

## Utilization of Emotional Language as an Effective Tool in Mass Media Discourse

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### Abstract

In general, the aim of study was to closely examine media statements which are an answer to sociological and economical problems of the modern world of the twenty-first century. Following extracted texts originating from various sources (such as social media, internet pages) will point to the typical linguistic expressions painting the picture of current problems during the time of crisis. For the main topics of interest were chosen health and vaccination, pseudoscience thesis and geopolitical representation. Unfortunately, the portrayal of such topics using specific language in the media space is characterized by the intent of influencing the consumer. These linguistic expressions effectively shift the perception of consumer, hence we will point out the pragmatic-persuasive side of statements. During the course of study, a specific lexicon analysis will be introduced, meaning stylistically characteristic, expressive and emotional lexicon, semantically characteristic, including metaphors and idioms. We will identify primary flag and stigmatizing words that play an important role, mainly when it comes to public discourse. The main purpose of this contribution is to identify such argumentative patterns through complex analysis and consequently to define characteristic discourse. The identification and revelation of emotional-expressive lexicon and the determination of typical argumentative patterns can serve modern society as a precaution through uncovering manipulative and persuasive strategies.

*Keywords:* manipulation, specific lexicon, groupthinking, stereotypes, argumentation

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## Introduction

Mass media play a key role in information distribution but they can also be used to gain power through the distribution of conspiracy theories and manipulative representation. All conspiracy stories share a common verbal presentation, which is the picture of an enemy that is to blame for the desperate condition of society. We will focus on the current socio-economic topics happening within the European space while also influencing the entire world. We will point out the typical strategies and ways of influence of the consumers of the media texts during the critical time and we will do so through the identification of emotional language. As it is, all of the conspiracy theories about both the real and the mythical worlds point out the verbal presentation of the culprits. Behind them stand migrants, representatives of various religions, feminists, politicians, the wealthy and the strong ones, the lying media, pharmaceutical companies, but also chips and radio waves. The act of spreading the conspiracy narratives such as “the uniqueness of knowing the real truth” and “the one about the lonely warrior fighting the dark forces and conspiracies” add to easy conviction and manipulation of people wrapped up in their own negative emotions. Underneath the emotional load supported by the conspiracy theories, that person either becomes radical and joins the conspirators’ side, using the help of supporting agents (such as homeopathics, amulets etc.) and procedures (connection to like-minded people such as antivaxers, anti-Semitism people and right-wing thinkers), or they choose the second way and become socially isolated, eliminating the deep fear and despair (which includes the total separation from the close ones – family, friends, connections in general). In addition, the choice of social isolation can also manifest as a failure to pay the bills, the fraternization of alike thinkers and the fear to leave the safety of home, for they could expose themselves to dangerous radiation, all the while being incapable of accepting any form of medical treatment. Various layers of society submit to the belief of conspiracy theories, ranging from the educated to uneducated society, from the economically stable to the opposite, from younger to older generations. When the degree of spread of seemingly harmless stories exceeds the all-social effect, they can become a weapon to influence the thinking of society and its standing (e.g. narratives connected to anti-vaccination or antisemitism leading to radicalization and absolute loss of respect). There is a whole range of expressions and linguistic realizations of anti-Semitic prejudice, from allusions to very obvious insults (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Authors K. Farrow, G. Grolleau and N. Mzoughi (2023) argue that the power of words has often been overlooked during the COVID-19 crisis and that seemingly irrelevant manipulations of word choice can influence behaviour. Many ruling parties and their politics are contributors to such state – they feed the distrust and socio-economic instability within the society. Consequently, both alternative media and radically right-wing parties use the weakened trust and the power of conspiracy theories to spread alternative versions of truth, leading to the increase in their voter base, their overall reach and spread of political strategies, which, despite their claims, do not bring any viable solutions. On the contrary, their expansion contributes to the spread of hate and anger within the population, all the while suggesting radical solutions, verbal and physical abuse. The populists’ strategic manipulation abuse the current state of affairs in society in order to establish political power. Hence, commoners are not to gain any certainty nor profit – the possible benefits such as the higher preferential profits go straight to the manipulators.

### The Verbal Manipulation in the Media

Unfortunately, the consumers of media content find the topic of manipulation uncomfortable, for they cannot acknowledge being privy to manipulation or suggestion to certain opinions,

they do not like to admit giving in to their emotions and repetitive verbal influence (Dinka, 2008, p. 7). The culprit is often the information surplus along with the complexity of media contributions. Frankly, the portrayal of relevant and truthful information uses the very same linguistic agents as the portrayal of half-truths or lies, purposeful misinterpretation or conspiracy, which is why their distinction remains crucial (Nutil, 2022, p. 14). “Medial manipulation is properly hidden, using methods difficult to untangle, so their meaning is likely to escape the consumer’s scrutiny” (Dinka, 2008, p. 10). “Words hold power because language is a major influencer of our perception of the world and our consequent actions. If someone was to borrow the language of the conspirators or people violators, they would strengthen their position of impact on our society” (Nocun & Lamberty, 2021, p. 274). The quality of verbal manipulation is determined by anonymity, which within the internet space enables the liberty of speech. However, it also facilitates the uncontrolled diffusion of hateful speeches, aggressive reactions or vulgar contributions. D. G. Myers (2016) defines this issue as deindividualisation, meaning the loss of self-awareness and fear of being held accountable, leading to the loss of responsibility altogether. Authors of such contributions act as their role models to fulfil the expectations of their chosen social groups, in order not to be excluded from them. This groupthinking is also referred to as group stupidity (Nutil, 2022). The goal is to achieve collective thinking and the illusion of flawlessness, invincibility (Koukolík & Drtilová, 2006). These convictions are sufficiently rationalized – “the correct words” serving as alibi and absolution of any wrongdoings. Groupthinking is a reflection of alternative media space through expression structures and ideological convictions. Verbal narratives lean toward the defence of own alternative thinking in the presence of opposition along with mainstream media. The authors of such articles deem themselves “smarter, better and the ones recognizing the actual truth” (in the perspective of opposition, WE are good, THEY are wrong). In the spirit of the phrase “social plague” (the shared imitation in actions, thinking and overall expressions) (Myers, 2016), the attention shifts to the fact that dominion grows exponentially in regard to the grade of medialization of its topic. We were able to witness topic recirculation within the Slovak alternative publications, the matters ranging from criminal behaviour of the marginalized groups, migration, anti-ruling and anti-European tendencies attacking democratic values, non-governmental organizations and coup d’états lead by the former female president of the Slovak republic, LGBTI critique and also the critique of the globalization and the liberalism. Due to the migration situation in 2015, Slovak politicians have also begun to use the topic of migration to mobilise their voters (Štefančík et al., 2021). These shared thoughts are the “only solution” originating from the conformism of the collective thinking as a society. Stereotyping allows disinformation to be easy when it comes to mental conduct, for it mainly utilizes our subconscious, certain stereotypes are spread within our own social groups, which significantly adds to their trustworthiness (Kolomazník et al., 2023, p. 98). The ultimate result is labelling or stigmatization in the name of diversity and ideological preference, such as you are a liberal and I am a conservative, or you are part of a progressive movement and I am a traditionalist. Alternative media dispose with many labels or various flag words in the likeness of fascist, racist, traitor, parasite or a “sun person”. What matters the most when discerning the truth are often the stereotypes instead of evaluation of information (Wodak, 2002). Groups with shared interests raise negative emotion within the society and they do so with the help of hateful, rash or aggressive statements, aimed to polarize society. This strategy along with anonymity contributes to the birth of extreme and radical pronouncements. Certain groups of like-minded people have the potential to elevate their opinions into higher positions (Sunstein, 2009). Our society has to deal with surplus of information daily, which needs to be organized in order to be understood. This information also carries many subjective assumptions that are deemed to be the truth. Kolomazník et al. (2023, p. 91) introduce excellent example of the

polarization of the Slovak republic through the effect of opinion consistency: the bubbles are hermetically closed and more and more radical opinions are accepted, while other conclusions are declined. The bubble WE vs THEY grows deeper by each conversation, which creates an atmosphere of distrust. Verbal attacks, extreme beliefs and physical abuse are approved. In the midst of these social bubbles of alike opinions, groupthinking is thriving along with fanaticism and certain sects' memberships. Contrariwise, there is no space for rational thinking and argumentation (Nutil, 2022, p. 55). Consequently, social media enclose people into carefully filtered bubbles. This precaution ensures precise time monitoring of the time passed on social media, all the while monitoring product/service preferences which inevitability leads to targeting ads within the media space and further risks associated with social media. The exact opposite is cognitive flexibility linked to tolerance and respect of all humankind, characterized mainly by the ability to change one's behaviour and decisions based on new facts with evolving context. However, depolarization of society requires a different approach: the search both of mutual human characteristics and capabilities and of goals needed to solve issues practically and in real time. This approach also includes exhibiting respect in the midst of different ideas and overall cooperation.

### **Methodology**

The search of the language in Slovak mass media (Badatel.net, Biblik.sk, Rizikaockovania.sk, Infohrot.sk) in 2022–2023 is based on the analysis of a specific lexicon, focusing on stylistically symptomatic and expressive vocabulary. The linguistic expressions capturing the essence of recent problems emerge amid the crisis. The method of the research is the analysis of a specific lexicon, focusing on stylistically symptomatic and expressive vocabulary (phraseological units, linguistically aggressive and vulgar representation, controlling lexicon) and flag words (within the media often signaling manipulation, emotion or warning, such as “garanted”, “exclusive”, “you must”, “always”, “never”, “all” etc. – they point out emotionally charged information).

With the help of lexical and text content analysis, we were able to identify the very expressions that effectively manipulate the audience's perception. The statements offered following presentations: the language of fear and hate, the invocation of negative emotions, the polarization of society, the charlatan character of contributions, the information used in deceiving context, the false news and propaganda, the encouragement of violence, the extremist content, the lack of authors and of reaction from hurt audience, the mixture of messages and comments, the shocking wrong statements, so called professionals and discredited scientists spreading pseudoscientific thesis, the critical, aggressive and reactive content, the rejection of mainstream media and of crucial democratic principles, the indication of own idea connection.

Verbal manipulation techniques include only the linguistic expressions that are used to ascertain various persuasive strategies. Calling upon emotional persuasion (Tomášková, 2015, p. 15), meaning the needs of consumer, their feelings, interests and wishes, is effective. Importantly, we have to capture the consumer's attention. It is also possible to target emotions such as fear or anger. Those manipulative verbal techniques can be both on the level of word and sentence. When it comes to the linguistic expressions within the words contributing to the resulting manipulation, they can be semantically symptomatic lexeme, figures and tropes, emotionally-expressive, stylistically symptomatic words, manipulative synonyms, verbal defects etc. Dysphemism, pejorative words or rash words in the midst of mass communication are linked to dysphemization within the common speeches. The

emotion-text level in mass communication is characterized by the use of tropes. Additionally, a metaphor can fulfil multiple functions in the relation to verbal manipulation (Čulenová, 2019, pp. 192–193): the shift of spotlight onto the manipulator themselves, the encouragement of certain mood and emotion, the influence of consumer, irony and dishonour of the consumer themselves or their opinions, the increase or decrease of certain situation's importance, the self-forgives or the lack of accountability on the manipulator's side. Metaphors and analogies are used instead of direct insults to evoke unexpected emotions (Wodak, 2002, p. 498). Comparison as a word has emotional base and that is why it possesses grand emotional power. Ironically, shifting the significance from a positive meaning to a pejorative one can have strong manipulative effect. In the end, the consumer is influenced by content with emotional subtext, that is to say the consumer is a witness to ridicule, disrespect and trivialization of certain phenomenons. The role of epithet is to provide emotion as it has the power to mock or disrespect both a person and a situation, but it becomes more and more cliché with every usage (Mistrík, 1997, p. 141). As for metonymies, they function as a dynamic and economizing element, that can turn the text into an emotional painting. Another elements, such as symbols and allegories represent abstract phenomenons and if author implements them accordingly, they can engage the audience, even convert them into the manipulator's point of view.

Next, flag words are expressions or phrases that emphasize something important within the text, alt. capture attention, activate quick emotional decision-making, contain generalizations – within the media, they often signalize emotion, manipulation or even warning, they are a notice for emotionally charged information. Additionally, they signalize emotional manipulation, the ease of reality, the creation of “WE vs THEY” movement within the politically touched media. Their goal is to mobilize the audience into action, to anger the consumer of media content or to simplify a complex problem. The image of THEY is created using expressive adjectives and sometimes unusual phrases (Schuppener et al., 2021). One of the typical characteristics of populist content is a higher frequency of repetition of emotional expressions. The creation of the enemy and the search for the culpable party emphasises the polarization of society, it divides it into the good and bad. The communicatively-oriented research, primarily focusing on expressions typical of the populist communication style, was examined by R. Štefančík (2025) on selected media texts of media statements of the Slovak coalition in 2023. The analysis reveals that the category of “enemy” (or “enemies”) is extensive for the new governing coalition. These encompass both internal enemies such as the media, NGOs, and George Soros, and external enemies such as illegal migrants and Western European states. Typical flag words in the time of crisis are “THEM”: “liberals”, “globalists”, “Brussels”, “the West”, “traitors”, “elite”, “media are lying”, “system” etc. The feeling of fellowship and moral superiority is painted into the expressions of irony of humankind, which suggests the existence of a homogenous “correct” group that is to say “WE”: “ordinary people”, “the majority of citizens”, “real Slovaks”, “voice of people”, “working nation” etc. The usage of expressions referencing fear, anger, threat, the feeling of guilt point to the emotionally charged content. Flag words suggest the desire to invoke a powerful emotion rather than rational argumentation: “shocking”, “catastrophe”, “threat”, “destruction of a nation”, “invasion”, “scandal”. The populists tend to reduce complex problems into much simpler yet unreal solutions: “immediately solving”, “suffice”, “just need to”, “simple solution”, “it is clear”. Flag words offer the black and white picture of the world through extreme absolutization and generalization of matters, for instance with the help of words such as “always”, “never”, “all”, “no one”, “the only truth”.

## Results

Stylistically symptomatic words signaled negative evaluation, negative connotation: “criminal corporations”, “financial groups/sharks”, “Satanists and fascists” which served as a reference to the conspiracies of world rulers, “cell cannibalism” as resistance to chemotherapy in relation to cancer treatment, “scum” as a declassed social group. We identified the aggregation of adjectives with a negative evaluation aspect serving as a tool to invoke syntactic expressiveness in following statements: “satanic and fascist associations”, “people nowadays lead their herds to even greater fear and demise”, “they were closing, forcibly curing and destroying our livelihood”, “non-scientific and segregated, even stupid precautions and statements of the pandemic”, “segregated and discriminatory precautions”.

Additionally, we identified expressive lexicon based on the dichotomy “WE vs THEM” as an adherent expressiveness in following statements: “anti-Slovak and anti-Slavic fascistic killer (in the phraseological meaning of destroyer)”, “satanic practices (in the meaning of intrigues)”, “tyrants (in the phraseological meaning of ‘the one who torments, terrorizes their environment’)”, “they will not pull in their tail (a phrase with a negative expressive reference - ‘to retreat’)”, “the loop progressively tightens (a phrase with the meaning of incoming doom)”, “the devil (expressively a person with many prominent, usually negative features)”, “Goyim-cattle (with an expressive meaning of taking likeness to an animal and possessing their urges)”, “over-motivated sanctions (the prefix over – pointing to expressiveness)”. The expressions in themselves profit from dysphemism, pejorative and vulgar words such as: “in-server” (a pejorative), “cursed solution” (in reference to vaccination), “the staging PANDEMIC” (in reference to the make-believe reality, enforced by the usage of introduction marks), “children only type into their phones” (in reference to shallow and consumer way of life), “slut” (a rough expression appointed to the former female president of the Slovak Republic, who was to fraternize with the West), “they are laughing into their faces” (an expressive phrase of the meaning of laughing on the expense of someone), “you voted the devils – Sulík, Kollár, Matovič, Čaputová and such dirt” (the expressive word “the devil” enforced by the negative pejorative effect of the word “dirt”).

Flag words and stigmatizing expressions were found in following media statements: “the Creator’s treatment”, “vaccination = fascism and dictatorship”, “the fear trade”, “a silent epidemic”, “segregation of the unvaccinated children”, “Aluminum as an adjuvant of vaccines”, “the real virus”, “a covidiant before court or in jail”, “criminal corporations such as Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson&Johnson”, “How much profit will arise from pharmaceutical and medical industries?”, “EU, NATO are satanic and fascistic associations”, “EU-Global criminal syndicate”, “liberal fascists”, “representatives of criminal fascist government”, “corrupt policemen”, “They want us to focus on Ukraine and blame Russia for economical devastation.”

Typical argumentative patterns based on the dichotomy “WE good ones vs Them bad ones” are characterized by statements: “they take part in homicide through wars and vaccines”, “to eliminate EU, NATO plus the developers of vaccines and all of their servants”. Next, we found following medical conspiracies in alternative media: “chemotherapy causes death”, “You are committing crime with every vaccination performed on a healthy individual or a child! WITH EACH ONE!”, “A breakthrough study revealed that four shots of covid vaccines are the culprits of total immunity collapse.”, “a vaccine that was falsely advertised to be effective”, “the genocide of own nation”, “THE REAL GOAL OF ALL THE CURRENT VACCINES = THE SPREAD OF DISEASES, CONSEQUENT

DEGENERATION AND ULTIMATE DEATH!”, “HPV vaccines are full of toxic substances”, “the vaccinators are primary killers”, “the injections of criminal companies!”. It is quite popular to multiply the negative tuning of content through linguistic units with negative meaning (Fraštková & Demčišák, 2025, p. 61). As it is, the narratives referring to the covid-19 pandemic are based on impactful emotional-expressive statements spreading alarm, distrust and fear, for instance: “the rehearsal of holocaust and mass homicide”, “Face masks cause insufficient flow of oxygen, which leads to irreparable damage on a developing brain and a decrease in intelligence by 20 percent”, “the plans to exterminate humanity through precautions, poisonous tests and vaccines!”, “dictation of the vaccines’ creators!”, “Lockdowns caused many disastrous physical and psychological issues in children, including the increase in suicides to a number for month that was attributed to a year in the past”.

Such narratives spreading conspiracy theories about the world domination founded upon the expressive presentations and negatively evaluating words which are the basis for the polarization of society and the diffusion of negative emotions: “EU forces nation rulers into the disruption of states”, “the European territory will be occupied and they will rape our women, our wives, our daughters!”, “This is not really a migration, rather that an import of an army of terrorists set to evoke chaos within the nation states.”, “possible outbreak of World war 3”, “Criminal satanic societies that have world domination and killings of the majority of the world population set as a main goal!”

Then we witness conspiracies linked to harmful radio waves and shocking discoveries of the extra-terrestrial civilisations about the rescue of habitants from the chemtrails, such conspiracies running freely through the alternative media on daily basis: “changes in one’s mood but also sharp headaches – probably a result of the bounce of the waves from the chemical layer in the sky”, “the Earth surface becomes progressively more inhabitable as a result of the fashion industry’s activities, radio waves and the desire to control weather – chemtrails”, “We will have to forsake radio waves altogether!”, “Humankind needs normal environment free of radio signals, we need more than GPS, mobile phones or the internet!”, “Thank you, boys: the Pleiadian spaceship cut through the chemtrail.”, “Humankind would be much more poisoned by the chemtrail and other similar substances if it was not for the work of these light creatures.”, “orbs such as the ones in the sky are moving so quickly that it is impossible for an ordinary human to see them”, “The light of the size of a much brighter star, that lit up every 43 seconds, only to turn off again. ...It must have been a UFO (unidentified flying object), for no one could identify it.”, “These chemicals and probably a technology named HAARP as well are a tool to modify both the weather and human thought.” Frankly, a huge part of the conspiracy theories is the questioning of scientific research and academic knowledge, as demonstrated: “meteorological textbooks mention chemtrail in a similar context – they were falsified long ago, so individual research speaks clearly”.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, the identification and exposure of the emotional-expressive lexicon and the definition of typical argumentative patters can serve the modern society as a prevention in the reveal of manipulative and persuasive strategies. The contributions have a multithematic character, meaning the versatility of contributions entices the readers to consume the content of the conspiracy theories and to spread it on directly, as follows: The health and anti-vaccination, The NATO’s aggressors, The European Union as a reason of a failure of the democratic system, The migrants and minority citizens are criminals, parasites, The corporate economic

system and capitalism, The hate to the sexual minorities and orbs. During the process of our research, we used lexical analysis to discern the alternative media's use of similar or even exact linguistic strategies within their conspiracy and manipulative statements. In Slovakia, such statements are spread by the alternative media such as Badatel.net, Davdva.sk, Napalete.sk, Slobodnyvysielac.sk, Infovojna, Kulturblog, Hlavnydennik.sk, Bibliik.sk, Rizikaockovania.sk, Infohrot.sk, Eurorespekt.sk.

As it is, alternative media incorporate sharp nationalist, xenophobic or extremist statements into their articles, which attack the very ideals of humanism such as liberty and democracy, moral action or protection of human rights, tolerance, respect of others and the openness to consider their arguments. Alternative media usually present only one truth that was created by "US" (the only just people) and paint "THEM" as the opposite party that is responsible for all the bad in the world. When it comes to manipulators within the mass communication, they tend to be politicians, media workers or artists, but they can also be healers, even proper physicians. Importantly, their formal performance has physical effects on the audience (charm, sympathies), but also verbal ones as well (the use of foreign words, phrases, syntactic structure inserts, uncommon grammatical tools such as transitional and passive forms of verbs).

Unfortunately, building resistance to media manipulation and social media conspiracies is a systemic process. Nobody can resist such manipulation and disinformation in full – the only distinction between people is the level of resistance possessed by individualists. That is how we can determine the resistance of society as a whole. Additionally, academic environment carries the potential to prevent such negative manipulative influence within the social media. Consequently, training and strengthening the abilities to identify and expose toxic media content on social media can contribute to the establishment of healthy and safe relationship between the students and also to the establishment of correct and respectful communication within the academic environment. Strategies eliminating manipulation in the media space are possible to recognize, consequently to train and implement in education in relation to prevention of any possible negative impact on the student, but also on the educational process in whole.

When it comes to media and interdisciplinary education related to the ability to resist media manipulation, it is imperative to expand one's "digital immune system", which is established upon adequate critical thinking. Critical thinking is a powerful tool in resisting manipulation (on social media). We can train it by doing following primary actions: discussion (shared thinking with teachers, students, parents are the best filter), posing of questions, argumentation, active listening. Within the course of academic practice, critical thinking can be developed with simple key questions regarding an article on the internet: Who was the author and why did he publish the article? Who is this article serving? For instance, students of intersubject education should have the opportunity to recognize such manipulative techniques of common and frequent internet manipulation. They should identify the Clickbait technique (big shocking title to draw attention and to reach optimal sharing and spread of disinformation). Next, they should be able to discern an effective strategy using disinformation, hoaxes and half-truths abused to manipulate information (manipulation in itself often combines truth and lies in order to appear trustworthy). Also, they should identify Deepfakes manipulation, video edits and their convincing yet falsified visual content. In addition, they should detect the technique of social pressure ("they are all sharing it, so you should too"), the technique of challenge "share it now" (manipulative pressure to act quickly without the thorough understanding of the text), the technique of repetitive content display,

the technique of emotional manipulation where emotion is a warning signal (manipulation aims for fear, anger, any negative emotions, invokes outrage). Importantly, it takes a lengthy training in order to control one's emotions to resist such manipulation – if something was to evoke a very strong feeling, it is advised to step back from the statement in question, to take a proper pause and only then share one's opinion on the matter. The very goal of manipulators on the internet is for the user of social media to react quickly, without thinking, but with a great emotion indeed.

Finally, we can implement satisfactory education in the familiar, academic and media environment, so that young content consumers can learn to identify and select suitable/unsuitable content and to eliminate harmful media content. There are many internet sites available within the media space that are able to increase the protection of an internet user, such as [bezpecnenainternete.sk](https://bezpecnenainternete.sk), [factcheck.org](https://factcheck.org), [fullcheck.app](https://fullcheck.app), [konspiratori.sk](https://konspiratori.sk), [facebook.com/hoaxyapodvody](https://facebook.com/hoaxyapodvody) and other educational platforms.

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