



Linguistics

Constructing the ‘Healthy Self’ on Instagram: An Appraisal and Critical Discourse Analysis of Health Narratives in Social Media Captions

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore how the identity of “Healthy Self” is formed discursively in Instagram captions that promote ideal healthy lifestyles. It investigates the evaluative language and ideological narratives in creating self-representation through social media. The qualitative approach was employed to analyze 26 captions in English tagged with #health, #diet, #healthylifestyle, or #bodygoals. The data were examined using Appraisal Theory (Martin & White) to identify evaluative meanings and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough) to interpret the ideology underlying the language use. The findings indicate that the captions express various affect, judgment, and appreciation dimensions to construct an image of “a healthy life.” Users tend to impose aspects of emotional recovery, discipline, self-acceptance, and personal empowerment. This discourse indicates a shift from traditional beauty standards towards a more balanced and compassionate approach to health. Still, it contains neoliberal ideological values such as individual responsibility, productivity, and control over the body. Instagram serves as a platform for self-expression and a discursive space that reproduces and negotiates dominant ideology about health. This study confirms the importance of critical reflection on health standards established through seemingly neutral personal narratives.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media, especially Instagram, has become one of the main spaces where people share their daily lives, including information about healthy lifestyles and body appearance. With its very visual nature, Instagram allows users to build a certain image of themselves through photos and captions. One obvious trend is how users present their identity as a “healthy” or “healthy Self”, not just physically, but also emotionally and mentally.

Whereas, the narrative around health on Instagram often has two sides. On the one hand, it encourages an active lifestyle, healthy eating, and life balance. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for this narrative to reinforce narrow beauty standards such as an ideal slim body or perfect skin, which are difficult for many people to achieve. This can potentially create high social pressure, especially for young users.

Recent research confirms this phenomenon. For example, (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022) shows that the more often someone uses Instagram, the more likely they are to feel dissatisfied with their body shape. A study by (Mironica et al., 2024) also found something similar, which stated that exposure to ideal body content on social media can encourage the desire to undergo cosmetic procedures. In fact,

(Taylor & Armes, 2024) noted that many users, especially women, post photos of their bodies in search of social validation, which then reinforces self-image anxiety.

However, rival narratives have begun to emerge recently that attempt to redefine the meaning of “healthy.” This narrative no longer focuses solely on physical appearance but on self-acceptance, mental balance, and a sustainable lifestyle. This is what is known as the healthy self. It is an identity formed from feeling good about oneself and a conscious decision to live healthier lives without pressure to meet certain ideal standards.

In contrast, most of those studies still focus on content consumption’s visual aspects and psychological effects. Few touched on how language, especially in Instagram captions, contributes to shaping the social construction of the healthy body. Language is the primary medium for conveying values, attitudes, and beliefs that form meaning in a particular social context.

By then, social media has developed into a powerful discursive space in shaping public opinion, social identity, and the construction of meaning on important issues such as health, gender, and culture. Instagram, as a very popular visual platform, not only functions as a medium for sharing photos or information, but also as an ideological arena where social narratives are produced and circulated.

Several previous studies have highlighted how Instagram is used to shape specific social constructions. (Inggit et al., 2024, for example, explored how Generation Z shapes Indonesian cultural identity through posts and captions on Instagram. In a similar study, (Rohmah & Suyanto, 2023) presented how [the@mubjadi.id](https://www.instagram.com/the@mubjadi.id) account builds a narrative of Islamic feminism and strengthens the value of gender equality through a critical discourse approach. Identity construction was also found in the study of (Nursagi et al., 2023), which analyzes how Nike uses Instagram captions to represent women’s empowerment in the context of sport and the ideal body.

The focus on body representation and the values attached to it is also highlighted in (Listyani et al., 2023), which examined how beauty clinics in Indonesia form beauty myths through a combination of text and visuals on Instagram. This research points out that beauty discourse is shaped by the aesthetics industry and reinforced by visual consumption on social media.

In public health, several studies use a CDA approach to reveal how official agencies frame health issues through social media. (Nugroho & Audinovic, 2022) studied the narrative COVID-19 vaccination by the official account of the Indonesian Ministry of Health, while (Setiawan et al., 2024) focused on the role of regional head in conveying public education messages during the pandemic via Instagram. These studies depicted that social media has become an extension of the government in conveying the health agenda to the public.

However, although various studies have discussed how institutional actors and global brands create social discourse on Instagram, very few studies specifically discuss how non-institutional individuals, such as common users, construct health narratives—particularly related to the construction of a healthy self—through captions on social media.

Additionally, systemic functional linguistic approaches, especially Appraisal Theory, have not been widely used to analyze how user’s expressions of attitudes, judgment, and ideological position emerge in their health narratives. Most studies still focus on macro ideological aspects with classic CDA approaches, such as Van Dijk, without delving deeper into the evaluative nuances in the users’ language.

In linguistics, Appraisal Theory, developed by (Martin, J.R & White, 2005) provides a framework for analyzing how evaluations and attitudes are formed and transmitted through language. This theory has been applied in various media, advertising, politics, and education contexts. Several recent studies demonstrate the relevance of this theory in the context of social media. For example, research by (Hamdani, 2021 and (Himmawati et al., 2022) reveals how captions on Instagram contain many evaluative expressions explicitly linked to healthy or identity construction, healthy self. Moreover, those studies rarely combine a linguistic framework with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to reveal the ideology hidden in these representations. CDA provides a tool for reading how power, domination, and hegemonic discourse work through language practices, including in personal texts such as Instagram captions.

Thus, this research positions itself at the intersection between media psychology studies and critical linguistics. It aims to explore how language in Instagram captions builds a “healthy self” identity through evaluative mechanisms (attitude, engagement, gradation) in Appraisal Theory and interpret the values and ideology hidden behind the narrative using a CDA framework (Fairclough, 1995).

In more detail, the objectives of this research are:

1. Identify and classify forms of evaluation that appear in Instagram captions with health and body themes based on categories in Appraisal Theory.
2. Interpreting how this evaluative system shapes healthy identity representations.
3. Revealing the values and ideology the “healthy self” narrative carries through the CDA approach.

By combining psychological and linguistic approaches and using data from actual practices on social media, this research offers an original contribution to understanding how language shapes and produces meanings of the body and health in the digital era.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a critical discourse analysis orientation. A qualitative approach was chosen because the primary focus of this research is understanding the meaning and ideology constructed through language on social media, especially Instagram captions related to a healthy lifestyle. In line with the opinion of (Denzin, N.K & Lincoln, 2018), a qualitative approach allows researchers to catch the complexity of social meaning that emerges from symbolic interactions in certain contexts.

In particular, this research combines Appraisal Theory (Martin, J.R & White, 2005) from the scope of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995) as an analytical framework. Appraisal is used to identify evaluative forms that appear in the text, while CDA assists in interpreting the ideology hidden behind the language choices used.

The type of data used is text data, Instagram captions in English. This data is primary because it is directly taken from public accounts on Instagram, which raise themes about health, diet, healthy lifestyles, and ideal body representation. Data sources are selected using the method of purposive sampling (Miles, Matthew B., Huberman, A.M., & Saldana, 2014), namely by considering the emergence of hashtags such as #health, #diet, #bodygoals, and #healthylifestyle. A total of 26 available captions were selected based on the following criteria. They are uploaded within January-April 2025, contain explicit or implicit themes about the body, diet, exercise, or life balance, are written by a public account (not a company account or paid sponsor), and use English to reach a broader narrative globally. The selection of this data is based on the consideration that social media is a discursive space where identity practices are presented, negotiated, and disseminated (Lupton, 2016).

Data is collected through methods online documentation, namely by manually searching and recording Instagram captions from public accounts. Data collection steps include:

- a. Browse Instagram with popular hashtags like #health, #diet, #bodygoals, and #healthylifestyle
- b. Identify accounts that meet purposive sampling criteria.
- c. Document relevant captions and note the upload date and visual context if necessary.

This technique refers to a digital data collection model adapted from netnography (Kozinets, R.V & Gambetti, 2021), which allows researchers to analyze internet-based social practices in depth.

In terms of data analysis techniques, this study conducted two main theories that complement each other.

1. Appraisal Analysis (Martin)

Captions are analyzed based on three main components of the evaluative system: attitude (consisting of Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation), Engagement (position towards other opinions, dialogism), and Gradation (strengthening or softening of evaluative expressions).

Each caption was coded using appraisal categories to reveal how language choices shape attitudes toward the self, body, and healthy practices.

2. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough)

After identifying the evaluative structure, the analysis continues by interpreting how the language reflects and reproduces the social structure and dominant ideology. The CDA approach is applied to convey power relations, ideal body constructs, and neoliberal narratives in healthy lifestyles promoted on Instagram. The analysis combines close reading of the text with interpretation of its social context. The results are presented as tables, thematic narratives, and discursive interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzes 26 Instagram captions marked with the hashtags #health, #diet, #bodygoals, and #healthylifestyle, using the Appraisal theory framework to see how language constructs the identity of the “healthy self.” Three main categories of appraisal—Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation—are used to classify the evaluative expressions in each caption.

The following table presents the data distribution based on Appraisal categories and evaluative explanations:

Table 1. Classification of Appraisal Categories for 26 Instagram Captions

No	D a t a No.	Original Caption	Appraisal Category	Notes
1	Data 1	“I feel healthy and strong and FREE.”	Affect	Positive emotions about mental and physical health recovery.
2	Data 2	“I feel stronger in my workout. I feel more energetic throughout the day”.	Affect	Physical reflection and energy after recovery from extreme hunger.
3	Data 3	“A fit and healthy body can be achieved with NO RULES.”	Judgment	Value a healthy lifestyle that is free from strict rules.
....				
....				
....				
25	Data 25	“Developed this beautiful trust with my body.”	Affect	A strong trust relationship with the body.
26	Data 26	“Giving yourself grace and showing up the best you can.”	Judgement	Assess the importance of having compassion for yourself in a healthy journey.”

As shown in Table 1, most of the captions show expressions of Affect (emotion), followed by Judgment (assessment of behaviour) and Appreciation (evaluation of an object or phenomenon). Captions like “*Weight GAINED my life back*” (data 10) or “*Confidence finally came after weight gain*” (data 23) show personal emotions and reflections on recovery, which strengthens the construction of a healthy self-identity based on body acceptance.

Meanwhile, category Judgement often appears in captions that assess certain habits or beliefs, such as “clean eating might be sabotaging your result” (data 4), which criticizes extreme diet approaches. This shows that there is a counter-narrative to the health ideology based on strict control.

As for Appreciation arises in reflection on processes or objects such as “*creating weird but effective daily rituals help me stayed connected to my body*” (data 17) which implies an appreciation for an intuitive and personal lifestyle.

The distribution of appraisal categories can be seen further in the following diagram.

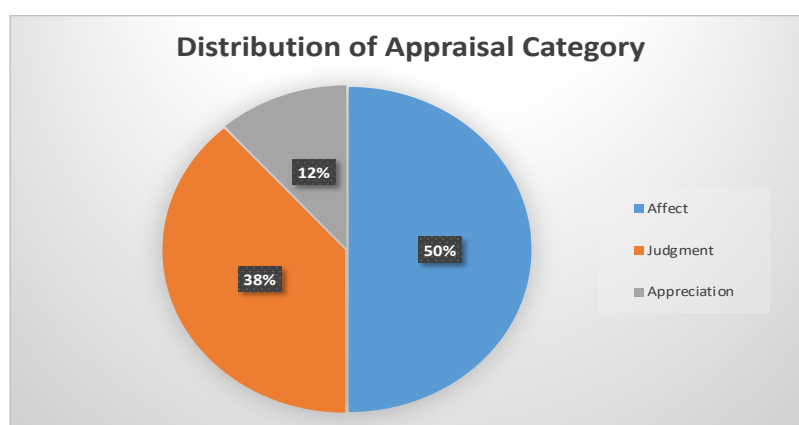


Diagram 1: Appraisal Categories in Healthy- Self 26 Instagram Caption

The following discussion will explain the relation between the three categories of appraisal in creating a “healthy Self” identity and its perspective on CDA.

Appraisal Findings

Analysis of 26 health-themed Instagram captions shows that most captions contain evaluative elements in the Appraisal Theory system. The most dominant category is Affect (50%), followed by Judgment (38%) and Appreciation (12%). This indicates that Instagram’s “healthy self” narrative tends to be built through emotional expression and personal reflection, rather than simply evaluating other people or objects.

For example:

Caption “*I fell healthy and strong and FREE*” (Data1) and “*Confidence finally came after weight gain*” (Data 23) express Affect, namely positive emotions towards physical and mental achievements.

Captions like “*You can’t hate yourself into a body you love*” (Data 14) and “*Giving yourself grace and showing up the best you can*” (Data 26) falls into the category Judgment which evaluates attitudes and mentality in the process of achieving a healthy lifestyle.

Meanwhile, caption like “*Establishing a regular eating pattern really helped me*” (Data 15) is a form of Appreciation, namely an evaluation of life systems or habits.

Formation of a “Healthy Self” Identity

Through the Appraisal Theory approach, it was found that Instagram users who discuss health not only describe the result of diet or exercise but also build a holistic healthy self-image, including emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions. The caption with the category Affect reflects the process of self-recovery and reconciliation, which strengthens the identity as a resilient and self-aware individual. Emotions such as freedom, self-acceptance, and gratitude emerge as a form of resistance to toxic narratives about the ideal body.

In context Judgment, users actively reflect on or criticize perfectionist mentalities, body shaming, and diet culture. For example, “*One meal won’t ruin your progress.*” (Data 5) voiced a positive attitude towards consistency rather than obsessiveness towards food control. Meanwhile in Appreciation, users show appreciation for new systems or habits that shape lifestyle alters. This illustrates a more sustainable and mindful approach to living a healthy life.

Perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

By using the CDA approach, it was found that the narrative in Instagram captions was not neutral. The narratives reproduce and challenge dominant ideologies around the body, diet, and productivity. Some captions like “*weight GAINED my life back*” (Data 8) or “*developed this beautiful trust with my body*” (Data 25) against the cultural hegemony of being thin and showing off self-empowerment discourse.

These discursive practices demonstrate a shift from a repressive diet culture towards a more inclusive

and personalized health discourse. On the other hand, the use of diction such as “powerful”, “free”, and “healed” strengthens the construction of the self as a subject who is empowered, reflective, and able to take control over his body.

Implications of Findings

These findings indicate that social media platforms such as Instagram have a role in framing health identities and ideologies. The use of evaluative language allows individuals to reframe personal experiences into collective narratives that can strengthen solidarity, especially among communities that have experienced body image distress or eating disorders.

CONCLUSIONS

This research explores how language in Instagram captions constructs healthy self-identity through the Appraisal Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approaches. The findings show that the majority of captions contain evaluative expressions in the form of Affect (emotions and feelings), Judgment (assessment of behavior or character), and Appreciation (assessment of objects, routines, or processes).

In general, the captions analyzed present personal narratives which support the value of self-acceptance, emotional balance, and a healing relationship with the body and food. Identity healthy self-formed through discourses that reject extreme diets, normalize weight gain, and prioritize mental health and bodily empowerment. Through CDA, it was found that the ideology conveyed in the narrative was a form of resistance to diet culture and normative beauty standards. This discourse also shows a shift in values in digital society, where the meaning of “healthy” is starting to be interpreted in a more inclusive and humanistic way. The appraisal distribution visualization also shows dominance Affect as the strongest form of representation in building a healthy identity. Thus, it can be concluded that Instagram is not just a visual platform, but a discursive arena that shapes ways of thinking and interpreting the body and health ideologically and emotionally.

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