

Investigating the Rhetorical Strategies in Tesla's Zero-Dollar Social Media Marketing

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Introduction

In an era where most automotive companies invest heavily in paid advertising, Tesla has adopted a different approach, one that relies on zero-dollar marketing strategies rooted in digital platforms like YouTube and social media. Rather than using traditional ad spots or direct promotional campaigns, Tesla leverages content that is informational, emotionally engaging, and aligned with its brand identity. This unconventional method of digital promotion not only sets Tesla apart from other companies in the industry but also invites questions about the rhetorical strategies that underpin its success. The application of rhetorical analysis to digital media is well-established in communication and marketing research. Rhetoric offers a strategic framework for influencing how audiences think, feel, and act, making it particularly useful in analyzing marketing communication. Through rhetorical strategies, messages can generate interest where none exists and shift audience perspectives by appealing to logic, credibility, and emotion. Miles et al. (2018) state that rhetoric shares commonalities with marketing strategies. Tonks (2002) insists that rhetoric “as a framing device and as an instrument for managerial action is central to a full appreciation of marketing reality” (p. 803). Scholars such as Bowdon (2014) and Moore (2020) demonstrated how rhetorical frameworks can be used to evaluate modern communication practices. The rhetorical theory that language is an instrument for persuasion was proposed by Aristotle in the 4th century B.C. (Mshvenieradze, 2013). He argues that persuasive speech must comprise three elements: Logos, Ethos, and Pathos. For communication to be persuasive and effective, the message must be clear, genuine, and emotional (Aristotle, 2004).

Social media use in marketing has become universal in communications (Myrick et al., 2016). Moore (2020) argues that persuasive word choice is often overlooked in social media marketing, where visual elements such as photography and video typically dominate. However, this does not diminish the importance of language. As Eyrich et al. (2008) emphasize, organizations must understand how to strategically use social media to effectively engage their audiences, an approach that requires careful attention to both visual and linguistic elements. This includes the purposeful use of persuasive language. In this context, persuasive word choice refers to the strategic use of language to influence audience perception through Aristotle's rhetorical appeals: *logos* (logic), *ethos* (credibility), and *pathos* (emotion). Language, as Vestergard and Schroder (1985) assert, plays a foundational role in communication and remains a critical component of modern advertising.

Recently, the automotive industry has encountered a shift in inventions towards electric vehicles, where various multifaceted approaches are employed in marketing, blending the conventional and unconventional styles of advertising in their products and brands. Tesla is widely recognized not only for its innovation in electric vehicle (EV) technology but also for its unconventional marketing strategies. Tesla presents a compelling case study due to its unique "zero-dollar" marketing approach. This approach allows the company not to invest in traditional paid advertisements such as TV commercials, print ads, or online banners. Instead, Tesla relies heavily on social media and word-of-mouth, referral program, viral content, and CEO Elon Musk's personal online presence to build brand visibility (Cezim, 2023; Dudovskiy, 2021). For instance, product announcements such as the Cybertruck launch generated widespread attention on Twitter/X and YouTube without the use of paid promotions, while user-generated content and influencer reviews further amplify Tesla's reach.

Hence, this study seeks to examine the use of rhetorical elements (logos, pathos, and ethos) in Tesla YouTube videos. The study offers a rhetorical analysis of how the company establishes credibility, taps into emotions, and employs logical reasoning to persuade its audience. Additionally, the application of Aristotle's rhetorical theory provides a robust framework for understanding the persuasive elements that contribute to effective communication. By exploring how Tesla utilizes ethos, pathos, and logos in its marketing efforts, this research aims to fill a gap in the literature regarding the intersection of rhetoric and digital marketing strategies. Finally, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of the role of persuasive communication in shaping consumer perceptions and driving brand loyalty.

Research Objectives

The objective of this study is to investigate the rhetorical elements of persuasiveness that are employed in Tesla's "zero-dollar" marketing strategy to promote their innovative electric vehicles.

Research Question

- What are the rhetorical elements used in Tesla automotive YouTube videos?
- How does Tesla employ logos, ethos, and pathos in their "zero-dollar" marketing strategy?

Literature Review

Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory

The art of rhetoric can be described as a stream of consciousness that involves the relationship between thought and expression. Rhetoric focuses on the strategic use of language to attain persuasion. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the understanding of available means of persuasion. The goals of rhetorical analysis include the persuasive strategies employed by a writer to accomplish their aim and the influence the use of

rhetoric can have on the audience. In Rhetoric, three artistic proofs, namely, logos, pathos, and ethos, were identified by Aristotle, and he argued that they constitute the art of rhetoric. According to Aristotle, the available means of persuasion in discourse are based on the three kinds of proof: logical reasoning, human emotions, and human character. Griffin (2000) states that the logical proof relies on sound reasoning within an argument, the pathetic proof is associated with the emotions evoked in the audience, and the ethical proof pertains to the way the writer's character or disposition is conveyed in the message. Similarly, Aristotle's definition of rhetoric is the ability to see the available means of persuasion in each case through the three main forms, ethos, pathos, and logos (Aristotle, as cited in Rashid & Mohamad, 2019). Aristotle's theory focuses on language as a tool and vehicle for shaping persuasive arguments (Aristotle, 2004).

Aristotle's rhetorical theory has been used to study modern communication and investigate the theme of persuasion. Yang et al. (2018), in their study on the marketability of a product, applied Aristotle's rhetorical theory to identify three main persuasive variables: credibility, emotive bonding, and accommodation characteristics, and further evaluated their functions in establishing the trust of users. The study's results show that maximum trustworthiness is needed in communication between clients and service providers in the business world. Another study by Auger (2014) examines how nonprofits use rhetorical techniques on Twitter to gain support and influence audiences, operationalizing logos with subcategories such as fact and statistics, ethos with celebrity and public figure, and pathos with motivation, humor, and love.

Furthermore, Murthy and Gosal (2016) apply Aristotle's rhetoric to industrial communication. The authors stated that effective communication is essential in the management of industries, given the heterogeneous nature of the workforce. They claimed that, with the help of Aristotle's three persuasive appeals, industrial communication could be highly effective.

As seen in the above review, Aristotle's rhetorical theory has been used in many persuasive studies. Similarly, his classification of persuasive elements -- ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logical reasoning) -- remains highly relevant and applicable to contemporary brands, particularly those that effectively leverage social media. These rhetorical principles offer valuable insight into today's communication style and remain a framework for understanding and analyzing the persuasive strategies employed by modern brands on social media platforms. While these means of persuasion are typically meant for a speech by a rhetor, when it comes to social media, these become relevant because social media has become one of the main marketing strategies used in promoting a product. When these three rhetorical appeals are strategically aligned, they create what Aristotle defined as successful rhetoric. In today's marketing landscape, this success can be measured by several indicators: increased audience engagement (likes, shares, comments), strong brand recall, emotional resonance with target consumers, and loyalty or advocacy as reflected in repeat interactions or purchases. For social media campaigns, additional metrics such as view counts, follower growth, and customer-generated content also serve as

evidence of rhetorical impact. Thus, Aristotle's framework continues to provide a robust framework through which we can assess the effectiveness of persuasive strategies in the digital age.

According to Lewandowsky et al. (2012), individuals tend to seek information that aligns with their existing beliefs, prioritize the coherence of the narrative, consider the credibility of the source, and consider the prevalence of belief or acceptance by others. From this perspective, it can be argued that effective persuasion or communication relies on the combination of a seemingly credible source and a well-crafted story or message, delivered to an audience that is predisposed to believe it. For this study, the discussion of social media focuses on one social network: YouTube. YouTube is a TV streaming service that includes live TV from 100+ broadcasts, cable, and regional sports networks. Most people have access to YouTube, and it is easy to navigate. YouTube has been one of the most popular video-sharing platforms since it was launched in 2017.

Overview of Tesla Company

According to Cezim (2023), Tesla is one of the most innovative and trailblazing car companies globally, setting itself apart with game-changing electric vehicles and innovative technology. Tesla produces fully electric cars that are fast and attractively designed. Moreover, the electric automaker does not deal with car dealerships and distributors and sells its vehicles directly to end-users. While other major automotive brands allocate a significant portion of their budget towards paid marketing efforts, Tesla has taken a different approach. For example, Tesla does not spend any money on social media ads, which contrasts with more traditional automotive brands like BMW, Porsche, Cadillac, and others. Tesla focuses on marketing through customer experience (a referral program), social media, and cross-promotional opportunities (Dudovskiy, 2021).

Tesla's marketing strategy is unconventional, setting it apart from traditional automotive advertising. Rather than investing in paid advertisements, Tesla relies on a "zero-dollar" marketing model that emphasizes organic brand promotion through social media, customer referrals, and viral content. The company engages its audience primarily through compelling narratives and product unveilings on platforms like YouTube and X (formerly Twitter), often led by CEO Elon Musk himself (Simplilearn, 2023). Musk's direct and influential online presence acts as a powerful branding tool, blurring the lines between corporate communication and personal advocacy (Forbes, 2020).

Tesla also utilizes a referral program that incentivizes customers to share their experiences, effectively turning users into brand ambassadors (Krows Digital, 2023). These strategies reflect a participatory marketing approach where community engagement, emotional appeal, and authenticity drive consumer interest and loyalty, core aspects of Aristotle's rhetorical principles. This strategic reliance on ethos and pathos enhances brand perception and credibility, creating a persuasive marketing presence without conventional advertising spend. This study expands on previous

research to contribute to the body of knowledge in rhetoric by applying Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory as a framework for examining and analyzing persuasion in the content of promotional YouTube videos published by Tesla automotive company.

Methodology

Research Design

The current study employed the qualitative research design given the interpretive nature of the investigation (Cohen et al., 2000; Williams, 2007). Crotty (1998) claims that qualitative research is subjective; the researcher derives meaning from their interpretation of the data collected. Similarly, according to Creswell (2009), qualitative researchers make interpretations of what they observe, hear, and understand. This study adopts a content analysis design, appropriate for exploring patterns of meaning and rhetorical strategies within textual or multimedia data. The analysis follows a directed content analysis approach, in which existing theory guides the initial coding framework (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Aristotle's rhetorical theory, ethos, pathos, and logos, served as the conceptual lens for coding, while Moore's (2020) categories provided operational definitions and subcategories for each rhetorical appeal.

Data Source and Data Collection

The data source for this study was Tesla's official YouTube channel, and the Unit of analysis for this study is the transcript auto-generated from Tesla's YouTube videos. According to Creswell (2009), the procedures involved in data collection in qualitative research include observation, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials. To identify the rhetorical elements, i.e., ethos, pathos, and logos, that characterize these video advertisements, a total of three videos were selected based on their recency, marketing relevance, and thematic alignment with the study's focus on persuasive communication. Auto-generated transcripts from each video were extracted and served as the textual data for coding and analysis. Hence, I refer to the auto-generated, analyzed video transcripts as Texts. The selected videos include: "Model S Track Pack," "Model Y - Engineering from First Principles," "Extreme Heat Testing -Tesla Model S, 3, X and Y."

These videos were published in 2023; each video showcases a specific model or product feature and contains clear rhetorical messaging aimed at building brand identity, promoting innovation, and engaging viewers emotionally. The videos also have high view counts, user interaction (likes/comments), and narrative structure, making them ideal for applying a rhetorical analysis framework.

Tesla’s YouTube Channel

Tesla YouTube videos have been created for engaging and informative content, making it a way to connect with people. It has 2.6 million subscribers and 259,519,218 views. It has published 324 videos since its creation in 2006. "Through these videos, viewers get a closer look at Tesla’s innovative products and features, as well as a behind-the-scenes peek into the company’s operations" (Cezim, 2023). A video focusing on the cyber-truck that was recently launched has about 1.2 million views in one day and about 5,000 viewers' engagement. This shows how the company uses captivating, compelling content to talk about its products.

Data Analysis Procedures

A qualitative content analysis was used to analyze sample YouTube videos. The transcripts extracted from the videos were first examined and coded to determine whether a video applied Logos, Ethos, and Pathos. The coding was done using the coding categories proposed by Moore (2020) in the table below (see Table 1) to identify appeals for each element. The subcategories used to measure logic include efficiency, productivity, quality, utility, facts, statistics, and surveys. For ethos, appeals to credibility include trustworthiness, competence, honesty, respect, expertise, and association with celebrities and public figures. For pathos, appeals to emotion, including love, happiness, passion, nostalgia, motivation, sadness, and humor, were identified.

Logos (Logic)	Ethos (Credibility)	Pathos (Emotion)
Efficiency	Trustworthiness	love
Productivity	Competence	Happiness
Quality	Honesty	Passion
Utility	Respect	Nostalgia
Facts	Expertise	Motivation
Statistics	Celebrities	Sadness
Surveys	Public figures	Humor

Table 1: Subcategories for each rhetorical element. Adapted from Moore (2020).

Results

This section presents the findings of the rhetorical analysis across three Tesla YouTube videos. Each video was analyzed using a directed coding scheme grounded in Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals: logos, ethos, and pathos, with subcodes adapted from Moore (2020). The tables below highlight representative examples for each appeal, followed by a focused interpretation.



Video 1: [Model S Track Pack | Tesla](#)

This video highlights Tesla's performance testing of the Model S Plaid equipped with the new Track Pack at the Paul Ricard F1 circuit in the south of France. The footage features a vehicle undergoing high-speed track trials to showcase enhancements in power, braking, and handling. The video emphasizes technical upgrades such as forged aluminum wheels, carbon ceramic brakes with continuous fibers, and track-focused tires. These innovations are framed as deliberate engineering choices aimed at delivering precise vehicle response and predictable braking, whether in daily driving or extreme racing conditions. Table 2 highlights the rhetorical strategies or elements and their subcategories used in the Tesla video.

Subcode	Example
Efficiency	“We’re putting them through their paces out on the circuit today.”
Productivity	“We’ve got 11 of our Model S Plaids; they’re coming here with the new track pack.”
Quality	“Model S Plaid is a beast on the track because we intentionally designed it that way.”
Utility	“With the Model S track package, we completely transformed the car with a brand-new track-focused tire...”
Facts/Statistics	“With 10–20 horsepower coming out of the powertrain, incredible acceleration with Track Pack...”
Surveys (Implied)	Testing at the Paul Ricard F1 track as a real-world evaluation of vehicle performance.

Table 2: Logos - Model S Track Pack

The above table shows Tesla's heavy reliance on logical appeals to persuade viewers of the Model S Track Pack's performance credibility. The use of technical language and quantitative data, such as "10–20 horsepower coming out of the powertrain," grounds the message in verifiable, factual evidence. By referencing productivity ("11 vehicles tested"), efficiency ("putting them through their paces"), and quality ("intentionally designed"), Tesla builds a rational argument for the car's superiority.

The reference to real-world testing at the Paul Ricard F1 track serves as an implied survey, a credible testing environment that adds legitimacy to the vehicle's capabilities. Tesla's choice to showcase utility ("track-focused tire," "forged aluminum wheel") highlights practical features that would appeal to the audience's desire for performance and reliability.

These appeals are particularly effective in the context of luxury and performance vehicle marketing, where buyers are typically informed and attentive to mechanical and engineering details. These uses of logos are effective because they offer rational, data-driven support for the product's excellence, appealing to an audience that values innovation, functionality, and engineering credibility.

Subcode	Example
Competence	"The Model S Track Pack really represents the vision at Tesla of achieving a vehicle behavior and response that is always very, very true to the driver inputs."
Trustworthiness	"Even the most demanding driver, the most sensitive, will take this car to the limit and still have the highest confidence in it."
Expertise	References to specific engineering features, such as continuous fiber ceramic brakes and forged aluminum wheels.

Table 3: Ethos – Model S Track Pack

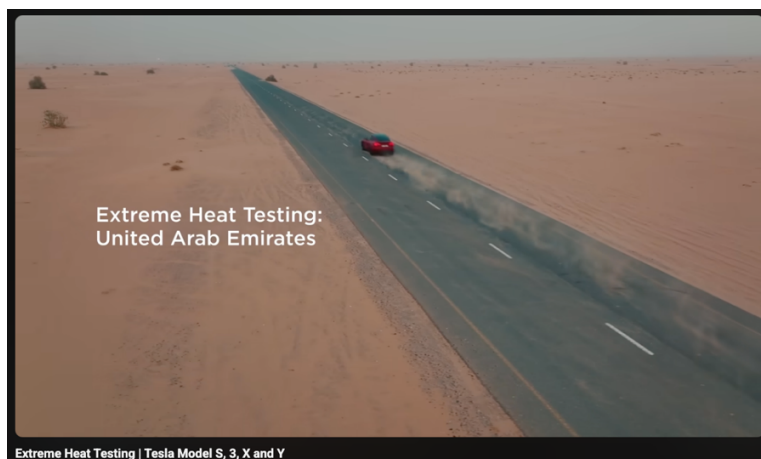
The table above shows how Tesla builds credibility by aligning the product with the company's broader vision and demonstrating engineering competence. Statements like "represents the vision at Tesla" connect the Model S Track Pack to the brand's long-term commitment to innovation and performance, thereby reinforcing organizational credibility. Additionally, appeals to expertise are subtly embedded in the technical language and reference to unique engineering features, such as "continuous fiber ceramic brakes," terminology that signals depth of knowledge and advanced research. Such content positions Tesla not only as a manufacturer but as a leader in automotive engineering.

The video addresses trustworthiness directly by stating that even "the most demanding driver" can be confident in the vehicle; this reassures viewers while maintaining a tone of technical certainty. In a media environment where audiences are often skeptical of marketing, these subtle but firm credibility markers strengthen consumer trust.

Subcode	Example
Passion	"Model S Plaid is a beast on the track because we intentionally designed it that way."
Motivation	"All the performance limits are lifted and balanced."
Happiness	"... you get predictable braking performance whether you're driving to the grocery store or on a racetrack."

Table 4: Pathos – Model S Track Pack

The table reveals Tesla's use of passionate and emotionally charged language to stir excitement. By describing the vehicle as a "beast on the track," the video evokes admiration and thrill, appealing to viewers' aspirations for power and performance. Such language not only informs but inspires. The emphasis on motivation, "all performance limits are lifted," creates a narrative of boundary-breaking innovation, an emotional hook that resonates with viewers drawn to cutting-edge technology. Tesla also appeals to happiness and reassurance by emphasizing that features like braking performance are reliable in both every day and extreme scenarios. This aligns with the consumer's desire for not just power, but confidence and control. By combining emotional appeal with rational demonstration, the video effectively humanizes technical content, making it more accessible and engaging to a broader audience.



Video 2: [Extreme Heat Testing Tesla Model S, 3, X, and Y](#)

This video documents Tesla’s field testing in the United Arab Emirates, where extreme temperatures, high humidity, and dusty terrain create ideal conditions for thermal and performance-stress testing. It features multiple Tesla vehicles undergoing rigorous evaluation, including steep mountain climbs, exposure to sandstorms, and sustained operation under intense heat. The video highlights the vehicle’s resilience in harsh environments and promotes Tesla’s engineering strength, particularly in extreme climates. Table 5 focuses on the rhetorical elements and their subcategories used in Tesla video 2.

Subcode	Example
Productivity	“We are actually driving between 250 and 400 kilometers per day...”
Quality	“We park it in the sun for a long time... charge it with Superchargers... use Cabin Overheat Protection.”
Utility	“It’s really important to keep the passengers cool... cool the battery, the drive units...”
Facts	“Earlier today it was 51 degrees... very dusty... up to 80–90% humidity sometimes.”
Statistics	Implied in environmental data (temperature, humidity, distance), though not numerically framed.
Survey	Not directly stated; implied through ongoing testing practices.

Table 5: Logos – Extreme Heat Testing – Model S, 3, X, and Y

The video strongly employs logos by documenting rigorous testing procedures and real-world environmental data. Viewers are presented with tangible details like temperature extremes (“51 degrees”), terrain challenges, and the distances driven each day—making Tesla’s claims about durability and safety feel verifiable. Appeals to utility and product quality are evident in the mention of protective systems and charging routines. These logical appeals are effective because they make Tesla’s engineering process feel methodical, transparent, and rooted in performance data rather than promotional language.

Subcode	Example
Trustworthiness	“We’re here right now in UAE because it is the worst time to be in UAE... the hottest time of the year.”
Competence	“We are testing Model Y here, and at the same time, we have a US Model X Plaid... to make sure these vehicles survive extreme conditions.”
Honesty	“It’s just too hot. No one wants to come here in the summer, but it’s a great time to test a car.”
Respect	“We’re trying to find everything that could impact the customer, from bumper to bumper.”
Expertise	“We’ll use all the features of the vehicle... Cabin Overheat Protection... AC, supercharging.”

Table 6: Ethos –Extreme Heat Testing – Model S, 3, X, and Y

The table illustrates that Tesla's ethos is built through transparency, technical mastery, and commitment to real-world accountability. The engineers' presence in one of the world's harshest climates and their willingness to test under discomfort ("no one wants to come here in the summer") demonstrate honesty and trustworthiness. Tesla's focus on "everything that could impact the customer" shows respect for users, while explanations of testing protocols and features like overheat protection highlight expertise and competence.

Subcode	Example
Passion	“We’re trying to find everything that could impact the customer...”
Motivation	“It’s the hottest time of the year... but it’s a great time to test a car.”
Humor	“Don’t worry, but you’ve got a hornet on your shorts.”

Table 7: Pathos Extreme Heat Testing – Model S, 3, X, and Y

The video’s pathos emerges through emotional tones of challenge, perseverance, and care. The engineers’ willingness to work in 51-degree heat (Celcius) to ensure vehicle safety reflects passion and dedication, which reinforces viewers’ emotional trust in the brand. Moments of dry humor (e.g., the hornet scene) briefly humanize the technical content, while statements about overcoming environmental hardship create an undercurrent of motivation.



Video 3: Model Y - Engineering from First Principles

This video features Tesla’s Vice President of Vehicle Engineering, Lars Moravy, discussing the development philosophy and engineering innovations behind the Model Y. Framed around Tesla’s “first principles” approach, the video emphasizes the vehicle’s design rationale from the ground up, highlighting both functional versatility and technical breakthroughs. Table 8 highlights the rhetorical elements and their subcategories used in Tesla video 3.

Subcode	Example
Productivity	“You don't get to say, well, we've done that for 50 years... you have to prove everything you're doing from the ground up.”
Quality	“Our cars have always had great range and great dynamic.”
Utility	“Off-road mode and cargo... gives the Model Y a capability that you might not otherwise get in a pretty sporty crossover.”
Facts	“We actually invented our own alloy... no need to heat treat it with these giant ovens.”

Table 8: Logos – Model Y - Engineering from First Principles

The video uses logos by framing Tesla’s design process as logical, evidence-based, and performance-driven. Appeals to productivity and utility are central, with features like off-road mode and cargo space presented as rational enhancements to daily functionality. The discussion of custom alloy development supports facts and quality, reinforcing the idea that each innovation serves a measurable engineering purpose. By grounding its claims in practical, demonstrable value, the video builds a persuasive

argument for the Model Y as a smart, efficient, and thoughtfully designed vehicle, appealing to viewers’ desire for logic and reliability.

Subcode	Example
Trustworthiness	“Every new product we make, I want to take it a step further.”
Competence	“We actually invented our own alloy... saves money, costs energy, and keeps the part straight.”
Honesty	“You have to prove everything you’re doing from the ground up with first principles of physics and mechanics.”
Respect	“The functionality you have in a typical crossover is something that’s super important.”
Expertise	“There’s been a lot of talk about the rear casting... from an engineering geek-out standpoint, it’s one of the coolest parts.”

Table 9: Ethos – Model Y - Engineering from First Principles

Tesla builds ethos in the video by emphasizing transparency, technical mastery, and alignment with consumer values. The speaker’s detailed discussion of Tesla’s custom alloy, engineered to maintain structural integrity without heat treatment, demonstrates both competence and expertise. His explanation of why traditional methods are questioned and re-evaluated through “first principles” thinking reflects honesty and a dedication to rigorous innovation. The video also shows respect for everyday drivers by highlighting functional design elements like fold-flat seats, cargo capacity, and towing, features that anticipate real user needs.

Subcode	Example
Love	“People that have a family and need the storage space, they’re going to love it.”
Happiness	“People that want to sit up high and see the road, they’re going to love it.”
Passion	“We’ve always tried to constantly improve our products... make it a part of your life, a part of your experience.”
Motivation	“Ultimately it results in a product people love and that’s when you know you’ve hit the right point.”

Table 10: Pathos – Model Y - Engineering from First Principles

Pathos in the video is built through emotionally resonant messaging about lifestyle, personal satisfaction, and empowerment. The repeated phrase “people are going to love it” directly expresses happiness and love, while the emphasis on making the car a part of the user’s “experience” reflects motivation and emotional integration. These appeals invite viewers to see themselves not just driving a vehicle, but living with a Tesla, reinforcing a personal connection. This emotional framing effectively complements the technical content by making Model Y feel relevant, relatable, and desirable across a range of user identities.

Discussion

The results from the rhetorical analysis of three Tesla YouTube videos reveal an intentional and distinct pattern in how the company uses logos, ethos, and pathos to strategically craft persuasive digital content. While each video presents a different marketing context, such as high-performance demonstrations (Model S Track Pack), real-world testing in extreme conditions (Extreme Heat Testing), and engineering philosophy (Model Y), they collectively reflect a strategic, multimodal rhetorical approach to build a persuasive narrative around Tesla products. The findings highlight several key rhetorical patterns across the videos, which align with Tesla's broader zero-dollar marketing strategy and brand identity.

Across all three videos, logos emerges as the most dominant rhetorical strategy, establishing Tesla's identity as a data- and design-driven brand. Each video reinforces this appeal by highlighting practical features, engineering innovations, and performance metrics. For example, in the Model S Track Pack video, performance specifications and the use of an F1 track provide a logical foundation for showcasing the vehicle's superiority. Likewise, the Extreme Heat Testing video emphasizes environmental data and real-world durability to position Tesla vehicles as reliable under extreme conditions. In Model Y, the focus on custom alloy development and a "first principles" design approach underscores Tesla's commitment to functionality and rational problem-solving. Frequent appeals to productivity, utility, and factual evidence build a strong logical framework that resonates with a tech-savvy, performance-conscious audience. These appeals are particularly effective in Tesla's context because they align with the expectations of consumers who value not just compelling branding, but clear, verifiable proof of concept.

While all three videos establish ethos, they do so with varying strategies. Tesla leverages professional credibility, technical vocabulary, and real-world effort to convey trustworthiness and competence. In the Model S Track Pack, credibility is built through alignment with Tesla's long-term vision and expert-level technical language. In the Extreme Heat Testing video, trustworthiness is conveyed by engineers enduring challenging climates to ensure product reliability, thereby enhancing perceptions of trust, honesty, and respect for users. In Model Y, ethos is constructed through clarity, technical insight, and a customer-first mindset, especially in discussions of functional design. Across these cases, Tesla's ethos is framed not through celebrity endorsements or broad claims, but through demonstrated competence, engineering expertise, and

real-world commitment. These qualities resonate with a skeptical, information-seeking public.

Although pathos is less dominant, it plays a key role in humanizing Tesla's message and making the technical content emotionally accessible. In the Model S Track Pack, emotionally charged phrases like "beast on the track" and "performance limits are lifted" frame the product as exhilarating and powerful. In Extreme Heat Testing, emotional engagement arises from scenes of hardship, perseverance, and brief humor, such as engineers working in 50°C heat or handling unexpected interruptions like hornets. These moments create emotional contrast and reinforce a sense of integrity and passion. In Model Y, the pathos is centered on lifestyle and belonging, with statements like "people are going to love it" appealing to values of family, safety, and joy. By embedding emotional resonance into technical storytelling, Tesla broadens its appeal beyond data to human experience, reinforcing the idea that these vehicles are not just machines, but part of users' everyday lives.

Implications

The findings provide valuable insights for marketers and researchers interested in understanding how innovative marketing strategies and persuasive communication contribute to the success of a brand in the digital age. Furthermore, this rhetorical analysis can serve as a resource for other studies that aim to analyze the content produced on social media, particularly those studies that focus on examining persuasive elements in marketing communication, using Aristotle's theory. Additionally, any future research that examines successful communication techniques employed in social media discourse or investigates specific communication strategies used on different social media platforms can draw from the findings of this study.

This study also offers several pedagogical implications for teaching digital rhetoric and technical communication in contemporary classrooms. First, it demonstrates how classical rhetorical theory, particularly Aristotle's appeals of logos, ethos, and pathos, can be meaningfully applied to modern, multimodal content such as branded YouTube videos. By analyzing Tesla's strategic use of rhetorical appeals, students can better understand how persuasion operates not only through text but also through visuals, voice, setting, and tone in digital media. This can also deepen their media literacy and their ability to engage critically with marketing, branding, and social media content. Finally, this research encourages educators to integrate real-world case studies (such as Tesla's videos) into the curriculum to help students connect theory to practice. This approach not only makes rhetorical principles more tangible but also fosters engagement with emerging trends in digital branding, content strategy, and ethical persuasion.

Conclusion

This study examined the use of rhetorical strategies (logos, ethos, and pathos) in three Tesla YouTube videos as part of the company's broader zero-dollar marketing

approach. The analysis revealed meaningful patterns in how Tesla constructs persuasive digital content. Across all three videos, logos emerged as the most dominant appeal, with frequent references to productivity, utility, technical features, and engineering data. This logical emphasis reflects Tesla's identity as a performance- and innovation-driven brand that seeks to build consumer trust through demonstrable value rather than traditional advertising. Ethos was also consistently used, often through demonstrations of engineering expertise, transparency in testing, and alignment with user needs. Although pathos was less prevalent, it played a key role in humanizing Tesla's message, particularly through emotionally resonant language, lifestyle references, and subtle moments of humor or motivation.

The findings suggest that Tesla's success in online brand communication stems from its ability to strategically balance technical content with emotional engagement, crafting persuasive narratives that resonate with both informed and aspirational audiences. A key connection between the company's rhetorical strategies and its broader marketing approach lies in how classical rhetorical theory is skillfully adapted to modern digital platforms, particularly YouTube. Tesla's communication style goes beyond product promotion; it builds a compelling brand identity rooted in performance, innovation, and trust. These rhetorical strategies not only reflect core brand values such as innovation, integrity, and user-centered design but also offer a model for effective digital communication.

This study strengthens the ongoing relevance of classical rhetorical theory in analyzing modern multimodal content and demonstrates how rhetorical analysis can offer meaningful insights into contemporary marketing practices.

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