

EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE IN SELF-IMPROVEMENT BOOK BLURBS: A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO AFFECTIVE READER ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This study examines how emotional language functions as an affective strategy in self-improvement book blurbs and how it triggers reader engagement from a psycholinguistic perspective. Self-improvement books constitute a rapidly expanding genre, making their promotional blurbs a significant site for linguistic analysis. Blurbs function as affective instruments that mediate reader perception and engagement, yet the emotional language mechanisms operating within them remain undertheorised. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytic approach, the study integrates three complementary frameworks: Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), Halliday's Interpersonal Metafunction (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), and the Affect Infusion Model (Forgas, 1995). Six blurbs from Brianna Wiest's bestselling self-improvement books (2016–2025) were selected for genre consistency, publication range, and international recognition. The analysis reveals that emotional language is systematically constructed across three appraisal systems, namely Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, forming a coherent affective architecture. These resources are strategically deployed through interpersonal choices of mood, pronoun, and modality to construct an affective writer-reader relationship. Emotional language appears to facilitate reader engagement through affective and evaluative processes, operating as a cognitive heuristic that shapes readers' decisions to engage with the text. This study contributes to discourse analysis by demonstrating how emotional language in self-improvement blurbs strategically constructs affective relationships that drive readers engagement.

Keywords: *Affect infusion model; affective strategy; appraisal theory; book blurbs; emotional language; reader engagement; self-improvement; systemic functional linguistics.*

1. Introduction

Although promotional discourse has received increasing scholarly attention, the affective mechanisms through which self-improvement blurbs shape reader engagement remain insufficiently examined. This gap is particularly noteworthy given the growing commercial and cultural prominence of the self-improvement genre, where paratextual elements play a crucial role in attracting and persuading potential readers. Self-improvement

books represent one of the fastest-growing segments in global publishing, with sales reaching \$708 million in 2022 (Marketdata LLC, 2023). As this genre continues to expand, paratexts such as blurbs have become increasingly significant as mediators of reader perception, serving as readers' first point of interaction with a book. These short texts play an important role in shaping readers' initial perceptions of whether a book aligns with their personal interests and needs. Batchelor (2018), through Genette's Paratextual Theory, argues that paratexts such as blurbs are not passive frames but texts that actively shape readers' perceptions and decisions. In the context of self-improvement books particularly, blurbs carry particular weight in self-improvement texts, as readers must swiftly determine relevance.

Readers rapidly evaluate a book's personal relevance, often relying on emotional resonance as a key interpretive cue. Research suggests that emotionally charged language facilitates deeper cognitive engagement and stronger perceptions of self-relevance during language comprehension, leading readers to seek not only information but also emotional connections that resonate with their personal experiences and concerns (Imbir, Pastwa, & Walkowiak, 2023; Fields & Kuperberg, 2012). Consequently, the process of assessing a book's appeal is inherently affective as well as cognitive. This tendency is particularly pronounced in the self-improvement genre, where readers intentionally seek texts that address emotional challenges, personal aspirations, and the development of self-concept (Gwynne, 2024; Natan & Tiatri, 2024). Within this context, emotional language functions not merely as a stylistic feature but as a fundamental mechanism through which blurbs establish personal relevance and foster reader engagement. Moreover, because blurbs are concise promotional texts that are typically read within seconds, readers are unlikely to engage in extensive analytical processing. Instead, they often rely on immediate emotional responses as cognitive shortcuts for evaluating a book's relevance and potential value. This pattern aligns with Forgas's (1995) Affect Infusion Model (AIM), particularly the heuristic processing strategy, whereby affective cues significantly influence judgments when cognitive effort is limited. Accordingly, emotional language in blurbs serves a crucial persuasive function by capturing attention, enhancing perceived personal relevance, and motivating readers to engage further with the text.

Academic focus on this area has grown in recent years. Studies on blurb structure have identified recurring rhetorical movements in both fiction and self-help genres (Godis, 2017). Separately, interpersonal language research has demonstrated that mood, pronouns, and modality in self-improvement texts significantly influence reader engagement (Hassan et al., 2025). On the other hand, the Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) offers a comprehensive framework for identifying how emotional language is systematically expressed in texts, encompassing both explicit affective expressions and implicit evaluative frameworks. However, a significant gap remains. Existing blurb studies focus primarily on structural patterns without examining affective lexical strategies, while interpersonal language research in self-improvement has been conducted on full-length texts rather than blurbs as compressed, high-stakes texts.

Among the most prominent authors in this genre is Brianna Wiest, whose self-improvement books have gained internationally recognized readership (Wiest, n.d.). Six blurbs from Brianna Wiest's bestselling works (2016-2025) were selected for consistency, temporal range, and global readership. These criteria position Brianna Wiest's blurbs as a representative corpus for examining affective strategies. To address this gap, this study examines how emotional language functions as an affective strategy in the blurbs of Brianna

Wiest's self-improvement books (2016-2025) and how this strategy triggers reader engagement from a psycholinguistic perspective. Specifically, this study addresses three questions:

- 1) What types of emotional language appear in self-improvement book blurbs?
- 2) How is emotional language employed as an effective strategy?
- 3) How does emotional language trigger reader engagement from a psycholinguistic perspective?

2. Literature Review

Book blurbs function as strategic paratexts shaping reader perception and engagement (Batchelor, 2018). Within Genette's paratextual framework, blurbs are interpretive thresholds that actively influence how readers approach a text. Genre analyses of blurbs in fiction and self-help (Godis, 2017) reveal recurring rhetorical structures, particularly descriptive and promotional moves. These studies emphasize structure but neglect the linguistic mechanisms that generate affective engagement.

Research in self-improvement discourse highlights the role of interpersonal language in fostering engagement. Hassan et al. (2025) show that the use of pronouns, mood, and modality in self-help books plays a significant role in building rapport and encouraging reader involvement. Sari (2018) shows that personal reference and repetition function as persuasive strategies, reinforcing immediacy and relevance. These findings suggest that self-improvement texts rely heavily on linguistic features that create a sense of immediacy and personal relevance. Nevertheless, such studies tend to examine full-length texts or general non-fiction blurbs, leaving the highly condensed and strategic nature of self-improvement book blurbs underexplored.

Central to this study is Halliday's Interpersonal Metafunction (SFL), which examines how mood, pronouns, and modality construct social relationships, positioning blurbs as affective strategies that build intimacy with readers, thereby establishing interpersonal closeness and affective resonance. Within this metafunction, linguistic choices such as mood (imperative vs. declarative), pronoun use, and modality are not merely grammatical features but interpersonal strategies that position the writer in relation to the reader and actively shape the affective tone of the text. In the context of self-improvement book blurbs, these interpersonal resources function as affective strategies that build an intimate writer-reader relationship, creating a sense of personal address and emotional proximity that encourages reader engagement.

Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) provides a framework for analyzing affect, judgment, and appreciation, enabling nuanced examination of implicit evaluative cues in blurbs. Supporting this approach, Troiano et al. (2023) demonstrate that emotional meaning is often conveyed implicitly through evaluative structures rather than explicit emotion words. This is particularly relevant for blurbs, where persuasion relies on subtle evaluative cues rather than overt emotion words. Therefore, Appraisal Theory enables a more nuanced analysis of how emotional language operates beyond surface-level lexical choices.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, emotional language can also be understood as a mechanism that triggers reader engagement. Forgas (1995), through the Affect Infusion Model (AIM), explains that individuals rely on heuristic processing when making quick judgments, especially in low-effort cognitive situations. Since blurbs are typically brief and processed rapidly, readers are likely to depend on emotional cues as cognitive heuristics in

evaluating a book's relevance. Recent psycholinguistic studies (Berger et al., 2023; Sabag-Shushan et al., 2025; Hu et al., 2025) confirm that emotionally charged vocabulary enhances attention, comprehension, and engagement.

Despite the growing body of research, a significant analytical gap remains. While Appraisal Theory, SFL Interpersonal Metafunction, and the Affect Infusion Model have each been applied independently in related fields, no study has yet integrated these three frameworks to systematically examine how emotional language operates as an affective strategy specifically within self-improvement book blurbs. The highly condensed and persuasive nature of blurbs as promotional texts demands a multi-layered analytical approach that existing studies have not yet provided. Furthermore, the psycholinguistic mechanisms by which emotional language in such short texts triggers reader engagement remain insufficiently theorized. To address this gap, the present study analyzes six blurbs from Brianna Wiest's self-improvement books (2016–2025), employing this theoretical triangulation to provide a comprehensive and empirically grounded explanation of how emotional language functions affectively and cognitively in self-improvement book blurbs.

3. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytic approach to examine emotional language in self-improvement book blurbs and its role in reader engagement. A qualitative approach is selected because the focus of this study lies in the interpretive and functional dimensions of language, which require close and in-depth textual analysis rather than quantitative measurement. Qualitative textual analysis is appropriate for examining how meanings and emotions are embedded in discourse, as this method emphasizes interpretation of contextual and affective meanings rather than statistical generalization (Baxter, 2020; Alejandro & Zhao, 2023). Furthermore, qualitative content analysis enables researchers to interpret linguistic patterns and uncover underlying emotional and persuasive functions within textual data through systematic yet context-sensitive analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The descriptive-analytic design further allows for systematic identification and explanation of linguistic patterns across the corpus without reducing the richness of meaning to quantifiable units.

The corpus consists of six blurbs from Brianna Wiest's bestselling works (2016–2025), selected for genre consistency, temporal range, and global readership. The corpus was purposively selected based on three criteria. First, all six works belong to the self-improvement genre, ensuring thematic and generic consistency across the data. Second, the publication range spanning nearly a decade allows for observation of consistent affective strategies across different titles and periods. Third, Brianna Wiest's globally recognized bestseller status across major platforms such as Amazon and Audible serves as an indicator of broad and sustained reader engagement, positioning her blurbs as a representative corpus for analysis.

Blurbs were collected from official print editions and verified against Amazon and Goodreads to ensure accuracy. Each blurb was then transcribed in full and prepared as the primary unit of analysis. The unit of analysis is the clause and lexical item, consistent with Appraisal Theory and SFL requirements, as both Appraisal Theory and the SFL Interpersonal Metafunction require close attention to grammatical and lexical choices within and across clauses. The data analysis is conducted through a three-stage analytical framework organized as follows:

1. Identification of emotional language using Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), with focus on the Attitude subsystem encompassing Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation. This stage addresses the first research question concerning the types of emotional language present in the blurbs.
2. Analysis of interpersonal strategies via Halliday's Interpersonal Metafunction within Systemic Functional Linguistics, directing attention toward mood choices (particularly imperative and declarative clauses), pronoun patterns (especially the second-person pronoun "you"), and modality markers. This stage addresses the second research question concerning how emotional language operates as an affective strategy.
3. Interpretation through the Affect Infusion Model (Forgas, 1995), with specific focus on heuristic processing as the cognitive pathway most relevant to the rapid, low-effort reading context of blurbs. This stage addresses the third research question concerning the psycholinguistic triggers of reader engagement.

Findings were iteratively cross-checked against criteria from all three frameworks to ensure analytical consistency. Analytical rigor was further ensured through iterative triangulation across frameworks and peer validation of coding decisions.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings and discussion based on the three research questions. First, it identifies the types of emotional language found in self-improvement book blurbs. Second, it examines how emotional language is employed as an affective strategy to persuade and connect with potential readers. Third, it explores how such emotional language may trigger reader engagement from a psycholinguistic perspective. The findings are presented and discussed sequentially, supported by textual evidence from the selected blurbs and interpreted in relation to relevant theories and previous studies.

4.1 Types of Emotional Language in Self-Improvement Book Blurbs

The appraisal analysis of six book blurbs by Brianna Wiest, published between 2016 and 2025, identifies emotional language operating across three interconnected systems within Martin & White's (2005) Appraisal Theory framework: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Each system contributes a distinct layer to the overall affective architecture, as reflected in the representative excerpts in Table 1.

Table 1.

Types of Emotional Language in Brianna Wiest's Book Blurbs (Representative Excerpts)

Book	System	Sub-type	Excerpt from Blurb	Affective Function / Analysis
The Mountain Is You (2020)	Attitude	Affect – Insecurity/Anxiety (negative)	"we resist efforts to change, often until they feel completely futile"	Inscribed negative affect. Names the reader's pain accurately to build empathic rapport before offering resolution.

Book	System	Sub-type	Excerpt from Blurb	Affective Function / Analysis
The Mountain Is You (2020)	Attitude	Affect – Satisfaction/Hope (positive)	"we can step out of our own way and into our potential"	Invoked positive affect via spatial metaphor. Converts negative affect into forward emotional momentum.
The Life That's Waiting (2025)	Attitude	Affect – Freedom/Vision (positive)	"not pushed by your fears but moved by your vision"	Contrastive affect structure. Parallelism determines emotional liberation, negative propulsive force replaced by positive motivational force.
101 Essays (2016)	Attitude	Appreciation – Valuation (social esteem)	"global bestseller and social media phenomenon"	Evaluates the book's worth via external social validation. Collective approval reduces reader risk and amplifies desirability.
When You're Ready... (2022)	Attitude	Appreciation – Reaction (somatic)	"Wiest's words are a balm for any soul on the journey of their own becoming"	Tactile somatic metaphor frames the text as therapeutic relief, targeting readers in emotional pain.
The Pivot Year (2023)	Attitude	Judgment – Propriety/Moral courage	"finding the courage to become who you've always wanted to be"	Positive moral judgment. Frames self-transformation as courageous, elevating the ethical stakes of personal growth.
The Mountain Is You (2020)	Engagement	Entertain – Bare assertion (all-caps)	"THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT SELF-SABOTAGE."	Monoglossic, typographically intensified assertion. Collapses social distance and forecloses negotiation.
When You're Ready... (2022)	Engagement	Entertain – Counter-expectation	"Healing is not a one-time event."	Dialogic contraction via counter-expectation. Creates cognitive tension that pulls the reader forward into the text.

Book	System	Sub-type	Excerpt from Blurb	Affective Function / Analysis
The Life That's Waiting (2025)	Graduation	Force – Intensification (temporal + focus)	"all this time" / "not just waiting to begin" / "the life you actually want"	Temporal amplifier ("all this time") graduates accumulated longing, focus sharpeners ("not just", "actually") narrow the emotional claim to its most recognizable form.

4.1.1 Attitude

Across all six blurbs, affect follows a consistent arc: inscribed negative affect precedes invoked positive affect, establishing recognition before resolution. This sequencing is not accidental: it functions as the structural backbone of each blurb, ensuring that the reader first feels recognised before being offered resolution.

A key distinction within this pattern is the difference between inscribed and invoked affect (Martin & White, 2005). Negative affect tends to be inscribed explicitly, as in *"we resist efforts to change, often until they feel completely futile"* (The Mountain Is You, 2020), which names the reader's experience with precision. As shown in Table 1, positive affect, by contrast, is predominantly invoked through spatial and directional metaphors, as in *"we can step out of our own way and into our potential"* (The Mountain Is You, 2020) and *"not pushed by your fears but moved by your vision"* (The Life That's Waiting, 2025). This asymmetry increases reader identification because the resolution feels discovered rather than imposed. The Life That's Waiting represents the most advanced instance of this strategy, relying almost entirely on figurative imagery to carry its affective load, which may reflect a rhetorical maturation across Wiest's publishing trajectory from 2016 to 2025.

Appreciation operates alongside Affect to assign value to the text and the human experience it addresses. Rather than targeting the reader's internal emotional states, it shapes their evaluative orientation toward the book itself. As shown in Table 1, valuation is achieved through social proof (*"global bestseller and social media phenomenon"*), reaction through somatic metaphor (*"a balm for any soul"*), and composition through aesthetic elevation (*"healing ceremony"*). Each dimension generates a distinct form of desire: for the text's credibility, its therapeutic quality, and its aesthetic significance respectively. Judgment, the third sub-type, appears less frequently but performs a targeted function: it pre-emptively affirms the reader's capacity for change. Instances such as *"finding the courage to become who you've always wanted to be"* (The Pivot Year, 2023) frame self-transformation as morally courageous and intellectually accessible, reducing resistance before the self-improvement work has even begun.

4.1.2 Engagement

At the level of Engagement, all six blurbs rely predominantly on bare monoglossic assertions: unhedged, unattributed truth claims that position the author's voice as the single authoritative perspective. This enacts what Martin & White (2005) describe as dialogic

contraction, foreclosing alternative readings and presenting claims as self-evident universal truths. The all-caps examples in Table 1, such as *"This Is A Book About Self-Sabotage"* (The Mountain Is You, 2020), reinforce this contraction through paralinguistic force. Assertions function affectively by foreclosing negotiation, positioning the reader's experience as pre-validated. The counter-expectation structure, as in *"Healing is not a one-time event"* (When You're Ready, This is How You Heal, 2022), is particularly effective by contradicting a widely held assumption; it creates cognitive and affective tension that compels the reader forward into the text. The emotional significance of this pattern lies not only in what is asserted but in how assertion itself performs confidence. The reader does not need to be persuaded; they need only to feel that their experience has already been anticipated and understood.

4.1.3 Graduation

Graduation does not introduce new categories of emotional language; instead, it calibrates the intensity of the Attitude and Engagement resources already present. Force and Intensification is the dominant mechanism, applied symmetrically to both negative and positive affect so that pain feels total and the promise of relief feels equally absolute. Temporal maximizers such as *"always wanted to be"* link aspiration to the reader's entire identity history, while universal quantifiers such as *"a balm for any soul"* expand emotional reach to every possible reader circumstance. Scientific-register amplifiers such as "at a cellular level" enhance perceived credibility by invoking empirical authority. Focus and Sharpening operates more selectively but with precise rhetorical effect: words such as exact, not just, and actually narrow emotional claims to their most specific and therefore most recognisable forms. The word actually is particularly forceful in that it implies the reader has been living inauthentically, constructing the promised life as urgent and affectively compelling.

Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation form a cohesive affective composition positioning blurbs as persuasive instruments. Affect sets each blurb's logic through its negative-to-positive arc. Focusing on the reader's evaluative orientation, Appreciation and Judgement go further. Through monoglossic authority, engagement presents assertions as self-evident, and graduation ensures both promise and suffering are felt at maximum intensity. These elements create an affective architecture inspiring the reader to act by making them feel capable, understood, and inspired.

4.2 How Emotional Language Is Employed as an Affective Strategy

After identifying the types of emotional language present in the blurbs (RQ1), this section examines how Wiest strategically deploys them to construct an affective relationship with her readers. Three interpersonal resources are the focus of the analysis, which is based on Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) Interpersonal Metafunction within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL): modality markers, pronoun patterns, and mood choices. As Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) argue, every clause enacts a social relationship between writer and reader that is simultaneously informational and relational. In self-improvement blurbs, this interpersonal dimension is constitutive: the affective charge of the text depends fundamentally on how the reader is positioned within it. As shown in Table 2, the full range of interpersonal features identified in the corpus.

Table 2.*Interpersonal Resources as Affective Strategies in Brianna Wiest's Book Blurbs*

No.	Interpersonal Resource	Specific Feature	Excerpt from Blurb	Book	Affective Function
1	Mood: Declarative	Unhedged assertion of reader's inner state	"Healing is not a one-time event."	When You're Ready (2022)	Performs emotional authority, produces affect of recognition where reader feels seen rather than persuaded
2	Mood: Declarative	Declarative as psychological diagnosis	"Coexisting but conflicting needs create self-sabotaging behaviors."	The Mountain Is You (2020)	Validates reader's pain by naming it with certainty; normalizes struggle before offering resolution
3	Mood: Declarative (typographic imperative)	All-caps declarative functioning as command	"THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT SELF-SABOTAGE."	The Mountain Is You (2020)	Collapses social distance, commands attention and forecloses negotiation, enacts urgency
4	Mood: Declarative (typographic imperative)	All-caps direct address	"THIS IS THE YEAR YOU CHANGE YOUR LIFE"	The Pivot Year (2023)	Transforms declarative into directive, positions reader as the immediate agent of change
5	Pronoun: Second-person (you/your)	Anaphoric repetition of direct address	"The life that you are proud of. The life that you actually want."	The Life That's Waiting (2025)	Positions reader as central subject, collapses distance between reader and content
6	Pronoun: Second-person (you/your)	Direct personal address in promise	"each will leave you thinking: this idea changed my life"	101 Essays (2016)	Creates anticipated personal impact, makes transformative promise feel individually targeted
7	Pronoun: Inclusive first-person plural (we/our)	Solidarity construction through shared struggle	"This is why we resist efforts to change."	The Mountain Is You (2020)	Performs co-membership in pain, lowers reader resistance, normalizes failure as universal

No.	Interpersonal Resource	Specific Feature	Excerpt from Blurb	Book	Affective Function
8	Pronoun: Inclusive first-person plural (we/our)	Shared experience of unmet expectations	"Other people are not here to love us in the exact way we think they should."	Ceremony (2021)	Author enters reader's emotional world, dissolves author-reader hierarchy through solidarity
9	Modality: High-value (will)	Future certainty marker	"each will leave you thinking"	101 Essays (2016)	Presents transformation as predetermined outcome, pre-empts reader self-doubt
10	Modality: High-value (can)	Capacity assertion	"we can step out of our own way and into our potential"	The Mountain Is You (2020)	Encodes reader's self-efficacy as factual, removes conditional framing from transformation
11	Modality: Zero modalization	Declarative without modal, reality construction	"The life where you are not pushed by your fears but moved by your vision."	The Life That's Waiting (2025)	Constructs the ideal life as already real and waiting, removes conditionality entirely
12	Modality: Low-value (can)	Softened epistemic opening	"It can begin with a one-time event."	When You're Ready (2022)	Opens possibility rather than prescribes outcome, creates empathetic, reader-centred tone
13	Modality: Deontic (should)	Obligation-framed advice	"why you should pursue purpose over passion"	101 Essays (2016)	Frames self-improvement as moral imperative while embedding reader in advisory relationship
14	Pronoun + Modality combined	Second-person + high-value modal	"The journey is convincing your mind to act consistently on what your heart already knows it wants to do."	The Pivot Year (2023)	Combines personal address with certainty that reader's desire is presented as already known and real

4.2.1 Mood Choices

The dominant mood structure across all six blurbs is the declarative, which in Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) framework positions the writer as knower and the reader as recipient. In these blurbs, however, the declarative is not deployed to inform in the conventional sense. Declarative mood functions as emotional authority, articulating the reader's inner state as self-evident truth. Statements such as *"Healing is not a one-time event"* (Table 2, row 1) and *"Coexisting but conflicting needs create self-sabotaging behaviors"* (row 2) present intimate psychological realities as self-evident truths that require neither qualification nor evidence. In Appraisal Theory terms, these are monoglossic assertions enacting dialogic contraction (Martin & White, 2005), closing off alternative readings. The interpersonal effect is that the writer assumes maximum epistemic authority over the reader's inner world, which is simultaneously bold and affectively powerful precisely because it names what the reader may not yet have found words for. This pattern is consistent with Hassan et al.'s (2025) observation that non-expert-authored self-help texts rely heavily on the declarative mood to construct a personal and motivational register. What distinguishes Wiest's blurbs is that her declaratives are directed inward toward the reader's psychology, repurposing the declarative from an informational tool into an affective mirror.

The imperative mood, while grammatically absent in most blurbs, is enacted at the pragmatic level through typographic intensification. The all-caps examples in Table 2 (rows 3 and 4) function as paralinguistic markers of maximum force, reducing author-reader distance and enacting urgency. Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) maintain that interpersonal meaning is not reducible to grammatical form, and in this context the typographic presentation does the work that grammar does not: it removes the possibility of casual reception and demands the reader's full psychological engagement.

4.2.2 Pronoun Patterns

Pronoun choice is the most consistently deployed affective strategy in the corpus, operating through two complementary configurations: second-person singular (you, your) and inclusive first-person plural (we, our). Each constructs a distinct dimension of the author-reader relationship. The second-person pronoun reaches its highest density in *The Life That's Waiting* (2025) (Table 2, row 5), where it anchors nearly every clause of the blurb. As Halliday (2014) identifies, pronouns define who the participants are in a communicative exchange and what roles they occupy. The sustained address makes the reader the sole subject of the discourse: not an audience consuming a text but the protagonist of the entire textual world. This frames engagement as personalized acquisition rather than transactional consumption, making the purchase feel less like acquiring a product and more like claiming something already intended for them. Hassan et al. (2025) similarly identify second-person pronouns as characteristic of motivational self-help writing, where they function to make readers feel personally engaged rather than generically addressed.

The inclusive "we" (Table 2, rows 7 and 8) operates with a different but equally deliberate affective purpose. By placing herself within the community of struggle, Wiest positions herself not as a therapist diagnosing a patient but as a fellow traveller who has navigated the same emotional terrain. This removes the asymmetry that would otherwise characterise the author-reader relationship, normalising pain as a shared human condition rather than an individual deficiency. A developmental trajectory is also visible across the

corpus: earlier blurbs rely more heavily on the inclusive *we*, while later texts shift decisively toward the singular “*you*”. This pattern reveals a diachronic shift from collective solidarity to individualized transformation, reflecting Wiest's evolving rhetorical authority over time.

4.2.3 Modality Markers

Modality emerges as one of the most significant interpersonal resources in the corpus because it regulates the degree of certainty attached to the promised transformation. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), modality allows writers to position propositions between absolute affirmation and denial, thereby shaping how readers interpret the likelihood and desirability of an outcome. In the Wiest blurbs, modality is employed not primarily to express probability but to construct emotional reassurance. The frequent use of high-value modal verbs such as *will* and *can* minimizes uncertainty and presents personal growth as both achievable and expected. Rather than inviting readers to consider whether change is possible, these modal choices presuppose its attainability. This finding supports Hassan et al. (2025), who report that *will* and *can* are dominant modal forms in self-help discourse because they communicate empowerment, possibility, and self-efficacy. By framing transformation as an accessible future reality, these modal forms encourage readers to envision positive outcomes and reduce psychological resistance to the book's claims.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the persuasive effect of high-value modality can be explained through expectancy-based processing. Research has shown that language expressing certainty tends to be perceived as more credible and authoritative than language marked by hesitation or uncertainty (Hyland & Jiang, 2023). Readers often interpret confident assertions as indicators of expertise, particularly in contexts where they seek guidance or solutions. In self-improvement blurbs, certainty therefore functions not only as a linguistic choice but also as an affective cue that fosters trust and optimism. This aligns with studies on narrative persuasion demonstrating that emotionally reassuring language increases audience receptivity by reducing perceived risk and cognitive resistance (Hamby & Jones, 2022). The modal verbs *will* and *can* thus serve as emotional amplifiers that strengthen the persuasive appeal of the blurb.

Equally noteworthy is the strategic use of zero modalization, where propositions are presented without any modal qualification. Instead of stating that a reader *might* achieve a better life, the blurbs frequently describe transformation as an existing reality waiting to be realized. Such constructions erase linguistic uncertainty and create what appears to be an objective truth rather than a subjective prediction. Previous research suggests that the absence of hedging can increase perceptions of authority and inevitability because readers encounter fewer signals that a claim is negotiable or contingent (Hyland & Jiang, 2023). In promotional discourse, this rhetorical certainty is particularly effective because it transforms persuasive claims into seemingly self-evident observations. The present findings indicate that zero modalization intensifies emotional engagement by positioning personal transformation as a discovery rather than a possibility.

At the opposite end of the modal continuum, low-value modality and deontic expressions such as *should* perform a different interpersonal function. Rather than imposing action, these forms offer guidance while preserving the reader's autonomy. This finding is consistent with contemporary self-help discourse, which increasingly favours supportive and reader-centred communication over authoritative instruction (Hassan et al., 2025). By softening obligation, low-value modality reduces the threat to the reader's freedom of

choice and encourages voluntary identification with the proposed message. From an affective perspective, this balance between certainty and autonomy is particularly important. While high-value modality inspires confidence in the possibility of change, low-value modality protects the reader from feeling coerced. Together, these modal strategies create a persuasive environment in which transformation appears both attainable and self-directed, thereby maximizing emotional engagement with the blurb.

4.3 Psycholinguistic Trigger of Reader Engagement

After determining the forms of emotional language that are present (RQ1) and how they are used as interpersonal techniques (RQ2), this section discusses the psycholinguistic reasons why these strategies are successful in eliciting reader engagement. Forgas's (1995) Affect Infusion Model (AIM), which offers a cognitive explanation of how affectively loaded language enters and influences evaluative judgement, is the interpretive framework used.

The central argument is that the blurb genre creates the precise cognitive conditions under which affect infusion is most powerful, and that the emotional language identified in this study is structurally designed to exploit those conditions. As shown in Table 3, the specific linguistic features from RQ1 and RQ2 are mapped onto their corresponding AIM processing pathways.

Table 3.

Affect Infusion Pathways in Wiest's Blurbs: AIM-Based Analysis

No.	Linguistic Feature (from RQ1 & RQ2)	Blurb Excerpt	AIM Processing Type	Affect Infusion Mechanism	Psycholinguistic Engagement Effect
1	Inscribed negative Affect (declarative)	"we resist efforts to change, often until they feel completely futile"	Heuristic	Affect-as-information	The reader's negative feelings are triggered and used as direct evaluative input, the text feels appropriate before it is evaluated
2	Invoked positive Affect (spatial metaphor)	"we can step out of our own way and into our potential"	Heuristic	Affect-as-information	Positive affective state is primed as the promised resolution; reader uses anticipated emotional outcome as shortcut to positive book evaluation
3	Monoglossic declarative (unhedged assertion)	"Healing is not a one-time event."	Heuristic	Affect-as-information	Unhedged certainty requires no cognitive effort to verify; reader's existing emotional state validates the claim instantly, producing affect-congruent acceptance

No.	Linguistic Feature (from RQ1 & RQ2)	Blurb Excerpt	AIM Processing Type	Affect Infusion Mechanism	Psycholinguistic Engagement Effect
4	Typographic intensification (all-caps)	"THIS IS THE YEAR YOU CHANGE YOUR LIFE"	Heuristic	Affect-as-information	Elevated arousal from typographic force triggers simplified processing; reader's desire for change functions as direct evaluative information
5	Anaphoric second-person address	"The life that you are proud of. The life that you actually want."	Heuristic → Substantive	Affect-as-information + Affect-priming	Repetitive direct address recruits increasingly constructive processing; mood-congruent autobiographical memories are primed and woven into judgment
6	Inclusive first-person plural, solidarity	"This is why we resist efforts to change."	Heuristic	Affect-as-information	Shared emotional framing normalizes reader's negative affect; lowers cognitive resistance; accelerates heuristic acceptance through belonging
7	High-value modality, will	"each will leave you thinking: this idea changed my life"	Heuristic	Affect-as-information	Certainty-coded language activates positive anticipatory affect; reader uses expected emotional outcome as evaluative shortcut
8	Zero modalization (bare declarative reality)	"The life where you are not pushed by your fears but moved by your vision."	Heuristic → Substantive	Affect-as-information + Affect-priming	Absence of hedging removes cognitive friction; the promised life is processed as emotionally real, priming mood-congruent memories of desired but unrealized experience

No.	Linguistic Feature (from RQ1 & RQ2)	Blurb Excerpt	AIM Processing Type	Affect Infusion Mechanism	Psycholinguistic Engagement Effect
9	Somatic Appreciation metaphor	"Wiest's words are a balm for any soul"	Heuristic	Affect-as-information	Tactile metaphor activates reader's existing pain; current negative affect is used as direct confirmation that the book addresses their condition
10	Graduation (Force intensification)	"releasing past experiences at a cellular level"	Substantive	Affect-priming	Scientific-register amplifier recruits more elaborate processing; primes associations with depth, embodiment, and radical transformation
11	Contrastive Affect structure	"not pushed by your fears but moved by your vision"	Substantive	Affect-priming	Binary contrast triggers constructive elaboration; reader retrieves mood-congruent memories from both sides of the contrast, deepening affective investment
12	Intertextual attribution (prior bestseller)	"from the internationally bestselling author of 101 Essays..."	Direct access	Low affect infusion	Returning readers retrieve stored positive evaluations directly; blurb reinforces rather than generates engagement for pre-existing fans

Recent studies further support the psycholinguistic role of emotional language in shaping reader engagement and evaluative judgment. Research by Hamby and Jones (2022) demonstrates that emotional cues embedded in persuasive narratives function as affective triggers that strengthen emotional engagement and increase audience receptivity to persuasive messages. Their findings suggest that emotional responses often precede conscious evaluation, supporting the argument that readers rely on affective impressions when processing emotionally loaded texts. Similarly, Berger, Moe, and Schweidel (2023), through an analysis of more than 600,000 reading sessions, found that emotional language significantly sustains reader attention, particularly when it evokes uncertainty, hope, anxiety, or anticipation. Their findings reinforce the present study's observation that self-

improvement blurbs strategically mobilize emotional states before readers engage in deeper cognitive evaluation.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, Arfé, Delatorre, and Mason (2023) found that emotionally valenced language influences both reading behaviour and memory retention. Using eye-tracking data, they demonstrated that negative emotional content attracts greater cognitive attention and affects subsequent recall processes. This finding aligns with the first stage of affect infusion identified in the present analysis, where inscribed negative affect activates readers' pre-existing emotional concerns before redirecting them toward positive resolution. In a broader review of emotion and reading, Pekrun (2022) also argues that emotions generated during reading substantially influence comprehension, motivation, and learning outcomes, indicating that affective responses are not peripheral but integral to textual processing itself.

More recent work on emotional language processing likewise suggests that readers often interpret emotionally charged texts through rapid and experience-based mechanisms rather than through fully analytical reasoning. Konat, Gajewska, and Rossa (2024) describe emotional appeals as interactional persuasive processes in which linguistic cues evoke emotional reactions that shape audience judgment and engagement. Their model supports the present finding that emotional language in self-improvement blurbs operates not merely as description but as a strategic persuasive device designed to guide readers toward favourable evaluations.

4.3.1 Heuristic Processing as the Dominant Cognitive Pathway

When a book blurb is encountered, little cognitive effort is required. The blurb is immediately absorbed, without preparation, and without prior commitment to prolonged attention, regardless of whether it is read on a physical cover, a digital shopfront, or a social media suggestion. These circumstances are exactly what Forgas (1995) describes as favourable to heuristic processing: the encounter is governed by no particular previous motivation, the target is unfamiliar, and deliberation time is limited.

Under heuristic processing, rather than systematically evaluating the logical content or evidential basis of a text, the reader relies on the affect-as-information mechanism, using their current emotional state as a direct shortcut to form an evaluative response. Together, the emotional language techniques found in RQ1 and RQ2 serve as affect-loading mechanisms. Each technique is intended to activate, intensify, or reroute the reader's emotional state so that, when their cognitive system consults their feelings to form a judgement, those feelings are already orientated favourably toward the book.

This process unfolds in three stages that mirror the affective architecture identified in the RQ2 analysis. In the first stage, inscribed negative affect activates the reader's pre-existing emotional pain through language that names it accurately (Table 3, rows 1 and 9). Forgas (1995) argues that affect infusion is most potent when the text's emotional content is congruent with the reader's existing affective state, because this congruence makes the reader's affect feel contextually appropriate rather than externally imposed. The inclusive we construction (row 6) reinforces this by normalising the negative affect as a shared human condition, preventing the motivated resistance that would otherwise reduce infusion. In the second stage, this activated negative affect is redirected toward positive possibility through invoked affect, high-value modality, and zero modalization (rows 2, 7, and 8). The second-person address (rows 5 and 6) secures this redirection by making the resolution feel personally applicable. In the third and final stage, the evaluative judgment is completed

automatically and largely unconsciously. According to Forgas (1995), affect infusion is most persuasive when the reader is unable to discern between affect generated by the text and affect that is a part of their own pre-existing condition. At that point, the engagement feels self-generated rather than externally influenced.

Most linguistic features in this corpus operate through heuristic processing, with occasional substantive elaboration occurring when contrastive affect structures or scientific-register amplifiers are employed, as in Table 3 (rows 10 and 11). This psycholinguistic account explains a phenomenon widely observed in self-improvement reading culture but rarely theorised: self-improvement readers often report decisions framed in emotional recognition rather than rational evaluation, consistent with Forgas's (1995) predictions under heuristic processing conditions where affect-as-information is operating. They claim that the book resonates with them, that it seems right, or that they knew they needed it. This produces the perception that the book directly addresses the reader's personal experience.

5. Conclusion

This study examined emotional language as an affective strategy in self-improvement book blurbs and its role in reader engagement from a psycholinguistic perspective. Three interconnected findings emerged from analysis of six Brianna Wiest blurbs (2016–2025) and a theoretical triangulation of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), Halliday's Interpersonal Metafunction (2014), and Forgas' Affect Infusion Model (1995).

Regarding the first research question, emotional language in Wiest's blurbs is systematically constructed across three subsystems of Appraisal Theory: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Across blurbs, affect consistently follows a negative-to-positive arc, validating suffering before promising transformation. Through social proof, bodily metaphor, and aesthetic elevation, appreciation gives the text worth, whereas judgement anticipates and affirms the reader's potential for transformation. Engagement reinforces these resources through monoglossic bare assertions that enact dialogic contraction, positioning the author's voice as the sole authoritative reading of the reader's emotional reality. Graduation calibrates the intensity of all prior resources, ensuring that pain feels absolute and the promise of relief equally total.

In addressing the second research question, emotional language is employed through three interconnected interpersonal resources that guide the reader through a sequential affective progression. The declarative mood serves as emotional authority, expressing the reader's internal state as an indisputable truth, while typographic intensification exerts imperative force at the pragmatic level. Pronoun selection functions through two complementary configurations: the inclusive first-person plural normalizes the reader's pain as a shared human experience and dissolves the author-reader hierarchy, whereas sustained second-person address positions the reader as the sole protagonist within the textual world. Modality eliminates conditionality from the transformative promise, with high-value modality and zero modalization presenting the desired life as already accessible to the reader. The corpus further reveals a diachronic shift from collective solidarity to individualized transformation, reflecting Wiest's evolving rhetorical authority over time.

Regarding the third research question, the Affect Infusion Model explains why these strategies succeed. Because blurbs are processed under conditions of minimal cognitive investment, readers default to heuristic processing, using affect-as-information as a direct shortcut to evaluative judgment. The emotional language strategies identified in this study

collectively activate, amplify, and redirect the reader's affective state across three sequential stages: negative Affect and solidarity constructions first activate pre-existing pain and lower motivated resistance; invoked positive Affect, high-value modality, and second-person address then redirect affect toward anticipated transformation; and the evaluative judgment is finally completed automatically. Readers experience engagement as recognition rather than persuasion, consistent with heuristic processing under AIM. This produces the perception that the book directly addresses the reader's personal experience.

These findings make several contributions. In theory, this integration of Appraisal Theory, SFL, and AIM represents a novel triangulation not previously applied to blurb analysis, allowing for a simultaneous understanding of what kind of emotional language is used, how it is strategically employed, and why it is effective from a psycholinguistic perspective. Empirically, the study demonstrates that affective strategies in self-improvement blurbs operate at the level of coordinated lexical and grammatical choice rather than rhetorical structure alone. Methodologically, the single-author longitudinal corpus reveals both synchronic affective patterns and a diachronic rhetorical trajectory not previously documented in blurb research.

The single-author corpus limits generalizability; future research should expand to multiple authors, languages, and empirical reader-response studies. Despite these limitations, this study establishes that emotional language in self-improvement book blurbs is not incidental but constitutive. It is the primary mechanism through which the text anticipates and validates the reader's emotional reality before reading begins.

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