



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tracking Mental Health: A Social Semiotic Analysis of Instagram Discourse

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Received: Aug 16, 2024

Accepted: Oct 9, 2024

Keywords

Mental health discourse

Instagram

Social semiotics

Linguistics

Visual analysis

User-generated content

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ABSTRACT

Mental health issues are increasingly common, affecting millions of people worldwide. This health challenge has both social and economic implications for individuals and society. By examining how language is used in mental health discourse on social media, people can better understand how it shapes perceptions, experiences, and interactions, ultimately informing more effective and supportive communication practices. This study investigates how mental health discourse is represented on two selected Instagram platforms, Sanemind and the NEEM Sanctuary, using a purposive sampling technique to select cases that are intentionally chosen for their relevance to mental health discourse. By combining social semiotics, linguistics, and mental health research, the study bridges the gap between these fields and offers insights into mental health concerns on social media. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) social semiotics framework, this study examines how language and other semiotic resources facilitate or hinder empathetic understanding, diagnosis, and treatment. Our analysis reveals specific strategies used by users to advocate for mental health awareness and support, such as representation, pigmentation, and framing used to highlight contemporary mental health complexities. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of mental health discourse on social media, informing strategies for promoting awareness, support, and resources. Our findings have implications for mental health promotion, social media platform design, and online support community development.

INTRODUCTION

The growing concern about mental health worldwide has led to an increased focus on understanding the complex dynamics surrounding mental well-being (World Health Organisation, 2020). As mental health issues affect millions globally, the need to examine how we communicate and negotiate meanings related to mental health has become pressing (Best et al., 2014). Social media platforms like Instagram have emerged as critical spaces where individuals share experiences, seek support, and shape public discourse around mental health. By investigating how language and other semiotic resources are used in mental health discourse on Instagram, this study aims to uncover how users construct and negotiate meanings related to mental health and how these constructions impact our understanding of mental well-being.

Interactions on Instagram draw users into a vortex of engagement, fostering a sense of community and mental health awareness (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Every interaction - a like, comment, or scroll - pulls users into a dynamic cycle of messages, urging them to support one another. However, beneath the surface lies a complex web of semiotic meaning-making, where visuals and language shape users' understanding of mental health and community (Jenkins, 2006). In engaging with these messages, we must ask: what does it mean to truly support one another in a digital space where empathy can be reduced to a click? How can social media foster genuine care and connection rather than performative allyship? While the endless scroll and curated content create a sense of community, it is imperative to be mindful of the boundaries between authentic connection and digital distraction (Kirschner and Karpinski, 2010) without discounting the subtle undercurrents shaping our online attitude towards mental health awareness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse is a powerful force that shapes our world, driving social change and transforming communities and individuals. At its core, discourse is a social practice that reproduces and regulates society, perpetuating the status quo or challenging it (Catalano and Waugh, 2020). It is through discourse that we create meaning, construct relationships, and engage in daily activities that define our lives (Ejechi and Ejechi, 2020; Liu, 2020; Morgan et al., 2022). As social beings, we are inextricably linked, and our interconnectedness is reinforced through discourse (Irimiea, 2017). Haslanger (2018) aptly notes, "people shape practices, and practices shape people." Discourse not only reflects our values and beliefs but also shapes them, challenging norms and shaping cultural narratives to effect meaningful social transformation. By fostering dialogue and challenging the status quo, discourse has the power to ignite profound social change, making it a crucial tool for creating a more just and equitable world.

In society's tapestry, human connection weaves people's lives together, forming a mosaic of diverse practices (Catalano and Waugh, 2020). Each practice is a vital strand in the web of relationships that shape their world. Within this social landscape, the discourse of 'Be your brother's keeper' resonates as a beacon of care, support, and kindness, illuminating Mental Health Awareness Discourse (MHAD). This discourse is a call to action, reminding us that individual well-being is intertwined with the well-being of those around us and that together, we can create a supportive community that uplifts and empowers each other.

Mental Health Awareness Discourse (MHAD) is a vital frontier in the quest for human well-being, shining a light on the complex struggles of the mind through diagnosis and treatment. As linguists examine the language of MHAD, they uncover the power of words to harm and heal, revealing the impact of discourse on mental health outcomes. Despite its importance, the linguistic dimensions of MHAD remain understudied (Shaji and Hebbani, 2021; Brookes and Hunt, 2021; Price, 2022; Wright et al., 2023; Price, 2023). By exploring this landscape, we can harness the potential of language to foster a more compassionate and inclusive society where mental health is prioritised. The social sciences and humanities increasingly focus on language's role in shaping the world, with online conversations often promoting social change (Nartey and Mwinlaaru, 2019). Instagram's content can be favourable or unfavourable, focusing on deception, hate speech, assault, and defamation (Backe et al., 2018; Heiss et al., 2024). However, favourable discourse can improve users' lives by educating, motivating, and causing sociocultural change and promoting mental health awareness (Engel et al., 2023; Heiss et al., 2024), which is the focus of this study.

The understudied area has sparked interest among social sciences and humanities scholars, who now focus on language's role in driving advocacy for change in online engagements. Language has become a powerful tool for shaping reality, with online conversations sparking movements and driving social change (Nartey and Mwinlaaru, 2019). On Instagram, the linguistic space is complex, ranging from toxic terrain marked by hate speech and defamation (Backe et al., 2018; Heiss et al., 2024) to fertile

ground nurturing empowerment, education, and sociocultural transformation (Engel et al., 2023; Heiss et al., 2024). This study explores how language can be exploited to promote mental health awareness, inspire positive change, and cultivate a supportive online community.

Previous literature on care for others includes Meijer et al.'s (2017) study on the Dutch policy of revaluing informal care, focusing on family and friends, but finding limited research on moral ambivalence in caring for loved ones with severe mental health problems. The study explores theoretical concepts to understand involvement and commitment in such situations. Lachmar et al.'s (2017) study on Twitter's hashtag #MyDepressionLooksLike identifies seven themes in users' discussions of depressive symptoms, highlighting the hashtag's impact on social support and reducing depression stigma.

Elisei et al.'s (2019) paper suggests that health and illness concepts require a global perspective, considering individual and family suffering. They emphasise the importance of dignity, human qualities, and humanitarian ethos, highlighting the ME-YOU relationship as the primary ethical factor. The question "Where is your brother?" forces people to decide how to place themselves in relationships with others and the world. Bond et al. (2022) examine discourses of compassion in healthcare, observing that compassion positively impacts care experiences and health outcomes. However, there is limited understanding of how individuals with mental health conditions identify compassion. They recommend that healthcare institutions design services to foster compassion and provide worker training.

METHODOLOGY

The study's research design is descriptive-qualitative, enabling a thorough data examination. Data were collected from two purposively chosen Instagram sites: Sanemind and the NEEM Sanctuary. Google and Instagram searches selected the two most effective platforms for data collection. Sample data were collected using the Instagram InSaver downloader and direct screenshots. Data analysis followed the research objective, analysing sample semiotic resources used to raise mental health awareness on the platforms based on Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotics framework.

Theoretical Framework

Social semiotics view language and other forms of communication as "semiotic resources" for meaning-making, based on Halliday's functional view of language. Semiotic materials include sounds, texts, images, objects, and visual components. Different semiotic resources are used to achieve various communicative goals, such as establishing meaning or conveying attitudes (Punkasirikul, 2018; Azab, 2022). Social semiotics sees "language" as a system of options that can be selected based on what sign-makers want to achieve within specific modes, media, and contexts (Ledin and Machin, 2018; Aiello, 2020). Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) posit that based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, an image or visual has three metafunctions: representational, interpersonal, and compositional, illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Social Semiotics Framework.

Metafunction	Types	Realisation in Image
Representational	Narrative Conceptual Processes	Action and Reaction Classification, Definition, and Analysis
Interactive/ Interpersonal	Visual Contact (Gaze) Social Distance Perspective (Attitude) Modality	Offer and Demand Close-up, Medium and Long Shot Horizontal and Vertical Low and High Modality/Pigmentation

Metafunction	Types	Realisation in Image
Compositional	Information Value Framing Saliency	Top/Bottom, Left/Right and Centre/Margin Separation, Segregation, Overlap and Rhyme Foreground/Background and Size/Colour

Adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen (2021)

Table 1 illustrates the three social semiotics metafunctions - representational, interactive, and compositional - and their realisation in an image. These metafunctions operate simultaneously, generating multidimensional meanings. Visuals can vary in complexity, from single elements to intricate compositions, just like language. This understanding informs the analytical approach in this study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The study analyses data on non-linguistic communication used to convey mental health awareness on two Instagram platforms. The study employs Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) social semiotic interpretation to understand the meaning construed and identify how semiotic resources (images, signs, gestures, colours) are used for meaning-making and conveying mental health awareness on Sanemind and NEEM. Sanemind focuses on caring for children's mental health, while NEEM Sanctuary demonstrates care for all humans.

Social Semiotics Analysis for Meaning-Making

Conveying meaning via visual resources from Sanemind (SM)

Representational meaning

Self-care in mental health awareness discourse has already been established as a prerequisite for caring for others. Caring for others here means caring for children as parents, guardians, or teachers to ensure their mental well-being. Texts 1, 2, and 3 illustrate how parents, guardians, teachers, and society can care for children's mental health.



Figure 1: Source - SM
Posted: 26/11/21, Extracted: 13/8/22



Figure 2: Source - SM
Posted: 02/10/20, Extracted: 13/8/22

Text 1 depicts the need to create positive experiences for children, shown in a photograph of a boy pointing to his temple, likely thinking or recalling something. The textual element states that every experience a child goes through builds on the brain, suggesting the boy is pointing to his brain. The background, with the alphabet inscription, indicates a classroom. Text 2 shows a girl and her mother dancing, illustrating caring for children by participating in activities that excite them.

Text 3



Figure 3: Source - SM
Posted: 13/05/22, Extracted: 13/8/22

Text 3 demonstrates how parents unconsciously reinforce negativity in their children. A boy in a red t-shirt stands looking down, avoiding eye contact with his mother, who is scolding him with a pointed finger. The mother looks directly at the boy, warning him against laziness. The textual elements suggest that in trying to discourage laziness, the mother unknowingly reinforces the idea in the boy's subconscious, potentially leading to laziness.

Interactive meaning

Visual contact

Texts 1, 2, and 3 depict 'offer' visual contacts as the Represented Participants (RPs) do not make direct eye contact or focus on the viewer. The boy in Text 1 looks up, away from the viewer; the girl and her mother also look elsewhere, their eyes hidden from the viewer. This presents the RPs as objects of contemplation and information. Text 3's pictorial elements represent visual contact, providing information on language use and mental health. The participants require little to no viewer involvement, leaving a viewer to contemplate the elements and their message.

Social distance

In Text 1, the social distance between the RP and the viewer could be considered medium close, even though the image is cut off approximately above the waist, not exactly from the waist. This category of social distance signifies a close personal social relationship or a 'one of us' social relations. In Text 2, all the figures of the RPs are shown with spaces around them, thus representing a long shot and far social distance, signifying a public and largely impersonal social relationship with the viewer. The RPs in Text 3 have a close shot or close personal distance with the viewer since the head and shoulders of subjects are visible to the viewer, thus signifying a friendly or personal relationship with the viewer.

Perspective

In Text 1, the social distance between the RP and the viewer is medium close, despite being cut off above the waist. This signifies a close personal relationship or 'one of us' dynamic. Text 2 shows the RPs with spaces around them, indicating a long shot and far social distance, representing a public and impersonal relationship with the viewer. Text 3 features a close shot, showing the head and shoulders of the subjects, signifying a friendly or personal relationship with the viewer.

Modality

The different shades of blue and bright yellow in Text 1 and 2, plus the boy's red bowtie in Text 1, represent high modality. This study found that blue and yellow are significant in mental health

awareness discourse. Text 3's dark blue and bright yellow also depict high modality, and the boy wears a red shirt.

Compositional meaning

Information value

In Texts 1 and 2, the image designer used the top/bottom information systems. Pictorial elements are at the top, representing ideal information, while textual elements are at the bottom, representing real and practical information. Pictorial elements are also centred, likely representing the core of the image, from which textual elements draw meaning. The top/bottom, centre, and left/right information value arrangements are used; textual elements are at the top and bottom, signifying ideal and real information. The central pictorial element represents the nucleus, connecting other elements. RPs are positioned left and right, with the boy representing given information, the woman representing new information, and the person using inappropriate language representing the problem to be solved.

Framing

The image designer uses separated framing to depict a disconnect, then creates a connection through colour rhyme and aligned images and textual narratives. In Text 1, the pictorial element is framed and separated from the textual element, but the same background connects them. The white lettering and boy's shirt align with the white background, and the textual element's message aligns with the boy pointing to his head. In Text 2, blank spaces separate the elements, but colour rhyme connects them; blue is used in the background, dancing floor, lettering, and outfits to create synergy in the information on caring for a child. In Text 3, the framing system is top-centre-bottom; textual elements occupy the top and bottom frames, while the pictorial element occupies the centre frame with a white background. Elements are separated by clear frame lines but connected by the dark blue background and yellow highlights.

Saliency

The foreground element in Text 1 is the boy in the frame, who is the representative participant, and in terms of the hierarchy of saliency, the boy is the most salient. Similarly, in Text 2, the most salient is the quasi-humans, the girl and her mum dancing. The framing system in Text 3 is top-centre-bottom, the textual element occupies the top and bottom frames, while the pictorial element occupies the centre frame, which has a white background. The elements are separated by clear frame lines of the pictorial element at the centre but connected by the dark blue background and yellow highlights on the text and the edge of the pictorial frame.

Conveying meaning via visual resources from NEEM (NM)

Representational meaning



Figure 4: Source - NM
Posted: 04/09/19, Extracted: 23/2/23



Figure 5: Source - NM
Posted: 17/9/21, Extracted: 23/2/23

Text 4's narrative strengthens the theme by emphasising intentional care without waiting for others to ask for help: "Remember to check in with them." Four scenarios illustrate this: a lonely girl in a new location, a quiet friend detached from others, a troubled friend appearing to have it all together, and a forlorn individual needing self-care. Each scenario highlights the importance of checking in and caring for others and oneself.

In Text 5, the emphasis is on looking out for friends, colleagues, and family, particularly the "always happy" ones. The narrative is illustrated with five people, possibly a nuclear family, each holding a happy emoji to mask their pain, sadness, fear, and depression.

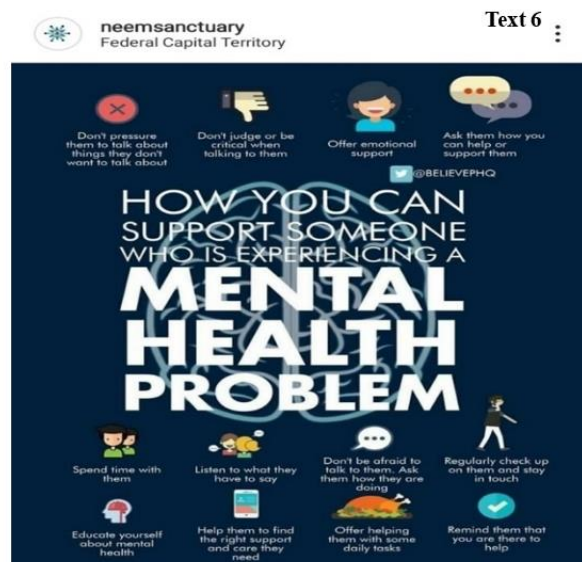


Figure 6: Source - NM
Posted: 28/01/19, Extracted: 23/2/23

Caring for others involves supporting someone with a mental health problem, illustrated by 12 scenarios in Text 6. The first scenario shows a red stop icon, indicating "Don't pressure them to talk." The second scenario displays a thumbs down sign, meaning "Don't judge or be critical." The third scenario features a smiling face woman, representing "Offer emotional support." The fourth scenario shows two comment bubbles, suggesting "Ask how you can help or support them." The fifth scenario depicts two quasi-human heads, symbolising "Spend time with them." The sixth scenario shows two human heads with speech icons, representing "Listen to what they have to say." The seventh scenario features another speech icon, encouraging "Don't be afraid to talk to them. Ask how they're doing." The eighth scenario shows a man walking, representing "Regularly check up on them and stay in touch." The ninth scenario features a human head with a brain, symbolising "Educate yourself about mental health." The tenth scenario displays a mobile phone, indicating "Help them find the right support and care." The eleventh scenario shows a burning turkey, representing "Offer help with daily tasks like cooking." The twelfth scenario features a blue tick icon or okay sign, meaning "Remind them you're there to help." At the center of the image is a human brain symbol with the text "How you can support someone with a mental health problem?"

Interactive meaning

Visual contact

In Text 4, all RPs except the two men in the second frame offer visual contact, while they demand visual contact by gazing directly at the viewer. The offer visual contacts communicate information on checking up on friends with little viewer involvement. In contrast, demand visual contacts require action, reaction, or involvement. In Text 5, all smiling and laughing elements demand visual contact,

triggering a reaction from the viewer due to the smiles, laughter, and front-angle capture. In Text 6, only the "Spend time with them" element demands contact or involvement, while the other eleven elements offer visual contact without direct involvement, serving as illustrations for supporting someone with a mental health issue.

Social distance

In Text 4, the social distance between the RPs in the top two frames represents medium close or far personal distance, as the RP's figure from the waist upwards is visible. This signifies a social or 'one of us' relationship with the viewer. The RP sleeping at the left/bottom margin has only her face visible, representing a very close-up social distance and indicating an intimate relationship. In contrast, the RP at the bottom/right margin represents a medium shot social distance, showing the subject's figure cut off from knee level and signifying a familiar social relationship. In Text 5, all RPs represent a long shot or far social distance, signifying an impersonal relationship with the viewer. In Text 6, the human element walking represents a long shot or far social distance, signifying an impersonal relationship, while the other eleven elements represent a very close-up or intimate distance.

Perspective

A frontal horizontal angle is used in Text 4, enhancing viewer involvement and presenting RPs as relatable subjects. Text 5's pictorial elements are designed with a frontal horizontal angle, connoting strong viewer involvement. In Text 6, most elements suggest frontal horizontal angles, creating viewer identification and involvement.

Modality

Pink, yellow, black, and blue are used in Text 4, but with low saturation and light, appearing less prominent. These colors maintain the same meaning established in previous sections. In contrast, Text 5 features bright, highly saturated colors like yellow, purple, red, and blue, resonating with mental health awareness and holding significant meaning for the study. Text 6's dark blue background also depicts high modality.

Compositional meaning

Information value

In Text 4, aside from the title, the layouts don't follow the information value system. The frames categorise friends to check in with, but the narrative doesn't imply a hierarchy of information value (given, new, ideal, or real). Although the frames are positioned symmetrically, this doesn't indicate a distinction between left and right or top and bottom frames in terms of information value. If it did, it would suggest prioritising some friends over others or categorising them as given, new, ideal, or real. However, the narrative suggests all four categories share the same information value.

In Text 5, the top/bottom information value system is used, in which the textual element indicating the ideal information is at the top, and the pictorial elements indicating the real and practical information are at the bottom of the image. Similarly, in Text 6, apart from the symbol of the brain, which could be identified as the nucleus or core element, and the lettering written on it, all the other elements at the top/bottom and left/right margins are subservient to the nucleus element and depend on or refer to the core element for meaning making, in line with the context.

Framing

In Text 4 and Text 6, the framing design is separated and integrated; while every element is separated, they are integrated with the textual elements labelled below each pictorial element. To communicate the intended information on caring for others, the elements are also connected by colour rhyme, the monochrome background in each image and other colour rhymes in the lettering

and outfits. However, in Text 5, the textual elements are separated from the pictorial elements by empty spaces but connected by the monochrome background to indicate the same information communicated.

Saliency

The elements in Text 4 appear to share the same saliency; none is bigger, more colourful, foregrounded or more eye-catching than the other, except that the viewer would most likely pay more attention to the pictorial elements than the textual elements. In Text 5, it could be assumed that all the pictorial elements are salient, but the big man wearing purple could be considered more salient, and the dull-coloured small human, the child, could also draw a viewer's attention more than other elements, depending on the viewer's point of view. The same features of Text 4 apply to the elements in Text 6, except that the elements in the centre are foregrounded and larger than other elements and, thus, more salient.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Social semiotics data analysis involved the three metafunctions: representational, interactional, and compositional. The dominant semiotic devices identified from the representational metafunction perspective are images, symbols, signs, and icons, representing actions and events used to communicate information on mental health awareness. From the interpersonal or interactive metafunction perspective, visual contacts (offer or demand), social distance (intimate/personal or social/impersonal), image angles or point of view, and colour illustrate mental health awareness information. Finally, from the compositional metafunction, information value, framing, and saliency are used to create meaning and convey mental health awareness information on the selected Instagram pages.

The textual and pictorial elements cohere to make meaning and communicate the intended information by arranging elements in an image according to angles, positions, saliency, and colours. For instance, the distance between the elements in a visual with the viewer communicates the kind of relationship and connection with the viewer, whether at an intimate or personal level or social and impersonal level. The contact between the viewer and the elements, whether as demand or offer visual contact, also determines the intended meaning behind the image.

In terms of arrangements of elements, the elements at the top/bottom, right/left and centre/margin communicate the information value of the message conveyed. The point of view or perspective in which an element connects with the viewer depicts meaning potential in terms of power relations and the level of engagement or involvement expected from the viewer. The framing of elements in an image, either connected or disconnected in meaning-making, is determined by the connection of the textual meaning to the pictorial representation or the context of both the textual or graphical elements if separated, segregated, integrated, or rhymed by colour cohesion. The background colour of an image or the same colour used for the lettering and other pictorial elements creates cohesion between the textual and symbols, signs or graphical elements used in an image. The use of colours like green, orange, and yellow by the content creators of all the pages connects the message in the lettering and pictures to the prevalent themes of mental health awareness. For example, green is the colour which symbolises mental health advocacy and stands for healing and good health. Orange signifies warmth and happiness, providing emotional strength and ginger for recovery from emotional distress, and yellow represents the colour of the brain, mind, and intellect and indicates good health and help for a mentally challenged person.

Furthermore, the positioning of elements to indicate the meaning hierarchy or importance in an image, that is, saliency, is achieved by foregrounding, image and font sizes, colour modality, and backgrounding. The most salient elements communicate the most essential information in the image with which the viewer must associate.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the visual and linguistic features of mental health awareness messages on Instagram by uncovering the ways in which they construct and communicate support and awareness advocacy. Through a systematic analysis of colour, composition, framing, and language, we have revealed the subtle yet significant ways in which these texts shape our understanding of mental health and encourage supportive behaviours. Key findings include the use of warm colours to convey empathy and support, the strategic deployment of framing and composition to guide viewer engagement, and the emphasis on inclusive language to promote accessibility and understanding. By analysing the visual and linguistic features of these texts, the study has helped readers to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which media can influence our perceptions of mental health and inform our responses to mental health issues. These insights have important implications for the development of effective mental health support and awareness campaigns, highlighting the need for a nuanced and multifaceted approach to promoting mental health and well-being.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS: All authors contributed and have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

FUNDING: We appreciate the financial support of the Covenant University Centre for Research, Innovation and Discovery (CUCRID) for this publication.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT: The study was conducted with the consent and formal approval of the Instagram platform owners used as data sources. Approval was also obtained from the Covenant Health Research Ethics Committee (CHREC).

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT: Not applicable.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The privacy policies of the selected Instagram platforms and the official authorisations from the platform owners were duly followed. With ethical clearance procedure number CHREC /335/2023, the Covenant Health Research Ethics Committee (CHREC) also approved the conduct of the study.

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