

Construction of the collective identity by means of online petitions

Online petitioning is part of nowadays 'repertoire of claim-making routines' (Tilly 2006:34-35), and the existing variety of petitioning platforms brings it within anyone's reach. This entails extremely diverse formulations and tones in the text of the petitions, compared to the paper genre. Moreover, the text of the petition itself is more than a text: it contains hyperlinks, hashtags, pictures, videos, etc.; and, compared to paper petitions, online petitions also consist in comments added by the signatories, likes, updates by the initiators, metrics, etc. (Cozma&Lehti 2021).

In this paper, I will address the construction of the collective identity in online petitions. A central feature of the genre is that the initiator - whether an individual or an association - includes in the text of the petition the signatories to come, and asserts a set of shared values (Boure&Bousquet 2011:304). The construction of the collective identity is essential, as it plays two argumentative roles: to persuade the signatories, and to persuade the addressees.

The data consists of 55 petitions collected from Change.org (France) in April 2023. The petitions are taken from all four sections displayed on the platform (Featured, Popular, Recent, Victories), in order to ensure a variety within the data. The analysis draws on notions of the French pragmatic approach, such as enunciation, deixis and modalisation (cf. Johansson&Suomela-Salmi 2011), speech acts (Searle 1969), and issues related to the use of hyperlinks (Turow&Tsui, eds. 2008).

The aim of this paper is to study the variety of means used to create a collective identity. The results indicate that this identity is not always expressed with the pronoun 'us' in the text, but is rather built on explicit and inferred shared values. The updates by the initiator of the petition and the comments section play a major role in creating collective identity. Expressive speech acts also contribute to this shared identity (while the core of the petition is generically a directive speech act, i.e. the claim that is made). The use of hyperlinks shows that, indeed, petitions are part of a repertoire of activism, and the broader action should be taken into account.

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