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Encountering Hedging in Advertising Discourse: Implications for Consumer Education in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements have become a salient feature in our daily life. With fierce brand competition in the market, we now encounter products, services and ideas through many types of platforms, from the traditional print materials to digital and social media platforms. In this digital era, advertising discourse has been much embedded in daily media use through entertainment, influencer content and even personalised recommendations generated by algorithms. This study observes the use of hedging as a dual linguistic strategy in contemporary advertising discourse as part of its persuasive technique. Applying a qualitative discourse analysis of 30 print advertisements, influencer promotions and AI-mediated advertising contents, this study draws on insights from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The analysis indicates that hedges do not only show uncertainty, but also function as conviction markers that strengthen persuasive messages. The use of hedges allows advertisers and content creators to suggest effectiveness, objectivity and credibility of the advertising claims while at the same time reduces the level of commitment towards the claims and provide some kind of discursive protection. The findings point towards the importance of developing critical linguistic awareness as part of consumer education in the digital age. It is the premise of the study that learning to evaluate persuasive language does not have to be taught in formal educational settings, but can also be achieved through everyday encounters with advertising in real-world environments, particularly in the current digital situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertisements for products, services and ideas permeate our daily lives. Myriads of advertisements appear in various media platforms, from traditional print materials to digital and social media ones. The development of digital technologies, especially artificial intelligence (AI), social media and algorithm-based recommender systems has made advertising become more closely connected to people's everyday media use. Thus, advertisements now are not limited to newspapers, magazines or television only. Instead, advertisers have utilised the digital platforms and people's shopping preferences, resulting in more advertisements appearing in social media feeds, influencer posts, sponsored content and AI-generated promotional messages. However, the aim of advertising remains the same, that is, to introduce and hook

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people's interest on the product, creating their desire based on the claimed benefits of the product, and ultimately, lead them to conviction, i.e to trust and buy the product.

Studies have shown that digital marketing is different from traditional mass advertising (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Boerman, van Reijmersdal & Neijens, 2017). In the former, the digital platforms allow advertisers to create and send personalised and targeted messages to specific audiences. Thus, most advertisements on these platforms appear to be informal and friendly, often present themselves as sharing and providing useful information for the audiences rather than direct promotion (Lou & Yuan, 2019). As a result, there seems to be a thin line between persuasion in advertising and everyday communication. This clever manipulation in advertising has raised concerns about how persuasive messages are presented and how consumers understand and evaluate the credibility of advertising claims in digital environments. Rader & Gray (2015) has put forward that persuasion has become pervasive in everyday digital environments, frequently embedded within entertainment content, lifestyle advice and personalised recommendations rather than appearing as explicit attempts to influence audiences.

The words used in advertisements play an important role in building credibility, managing claims and guiding how audiences understand the message. Persuasion can be initially influenced by visual design, platform features and algorithmic targeting in advertising. However, the final influence is usually the message expressed through language. Empirical studies on advertising discourse indicate that the wording crafted in advertisements can strongly affect how claims are interpreted (Cook, 2001; Myers, 1994). The advertisements may be seen as factual, trustworthy, otherwise. Thus, the choice of wording is very important as it can act as a linguistic strategy that can shape persuasion in a subtle way.

Among the linguistic resources commonly employed in advertisements is hedging. Words and phrases such as modal verbs, approximators, probability expressions and vague quantifiers are employed to soften claims, show caution and present reasonable rather than definite statements. Advertising discourse that contains hedges can make messages sound more balanced, objective and trustworthy, helping increase consumer acceptance of advertising claims (Cook, 2001). However, research has shown that hedging does not only signal uncertainty but also allows speakers or writers manage commitment, engage audiences and balance assertion with caution (Hyland, 1996; Andriani, 2019). In advertising, such vagueness is simply not included by chance but serves important pragmatic and persuasive purposes (Myers, 1994; Yang, 2019). It allows advertisers to suggest effectiveness and credibility of a product, while at the same time limiting their responsibility for the accuracy or results of the claims. As put forward by Fuertes-Olivera et al. (2001) and Yang (2019), hedging can act as a strategic linguistic tool that strengthens persuasive messages while providing protection for advertisers and content creators.

Although there have been myriads of studies on hedging in various field, this persuasive linguistic in advertisement has not been widely researched, especially across different advertising platforms, including print media, influencer marketing and AI-generated content. The present study examined the use of hedges in three advertising platforms, i.e print advertisements, influencer marketing and AI-mediated promotional content. The study aims to contribute to consumer education in the digital age and highlights the need to develop critical linguistic awareness beyond formal classroom learning.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

- i. What are the most common hedging strategies used in advertisements across print, influencer and AI-generated contexts?
- ii. How does hedging function as a conviction marker to construct credibility and trust?
- iii. In what ways do AI-generated advertisements adopt human-like hedging patterns to enhance persuasive appeal?

The study hopes to contribute to critical discourse awareness in the age of digital marketing and underscores the need for consumers to learn to evaluate persuasive language employed in real-world digital environments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Hedging as a Persuasive Linguistic Strategy

Academic and professional writing studies have shown that hedging functions as a linguistic tool to express uncertainty, politeness or caution (Hyland, 1998; Hyland, 2017; Hyland & Jiang, 2021). However, in persuasive communication, especially advertisements, the role of hedging goes beyond expressing uncertainty or caution. Phrases and expressions such as “may”, “could”, “often”, “generally”, “up to” and “most users” plays a more complex role. They can also function as rhetorical devices that allow flexibility while maintaining credibility of the claims.

Research on metadiscourse has demonstrated that hedging allows writers and speakers to make persuasive claims without committing to a single position (Hyland, 2017). The presence of hedges in the claims, thus, can leave room for alternative interpretations. As put forward by Hyland (2017), hedging helps writers position themselves by showing awareness of possible disagreement or uncertainty. In the same vein, hedges in advertising discourse can increase the perceived credibility of the message although the advertisers are aware of the uncertainty of their product claims. Thus, to avoid appearing dishonest, hedges are used to make the claims appear more reasonable and credible. Such strategy and its effects have been reported in earlier studies, where cautious language of hedges is associated with honesty and professionalism in persuasive texts (Myers, 1994; Cook, 2001).

The persuasive strength of hedging is in its ability to appear confident but cautious at the same time. For example, modal verbs like “may” or “might” shows the claims are possible but not necessarily guaranteed. Similarly, quantifiers such as “many” or “most” only suggest general acceptance without providing exact figures that can strengthen credibility. Further examples include approximators such as “around” or “up to” that make numerical claims appear realistic rather than exaggerated. Passive constructions, for example, “clinically tested”, also contribute to the persuasive effect by creating an impression of scientific authority while avoiding specific details about the tests (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The hedging strategy helps advertisers build a credibility tone that encourages consumer trust. This corroborates with findings that hedging in advertising can soften claims and reinforce perceived credibility which makes claims more persuasive and managing uncertainty at the same time (Fuertes-Olivera, Nielsen & Tarp, 2001). Observing from a pragmatic perspective, qualifiers used in advertising aligns with cooperative principles to influence audience interpretation (Yang, 2019). This confirms that hedging is pivotal in persuasive domains, especially advertising, in which credibility must be kept despite uncertain outcomes.

In general, hedging can be realised in the use of lexical and grammatical resources which allow speakers and writers to control their commitment to a statement. It has been emphasised that hedges serve both epistemic and interpersonal functions as they express possibility, reduce assertiveness and help manage responsibility (Lakoff, 1973; Hyland, 1998; Hyland, 2017). In advertising discourse, there are five common types of hedges: i) modal verbs, ii) approximators, iii) quantifiers, iv) passive constructions and v) adverbs of frequency or probability. These categories and their functions and examples are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of Common Hedges and the Functions

Type	Function	Examples
Modal verbs	To suggest possibility rather than certainty, or to imply benefits without guarantees	<i>may reduce dark spots;</i> <i>might improve sleep quality;</i>
Approximators	To soften numerical precision, or present best-case outcomes while remaining non-committal	<i>lose up to 5 kg in 3 weeks;</i> <i>as little as 10 minutes a day;</i>
Quantifiers	To evoke social proof through vague majority claims, or to imply broad acceptance	<i>most users saw results;</i> <i>many customers agree;</i>
Passive Constructions	To convey authority and scientific legitimacy while obscuring agency and accountability	<i>clinically tested;</i> <i>proven to improve skin texture;</i>
Adverbs of Frequency or Probability	To express probabilistic outcomes that appear common yet allow exceptions	<i>skin usually looks firmer;</i> <i>results often visible in 14 days;</i>

Based on the description, it can be seen that hedges are actually a resource for building conviction. The use of hedges enables advertisers to present claims as careful, reasonable and trustworthy, while at the same time avoid direct responsibility. In turn, this can increase audience acceptance. Recognising the different types of hedges and their functions can, thus, aid the critical interpretation of persuasive language.

2.2 Hedging in Advertising Discourse

Advertising language is purposely designed to present products and services in a positive and appealing way so as to influence people's attitudes and behaviours towards the desired action. Thus, advertisements often use carefully selected language to suggest benefits while avoiding direct promises and commitment. As Cook (2001) explains, advertising discourse balances persuasion and caution and encourages favourable interpretations without stating claims that can be easily challenged.

Hedges are universally used in advertisements regardless of the platforms used. In print advertising, for example, hedging is a common feature in making promotional messages appear more objective, reasonable, and factual. Vague or non-absolute expressions such as approximators (e.g. "up to 70% improvement") and indefinite quantifiers (e.g. "most users" or "many customers") function persuasively by encouraging consumers to infer success and reliability. Such language use allows advertisers to sound precise but at the same time leaving room for interpretation (Cook, 2001; Varttala, 2001; Yang, 2019). Advertisers rely on the hedged expressions as the claims are not absolute, making them difficult to refute. This provides advertisers with some form of linguistic protection as the claims only imply effectiveness or scientific credibility without having to provide proofs of evidence.

In the same vein, hedging is also widely employed in influencer marketing. At the surface level, influencers' promotional messages are often framed as personal experiences or honest and friendly advice. Analysis of the language use will find personal and cautious expressions such as "this might help you sleep better" or "it may work differently" in their speech for everyone to create a sense of authenticity. Research on influencer advertising suggests that such language use can increase perceived trustworthiness and reduces audience resistance. This is because the message appears less commercial and more sincere (Abidin, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019). However, the audience may not realise that the hedged expressions actually shift responsibility away from the influencer by presenting outcomes as subjective or uncertain – exactly a role played by hedging.

The rise of artificial intelligence has made hedging even more prominent in AI-generated promotional content. Since AI systems generate product descriptions based on algorithm, AI-generated campaigns often rely on existing modal verbs and probability expressions, such as "may", "could" and "often", to avoid making incorrect claims. Sui (2025) investigated how AI-generated texts express subjectivity and how AI mimics human language features. The findings reported that AI content shows stronger patterns of subjectivity than human-written texts. This suggests that AI outputs may exhibit higher levels of subjectivity and emotional appeal that can influence how persuasive or trustworthy messages are perceived (Sui, 2025). Along the same line, Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens (2017) put forward that when combined with algorithmic personalisation, hedged messages may become particularly persuasive as they are tailored to individual users while maintaining an appearance of objectivity.

Although there has been extensive research on hedging in academic and professional genres, its role in advertising discourse, particularly in the new media of advertising, i.e. influencers and AI-generated content, has received less attention. Research on advertising has focused more on the persuasion features such as emotional appeal, visual design, or consumer psychology, rather than on how linguistic strategies soften certainty to strengthen persuasion. This study addresses this gap by examining hedging as a conviction marker - a linguistic resource that enhances persuasive impact by appearing careful, reasonable and trustworthy. In a media environment where consumers encounter advertising across multiple platforms, understanding how hedging works is not only a linguistic concern but also an important aspect of consumer education and critical digital literacy.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study to examine how hedging is used in advertisements across three platforms of promotional contents: print media, influencer marketing and AI-generated. To do this, a qualitative discourse analysis approach that was foregrounded by insights from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), was adopted. It is important to note that the SFL and CDA frameworks were not applied as fixed coding systems, but were employed as interpretive tools to explain how hedging functions linguistically and socially in advertising discourse.

3.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) examines how language works in social contexts. Language in SFL operates through three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Hedged expressions, which work largely on inference and interpretation, are closely connected to interpersonal metafunction. This is because the expressions indicate how speakers express their attitudes, negotiate relationships, and position themselves towards their audience. Since the current study's main objective is to identify how hedging is used to construct credibility and trust, SFL is only used at a functional level rather than through detailed grammatical coding. The functional level analysis included how hedged expressions, like modal verbs, approximators and vague quantifiers, help advertisers manage certainty, credibility and alignment with consumers.

In advertising, hedging is linked to interpersonal metafunction as it also involves modality that indicates the certainty of a statement. Modality choices in advertising discourse show how strongly a claim is presented. The modal 'may', for example, can either express possibility or certainty. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) stated that with modality writers or speakers can adjust their level of commitment and responsibility. In this way, hedges can serve a dual function – they help advertisers appear cautious and reasonable, but at the same time still suggest favourable outcomes to the audience.

In addition, SFL also underlines the concept of appraisal especially in the system of engagement. This refers to how speakers open up or limit alternative viewpoints (Martin & White, 2005). In this concept, hedges function as engagement sources. This is because the expressions somewhat invite audience to agree with the claims without forcing it. For example, the claim "This product usually works for me", usually allows for different experiences and this encourages audiences to accept the claim more easily.

3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

As mentioned earlier, language is viewed as a source for making meaning in SFL. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), on the other hand, describes discourse as a form of social practice. CDA explains the reasons for the linguistic choices. This, in turn, reflects and shapes the power relations and ideologies behind it (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk (2017). In terms of advertising discourse, it is not seen as neutral communication. Rather, it is viewed as a carefully planned discourse that promotes consumption and normalises commercial values.

Fairclough (2015) proposed three level of analysing discourse: i) textual level, that focuses on linguistic features such as hedging; ii) discursive practice level, that gives attention to how advertising messages are produced and received; and iii) social practice level, that considers how the claims support trust, expertise and authority in consumer culture. Taken together, from a CDA perspective, the use of hedging can be regarded as a strategy of legalising the claims (van Leeuwen, 2008). By using the hedged-expressions, advertisers and content creators can appear responsible, scientific or authentic, but at the same time avoid full accountability for their claims. Employing CDA in this study could explain how such linguistic choices contribute to the shifting of responsibility away from those who produce the message.

Having looked at how both SFL and CDA were operationalised in this study, it is important to emphasise that the SFL and CDA frameworks were used to treat hedging as a socially meaningful persuasive resource

rather than a grammatical feature. Hedging, thus, should be understood as a means for managing uncertainty, building trust and maintaining persuasive influence in advertising discourse.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative discourse-analytic design in investigating the use of hedging in contemporary advertising discourse. Since the study focused on understanding how language is used to construct meaning, credibility, and persuasion instead of measuring frequency or statistical patterns, the choice of qualitative approach was, thus, justified. Not only that, discourse analysis also allows how linguistic choices function within specific social and communicative contexts is examined (Gee, 2014). The focus on the analytical depth and variation in discourse types is, thus, appropriate for qualitative discourse studies (Paltridge, 2012).

As mentioned previously, the analysis was within the principles of the SFL and CDA. These frameworks were only employed as interpretive standpoint rather than as the common coding procedures in most SFL and CDA studies. This is because the objective of the study was to understand how hedging functions linguistically and socially across different advertising platforms, not instead of yielding grammatical explanation.

The study adhered to ethical standards outlined by the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. All influencer materials were drawn from publicly available content without personal identifiers beyond public usernames. Since AI-generated advertisements do not involve human participants, and the analysis only focused on linguistic patterns rather than brand evaluation or product endorsement, ethical concerns were, thus, minimal.

4.2 Data Collection

The data set consists of 30 advertising texts that were extracted from three different platforms: i) print advertisements, ii) influencer advertisements, and iii) AI-generated advertisements. The advertisements were collected between January and August 2025. These three platforms were selected as they reflected both traditional and emerging forms of advertising. This would allow comparison across platforms. The decision to include AI-generated advertisements was due to recent concerns with regard to the growing role of algorithmic systems in forming persuasive communication (Kietzmann et al., 2018; Floridi et al., 2018).

The advertisements were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

- i. the advertisements must be in English to ensure a valid and consistent comparison
- ii. the advertisements must present explicit promotional intent
- iii. the advertisements must contain the presence of evaluative or claim-making language

Table 2 shows the categories of the advertisements.

Table 2. Categories of Dataset

Type of Advertisements	Description	Number (n)
Print advertisements	Extracted from digital magazines and product websites, focusing on health, skincare, and lifestyle goods.	10
Influencer advertisements	Transcribed from YouTube and TikTok promotional segments featuring personal endorsements.	10
AI-generated advertisements	Created using publicly available AI writing tools (ChatGPT 4, Jasper AI, Writesonic), prompted with identical product descriptions to ensure comparability.	10

All examples were limited to English-language texts to maintain consistency in linguistic analysis. To ensure authenticity, AI-generated outputs were maintained without manual editing to capture how machine

discourse naturally incorporates hedging. Figure 1 presents some of the print and AI-generated advertisements collected as the dataset.



Fig. 1 Samples of Advertisement

4.3 Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically, with particular attention paid to recurring hedging patterns and their communicative functions across platforms. The combined use of SFL and CDA allows the study to account for both the micro-level linguistic features of hedging and their macro-level persuasive and ideological effects in contemporary advertising discourse.

The analysis followed a three-step process: identification, classification, and interpretation as shown in Figure 2.

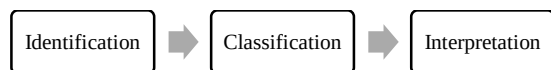


Fig. 2 Data Analysis Process

In the identification process, all texts were read repeatedly to identify hedging expressions, including modal verbs, approximators, vague quantifiers, adverbs of probability or frequency and passive constructions. All lexical and grammatical items functioning as hedges were manually highlighted in each text. Examples included modal verbs such as “may”, “might”, “could”, “can”, “should”; quantifiers like “some”, “many”, “most”; approximators like “around”, “up to”, “about”; adverbs such as “likely”, “generally”, “possibly”; and passive constructions like “naturally proven”, “recommended by experts”.

As for the classification process, hedges were categorised based on Hyland’s (1998) typology that is adapted for advertising contexts. Each hedge type was recorded and grouped under the five categories: i) modal verb, ii) approximators, iii) quantifiers, iv) passive constructions and v) adverbs of

frequency/intensity. The classification process was aided by the functional grammar framework of SFL to examine how modality contributes to interpersonal meaning.

The interpretation process involved examining the hedged-expressions based on the interpersonal metafunction principle of SFL. The analysis focused on how hedges function to moderate certainty, negotiate commitment, and position the advertiser or content creator in relation to the audience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Thus, instead of analysing each clause grammatically, the analysis focused on how clusters of linguistic choices contribute to an overall persuasive tone. In addition, insights from CDA were applied to interpret the social and ideological implications of these hedging strategies. In addition, the analysis also examined how hedging construct credibility, authority and responsibility within advertising discourse (Fairclough, 2015). As for the influencer and AI-generated content, the analysis focused more on how hedging creates an impression appearance of authenticity or ethical caution while at the same time steering towards consumer interpretation.

The combination of SFL and CDA frameworks enabled an integrated analysis of both the linguistic and social dimensions of advertising discourse; SFL offered an interpretation of how hedging operates interpersonally to negotiate meaning and credibility at the level of language use. CDA, on the other hand, extended the analysis by positioning the linguistic choices within broader structures of persuasion, power and responsibility in consumer culture. SFL and CDA were, thus, employed as complementary interpretive frameworks rather than analytical procedures. This provides an understanding of how micro-level linguistic strategies contribute to macro-level social effects in digital advertising.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the use of hedging across print advertisements, influencer marketing content and AI-generated, promotional texts focused on how hedging operates as a conviction marker, shaping credibility, managing commitment and guiding consumer interpretation. On the whole, the findings demonstrate the use of hedging as a strategic linguistic resource that strengthens persuasion while limiting advertiser responsibility at the same time. The following subsections show the findings in each of the advertising platforms examined

5.1 Hedging in Print Advertising

The analysis of print advertisements dataset demonstrates frequent employment of hedging devices such as approximators (“*lasts around 8 hours*”), vague quantifiers (“*the majority of*”, “*20 times more*”) and passive constructions (“*chosen by*”). The use of these linguistic forms enables advertisers to imply effectiveness and scientific credibility without having to make direct or verifiable claims. This is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Hedging in Print Advertising

Type of Hedging	Example
Modal verbs	<i>helps, may, might, could</i>
Approximators	<i>around, approximately, up to</i>
Vague quantifiers	<i>as low as, as little as, the majority of</i>
Passive or agent-deleted constructions	<i>chosen by, proven to support health, will be loved by</i>

Looking from an SFL perspective, these hedges work within the interpersonal metafunction. As put forward by Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), modality can be used to adjust the level of certainty and commitment in propositions. In these promotional texts, advertisers present claims as cautious and reasonable lowering the products’ epistemic commitment. This aligns with earlier findings that advertisers strategically avoid absolute assertions to maintain credibility while still persuading consumers (Myers, 1994; Cook, 2001).

Meanwhile, from a CDA perspective, hedging in this advertising platform functions as a form of discursive protection. Phrases in passive constructions such as “*proven to support*” suggest vagueness as

they omit the agent who proved the product or under what conditions the product is proven. This a strategy to reduce or limit the necessary accountability for the claim. As put forward by Fairclough (2015), such linguistic choices although not neutral, can serve ideological purposes by normalising uncertainty while preserving authority. Hence, the use of hedging enables the unequal power relations between advertisers and consumers since it is the advertisers who control how information is framed and interpreted. This is in line with empirical discourse-analytic research that show how vagueness and qualification function rhetorically to persuade while avoiding legal or ethical liability (Varttala, 2001; Yang, 2019).

5.2 Hedging in Influencer Discourse

The analysis shows that hedging occurs primarily through experiential and subjective expressions in influencer discourse. Expressions such as “might help”, “What I love about this is”, or “Results may vary” are commonly found in influencer marketing content. These hedged expressions are often embedded in the influencers’ personal narratives, creating an informal and conversational tone that is consistent with social media norms. Table 3 shows the most salient hedging expressions in influencer discourse across the data set.

Table 3. Hedging in Influencer Discourse

Type of Hedging	Example
First-person experiential hedges	<i>What I love about this is ...</i> <i>Just like you, I also care about ...</i> <i>I've noticed it can improve ...</i>
Contingency hedges	<i>It may not be the same for everyone.</i> <i>Results may vary.</i> <i>I'm not claiming it's a miracle, but ...</i>
Epistemic stance hedges	<i>It seems to me ...</i> <i>I believe ...</i> <i>I am confident that ...</i>

Social media discourse norms are informal and conversational, containing personal narratives. Thus, expressions in the first-person experiential hedges like “What I love about this...”, “I also care about” and “I’ve noticed that” are very common in influencer discourse. Similarly, epistemic stance hedges function as a signal of sincerity. The presentation of claims through interpersonal sharing, influencers make persuasion feel personal, sincere and therefore, more convincing. However, deep analysis reveals that the analysis reveals that these expressions seem to foreground the influencers’ subjectivity for the claims. They allow the influencers to promote a product while distancing themselves from objective accountability at the same time. Such strategy of disclaiming liability is also embedded in the contingency hedges like ‘It may not be the same for everyone’ or “Results may vary”. The expressions may sound ethical on the front as they do not promise objective results, but it is also a clear disclaim of accountability.

From an SFL perspective, it seems that hedging is used as an interpersonal resource that build a relationship between influencers and their audiences. Presenting claims as personal experiences rather than factual information about the product allows influencers to invite audience to agree with them but at the same time reduce their own liability to the product (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This use of modality enables influencers to appear honest and this strengthens perceived authenticity.

As from a CDA perspective, the hedged expressions used also function to avoid responsibility. The hedged statements function as shield to distance themselves from the outcomes of the product use. The use of experiential, contingency and epistemic stance hedges are used to create authenticity while promoting the products. Consequently, audience may be inclined to interpret and believe the influencers’ recommendations as trustworthy, which can result in the advertisers’ desired action. Earlier studies on influencer marketing have reported that authenticity is often strategically created using linguistic cues that can soften promotional intent (Abidin, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

In summary, the findings have shown how the use of hedging in promotional discourse can make persuasive intent less visible and more acceptable to the audience. At the same time, it is also used as a protection to avoid accountability to the claim.

5.3 Hedging in AI-Generated Promotional Messaging

The data set demonstrates that AI-generated promotional texts also show extensive use of hedging. This is commonly shown through modal verbs (“may”, “can”, “could”), probability adverbs (“often”, “typically”) and generalised evaluative phrases (“designed to help”, “can support”), giving AI-generated content a neutral but cautious tone. Research on algorithmic persuasion suggests that while appearing neutral and informative, personalised and automated messaging can influence users in a subtle way (Kietzmann et al., 2018; Floridi et al., 2018).

From an SFL perspective, the consistent use of low modality (“may”, “could”) to moderate modality (“designed to help”, “can support”) reflects some kind of controlled interpersonal positioning. The AI seems to avoid categorical or affirmative and negative claims. This is in line with Halliday’s view that graded modality allows speakers, or in this case, systems, i.e. AI, to manage commitment and avoid risk (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

From a CDA perspective, like in the other advertising platforms, hedging in AI-generated advertising also projects objectivity and ethical caution. However, this raises the issue of responsibility and power. This is because while hedging enables persuasive influence, it does not clearly identify the agent. van Dijk (2018) has contended that power in discourse often works through indirect and implicit means. This is true in AI-generated texts as hedging contributes towards the distribution of responsibility between the AI elements – the platforms, technologies and commercial actors (in this case the influencers). This makes it difficult for the audience to identify who is responsible for the claims.

5.4 Cross-Platform Persuasive Patterns

Across the three platforms examined, namely, print advertisements, influencer marketing and AI-generated contents, it is found that hedging consistently functions as a conviction marker. At first glance, the hedged expressions may seem to weaken the messages as they suggest subjectivity rather than objectivity. However, the presence of hedging actually makes the claims appear balanced, cautious and trustworthy, helping enhance credibility of the products. Previous works on marketing strategy supported this notion claiming that audiences often associate and regard qualified statements with professionalism and honesty (Myers, 1994; Cook, 2001). Table 4 shows the linguistic and contextual adaptation across the three advertising contexts.

Table 4. A comparative analysis across the three advertising contexts

Platform	Dominant Hedge Types	Discursive Effect	Example
Print Ads	Modals, Approximators, Passives	Credibility and scientific authority	<i>Proven to show results as early as 5 days.</i>
Influencer Ads	Modals, Adverbs, Quantifiers	Relatability and authenticity	<i>It has worked for me – It might be a solution to your problem too.</i>
AI Ads	Modals, Quantifiers, Passives	Algorithmic caution and persuasive neutrality	<i>With consistent use, you will be better off with this new diet plan.</i>

By integrating SFL and CDA, this study has shown that hedging functions at both linguistic and social levels. From the linguistic perspective, hedging modulates certainty and interpersonal position. From the socially point of view, hedging legitimises persuasive discourse while at the same time protect advertisers, influencers and AI systems from direct accountability. The findings of this study reinforce the view that persuasion even in the digital age relies on subtle linguistic strategies rather than overt claims regardless of the platforms used. Therefore, understanding the function of hedging as a conviction marker is critical for consumer education. Thus, in an environment where advertising is embedded across multiple platforms,

recognising how language is used to manage uncertainty and accountability should be a pivotal component of digital literacy.

Overall, the findings have shown that hedging is neither a neutral or unintentional feature of advertising language. Instead, it is a strategic tool that enables persuasion to take place implicitly through controlled mask of uncertainty. Ergo, it is essential for consumers to understand how hedging functions across any advertising platforms to develop critical and discerning awareness in the digital age.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE AND MEDIA EDUCATION

As Hyland (2017) maintains that language shapes how reality is understood by carefully modulating levels of certainty and commitment. In advertising, the ability to notice and identify statements containing hedged expressions like “perhaps”, “could” or “usually” enables consumers to distinguish between strong evidence and rhetorical suggestion. Understanding hedging can help consumers be aware of subtle strategies of persuasion that are embedded in the promotional messages.

Consumers are constantly exposed to persuasive language through social media, online shopping platforms, influencer contents and automated recommendations in their everyday life. Thus, this study is also steered by an educational perspective that views advertising discourse as a form of informal learning. It contends that instead of taking place in formal classroom settings, learning about language and persuasion is now increasingly taking place through daily interactions with media texts. This contention aligns with earlier suggestion that the ability to analyse how language constructs meaning, trust and authority in public discourse should be included in literacy in the digital age (Gee, 2014; Fairclough, 2015). Hence, traditional language education needs to be expanded into critical media and discourse literacy. Critical literacy will teach consumers to understand how texts position readers and shape beliefs instead of simply interpreting surface meaning (Buckingham, 2003; Livingstone, 2004). As far as persuasion in advertising is concerned, analysing hedging can help learners to be more aware how persuasion is deployed through language.

In this digital era, persuasive communication is formed by algorithmic systems and data-driven personalisation. Research on digital platforms has demonstrated that recommender systems and targeted messaging can influence user behaviour even though they may appear neutral or helpful on the surface (Kietzmann et al., 2018; Floridi et al., 2018). When hedging is combined with such systems, persuasive messages may sound sincere, balanced and trustworthy. This is actually employed to guide consumer to make decisions. Thus, consumers need to realise that the persuasive force in the advertisements is either softened or indirectly delivered through clever use of language. Hedging, thus, has become a tool of commercial persuasion.

The growing presence of algorithmic targeting and AI-mediated recommendations in this era has increasingly exposed consumers to advertising messages that seems to be harmless and reasonable. Researchers have contended that the subtle forms of digital persuasion can shape decision-making as they are indirect and difficult to detect (Susser, Roessler, & Nissenbaum, 2019). Therefore, developing critical digital language literacy is crucial for helping consumers to be more discerning by recognising the persuasive strategies and engaging more critically with advertising discourse.

7. CONCLUSION

This study looked into how hedging functions in advertising discourse across print advertisements, influencer marketing, and AI-generated promotional contents. Insights from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) indicate that hedging shifts from being a marker of uncertainty to a conviction marker that strengthens persuasive appeal while reducing accountability for the claims. SFL informed that hedging operates within the interpersonal metafunction to modulate certainty and manage commitment, lending trustworthy and credibility to the claims (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Myers, 1994; Cook, 2001). CDA also reported that hedging performs important both social and ideological functions. Regardless of the platforms, hedging normalises obscure agency and accountability (Fairclough,

2015; Varttala, 2001) and creating neutrality and caution (Kietzmann et al., 2018; Floridi et al., 2018), while contributing allowing influencers to distance themselves from responsibility for outcomes (Abidin, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Most importantly, as advertising discourse becomes integrated into social media feeds, influencer narratives, and AI-mediated recommendations, this study highlights the importance of digital literacy as part of consumer education. Developing the ability to recognise hedging as a conviction marker will enable consumers to better evaluate credibility, responsibility and intent in advertising messages.

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9. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts.

10. AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Kamisah Ariffin: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, and writing-original draft; **Misyana Susanti Husin:** Writing- review and editing and validation.

11. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

This manuscript was developed with the assistance of ChatGPT and Gemini for the purpose of initial proofreading and literature identification. The tool/service supported the author(s) in reviewing and refining the content, and the authors assume full responsibility for the final version submitted for publication.

12. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

13. ETHICS STATEMENT

Not applicable.

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