



From Language Appeals to Consumer Trust: A Comparative Case Study of TikTok Cross-Border Live Streaming

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Abstract. Cross-border live-streaming e-commerce on TikTok Shop relies heavily on anchors' language to build consumer trust. This study investigates how rational versus emotional language appeals influence trust formation in TikTok English broadcasts. Integrating the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model and the Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) theory, a qualitative comparative case analysis is conducted. Findings show that emotional/experience products predominantly use emotional appeals, triggering positive strain (self-referencing, anticipated elation) and building affective trust. The study extends platform trust research to verbal strategies and offers practical implications for cross-border live-streaming anchors.

Keywords: cross-border e-commerce, live streaming, language strategies, consumer trust, S-O-R model, SSO theory, TikTok Shop

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

TikTok Shop has emerged as a leading cross-border live-streaming platform, enabling real-time seller-consumer interaction across different countries. In this environment, the anchor's language – not only what is said but how it is said – becomes crucial for reducing perceived risk and building consumer trust.^[1]

1.2 Research Gap and Questions

Prior research has examined anchor characteristics (professionalism, attractiveness) and platform affordances^[4], but few studies systematically compare how different language strategies (rational vs. emotional appeals) construct trust across product types. M This study addresses these gaps by asking: (1) What language strategies do TikTok

cross-border anchors use? (2) How do they differ between emotional/experience products and functional/search products? (3) Through which positive or negative strain mechanisms do they influence consumer trust?

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Language Strategies in Live Streaming

Live-streaming anchors use two broad types of language appeals. Rational appeals convey factual information about price, specifications, warranty, and shipping^[3]. Emotional appeals use affective expressions such as warmth, exclamations, direct address (“honey”), and scarcity framed as celebration^[4]. Previous research has confirmed that both appeals significantly influence consumer purchase intention through self-referencing and self-brand congruity^[3].

2.2 Platform Trust and Cognitive Offloading

Digital platforms engineer trust through design cues – ratings, badges, “fulfilled by platform” labels – which encourage consumers to rely on heuristics rather than systematic product evaluation^[6]. This “cognitive offloading” reduces scrutiny and can create a false sense of security, allowing low-quality products to benefit from platform reputation.

2.3 Dual Pathways: Positive and Negative Strain

The Stimulus-Organism-Response model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) posits that environmental stimuli trigger internal states leading to behavioral responses. The Stressor-Strain-Outcome theory (Koeske & Koeske, 1993) adds the distinction between positive strain (e.g., anticipated elation) and negative strain (e.g., psychological reactance). Recent research in live streaming shows that limited-quantity scarcity and creative descriptions jointly affect purchase intentions through these dual pathways^[5].

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a “qualitative content analysis” approach to investigate how language strategies in TikTok Shop live streaming contribute to consumer trust building. A comparative case study design is employed, covering six live-streaming episodes from four product categories.

3.2 Data Collection

Sampling Strategy.

A “purposive sampling” strategy was used. The researcher selected live-streaming clips based on the following criteria:

Platform: TikTok Shop (English broadcasts).

Language: English, with complete and clear seller utterances.

Product coverage: clips from each of the four categories – clothing, food, home supplies, and travel

The final sample consists of six live-streaming clips, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Composition of the case sample

ID	Category	Subcategory
1	Clothing & Accessories	Second-hand luxury
2	Clothing & Accessories	Smartwatch
3	Food	Thai snack bundle
4	Food	Coffe gift set
5	Housing	Vaccum storage bags
6	Travelling	Portable luggage scale

Data Recording and Transcription.

All video clips were recorded using the screen recording function of a smartphone. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim by the researcher, including repetitions, hesitations (e.g., “hmm”, “uh”), exclamations (e.g., “oh my god”), and non-fluency features to preserve the naturalness of live-streaming discourse. Each transcript was checked twice to ensure accuracy (targeting >95% accuracy).

3.3 Analytical Framework

This study adopts an integrated framework combining Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R)

(Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) (Koeske & Koeske, 1993) theories.

Operationalisation of the Framework.

The framework operationalises each component as follows.

Stimulus / External stressor: The anchor’s language strategies, including rational appeals (factual information about price, specifications, warranty, shipping) and emotional appeals (affective expressions such as warmth, exclamations, direct address like “honey”, and celebratory remarks).^{[3][2]}

Organism / Strain: The viewer’s internal psychological response. Positive strain includes self-referencing (relating the message to one’s own identity or experience), self-brand congruity (perceived match between brand image and self-image), and anticipated elation, all of which lead to affective trust.^[2] Negative strain includes psychological reactance (perceived threat to freedom) and heightened skepticism, which may lead to cognitive distrust or reduced trust.

Response / Outcome: Consumer trust, which can be cognitive (based on transparency, reliability, and factual information) or affective (based on emotional bonding and perceived benevolence).

Analytical Procedure.

The analysis follows four steps.

Step 1 Identify external stressors. For each of the six cases, the researcher lists the specific language strategies used. These include rational appeals (e.g., price, compatibility, after-sale guarantees, honest limitations) and emotional appeals (e.g., warmth, exclamations, address terms, scarcity as celebration).

Step 2 Infer strain (positive or negative). Based on the context and linguistic cues, the researcher interprets whether the strategies are likely to generate positive strain (such as anticipated elation, self-referencing, or self-brand congruity) or negative strain (such as psychological reactance, perceived manipulation,^[5] or heightened skepticism).

Step 3 Determine trust outcome. The researcher assesses whether the case primarily builds cognitive trust (based on transparency, guarantees, and factual information), affective trust (based on emotional bonding and perceived benevolence), or leads to distrust or reduced trust.

Step 4 Cross-case comparison. The six cases are compared across product categories: emotional/experience products. The comparison aims to reveal whether emotional products tend to evoke positive strain through emotional appeals and affective trust, while functional products rely on rational appeals to avoid negative strain and to build cognitive trust.

4 Findings

4.1 Overview of Language Strategies

All six cases used rational and/or emotional appeals, but with clear differences. Emotional/experience products (Cases 1, 3, 4) relied heavily on emotional appeals – warm address, exclamations, scarcity as celebration, and freebie offers. Functional products (Cases 2, 5, 6) predominantly used rational appeals – price disclosure, compatibility, honest limitations, and after-sale guarantees.^[2]

4.2 Emotional Products and Affective Trust

Case 1 (second-hand luxury bag) transformed scarcity into a positive event (“You are my first customer”), triggering self-referencing (feeling special) and anticipated elation (free gift). Repeated co-creation of celebration (“congratulations”, “best wishes”) built strong affective trust^[2].

Case 3 (Thai snack bundle) used sensory emotional appeals (“smell it... crispy”) and social proof (“500 bundles sold”) to evoke positive strain.

Case 4 (instant coffee set) combined satisfaction guarantees with sensory language (“rich aroma”), demonstrating that mixed appeals can further reinforce trust.

4.3 Functional Products and Cognitive Trust

Case 2 (smartwatch) listed four colors and system compatibility, emphasised the lowest price, and transparently restricted shipping to the US, reducing uncertainty and building cognitive trust.

Case 5 (vacuum storage bags) openly admitted the product was not TSA-approved for carry-on – a surprising disclosure that paradoxically increased credibility^[6]. The step-by-step demonstration (“pump 10 times... save 80% space”) further reinforced cognitive trust.

Case 6 (portable luggage scale) used problem-solution framing (“overweight fee → this scale”) and bundle pricing (“buy two get one free”), backed by a strong guarantee (“30-day money-back, no return shipping fee”), appealing to logical risk assessment^[5].

4.4 Cross-Case Comparison

The comparison reveals a consistent pattern: emotional products evoke positive strain via emotional appeals → affective trust^[5]; functional products avoid negative strain via rational appeals → cognitive trust. Mixed-appeal cases (e.g., coffee set) show that adding rational elements to emotional products can further reinforce trust without causing reactance.

5 Discussion

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study demonstrates that TikTok cross-border anchors systematically align language strategies with product type. Emotional/experience products benefit from emotional appeals that trigger self-referencing and anticipated elation, while functional/search products require rational appeals that provide transparency and reduce psychological reactance^[2].

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings extend the S-O-R and SSO framework to live-streaming language, confirming that language strategies act as external stressors whose valence (positive vs. negative strain) depends on product context^[5]. They also resonate with platform trust literature: cognitive offloading occurs on trusted platforms; anchors who use rational appeals with honest limitations exploit this trust appropriately, while those who overuse emotional appeals under high scarcity risk triggering reactance.

5.3 Practical Implications

Cross-border anchors should:

For emotional products – use warm address, celebrate customer actions, and frame scarcity as shared happiness.

For functional products – list specifications clearly, disclose limitations transparently, and provide concrete guarantees.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

The sample of six cases is small; future quantitative studies could measure actual trust levels. Only verbal language was analyzed; body language and voice tone may moderate effects. Cross-cultural comparisons would reveal how cultural dimensions affect the rational/emotional appeal effectiveness.

6 Conclusion

This qualitative comparative case study of six TikTok Shop live-streaming episodes reveals that anchors systematically use rational or emotional appeals depending on product type. Emotional appeals generate positive strain (self-referencing, anticipated elation) and build affective trust, especially for experiential products^[2]. Rational appeals reduce negative strain and build cognitive trust, especially for functional products. By integrating S-O-R and SSO theories, the study offers a novel framework for understanding how language strategies function as stressors in platform-mediated cross-border commerce. The findings provide actionable guidance for anchors and platform managers to design product-tailored verbal strategies that foster consumer trust.

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