

## REPRESENTATION OF INFLUENCER IDENTITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA (SOCIAL SEMIOTICS ANALYSIS ON INSTAGRAM ACCOUNTS @CRISTIANO, @JUSTINBIEBER, @LEOMESSI, AND @THEROCK)

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**Abstract.** Social media Instagram is a popular photo and video sharing application. Through sharing images on the app, influencers can promote or endorse products, brands and services to their followers. Influencers are also required to be creative in posting photos on Instagram for the sake of the beauty of the feed on their Instagram. Their success in promoting or assessing their reputation as influencers is usually manifested through the number of “Likes” received on photos posted on Instagram accounts. The question is what kind of fashion images are likely to be well received by their followers. This study uses the work of social semiotics Kress and van Leeuwen (1999&2006) to evaluate what types of photos tend to be liked by audiences and why they are liked. The analysis involved examining five different semiotic sources (i.e. distance from which the photo was taken, participant gaze (gaze), relationship between participants in the photo, participant's clothing and clothing color), followed by a qualitative analysis of preferred photographs, taking into account the particular context of the photo. The photo is like the identity described by the influencer, and the moment is described through the photo.

**Keywords:** social media, social semiotics, influencer

**Abstrak.** Social media Instagram is a popular photo and video sharing application. Through sharing images on the app, influencers can promote or endorse products, brands and services to their followers. Influencers are also required to be creative in posting photos on Instagram for the sake of the beauty of the feed on their Instagram. Their success in promoting or assessing their reputation as influencers is usually manifested through the number of “Likes” received on photos posted on Instagram accounts. The question is what kind of fashion images are likely to be well received by their followers. This study uses the work of social semiotics Kress and van Leeuwen (1999, 2006) to evaluate what types of photos tend to be liked by audiences and why they are liked. The analysis involved examining five different semiotic sources (i.e. distance from which the photo was taken, participant gaze (gaze), relationship between participants in the photo, participant's clothing and clothing color), followed by a qualitative analysis of preferred photographs, taking into account the particular context of the photo. The photo is like the identity described by the influencer, and the moment is described through the photo.

**Kata Kunci:** media sosial, semiotic sosial, influencer

### INTRODUCTION.

Joseph Grenny (2014:6) states that the word influence is the ability to make changes in human behavior. Meanwhile, according to Brown & Fiorella (2013: 195) Influencers are typically a noncustomer or business incentivized to recommend/create content about a business brand or product. While Nick Hayes (2008: 50) defines Influencer as "A third party who significantly shapes the customer's purchasing decision, but may ever be accountable for it".

In other words, Influencers are people who have a large number of followers or audiences on social media and they have a strong influence on their followers, such as artists,

micro celebrities, bloggers, and youtubers. They are liked and trusted by followers and audiences so that what they wear, say or do, can inspire and influence followers, including to try and buy a product they use. Influencers are motivated to promote a product or service because they truly believe in the product or service, or to earn financial gain.

Instagram is a social networking service for sharing photos and videos owned by Facebook that is widely used by Influencers since Instagram provides an application or system that makes it easier for influencers to work. The platform allows its users to create business accounts, enabling access to analytics that can be used to measure the progress of their posts and their overall profile.

The types of images that Influencers post are generally curated, well thought out, and pre-planned to fit a particular need or aesthetic. The content is also often created using advanced cameras and editing equipment. Influencers can also use Instagram's built-in photo editing features including filters, location tags, hash tags, and direct user account tags.

The ability of users to like Instagram posts is an important part of the social media platform. Likes are the simplest engagement measure on Instagram, but also the most effective, as they can show the success of a photo and inform Influencers about what they should continue to post, or how they can modify content to suit their followers) them (Schivinski, Langaro & Shaw, 2019, p. 846).

The number of likes received for an image can vary greatly depending on its content. In specific photos, for example those with faces (Bakhshi, Gilbert & Shamna, 2014), or those with an open left cheek rather than the right cheek (Lindell, 2018) received more “likes” than other photos.

From the perspective of social semiotics (van Leeuwen, 2004; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1999, 2006; van Leeuwen and Machin, 2016), visual choices, such as the direction of the participant's gaze, the distance of the face from the frame, the number of faces in the photo, the relationship between different faces presented by an influencer, or content producer has a positive impact on Instagram viewers.

This study seeks to find out how the semiotic choices made by influencers in the photos they post have an impact on their followers' acceptance of the photos.

Instagram is a photo-sharing social media site that is primarily accessed via the mobile app or via the Instagram website. Connect with others in a simple but effective way of communicating. (Evans, Jun, Lim & Phua, 2017), the feature to follow users and “like” posts is an important function of Instagram.

The content of photos and videos uploaded by its users is what keeps Instagram accounts active and attractive to their followers. Furthermore, Instagram involves visually and culturally oriented content where users document their lives through uploaded photos. These photos express feelings, memories, or events that users share with their online connections or followers (Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015). The motivation behind photo posting by most Instagram users involves ideals of self-expression and freedom of speech which they cannot do in the offline world (Lee, et al, 2015). Most importantly, Instagram provides tools to facilitate image manipulation through photo editing applications that were previously difficult for most people to do. With the editing features through Instagram, it makes it easy for users to change their personal life photos to appear brighter, sharper, stronger and more attractive (Lee, et al, 2015).

The focus of the development of Instagram over the last decade has been to develop the platform as a marketing tool, and those who have made the most of the opportunity are users referred to as Influencers. According to Cauberghe, De Veirman & Hudders (2017), a Social Media Influencer is “a person who has built a large social network with followers” and is considered a “trusted sense creator”. It means that influencers have worked hard to gain the trust of their followers as suppliers of trends that can influence their followers to “like” or buy products or services posted on their accounts (Ceyhan, 2019).

Influencers and online brand products rely on their followers because they have hedonic shopping motives. Triwidisari, Nurkin & Muhsin (2018) describe hedonic shopping motives as “the behavior of individuals who carry out excessive shopping activities to meet their own needs for satisfaction. The hedonic nature of shopping motives will be created by shopping while walking around choosing the preferred item, or by visiting several online stores on a web page.” (Triwidisari, Nurkin & Muhsin, 2018, p.172). Influencers use Instagram as a marketing platform in partnership with various brands.

Social influence is very important for Instagram Influencers. According to Cialdini (2009) there are six key factors in an effort to gain social influence, namely; reciprocity, commitment, social proof, liking, authority and scarcity. Reciprocity can be applied by an Influencer when they discount or rebate for a particular brand in return for followers. Commitment is when Influencers build trust with their followers on a regular and consistent basis, such as posting content in a timely manner. Social proof is when Influencers display common ground and build relationships with their followers. This often happens when Influencers are actively responding to comments in uploaded photos. Authority is when Influencers display expert information about the uploaded product or brand. Examples are new product snippets, or product reviews before the product is released. Scarcity refers to the influence of the influencer itself. If an influencer has a very distinctive quality or aesthetic, then users tend to be influenced to follow influencers who they consider a rare “commodity” (Juma, 2015).

According to Kress & van Leeuwen, “the image itself, and a knowledge of the communicative resources that allow its articulation and understanding, a knowledge of the way social interactions and social relations can be encoded in images” (p. 120). That means that an individual's response to an image can be positive or negative depending on certain aspects of the content including the way in which the relationship is formed between the image producer and the viewer.

There are several ways that images can form a relationship or bond between an image producer and a viewer. Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) show that relationships are formed when the subject of the image is looking directly at the viewer, rather than away from the viewer, or if the image is shown from the waist up instead of a full-body photograph taken from afar. Differently distanced social representations in images can “allow us to approach imaginary public figures as if they were our friends and neighbors or see people like us as strangers” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 132).

Color can also be used to create a connection between the producer and the photo or photo maker (van Leeuwen, 2011). Warm colors can remind the viewer of a happy place such as summer, vacation or passionate moments, while cooler colors can remind the viewer of difficult times, either emotionally or physically, such as winter, unhealthy, or cold. As van Leeuwen (2011), citing Goethe's color point theory “... Colors have an immediate sensory effect: 'Experience teaches us certain colors evoke certain feelings. Blue, for example, has a rather active character'. 'It's an exciting power', as distinct from red-yellow, which is said to be distracting rather than enlivening.” (van Leeuwen, 2011, p. 23),

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the image constructs and encodes precisely the social interactions and relationships between those represented in the image and the viewer of the image. As a result, certain semiotic sources such as gaze and social distance can be a determining factor in whether an Instagram user will like a post or follow an Influencer.

Two central concepts in social semiotics are the mode of semiotics and the source of semiotics. Mode semiotics refers to a set of socially organized semiotic resources used to create meaning (van Leeuwen, 2004). Examples of semiotic modes such as writing, speaking, visual images, body movements, sound and layout. Sources of semiotics are markers, actions or objects associated with certain semiotic modes used to communicate (van Leeuwen, 2004).

Both of these things can be produced physiologically, namely through vocal organs or other body muscles, or through technology, such as: pens, paints, computers, or musical instruments. As an example of a semiotic mode, a visual image can include a color semiotic source.

Different articulations of semiotic sources work to influence or influence the viewer in several ways (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). For example, a participant in a photo smiling directly at the viewer of the photo connotes sympathetic communication with the viewer, while a participant who stares coldly at the viewer may mean the viewer is inferior who is communicating with a superior (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, p. 118).

## METHODS

This study uses a constructivist paradigm which views that the reality of social life is not a natural reality, but the result of construction. Therefore, the concentration of the analysis is to find out how the event or reality is constructed, in what way the construction is formed. This study analyzes the relationship between various semiotic sources found on Instagram photos from Influencers and the number of likes that Instagram images receive. Then analyzed by Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal theory of social semiotics.

This study explores the potential of social semiotics in the Instagram social media platform and analyzes social semiotics of visual images through the use of qualitative communication methods. The results of this study are important for the world of social media, as they help social media influencers make decisions about uploading their visual photos.

This study analyzes nine photos that have received the most likes from four Instagram Influencer accounts in the year 2020. The fourth account of Influencers is four of the ten influencer accounts with the most followers in the world according to statista.com which were chosen randomly. The four accounts include @cristiano belonging to footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, @justinbieber belonging to musician Justin Bieber, @leomessi belonging to footballer Lionel Messi, and @therock belonging to actor Dwayne Johnson.

Based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1999, 2006) social semiotic analysis, the next step is to examine the collected Instagram photos to identify the source of the semiotics used by image producers. The sources of semiotics that are used as the focus for the analysis are: 1. Social distance, the distance between the participants in the picture and the camera lens. 2. View direction (gaze) Participants in the picture. 3. Participant relationship: whether the participant is alone or there is someone else in the picture and if a participant is with another person what level of intimacy is conveyed. 4. Participant's attire. And 5. Color: the dominant color, or hue of an image (Kress & van Leeuwen).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Discussion.** The source of social distance semiotics aims to analyze the semiotic choices made in images posted by influencers within Instagram. This category relates to how the participants in the picture are shown to be close between the participants in the picture and the audience. Social distance can be observed from taking pictures.

Almost all photos displayed by influencers use medium shots with social relations not close or far. Participants' social images are displayed with other participants in a balanced portion. There are two photos that appear slightly different that obtain a lot of likes, namely the photo uploaded by @cristiano which shows photos taken from a close-up distance and displays close, personal and intimate relationships and interactions with the audience. The picture shows that the Influencer or participant is part of the "us" audience and there is no barrier to getting to know the participants closely and showing @cristiano's personal life which is casual and simple. The connection between participants and the audience looks more intimate

and has an impact on increasing the number of likes.

What is interesting is that some of the uploaded photos are not photos of the participants themselves but of other participants. As in @justinbieber's upload, there is one photo that gets a lot of likes. It is a photo of his wife Hailey Baldwin which is shown with a close-up and personal relationship, depicting the closeness with the participants themselves and providing space for the audience to get to know his wife more closely. Female participants received more likes with intimate close-up photos close to the camera because it is related to the beauty norms of western society where lips, eyes, and facial skin often determine attractiveness (Jung, 2018).

Likewise with one photo of another participant uploaded by @cristiano, @leomessi and @therock which is a photo of basketball player Kobe Bryant and plus one photo of participant Chadwick Boseman, an actor in the Black Panther film uploaded by @therock. The two photos are displayed in the context of expressing deep condolences for the death of these two figures. Photos of Kobe Bryant and Chadwick Boseman are shown in a close-up and personal way that depicts the closeness between the participants in the picture and the uploader and opens a space of closeness to the audience for the participants and uploaders to feel the grief.

In the photo uploaded by @leomessi, a photo of Lionel Messi's three children without him getting a lot of likes is shown with a medium shot and included in a social image, inviting the audience to get to know a little about the figures of his three children in general, not personally and intimately.

The findings above are in accordance with the analysis of social distance semiotic sources according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) that an image is more likely to create the impression of a positive connection if the participant in the image is positioned close to the audience, for example close-up. Influencers' goal of creating a connection with their followers will be more successful through the use of images that position participants closer to the audience.

Furthermore, in the category of sources of semiotic gaze (gaze) participants. This category relates to where the participants in the picture are directing their eyes. The live viewing category photo posted by @cristiano received a large number of likes. This is in accordance with Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) which states that viewers tend to respond more to photos with direct eye contact. "the participant's gaze (and the gesture, if present) demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her" (p. 118). However, in the photos posted by @leomessi, @therock, and @justinbieber, they get different results that photos with no main participants, participants seeing other participants or other objects, and participants looking out of the frame get a lot of likes. This proves that influencers' assumption that Directly Looking gaze helps in creating a relationship with the audience is not always true.

In the category of semiotic sources of participant relations, @cristiano's photo with a single participant gets a lot of likes. As an Instagram influencer, his work is centered on self-promotion represented by the single-participant semiotic category. However, the photo uploaded by @cristiano with the highest number of likes was not in the single participant category, but in the minor physical category on the photo of Cristiano Ronaldo who was receiving a birthday surprise from his wife Georgina Rodriguez and his son Cristiano Ronaldo Jr. In this case, it is possible for followers to feel bored with photos that only contain influencers and view photos containing other participants, namely wives and children giving birthday surprises, as fresh and interesting. The photo also succeeded in creating joy and personal closeness with the audience as reflected in congratulatory comments and emoticons in the form of hearts, applause and birthday cakes written by the audience.

In the photo uploaded by @justinbieber showing a surprising fact, eight of the nine photos uploaded are photos in the full physical relationship category such as physical contact

with other participants in an intimate and passionate way (hugs, kisses) with his wife, and the category of strong physical relationship with his wife. Other participants. It seems that the audience is more interested in photos that provide information related to Justin Bieber's personal relationship which is described as very intimate with his partner than Justin Bieber himself. In fact, those nine photos that received a lot of likes did not contain a photo of Justin Bieber as the sole participant.

In the photo uploaded by @leomessi, it falls into various categories i.e. one photo of a single participant, two photos of more than one participants, one photo of a light physical relationship, and one photo of a strong physical relationship with his two children. Photos with more than one participant obtain the most likes than other photos. This photo is a photo of Lionel Messi's farewell moment with his teammate at Barcelona football club Luis Suárez. Similar to the discussion of @cristiano and @justinbieber, audiences tend to like photos that provide space and information related to participants' personal relationships in the form of photos depicting participants' relationships with other participants who are closest people, teammates or other sportsmen. Those provide a feeling of personal closeness between the audience and participants because they feel like they already know, take part, feel and are in the lives of participants.

Meanwhile, the photos uploaded by @therock are dominated by photos with a strong physical relationship category. The five photos that get lots of likes are photos of participants with other participants i.e. Dwayne Johnson's two children. This fact reinforces the assumption that the average audience is attracted to photos that provide information related to personal relationships and provide a feeling of personal closeness to the audience.

The source category of participants' clothing semiotics assessed the clothes worn by participants in an image. Three influencers @therock, @justinbieber and @cristiano received high likes for photos that represent the fully and partially dressed semiotics category. Meanwhile, @leomessi received many likes from photos representing the semiotics category of dress. This shows that viewers tend to have different reactions to these types of posts.

Fully dressed photos, for example, wearing clothes that cover almost the entire skin of the arms and legs in various circumstances can increase the quality of masculinity.

Accounts @therock, @justinbieber and @cristiano in some of his photos build his masculine identity by showing a muscular body that is tight and firm. Durante, Fasoli, and Mari, et al (344, 2018) stated, "A way to emphasize masculinity and dominance is to portray men as fit and muscular to convey a representation of physical strength."

The source of color semiotics refers to the dominant color, tone or hue of an image for the purpose of analyzing the semiotic choices made in the images posted by Influencers. The selection of 11 colors is based on van Leeuwen (2011) "Seven basic colors (white, black, red, yellow, brown, purple, green and blue)", while three colors are black, white and gray, and orange, not categorized as a base color by van Leeuwen.

The wide range of colors in Influencer photos shows that they each have unique color preferences. The photos uploaded by influencers that get the most likes are photos with yellow tones or dominated by yellow. Some of the other photos are in yellow tones. Yellow is traditionally known as a color that evokes happiness because it is bright and vibrant (Van Leeuwen, 2011). Research shows that yellow promotes positive feelings such as joy, praise and surprise (Duh & Kolar, 2014). The photo received a lot of likes from the audience because of the feeling the color offered. As Van Leeuwen (2011) states "bright yellow, calm, gentle and attractive". From observations it can be said that color is a special preference for each audience or certain followers, it cannot be generalized to Instagram followers in general.

## CONCLUSION.

This study explains the relationship between the types of photos posted by Instagram

influencers and audience acceptance of photos using Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory. This study articulates the different categories of a number of semiotic sources used in the images, and evaluates the impact on followers assessed through the number of likes received. This study found that semiotic choices made by influencers did increase the number of likes received, although this was often associated with the identity and lifestyle of each influencer. Some of the findings of this study also contrast with Kress and van Leeuwen's (1999&2006).

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