

Persuasive discourse through lexical choices used by experts in *The Social Dilemma* (2020)

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Abstract

This study investigated how expert speakers in The Social Dilemma (2020) constructed persuasive discourse through lexical choices. It aimed to identify the lexical strategies that realized Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos) and to classify them using Kuna (2018) seven persuasive categories. A convergent mixed-methods design integrated corpus-assisted discourse analysis with qualitative rhetorical interpretation. Expert utterances were extracted from the documentary transcripts and processed with Sketch Engine to identify and quantify recurring lexical items. The findings showed that Certainty and Emotional Involvement were the most prominent categories. Lexical items such as know, predict, you, we, manipulate, control, and existential combined epistemic authority, personal address, and threat framing to convert abstract technological processes into immediate social risks. General Positive Value terms were frequently recontextualized ironically, whereas Testedness and Authenticity/Credibility strengthened evidence-based and insider claims. These patterns demonstrate that persuasion in the documentary emerged from the interaction of lexical frequency, discourse context, and rhetorical function rather than from isolated words. Future researchers should compare several technology documentaries and integrate verbal, visual, and auditory modes to test the transferability of these lexical patterns.

Keywords: Documentary; lexical; persuasion; rhetoric; technology

INTRODUCTION

Persuasion is an essential part of communication. It systematically influences beliefs, attitudes, and interpretations through the strategic use of language (O'Keefe, 2016a). Rather than using direct commands, persuasion works by framing how information is presented to the audience. Therefore, persuasive communication does not simply share neutral information; it actively shapes how audiences view complex social issues. Furthermore, persuasive communication can influence audiences emotionally and cognitively to change their behavior (Orji, 2017). In the digital era, persuasion is very common in media and public relations. Pratiwi et al., (2021) explain that persuasive communication uses language to implicitly shape social values and audience responses. This shows that language is not just a descriptive tool, but a strong persuasive resource to shape public perception.

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In discourse analysis, persuasion is commonly examined through Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos (Kennedy, 2007). In the present study, these appeals function as analytical categories for explaining how the experts in *The Social Dilemma* construct persuasive meanings through their lexical choices. Ethos is relevant to identifying words and expressions that reinforce the speakers' authority as former technology insiders and experts; pathos helps explain lexical choices that evoke fear, concern, urgency, or personal involvement; while logos is used to examine words that support causal explanations, factual claims, predictions, and evidence-based arguments. Thus, rather than treating ethos, pathos, and logos merely as general rhetorical concepts, this study uses them to interpret the persuasive function of recurring lexical items identified in the documentary (Mori, 2016). Kennedy (2007) further emphasizes that persuasive effectiveness often emerges from the interaction of credibility, emotion, and reasoning, which is particularly relevant to *The Social Dilemma*, where expert testimony frequently combines insider authority, emotional warnings, and explanations of algorithmic mechanisms, Pelclová & Lu, (2018) state that persuasion in public discourse is developed through evaluative word choices. argue that persuasion in public discourse is realized through evaluative and strategically selected language. This perspective supports the present study's focus on lexical choices, because specific words used by the experts are examined not only for their frequency but also for how they operationalize ethos, pathos, and logos within the persuasive discourse of the documentary.

Lexical choices are very important because they directly affect how the audience understands the message and feels about the issue (Riyono et al., 2018). Kuna (2018) classifies persuasive words into seven distinct psychological and rhetorical categories. First, General Positive Value includes words that carry good, beneficial, or constructive meanings (such as good, useful, excellent, and famous) to build a positive image. Second, Intensity consists of adverbs and adjectives that emphasize the degree or seriousness of a statement (such as very, much, greatly, and completely). Third, Testedness involves words related to empirical evidence, practical experience, or proven facts that validate a claim (such as tested, tried, proved, and experienced). Fourth, Certainty includes epistemic markers—words showing knowledge—that express absolute truth and high confidence (such as certain, sure, truly, and without doubt). Fifth, Time Factor contains words indicating urgency, continuity, or historical sequence (such as often, always, quickly, and immediately). Sixth, Authenticity and Credibility involves words related to genuineness, reality, or exposing what is true versus fake (such as real, true, and authentic). Finally, Emotional Involvement includes personal pronouns and emotional words designed to directly engage the audience's personal feelings and psychological connection (such as I, you, we, fear, and pain). Kuna's framework is very useful for understanding how experts persuade the audience in documentary media through specific lexical choices.

Several previous studies have investigated persuasive language and lexical choices in various contexts. Khramchenko (2023) explored persuasive language in mass media, highlighting how specific linguistic structures create discourse synergy that influences public opinion. Similarly, Farhan, Revita, &

Oktavianus, (2024) investigated persuasive language on political billboards, emphasizing the use of lexical choices to build political identity and public influence. Adding to the political discourse, Kennedy (2007) examined the rhetorical and persuasive strategies in US election speeches, revealing how political figures utilize positive self-representation and negative other-representation to capture audience attention. In the commercial sector, Al Al Kayed et al. (2026) analyzed persuasive linguistic devices in social media advertisements, while Santos and Santos & Mukminin (2022) revealed how promotional lexical choices in tourism brochures manipulate cross-cultural persuasion. Furthermore, El-Dakhs et al. (2024) demonstrated how writers employ persuasive strategies in research abstracts to establish academic persuasion. Among Indonesian contexts, Hidarto (2021) examined the persuasive language of online advertisements featuring influencers on Instagram using a multimodal approach, though focusing strictly on commercial text. Mori (2016) investigated diplomatic communication to map general rhetorical strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos, but lacked a detailed analysis of specific word choices. Additionally, Rambe et al. (2025) analyzed political communication in the digital era, revealing the frequent use of evaluative words but without a structured lexical framework to categorize the words systematically. Overall, these previous studies mostly focus on advertising, politics, academic writing, and social media. Research exploring persuasive lexical choices within documentary movies remains severely limited. More importantly, none of the previous literature has combined Aristotle's rhetorical appeals with specific lexical categories to provide a comprehensive analysis of persuasion.

These gaps are particularly salient in technology documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma* (2020), in which expert testimony is used to frame the social consequences of digital platform design. Previous studies have examined persuasive discourse through rhetorical appeals or lexical features, but limited attention has been given to how specific recurring lexical choices in documentary expert discourse simultaneously realize broader rhetorical functions. In particular, the relationship between lexical-level persuasive categories and Aristotle's ethos, pathos, and logos has not been systematically examined in technology documentary discourse. To address this gap, the present study integrates Aristotle's rhetorical appeals with Kuna (2018) seven persuasive categories. Kuna's framework is used to classify recurring persuasive lexical items, while Aristotle's framework is used to interpret the rhetorical functions performed by those lexical choices. The novelty of this study therefore lies in linking micro-level lexical classification with macro-level rhetorical interpretation to explain how expert speakers in *The Social Dilemma* construct persuasive discourse.

Recent scholarship on misinformation, disinformation, and platformed persuasion further strengthens the need to examine lexical persuasion in documentary discourse. False and emotionally loaded information can circulate rapidly online, while algorithmic and media environments may intensify credibility problems, polarization, and public distrust Aïmeur et al. (2023); (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017); Cinelli et al., (2021); Ecker et al., (2022); Hameleers et al., (2020); Lazer et al., (2018); Pennycook & Rand (2021); Shu et al., (2020);

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Vosoughi et al., (2018); Wu et al., (2019). Persuasion in digital media is therefore not limited to explicit argumentation; it is also embedded in repeated lexical patterns, credibility claims, affective intensification, and constructions of urgency. Accordingly, this study had two main objectives: to identify and quantify recurring persuasive lexical items in the expert interview transcripts of *The Social Dilemma* (2020), and to interpret how those items operationalized Aristotle's rhetorical appeals within Kuna's categories.

METHOD

This study used a mixed-methods approach combined with corpus-assisted discourse analysis to examine persuasive lexical choices in expert interviews from *The Social Dilemma* (2020). Following Creswell (2022), the design integrated quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative interpretation. The qualitative component interpreted how lexical items realized Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos), whereas the quantitative component calculated the frequency of persuasive words in the transcripts. The dataset comprised expert statements grouped into Kuna (2018) seven categories: General Positive Value, Intensity, Testedness, Certainty, Time Factor, Authenticity/Credibility, and Emotional Involvement.

Research design

This research employed a convergent mixed-methods design alongside corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Taylor & Marchi (2018) described this approach as a connection between corpus linguistics and discourse analysis that supports the systematic identification of recurring language patterns. The qualitative component identified the rhetorical functions of the lexical choices, while the quantitative component measured their frequencies. Integrating the two components enabled a comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis of persuasive discourse.

Data and source of data

The main data source was the official transcript of *The Social Dilemma* (2020). The data consisted of specific utterances by technology experts, including former technology executives, software engineers, and digital ethicists. Purposive sampling was used to select utterances containing salient persuasive elements. To be included, an utterance had to contain lexical items relevant to Kuna's seven categories and support the interpretation of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals.

Data collection procedure

The researcher functioned as the primary instrument in the qualitative process of gathering the data. The data collection procedure followed several systematic steps. First, the researcher watched *The Social Dilemma* (2020) documentary repeatedly to comprehend the context and the persuasive narrative presented by the experts. Second, the official transcript of the documentary was collected and carefully verified against the audiovisual source to ensure the accuracy of the spoken words. Third, the researcher conducted purposive sampling by manually reading the transcript to identify and highlight specific expert utterances that contained strong persuasive elements. The final selected data

consisted only of statements that utilized persuasive lexical choices relevant to the study's framework.

Data analysis

The data analysis utilized a mixed-methods approach supported by corpus software. First, the selected expert utterances from the transcript were entered into Sketch Engine (Kilgariff et al., 2014). This corpus analysis tool was used to systematically extract recurring lexical patterns, generate concordance lines, and calculate the frequency of each persuasive lexical item. Second, the extracted lexical choices were grouped into Kuna (2018) seven persuasive categories: General Positive Value, Intensity, Testedness, Certainty, Time Factor, Authenticity/Credibility, and Emotional Involvement. Third, the researcher qualitatively analyzed the classified lexical choices using Aristotle's rhetorical appeals ethos, pathos, and logos to interpret their specific persuasive functions. Finally, the interpretations were synthesized to explain how the technology experts strategically deployed these lexical choices to influence the audience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research findings

This section presents the findings of persuasive discourse through lexical choices identified in expert interviews in *The Social Dilemma* (2020). The findings were analyzed based on Aristotle's rhetorical appeals and categorized using Kuna's Persuasive Categories. It is important to note that Kuna (2018) framework provides the psychological and functional domains for persuasion, rather than a rigid, fixed dictionary of words. Because Kuna's original framework was applied to a different specific discourse (historical medical texts), his lexical examples naturally differ from modern spoken English in the technology sector. As Taylor & Marchi (2018) emphasize, in corpus-assisted discourse analysis, the persuasive meaning of a word is not fixed; it is highly dependent on its specific context and how it is used within a particular discourse. Therefore, in this study, the specific lexical items extracted via Sketch Engine (such as social, really, or work) were categorized based on their contextual function and meaning. This aligns with Riyono et al. (2018), who argue that lexical choices must be evaluated based on the specific social and ideological contexts in which they are produced. For example, if a word functioned to emphasize severity in the tech industry, it was classified under Intensity; if it appealed to empirical outcomes, it was classified under Testedness. Supported by corpus-assisted techniques, the findings reveal that persuasive discourse was strategically constructed through emotional concern, evaluative language, credibility-oriented expressions, and analytical explanations.

Table 1. Lexical Frequency of General Positive Value Category

Category	Lexical Item	Frequency
General Positive Value	Social	29
General Positive Value	Good	26

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Category	Lexical Item	Frequency
General Positive Value	New	24
General Positive Value	Create	17
General Positive Value	Build	13
General Positive Value	Great	10
General Positive Value	Grow	8

According to Kuna (2018), the General Positive Value category includes words that carry inherently positive meanings to suggest beneficial or constructive qualities. However, in this documentary, these words are systematically subverted by the experts to expose corporate manipulation.

The lexical choice 'social' is used to build a logical argument (logos). For example, Justin Rosenstein stated, *"I think the tools that have been created today are starting to erode the social fabric of how society works"*. (00:05:39) Also, Tristan Harris said, *"Social media isn't a tool that's just waiting to be used. It has its own goals"*. (00:30:35) In these sentences, the positive meaning of 'social' is changed to give a warning. The speakers logically explain that *"social"* platforms have hidden goals, proving that technology is not just a neutral tool.

The lexical choice 'good' is used by the experts to build their credibility (ethos). Alex Roetter confessed, *"I always felt like, fundamentally, it was a force for good. I don't know if I feel that way anymore."* (00:02:01) Tristan Harris also stated, *"The fundamental way that this stuff is designed... isn't going in a good direction"*. (01:28:47) By admitting their past positive intentions, the experts show their honest reflection. This makes their current warnings more believable to the audience.

The lexical choice 'new' is used to trigger fear and urgency (pathos). Shoshana Zuboff noted, *"This is a new kind of marketplace now. It's a marketplace that never existed before"*. (00:15:45) Tristan Harris also warned, *"This is a totally new species of power and influence"*. (00:44:11) The word emphasizes that people are facing a dangerous new problem that they are not ready for.

The lexical choice 'create' is used to build a collective ethos. Tristan Harris stated, *"We in the tech industry have created the tools to destabilize and erode the fabric of society"*. (01:11:33) By admitting that they *"created"* the problem, the speaker shows responsibility. This makes him look like a credible insider.

The lexical choice 'build' is used to explain the system of artificial intelligence. Aza Raskin stated, *"They build models that predict our actions"*. (00:17:54) This word functions as logos because it logically explains how the technology is designed to predict human behavior.

The lexical choice 'great' is used ironically to expose the company's bad habits. Tristan Harris quoted the corporate mindset by stating, *"This is gonna be a great way to grow activity"*. (00:25:46) This word functions as logos to show how companies see manipulative features as something *"great"* for their business.

The lexical choice 'grow' highlights the problem of the business model. Alex Roetter stated, *"You've gotta grow revenue and usage, quarter over quarter"*. (01:22:30)

This word gives a logical explanation (logos) that tech companies cannot stop their bad algorithms because they always need to "grow" their money.

Table 2. Lexical Frequency of Intensity Category

Category	Lexical Item	Frequency
Intensity	Really	25
Intensity	Even	19
Intensity	Very	14
Intensity	Never	8
Intensity	Exactly	7
Intensity	Extreme	7
Intensity	Existential	6

Based on Kuna (2018) framework, the Intensity category consists of words that emphasize or strengthen the degree of a situation, acting as psychological intensifiers to highlight severity.

The lexical choice 'really' is used to show how serious the digital crisis is. Shoshana Zuboff stated, *"It's really a new kind of marketplace now"* (00:15:45), while Chamath Palihapitiya warned, *"It's really, really bad"* (00:39:56) By repeating this word, the speakers trigger the audience's emotion (pathos). It makes the abstract problem of data trading feel very real and scary.

The lexical choice 'even' highlights that the algorithms are hard to escape. Jeff Seibert confessed, *"Even knowing how these tricks work, I'm still susceptible to them"* (00:32:03), and Justin Rosenstein noted, *"The Internet is just a new, even more efficient way to do that."* (00:58:35) This word creates a pathos appeal by showing that if the creators themselves cannot escape the system, normal users are in bigger danger.

The lexical choice 'very' is used to show the experts' personal fear. Justin Rosenstein stated, *"I'm very concerned. I'm very concerned"*. (00:02:14) This word transfers the speaker's feeling of panic (pathos) directly to the viewers.

The lexical choice 'never' shows the massive scale of the issue. Tristan Harris stated, *"Never before in history have 50 designers... made decisions that would have an impact on two billion people"*. (00:09:08) This creates a strong pathos appeal, making the audience realize how big the digital crisis is.

The lexical choice 'exactly' confirms the manipulation. Jaron Lanier stated, *"That's exactly what's happening on Facebook"*. (00:55:24) This word strengthens the logos appeal by confirming that the dangers are really happening in the real world.

The lexical choice 'extreme' is used to describe the bad effects on society. Tristan Harris stated, *"What we're seeing with COVID is just an extreme version of what's*

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happening". (01:04:56) This word triggers pathos by comparing digital manipulation to a real global disaster.

The lexical choice 'existential' is a strong pathos strategy. Tristan Harris stated, *"It's the technology's ability to bring out the worst in society, and the worst in society being the existential threat"*. (01:18:03) By calling it an *"existential"* threat, he makes the audience feel the extreme danger of the situation.

Table 3. Lexical Frequency of Testedness Category

Category	Lexical Item	Frequency
Testedness	Work	27
Testedness	True	12
Testedness	Real	11
Testedness	Show	11
Testedness	Find	10
Testedness	Understand	8

According to Testedness refers to words related to empirical evidence, practical experience, or proven facts that validate a speaker's claim. The lexical choice 'work' is used to explain the reality of the algorithms. Jeff Seibert stated, *"Even knowing how these tricks work, I'm still susceptible to them"* (00:32:03), and Tristan Harris said, *"I wish more people could understand how this works"*. (00:07:27) This word combines ethos and logos. By showing they know how the machine *"works,"* they prove their expertise (ethos) and give factual explanations (logos).

The lexical choice 'true' is used to challenge the fake information on digital platforms. Tristan Harris stated, *"Fake news on Twitter spreads six times faster than true news"*. (01:02:14) By using data about true and fake news, he provides a logical argument (logos) about how algorithms spread misinformation.

The lexical choice 'real' is used to validate the offline impact of social media. Cynthia M. Wong stated, *"It has led to real, offline harm"*. (01:07:11) This word functions as logos to prove that digital manipulation causes physical damage in the real world.

The lexical choice 'show' is used to present data. An AI algorithm representation stated, *"My analysis shows that going political with Extreme Center content has a 62.3 percent chance of long-term engagement"*. (00:49:22) This word represents logos because it gives the audience clear statistical evidence.

The lexical choice 'find' explains how the system actively manipulates users. Guillaume Chaslot stated, *"The algorithm is actually trying to find a few rabbit holes that are very powerful"*. (00:59:50) This word logically (logos) explains that algorithms are programmed to search for human weaknesses.

The lexical choice 'understand' shows the lack of transparency in tech companies. Jeff Seibert stated, *"No one really understands what they're doing in order to achieve that goal"*. (00:48:19) This word builds ethos by honestly revealing that even the creators do not fully know how the AI works.

Table 4. Lexical Frequency of Certainty Category

Category	Lexical Item	Frequency
Certainty	Know	77
Certainty	Think	53
Certainty	Right	36
Certainty	Need	17
Certainty	Believe	15
Certainty	Probably	14
Certainty	Predict	7

Kuna (2018) defines Certainty as epistemic markers expressing absolute truth and undeniable knowledge. This category dominates the documentary's narrative to build authoritative arguments

The lexical choice 'know' exposes the surveillance power of tech companies. Tristan Harris stated, *"They know when people are lonely. They know when people are depressed"* (00:16:50), and added, *"They know what you're doing late at night"*. (00:16:57) The repetition of this word builds fear (pathos) about privacy. It also shows ethos because the experts are very sure about the data extraction.

The lexical choice 'think' is used to show the experts' evaluation. Justin Rosenstein observed, *"I think the tools that have been created today are starting to erode the social fabric"* (00:05:36), and Tim Kendall stated, *"I think we were naive about the flip side of that coin"*. (00:02:40) This word establishes ethos by showing that the insiders have carefully reflected on their creations.

The lexical choice 'right' confirms the validity of their claims. Tristan Harris stated, *"This conversation is so critical right now"* (01:03:30), and later asked, *"No one got upset when bicycles showed up. Right?"* (00:29:50) This word functions as ethos and logos by inviting the audience to agree with their logical points.

The lexical choice 'need' is used to propose a solution. Roger McNamee argued, *"We need to have... some shared understanding of reality"*. (01:14:52) This word uses logos to logically explain that society must have a shared truth to survive.

The lexical choice 'believe' addresses the problem of fake news. Tristan Harris stated, *"Everyone believes the government's lying to them"*. (01:09:52) This word triggers pathos by showing the divided and paranoid condition of society.

The lexical choice 'probably' shows a bad future prediction. Jaron Lanier stated, *"We probably destroy our civilization through willful ignorance"*. (01:20:31) This word is used as a logical warning (logos) about the high chance of society's collapse.

The lexical choice 'predict' shows the power of the algorithm. Tristan Harris stated, *"I can predict what kind of videos will keep you watching"*. (00:18:32) This word provides a logical proof (logos) that technology does not guess; it calculates human behavior.

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Table 5. Lexical Frequency of Time Factor Category

Category	Lexical Item	Frequency
Time Factor	Now	35
Time Factor	Then	28
Time Factor	Start	18
Time Factor	Keep	17
Time Factor	Back	17
Time Factor	Ever	12
Time Factor	Continue	10

According to Kuna (2018), the Time Factor category includes words indicating time, urgency, or continuity, functioning to show that the manipulation is happening constantly.

The lexical choice 'now' highlights the current crisis. Tristan Harris stated, *"And now society is incapable of healing itself and just devolving into a kind of chaos"* (01:18:40), while Shoshana Zuboff noted, *"It's really a new kind of marketplace now"*. (00:15:45) This word triggers pathos by making the audience realize that the problem is happening right now, not in the future.

The lexical choice 'then' explains the process of cause and effect. Tristan Harris stated, *"If you're not paying for the product, then you are the product"* (00:13:17), and Bailey Richardson added, *"You build the machine, and then the machine changes itself"*. (00:48:30) This word is a logos strategy that logically connects business models to user exploitation.

The lexical choice 'start' shows the beginning of the negative impact. Justin Rosenstein stated, *"The tools that have been created today are starting to erode the social fabric"*. (00:05:39) This word logically (logos) explains that the damage has already begun.

The lexical choice 'keep' shows the continuous danger of social media. Tristan Harris stated, *"Their business model is to keep people engaged on the screen"*. (00:13:41) This word explains the logical goal (logos) of the companies, which is to always hold the users' attention.

The lexical choice 'back' shows the habit-forming design. Tristan Harris stated, *"To keep you coming back and inviting as many friends.."*. (00:19:06) This word serves as a logical explanation (logos) of how platforms are designed to make users return continuously.

The lexical choice 'ever' shows the massive scale of data collection. Shoshana Zuboff stated, *"They have more information about us than has ever been imagined"*. (00:17:08) This word heightens pathos by making the audience realize that this level of privacy invasion has never happened before in history.

The lexical choice 'continue' warns about the unstoppable progress of tech companies. Justin Rosenstein stated, *"They're going to continue to destroy trees..."*

continue to pull oil out of the ground". (01:24:58) This word triggers pathos by describing the bad consequences if technology is not regulated.

Table 6. Lexical Frequency of Authenticity / Credibility Category

Category	Lexical Item	Frequency
Authenticity/Credibility	Manipulate	12
Authenticity/Credibility	Fake	9
Authenticity/Credibility	Control	10
Authenticity/Credibility	Political	9
Authenticity/Credibility	Polarization	8
Authenticity/Credibility	Design	6

In Kuna (2018) theory, Authenticity and Credibility involve words exposing what is real versus fake, serving a strong delegitimization function against tech companies.

The lexical choice 'manipulate' is used to expose the hidden agenda of tech platforms. Chamath Palihapitiya admitted, *"We want to psychologically figure out how to manipulate you as fast as possible"* (00:29:04), and Tristan Harris warned, *"One country can manipulate another one without actually invading its physical borders"*. (01:12:34) The experts use this word to build ethos. By honestly exposing their former companies, they gain the audience's trust.

The lexical choice 'control' illustrates the loss of human freedom. Roger McNamee stated, *"If you want to control the population of your country, there has never been a tool as effective as Facebook"* (01:06:53), and Sandy Parakilas added, *"As humans, we've almost lost control over these systems"*. (00:48:49) This word triggers pathos, making the audience fear the power that algorithms have over society.

The lexical choice 'fake' highlights the spread of false information. Tristan Harris stated, *"Fake news on Twitter spreads six times faster than true news"*. (01:02:14) This word is grounded in logos because it uses data to explain how misinformation spreads.

The lexical choice 'political' uncovers the division created by the platforms. An AI algorithm representation stated, *"Going political with Extreme Center content has a 62.3 percent chance of long-term engagement"*. (00:49:22) This word serves as logos, proving that political conflict is used by algorithms to get more user engagement.

The lexical choice 'polarization' reflects the division in society. Guillaume Chaslot confessed, *"The algorithm that I worked on is actually increasing polarization in society"*. (00:58:47) This word establishes ethos because the engineer honestly admits that his creation divides people.

The lexical choice 'design' exposes the real intention of the platforms. Tristan Harris stated, *"That's not by accident. That's a design technique"*. (00:25:03) This

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word logically (logos) proves that user addiction is not a mistake, but a planned feature of the technology.

Table 7. Lexical Frequency of Emotional Involvement Category

Category	Lexical Item	Frequency
Emotional Involvement	You	294
Emotional Involvement	We	211
Emotional Involvement	Want	34
Emotional Involvement	Human	22
Emotional Involvement	Feel	13
Emotional Involvement	Lose	7
Emotional Involvement	Ruin	7

According to Kuna (2018a), Emotional Involvement includes personal pronouns and emotional words designed to directly engage the audience, acting as the core of the persuasion.

The lexical choice 'you' removes the distance between the speaker and the viewer. Tristan Harris stated, *"If you're not paying for the product, then you are the product"* (00:13:17), and Chamath Palihapitiya admitted, *"We want to psychologically figure out how to manipulate you"*. (00:29:04) This word is a strong use of pathos. It makes the issue of data trading feel very personal for the audience.

The lexical choice 'we' is used to show shared responsibility. Tristan Harris stated, *"We in the tech industry have created the tools to destabilize"* (01:11:33), and Jaron Lanier confessed, *"We've put deceit and sneakiness at the absolute center of everything we do"*. (00:21:47) This word establishes a collective ethos. It shows that the speakers take responsibility for their past actions.

The lexical choice 'want' explains corporate greed. Sandy Parakilas stated, *"Because they want us to look at more ads"* (00:27:58), and Tristan Harris stated, *"We want them to take this action"*. (00:24:18) This word provides a logical explanation (logos) for the financial motivations of the tech industry.

The lexical choice 'human' shows the threat to people. Shoshana Zuboff stated, *"It's a marketplace that trades exclusively in human futures"*. (00:15:48) This word triggers pathos by showing that human life is being treated as a product to be sold.

The lexical choice 'feel' expresses the psychological impact. Alex Roetter shared, *"I always felt like, fundamentally, it was a force for good"*. (00:02:01) This word establishes ethos by showing the speaker's honest personal feelings.

The lexical choice 'lose' shows human weakness. Sandy Parakilas warned, *"As humans, we've almost lost control over these systems"*. (00:48:49) This word targets the audience's sense of security, triggering pathos by showing that humans are losing to artificial intelligence.

The lexical choice 'ruin' provides a final warning. Jeff Flake stated, "*Tribalism is ruining us. It is tearing our country apart*". (01:14:32) This word is a pathos strategy used to make the audience feel worried about the future of society.

Discussion

The interpretation of these findings is also supported by recent studies on platform communication, which show that persuasive influence is shaped by credibility indicators, emotional manipulation, correction strategies, visual framing, and media literacy practices Hamелеers et al. (2020); Huffaker et al. (2020); Jones-Jang et al. (2021); Lewandowsky (2021); Luo et al. (2022); Lutzke et al. (2019); Rapp & Salovich (2018); Vraga & Bode (2017). Consequently, the lexical patterns found in *The Social Dilemma* (2020) should be understood as part of a broader persuasive ecology in which language, platform design, and audience cognition interact to shape public interpretation.

The findings demonstrate that persuasive discourse in *The Social Dilemma* (2020) was systematically constructed through lexical selections that operationalized specific rhetorical appeals. The mapping became clear when the category labels were examined against their concordance lines: positive vocabulary was reversed, intensifiers dramatized risk, testedness markers naturalized evidence, certainty markers authorized warnings, temporal markers compressed urgency, authenticity terms exposed intention, and personal pronouns implicated viewers. The category-specific examples below show how lexical form, local context, speaker identity, and documentary sequencing jointly produced ethos, pathos, and logos rather than allowing frequency counts to stand as self-explanatory evidence. This interpretation supports O'Keefe (2016) assertion that persuasion shapes audience interpretation through strategic language framing rather than direct coercion.

In the General Positive Value domain, speakers subverted words conventionally associated with innovation and progress—social, good, new, create, build, great, and grow—to expose systemic harm and corporate incentives. Justin Rosenstein's warning, "*I think the tools that have been created today are starting to erode the social fabric of how society works*". (00:05:39), reversed the affiliative meaning of social, while Alex Roetter's admission, "*I always felt like, fundamentally, it was a force for good. I don't know if I feel that way anymore*". (00:02:01), constructed an insider ethos through self-correction. This recontextualization contrasts with Santos and Santos & Mukminin (2022), who found that positive lexical choices in promotional discourse attract and reassure consumers. Here, the documentary turned the technology industry's own promotional vocabulary against itself. The inversion also aligns with Riyono et al. (2018) who argue that lexical choices reflect ideological positioning within their social context.

Within the Intensity domain, really, even, very, never, exactly, extreme, and existential functioned as psychological intensifiers that strengthened pathos. The repetition in "*It's really, really bad*". (00:39:56) amplified affective force, while "*Never before in history have 50 designers... made decisions that would have an impact on two billion people*". (00:09:08) framed the scale of platform power as historically unprecedented. These choices are particularly effective in a documentary about digital technology because recommender systems, behavioral prediction, and

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data extraction are largely invisible to ordinary viewers. Intensifiers translate those abstract processes into perceptible urgency and shorten the psychological distance between technical design and its social consequences. Delivered by former industry insiders and combined with explanatory testimony, the emotional force directs attention to evidence developed elsewhere in the documentary; pathos therefore reinforces rather than replaces ethos and logos. This interaction is consistent with Khrumchenko (2023) account of discourse synergy in mass media.

In the Testedness domain, work, true, real, show, find, and understand constructed a fact-oriented narrative that supported logos. The algorithmic statement, *"My analysis shows that going political with Extreme Center content has a 62.3 percent chance of long-term engagement"*. (00:49:22), combined the verb shows with numerical evidence, whereas *"It has led to real, offline harm"* (01:07:11) connected digital activity to observable consequences. In both examples, testedness markers presented the experts' claims as verifiable rather than speculative. The category therefore helped the documentary balance its emotional warnings with the appearance of empirical accountability, extending El-Dakhs et al. (2024) observation that factual evidence strengthens persuasive authority in specialized registers.

The Certainty domain relied on epistemic markers such as know, think, right, need, believe, probably, and predict to construct authoritative ethos. In *"They know when people are lonely. They know when people are depressed"*. (00:16:50), repetition represented platform surveillance as established knowledge. Similarly, *"I can predict what kind of videos will keep you watching"*. (00:18:32) presented behavioral prediction as a controllable technical capability rather than a possibility. Because these claims were voiced by technology insiders, the epistemic markers linked access to industry knowledge with confidence, strengthening audience trust in the warning. This pattern corresponds with Mori (2016) finding that certainty markers can establish authority within persuasive discourse.

In the Time Factor domain, now, then, start, keep, back, ever, and continue compressed the distance between digital design and real-world impact. The statement *"And now society is incapable of healing itself and just devolving into a kind of chaos"*. (01:18:40) positioned the crisis in the audience's present, while *"They're going to continue to destroy trees... continue to pull oil out of the ground"*. (01:24:58) extended its consequences into the future. The pairing of immediacy and continuity created a temporal logic in which inaction appeared to permit escalating harm. Compared with the broader emotional appeals described by Rambe et al. (2025), these specific temporal lexemes show precisely how urgency is encoded at the word level.

Within the Authenticity and Credibility domain, manipulate, fake, control, political, polarization, and design delegitimized the neutral image of digital platforms. The insider admission *"We want to psychologically figure out how to manipulate you as fast as possible"*. (00:29:04) named the intended effect on users, while *"That's not by accident. That's a design technique"*. (00:25:03) recast harmful outcomes as deliberate design decisions. Because the accusations came from former industry participants, the lexical choices simultaneously exposed

intention and built source credibility. They transformed corporate architecture into a moral object of judgment and connected the documentary's logos to an insider-based ethos.

Finally, the Emotional Involvement domain used you and we alongside want, human, feel, lose, and ruin to reduce the psychological distance between systemic problems and individual viewers. In *"If you're not paying for the product, then you are the product"*. (00:13:17), the second-person pronoun positioned the viewer inside the economic exchange; in *"As humans, we've almost lost control over these systems"*. (00:48:49), the inclusive we turned the warning into a shared vulnerability. The category was therefore effective not simply because it contained emotional vocabulary, but because its pronouns reassigned participant roles: experts and viewers became a collective exposed to the same technological system. This mechanism parallels Al Kayed et al. (2026) finding that direct address creates an immediate relational bridge in persuasive digital discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that persuasive discourse in documentary communication, specifically within *The Social Dilemma* (2020), operates as a highly structured, role-dependent linguistic phenomenon. By bridging Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) with Kuna (2018) framework, this research demonstrates that persuasion is not merely achieved through scattered evaluative terms, but through a systematic and strategic subversion of lexical choices. The findings reveal that technology experts, corporate executives, and academics intentionally deploy distinct lexical choices such as Certainty, Intensity, and Emotional Involvement to transform abstract algorithmic processes into immediate personal vulnerabilities and existential societal risks. Ultimately, by successfully exposing how digital platforms navigate the tension between factual presentation and ideological influence, this study underscores that strategic lexical choice is a potent instrument for engineering public perception in media discourse.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in its integrated methodological approach. While previous literature frequently separates broad rhetorical strategies from specific linguistic features, this study provides a unified framework showing how specific lexical choices directly operationalize abstract rhetorical appeals within media communication. Practically, these insights contribute to the development of critical media literacy. By understanding the linguistic mechanisms of subverted terminology—such as how positive concepts like "social" or "connection" are recontextualized to evoke dread—media consumers can better detect underlying persuasive agendas and corporate positioning in contemporary digital landscapes.

Despite its comprehensive findings, this study is subject to certain limitations. The dataset is exclusively constrained to the spoken expert utterances within a single documentary transcript, which may limit the generalizability of the lexical patterns across broader media genres. Furthermore, the corpus-assisted approach focused primarily on verbal textual data, omitting the potential interaction between lexical choices and non-verbal

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or visual semiotic resources. Future research should address these gaps by conducting comparative or cross-documentary discourse analysis across various technology-centered media. Additionally, integrating multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) could offer a more holistic understanding of how persuasive lexical choices interact with visual framing, sound design, and editing techniques to shape audience persuasion.

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Risma Fadilla was responsible for the overall preparation of the manuscript, including the introduction, methodology, results and discussion, conclusion, author statements, acknowledgements, references, data collection, corpus processing, lexical frequency analysis, and the interpretation of rhetorical appeals and persuasive lexical choices. **Cipto Wardoyo** and **Dian Nurrachman** contributed to the supervision, critical review, and editing of the manuscript, ensuring the accuracy, clarity, and overall quality of the final version prior to publication. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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