Writing across the University of Alberta

To Read or Not to Read: Analyzing Rhetoric in Three Academic Articles on the Relationship Between the COVID-19 Pandemic and Suicidality

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Introduction

Students in this WRS class were asked to analyze the rhetorical strategies used by authors to persuade their audience. Valeriya Sytnik analyzes three academic articles and reveals how researchers use features of the genre of academic articles to convince readers.

Keywords: Rhetorical analysis, argumentation, academic writing, suicide, Covid-19

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Rhetoric is a powerful tool that is used not only to constructively inform or genuinely inspire, but ultimately to win over the audience. This report aims to examine how rhetoric is structured within the genre of argumentative research articles. To this end, three peer-reviewed academic papers from the same discipline of psychology were selected. All were published in the past three years and focus on the same topic of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on suicidality. These articles are:

1. *Association Between SARS-CoV-2 Infection and Self-Harm: Danish Nationwide Register-Based Cohort Study* by Annette Erlangsen et al. (2023);
2. *Trends in Depressive Symptoms and Suicidality of South Korean Adolescents: Comparison of Expected and Observed Prevalence During the COVID-19 Pandemic* by Hyejin Kim et al. (2022);
3. *Crisis Response and Suicidal Patterns in U.S. Youth Before and During COVID-19: A Latent Class Analysis* by Jennifer D. Runkle et al. (2021).

These articles will henceforth be referred to as Article 1, Article 2, and Article 3. This report will dissect and juxtapose five rhetorical aspects of the articles, each addressed in a corresponding section: rhetorical situation, rhetorical strategies, macro-organization, micro-organization, and argument organization. Appendix A provides specific examples of rhetorical aspects of each article. Through this critical analysis, this report will answer the following question: How do the chosen articles use the general rhetorical rules of their shared genre to achieve their specific rhetorical objectives? In other words, how effective are these articles in captivating their readers to the extent that they would feel compelled to continue flipping or scrolling through the articles' pages?

Rhetorical Situation

Published during the same historical period by authors from the same area of expertise, all three articles focus on the same specific topic. They were written over the span of three years in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic by leading scholars in the fields of infectious disease epidemiology, mental health, and suicide research and prevention. Although these studies were conducted in three different countries (Denmark, Korea, and the USA) and used different population samples (Article 1 focused on adults while Articles 2 and 3 studied adolescents), all three examined the association between COVID-19 risk and suicidal ideations.

Since all three studies pursue the same general purpose of filling a research gap, they all take on the same form and address the same audience. Each article represents an academic research paper: Article 1 is a cohort study, Article 2 is a descriptive study, and Article 3 is a latent class analysis. Consequently, all three are primarily aimed at the academic community. While Articles 1 and 2 also target the government agencies that provided the data, Article 3 engages practicing crisis counselors. In addition, all three articles unintentionally communicate their findings to the general public, who may be concerned about the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health.

Given that three articles have their own specific research goals, they put forth different thesis statements and adopt different narrative tones. Article 1 delivers an encouraging message of no correlation found between COVID-19 infection and suicidal thoughts, assuming an affirmative stance expressed through concise, to-the-point sentences. Article 2 presents its surprising results of low indicators of depression and suicidality associated with COVID-19-related restrictions, providing an abundance of information in a calm, measured voice. Article 3 conveys its alerting findings of the adverse effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on eleven crisis concern markers, using detailed explanations in simple, accessible language. Despite these differences, the underlying writing style of all three papers remains formal and professional.

Rhetorical Strategies

While all three articles use one particular common method to build their ethos, each also uses unique strategies. All articles base their claims on solid evidence derived from the analysis of ample data. Article 1 includes the entire Danish adult population of over 4.4 million people, Article 2 uses a sample of more than one million teenagers, and Article 3 deals with close to six million crisis text messages. Concurrently, the authors of Article 1 demonstrate a cautious attitude towards their work by discussing their findings from opposing viewpoints. The authors of Article 2 display their in-depth knowledge of the subject by placing a huge emphasis on a literature review. The authors of Article 3 present their meticulous approach to research by revealing the sequential relationship among psychological responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of their variety or similarity, all of these rhetorical tactics serve the single goal of establishing trust.

The given articles take three drastically different approaches to constructing their pathos. Article 1 opts for a people-oriented approach. By using comprehensive national data of all Danish people and focusing on all vulnerable population groups, irrespective of their gender, ethnic background, or sexual orientation, Article 1 fosters a feeling of relatedness in readers. Article 2 employs an innovative approach. By declaring itself as the first study to investigate the link between the COVID-19 pandemic and suicidality in Korean adolescents, and noting that its findings align with those found in other countries, Article 2 evokes an emotion of excitement in readers. Article 3 leverages a problem-solving approach. By explaining the problem of worrying long-term signs of suicidal rates and offering a solution in the form of accessible and affordable mental health support, Article 3 elicits a feeling of gratitude in readers. All in all, all these tactics are created to remind readers that they are not alone.

The three chosen articles also implement substantially different methods when shaping their logos. Article 1 develops a robust research method that involves constant comparison of the study's specific findings with existing general ones. This continuous evaluation of its results against a set benchmark enables Article 1 to support the logic of its reassuring message. Article 2 delves into an extensive literature review to provide a comprehensive explanation of the cause-and-effect of its findings. This thorough exploration of the topic allows Article 2 to validate the logic of its discovery. Article 3 incorporates a modern text-based platform into its study to explore a cutting-edge technological solution to the issue at hand. The demonstration of the benefits of using this platform allows Article 3 to rationalize the logic of its proposition. Although different, all these strategies aim to solidify the logic of each article's deductions in the readers' minds.

Macro-Organization

By virtue of their common genre, all three articles adhere to the IMRD model of organizational structure, with clear Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion sections, supplemented by Abstract, References, and other miscellaneous sections. All articles: feature Abstracts of similar length (270, 210, 260 words) with the same sections (Purpose, Methods, Results, Conclusions); incorporate literature reviews into their untitled Introduction sections; integrate their Conclusions into Discussion sections; and use generic titles for sections and descriptive ones for sub-sections. The only two deviations from the model are observed in Article 1, which has two additional sub-sections (Background and Keywords) in its Abstract, and in Article 2, which lacks a title for its Strengths and Limitations sub-section in the Discussion.

Due to their individual features, each of the three articles prioritizes a particular section of their structure over the others. As Article 1 attaches great importance to its research method, it devotes more sub-sections (7, 5, 5) and more words (1310, 1010, 990) to its Method section. Since Article 2 takes pride in its literature review, it boasts a 1.6 times longer list of references (35, 56, 35) and twice the number of words in the Discussion section (730, 2040, 1390). Since Article 3 highlights its technological solution, it allocates more sub-sections (3, 2, 5) and more words (1040, 900, 1250) to the Results section. These considerations are also manifested in the word count of articles' Introductions (540, 620, 390).

Micro-Organization

The unique characteristics of the articles are reflected not only in their rhetoric and macro-organization but also in their micro-structures. This is evident in the analysis of the rhetorical moves in paragraphs on Limitations in the Discussion sections, for example. Article 1 presents only one major limitation, entirely devoted to its research data. The sentences are structured with the help of rhetorical moves that alternate between introducing six causes of that limitation and their implications. Article 2 stresses suggestions for future research. It uses rhetorical moves to numerically list the study's limitations, introduce them, explain their causes, and then advise on future research. Article 3 promotes the benefits of its technological platform. It employs rhetorical moves to introduce not only the platform's limitations but also justifications for them. The diversity of objectives for these rhetorical moves ensures a lack of repetition both within and across all three articles.

The specific rhetorical goals of the articles dictate the number of rhetorical moves in each of them. The Limitations paragraph in Article 1 has a medium number of words (257), with 54% being allocated to 20 rhetorical moves across 11 sentences. This coincides with Article 1's principle of using no more and no fewer words than necessary to get its point across. The Limitations paragraph in Article 2 produces the highest number of words (412), with 58% dedicated to 34 rhetorical moves in 20 sentences. This shows that Article 2 seizes every opportunity to share its insights from the existing academic discourse. The Limitations paragraph in Article 3 contains the least number of words (195), with 37% comprising 8 rhetorical moves in 7 sentences. This indicates Article 3's intention to let the positive aspects of the technological platform overshadow the negative ones. Thus, the statistics on the articles' words speak louder about their rhetoric than the words themselves.

Argument Organization

The three articles share similarities in the placement of their arguments, but diverge in the types of evidence used to support those arguments. All three articles use indirect arguments, positioning their research questions in the Introduction sections and providing answers to those questions in the first and final paragraphs of the Discussion sections. While both Article 1 and Article 2 source their research data from government agencies, Article 1 uses numerical data to form quantitative evidence, whereas Article 2 deals with questionnaires to produce qualitative evidence. Even though Article 3 exploits numerical data to generate quantitative evidence, like Article 1, it obtains its data from a non-profit organization. Hence, the different rhetorical purposes of the articles are supported by largely the same argument organization.

The selected articles also vary in their choice of the number of tables and figures to develop their visual arguments. Article 1 uses a balanced combination of two tables and two figures, located and distributed at quarter marks of the Results section. This choice underlines the highly organized nature of Article 1, with a laser focus on clarity and precision. Article 2 uses four groups of figures, each containing three graphs, found in the Results section, and only 1 table is referred to in the Methods, Results, and Discussion sections. This choice is attributed to the largest number of population subgroups of Article 2 and its commitment to explaining the cause-and-effect correlations between them. Article 3 uses four tables and only one figure, consisting of three bar charts, all situated in the Results section. This choice is due to the widest range of psychological responses that Article 3 considers in order to spotlight the encompassing potential of the studied technological platform. So, the different rhetorical purposes of the articles are expressed through different visual tools.

Conclusion

This report compares and contrasts the ways in which three chosen articles apply the rhetorical rules of their common genre of academic research papers to their specific rhetorical purposes. To convey a hopeful message derived from a sophisticated research method, Article 1 employs an authoritative voice, a humanistic approach, self-reflective evaluations, an emphasized Methods section, moderate use of words, and balanced visual aids. To comment on positive findings obtained through deep excavations of existing evidence, Article 2 resorts to a calming narrative, a pioneering approach, a wealth of sources, an emphasized Discussion section, extensive use of words, and numerous graphs. To send an urgent warning based on complex analysis of multiple variables, Article 3 chooses an approachable tone, a resolution-seeking approach, a technological solution, an emphasized Results section, a limited number of words, and a bounty of tables. Although working in different ways within one genre, the authors of all three articles do everything in their rhetorical power to ensure that the choice for their readers would not be as difficult as the one faced by Hamlet.

Works Cited

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Appendix A

Article 1		
Sentence	**Rhetorical Purpose**	**Rhetorical Move**
1	Acknowledging limitations	"Limitations of our study include the fact that it is possible that ___"
	Presenting alternatives	"___ or ___ instead of ___"
	Highlighting conservative estimates	"___, which is likely to have made our estimates conservative."
2	Providing historical context	"Yet, it was only at the end of ___ that ___"
3	Introducing condition/reason	"Given that ___, our findings are not representative for that period."
	Identifying causality	"___ caused by ___"
4	Describing tendencies	"___ less inclined to ___"
	Acknowledging/explaining potential bias	"___, which might imply some bias in those estimates."
5	Discussing implications	"Although the wider definition of ___ is likely to ___,
	Referencing previous studies	"___, which has previously been used in other investigations, ___"
6	Adding information	"Also, ___"
	Explaining outcomes	"___ resulting in ___"
7	Discussing potential bias in subgroups	"It is possible that members of the examined study subgroups were more (or less) inclined to ___ than ___"
	Explaining reasons/conditions	"___, which could bias our estimates, ___"
	Providing examples	"___, e.g. ___"
8	Presenting possibilities	"It is also possible that___"
9	Acknowledging a lack of information	"We did not have confirmative information that ___"
10	Discussing constraints due to sample size	"The small numbers prevented us from examining ___"
11	Identifying omitted factors	"Potentially relevant but not included factors, such as ___ or ___"
	Discussing potential confounders	"___ might have acted as confounders."

Appendix A, continued

Article 2		
Sentence	**Rhetorical Purpose**	**Rhetorical Move**
1	Stating limitations of the study	“There are several limitations to the current study.”
2	Introducing the first limitation	“First, ___”
	Describing the method of measurement	“___ were measured by ___”
3	Drawing a conclusion based on the previous statement	“Therefore, ___”
	Suggesting a potential underestimation of the study's findings	“___observed in this study could be underestimated.”
4	Transitioning to a contrasting point	“Nevertheless, ___”
	Establishing a comparison between two entities	“___ have comparability in that ___”
5	Introducing the second limitation	“Second, ___”
	Discussing the validity of the measurement	“___ the measure of ___ used in ___ were not validated in ___ population.”
6	Transitioning to a contrasting point	“However, ___”
	Asserting the validity and reliability	“___the validity and reliability of the measures in ___ were reported to be satisfactory.”
7	Recommending further studies on a specific topic	“Further studies should examine ____, especially in terms of ___”
8	Introducing the third limitation	“Third, ___”
	Providing reasoning for a specific situation or result	“___ because ___”
9	Transitioning to a contrasting point	“Although ___”
	Discussing the inability to extrapolate prevalence from the study	“___we cannot extrapolate the prevalence of ___ among ___ from the study.”
10	Adding additional information or points	“In addition, ___”
	Comparing two quantities or values	“___ was slightly lower than ___”

Appendix A, continued

Article 2, continued		
Sentence	**Rhetorical Purpose**	**Rhetorical Move**
11	Describing steps taken to minimize bias in the study	"In order to minimize the possibility of selection bias, we used ___ to estimate ___ that ___"
12	Referring to an external source or study	"According to ___"
13	Establishing similarity between two entities	"___ similar to ___"
	Discussing the deviation of the data	"___ the deviation of ___ was not large ___"
	Validating the representativeness of the data	"___, which validates the representativeness of ___"
14	Introducing the fourth limitation	"Fourth, ___"
15	Explaining the method used in the study	"___we could not use ___ but instead relied on ___"
16	Comparing results from different studies or methods	"Although the previous study supported that ___ the results of ___ using ___ may differ from those of this study."
	Validating the method used in the study	"___ be as valid as ___"
17	Adding additional information or points	"In addition, ___"
	Discussing potential bias in the classification	"___ the reclassification of ___ into ___ might introduce misclassification bias."
18	Interpreting findings	"The findings of ___ should therefore be interpreted as ___"
	Suggesting future research directions	"___ and further research ___ is necessary in order to validate the results."
19	Introducing the final point or limitation	"Finally, ___"
20	Comparing results from different studies	"Although a previous study using ___ showed similar results to the findings of this study, ___"
	Discussing potential differences between two entities	"___ might differ from ___"

Appendix A, continued

Article 3		
Sentence	**Rhetorical Purpose**	**Rhetorical Move**
1	Introducing the limitations of the study	"There are a few limitations that must be considered in interpreting results."
3	Recommending further research	"Future research should use ___ to examine ___"
4	Discussing results	"Results are from ___ and may not be generalized to ___ as a whole."
5	Transitioning to a contrasting point	"However, given ___"
6	Introducing the final point/limitation	"Finally, ___"
6	Discussing the inability to determine causality or correlation	"___ are not ___ nor can we determine if ___"
6	Questioning causality or correlation	"___ if ___ is due to a corresponding increase in ___ or ___"
7	Validating results from prior studies	"Results from prior studies using ___ have been validated using ___"