of his companies and reinforces his personal brand as an embodiment of humanity's bright future.

Another example of this type of self-promotion is a short slogan-like Tweet "*Conceptual telepathy*" [9], which makes a reference to Neuralink's endeavor to make human brain compatible with the technology, allowing people to control devices with the power of thought.

There are also slogan-like Tweets related to the Boring Company's project of underground tunnels, for example: "*Embrace tunnels!*" [9]. Elon Musk also uses longer affirmations like: "*When space travel becomes as common as air travel, the future of civilization will be assured.*" [9]. This Tweet promotes Elon Musk's space exploration goals, implanting his values into the minds of the target audience.

Rhetorical questions are also used for self-promotion, as they appeal to each person individually and arouse response: "*Have you hugged a tunnel today?*" [9]. The joking and light tone of the Tweet wins the target audience over.

Promotion Tweets also include Tweets with culture references. They enable Elon Musk to contextualize his personal brand into the general discourse of popular culture. For example, Tweet "*Of course I still love you*" [9] refers to a name of a robotic ship that serves as a landing platform for SpaceX rocket. This name is a clever and subtle allusion to the works of the legendary sci-fi author Iain M. Banks.

4) provocative Tweets (meant to stir controversy and provoke discussion, possibly scandal, in order to attract attention).

A valid example of this category is the Tweet *"What can't we predict?"* [9], which was posted completely out of context. It sparked, however, an immediate response and active discussion his followers trying to come up with the correct or clever answer: *"Both the position and momentum of an elementary particle."* [9]. Notably, Musk participated in the discussion personally, answering the Tweets and engaging with his followers. In our opinion, the possibility to get a Tweet from Musk encouraged more people to take part in the discussion, which in turn boosted Elon Musk's popularity and attracted new followers through multiple retweets.

A similar example of Tweets stirring up controversy is a thread of Tweets about the mystery of the origin of the Egyptian pyramids. Elon Musk tweeted: *"Aliens built the pyramids obv"* [9]. This provocative statement drew a wide response and even influential people were engaged in the discussion. Egypt's Minister of International Co-operation Rania al-Mashat responded on Twitter, saying she followed and admired Mr Musk's work, but urged him to further explore evidence about the building of the structures built for pharaohs of Egypt. Wide outreach of Elon Musk's Tweet and the response from high-ranking officials proves and reasserts the control of his brand over the public opinion.

Elon Musk is known to have been involved in scandals, sometimes even because of his Tweets. In 2020, we still find repercussions of Elon Musk's Tweet posted on the 7th of August 2018: *"Am considering taking Tesla private at \$420. Funding secured."* [9]. This Tweet sparked a series of events that led to high financial losses on the part of the short-sellers (who make money by buying and selling stocks), a conflict with US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), \$40 million loss on Elon Musk's part and a precarious market position for Tesla.

Elon Musk, however, did not shy away from the incident. On the contrary, he went as far as to produce red satin shorts and sell them on his website to commemorate his financial victory as Tesla stocks climbed. In June 2020, Elon Musk made a notable

Tweet "*limited edition shorts now available at..*", "*Only \$69.420!!*" [9], announcing the sale of the shorts at a mock price, related to both popular culture (sexually connoted number) and his past scandalous episodes (smoking marijuana live on a web show). The effect 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.*" [9]. From the point of view of branding, this is a very successful example of making a linguistic phenomenon of play on words into a reality and using it as both a personal brand booster and an attack on the reputation of Elon Musk's adversaries at the same time.

Another example of the provocative tweeting was a mocking, disrespectful and even insulting comment towards US Securities and Exchange Commission: "*SEC, three letter acronym, middle word is Elon's*" [9]. In terms of linguistics, he used abbreviation to create a play on words and used this device for branding purposes, as it strengthened his image as of the "winner", a fearless and successful businessman.

During his confrontation with SEC, Elon Musk was also involved in another scandal – he smoked a joint live on web show with comedian Joe Rogan. Although it had detrimental economic effects for Elon Musk's business, it sparked a wave of extra attention towards his personal brand. Two years later on his birthday Elon Musk still makes references towards smoking marijuana despite past troubles. He tweeted: "*69 days after 4/20 again haha*" [9], using potentially discrediting sexually connoted number and the number closely associated with smoking weed.

5) entertaining Tweets (meant to share light-hearted contact with the target audience in order to build attachment and the sense of community). They mostly embrace joke and meme Tweets.

In the Tweet "*Centaur with a bow obviously*" [9] with an attached image, Elon shares a meme and makes fun of Ancient Greek Astrologers and the way they identified the constellations in the night sky.

Ancient Greek Astrologers be like...



This Tweet is mostly of entertaining nature, but at the same time, it is based on the cosmos theme, which corresponds to Musk's sphere of interest and wins the favour of those who also find it funny.

Musk is also known to be a huge fan and an active participant of a meme culture, as it is a quintessence of humour and irony of the digitalized era.

Sometimes Musk responds to non-business-related Tweets of his followers in a witty and humorous way. When asked "*...if you had the opportunity to travel in time...what time and place would you like to go and why?*" [9], Elon Musk replied with a meme:



This creates a friendly atmosphere and brings the billionaire closer to common people, bridges the alienation and levels the social gap.

Other entertaining Tweets included a joke about a corpse of a man who was found sitting idly in the desert for 9000 years. Elon Musk tweeted: *"He might run for President in 2024"* [9]. He also posted several Tweets with memes, which he felt resonated with his life. One of them depicted a mouse in a helmet approaching the mousetrap, insinuating that a person commits the same mistake but this time is a little more prepared; and the other featured allegoric mem depicting an American football team with business related captions. This makes Elon Musk's personal brand more attracting for the geek community and younger generation.

6) bonding Tweets (meant to put Elon Musk closer to his followers by sharing something personal, e.g. photos of old homework).

Among bonding Tweets we find a photo of Elon Musk with his son with a caption in German. By sharing this photo, Elon Musk allows his followers to get a glimpse into his personal life and his family.

Another example of the bonding Tweet is about Elon Musk's old homework. Elon Musk tweeted: *"Just learned that my physics prof from Penn is head of Fermilab & still has some of my old homework"* [9] and shared a picture of his old math homework noting, though, that *"it's too embarrassing"* [9] and that it's *"very basic stuff"* [9]. This way Elon Musk appears humble to his followers, opens up to share something he is not particularly proud of and builds a bond with his target audience who can relate to math homework. This also makes Elon Musk more humane, reminding people that he hasn't always been a successful billionaire, but started as a common student. It makes Elon Musk's personal brand more appealing and closer to the common people, who share same experience, and may be a basis of the further bonding and support.

Another variety of bonding Tweets are those with culture references. They bring up cultural phenomena that resonate with the target audience. For example, the quote of Ernest Rutherford, British physicist who came to be known as the father of nuclear physics, *"All of physics is either impossible or trivial. It is impossible until you*

understand it, and then it becomes trivial" [9] tweeted by Elon Musk appealed to science-minded part of his audience.

For geek community, Elon Musk tweeted: *"Stankmemes.com strikes again!"* [9], mentioning his website, whose domain he bought specifically to make a joke. "Stank memes" are poor quality memes and Elon Musk played a prank by creating a website just to post a bad meme. Meme culture is very popular among younger generation and they appreciate that Elon Musk is "one of them".

To appeal to broader audience, Elon Musk posted a link to the song "Lithium" by Nirvana, encouraging discussion and sharing his personal preference in music. Similarly, he tweeted: *"Sure could use a good rave/ What's your favorite techno"* [9], engaging fans of rave culture into the discussion and welcoming their advice.

The research also found several Tweets with political or economic subtext, which referred to urgent issues, widely discussed in the society. Such Tweets were found to cause controversy as some people supported him and other attacked him for his views of for being billionaire.

7) saving face Tweets (mitigating the damage to the brand, reframing and turning failings into successes).

One of the prominent examples of this type of Tweets is *"Thanks Tesla Team for great work on deliveries! For new owners, we super appreciate accommodating us on delivery timing! Definitely one of our toughest quarters in global logistics."* [9] Elon Musk compliments his team on overcoming difficult shipping conditions during the times of Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, he stresses the efficiency of the employees of his company, saves face and covers the shortcomings of the deliveries with the praise of problem-solving of the Tesla team. By thanking the customers, Elon Musk decreases the frustration with long deliveries and attributes them patience and understanding, which they now have to live up to.

Elon Musk is also good at making amends and covering up blunders. A follower @Sinan25 tweeted to Elon Musk: *"insulation is too bad mr.Musk, everybody outside the car can listen to my phonecalls [sad emoji]"* [9], complaining about the soundproofing of the Tesla car. This user had only 144 followers at the time of this Tweet, so

Elon Musk could have just ignored the comment. However, he chose to reply: *"Sorry, noise reduction has gotten much better recently & will continue to improve"* [9]. Nowadays, customers' feedback is of utmost importance for any business and by apologizing openly and promising to improve on the flaw in the future Elon Musk won favor of his customers as they felt heard, appreciated and important.

Among the used **linguistic devices**, the most prominent and relevant to the maintenance and shaping of the personal brand were the following:

1) irony.

Irony is an inherent tone of most of Elon Musk Tweets and was found to be one of the core traits of his personal brand.

2) code-switching (change of language).

Such languages as German, French, Russian, Ukrainian were found present in the Tweets: *"Bitte arbeiten Sie bei Tesla Giga Berlin! Es wird super Spaß machen!!"*; *"A la guerre comme à la guerre."*; *"I spoke with Korolev's family today. He was one of the very best. Корольов / Королёв."* [9].

3) quoting.

As was already demonstrated above, Elon Musk uses quotes by famous people to establish a deeper connection with the target audience and to reinforce his point.

4) play on words.

Elon Musk twisted the economic notion of "shortsellers" into "selling shorts" and launched a line of red satin shorts.

5) slogans.

Tweets like *"We must pass The Great Filter"* [9] promote Elon Musk's vision and business.

6) slang abbreviations / netspeak

Elon Musk sees himself as a part of the geek community and digital natives who use widespread Internet abbreviations. Within the present research the following abbreviations were found.

Lmk = let me know

Tbh = to be honest

Em = them

Btw = by the way

Obv = obviously

For example, "... *We will teach you what's known about the brain, which is not much tbh.*" or "*If you can't beat em, join em // Neuralink mission statement*" [9].

Netspeak allows Elon Musk both to save space in a Tweet and to be a part of the online culture of the young digital generation.

7) extralinguistic factors / signs.

... was found to be used for stress – for example: "*A prior track record of exceptional achievement in engineering* *is* *required, but no prior experience working on the brain or human psychology is required...*" [9].

Conclusion

The present research analyzed Tweets posted by Elon Musk in 2020, which were collected by means of continuous sampling method. The research covered 500 Tweets and analyzed linguistic and communicative means of brand-building, maintenance and counteracting the threats to one's image and status.

Elon Musk's Tweets were found to fall into the following groups according to the communicative aim: 1) informative Tweets; 2) advertising Tweets; 3) self-promotion Tweets; 4) provocative Tweets; 5) entertaining Tweets; 6) bonding Tweets; 7) saving face Tweets.

The research showed that the most prominent and relevant to the maintenance and shaping of the personal brand linguistic devices were irony, code-switching, quoting, play on words, slogans, slang abbreviations / netspeak, extralinguistic factors / signs.

Elon Musk's personal brand was found to be highly competitive and resistant to attacks of adversaries and various challenges. Elon Musk features himself as a visionary for space colonization and robotization, a member of geek and meme communities, bold, charismatic and influential businessman, who appreciates real talent and does not distance himself from common people and popular culture. His Tweets posted in 2020 were found to confirm these traits of his personal brand. On the other hand, Twitter was proved to be a powerful branding source, as Tweets have wide outreach and have real-world repercussions.

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КОМУНІКАТИВНІ ТА ЛІНГВІСТИЧНІ ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ В ПЕРСОНАЛЬНОМУ БРЕНДИНГУ ІЛОНА МАСКА (НА МАТЕРІАЛІ ПУБЛІКАЦІЙ У TWITTER У 2020 РОЦІ)

Присвячено вивченню основних комунікативних тенденцій та лінгвістичних особливостей персонального брендингу Ілона Маска. Проаналізовано понад 500 Твітів, опублікованих Ілоном Маском упродовж 2020 р., і класифіковано їх у 7 категорій за комунікативною метою у зв'язку з побудовою бренду. Дослідження дозволило виділити такі групи: інформативні, рекламні, самопросувні (ідеологічні), провокативні, розважальні Твіти, Твіти встановлення зв'язку та підтримання репутації. Роль і значення кожної категорії в побудові, підтриманні та покращенні особистого бренду було простежено на конкретних прикладах. Розглянуто лінгвістичні засоби, застосовані Ілоном Маском у межах розбудови бренду, і виявлено основні: іронія, зміна мови, цитування, гра слів, слогани, сленгові аббревіатури / інтернет-жаргон та екстралінгвістичні знаки. Стаття демонструє цілісність і конкурентоспроможність особистого бренду Ілона Маска та підтверджує значення мережі Twitter як потужного інструменту брендингу.

Ключові слова: *персональний брендинг, соціальні мережі, Twitter, побудова бренду, просування бренду, лінгвістичні засоби та комунікативні тренди.*

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Дата затвердження редакцією – 23.05.2021