



A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Women's Representation on Instagram: A Case Study of Chiara Ferragni

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the construction of women's identity through the multimodal representation in Chiara Ferragni's Instagram post with the Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), together with supporting theories including Abidin's (2017) strategy of authenticity in influencer culture, Manovich's (2016) digital aesthetic, and Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital. The data in the form of photos and captions were analyzed based on the visual aspect, including the composition, gaze, pose, lighting, color, filter, and the textual aspect, such as the caption, hashtags, mentions, and emojis. The findings of the study indicate that Ferragni's identity was formed by the multifaceted multimodal strategy, where the visual elements typically highlight glamour, social status, and cultural legitimacy. Meanwhile, the caption is an element of textual reinforcement of the meaning via anchorage and appraisal metafunctions. The researcher establishes that the women's representation, specifically Chiara Ferragni, on Instagram was constructed by a planned multimodal construction, which displays women as modern figures with glamorous, authentic, and influential in digital culture.

INTRODUCTION

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is an approach of discourse analysis that focuses on how meaning is constructed through the combination of modes of communication, not only written and spoken language, but also images, color, sound, typography, sign, and movement (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). They further emphasize that each of the modes has three main metafunctions, which are representation (showing the content or object), interpersonal (to create the relation between the sender and receiver), and textual (organizing the message to be cohesive). Consequently, multimodal analysis allows the researcher to comprehend more about how digital communication is not just a text, but a complex combination of several sources of meaning.

Instagram became one of the modern social media networks that is relevant to be analyzed through the MDA approach. Unlike the traditional media, such as newspapers and magazines, that commonly display black and white static images and texts, Instagram serves multiple multimodal features: colorful images, video, captions, emojis, hashtags, mentions, as well as interactive elements such as polling (Leaver et al., 2020). The complexity of Instagram gives a chance to the users to display themselves more strategically and layered. As stated by Barthes (1977), texts in media are used as *anchorage* that direct the image interpretations, while on Instagram, captions, hashtags, and emojis strengthen or extend the visual meaning that is being represented. Because of that, Instagram became a space for social identity, cultural, and personal deconstruction consciously.

In the context of women's representation, Instagram presents truly fascinating dynamics. Women are frequently regulated by complex social norms associated with femininity, beauty, and success (Doring et al., 2021). On top of that, the *impression management* theory that was put forward by Goffman (1959) became the concern of how individuals, including women, organize how they are displayed in front of the audience to form an identity. Goffman sees social interaction as a "stage" where each individual plays a role to maintain the desired impression. Leary and Kowalski (1990) from *self-presentation* explain how individuals consciously present themselves according to social expectations, for instance, with the *exemplification* strategy (display themselves as a moral and inspiring figure) or *self-promotion* (highlight talents or achievements). It is related to the *visibility labour* strategy, where the continuous work in order to maintain an identity that is acceptable to the audience, especially in influencer worlds (Abidin, 2016). Therefore, these theories emphasized that the self-representation of women on social media can not be separated from the conscious strategy to fulfill the social expectation and the audience that constructs their identity in the digital space.

Accordingly, Chiara Ferragni was chosen as an object of the research because she is one of the most influential influencers in the world. Her career started from *The Blonde Salad* blog in 2009, which initially contained personal photos and fashion inspiration, but quickly developed and became a global phenomenon. Along with the development of Instagram, Ferragni uses this platform to broaden her audience reach, strengthen her personal brand, and create businesses, including *Chiara Ferragni Collection*, that are recognized internationally. Not only chosen because of his position as one of the most influential influencers globally, but also her significant role in forming cultural fashion, digital, and the habits of the audience. Ferragni is known able to integrate personal identity, digital marketing strategy, and the aesthetics of Instagram visuals that are consistent, making her a representative example in the case of women representation in social media (Abidin, 2016; Weiser, 2018). Casadesus-Masanell and Dorobantu (2015) used Ferragni's popularity as a study material in Harvard Business School because it is considered a successful example of a personal branding strategy in the digital era. With a huge number of followers that reach tens of millions, Ferragni is not only seen as a model icon but also as a woman who used Instagram as a multimodal medium to construct identity.

Other ways, the research aims to analyze the women's representation in Chiara Ferragni's Instagram accounts using the framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Instagram, as a multimodal platform, provides a space where text, image, and sign interact to create a complex meaning. This study makes an effort to examine how Ferragni, as a women influencer, constructs her identity through the combination of visual and textual elements, also how those actions represented the role of women in the digital era. Through this analysis, the research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how women's identity is constructed and presented in contemporary social media culture.

For example, in one of the selected posts, Ferragni appears wearing a red dress with a background that contains several huge brand logos. As a visual, a red dress, symmetrical body position, and direct gaze to the camera represented authority and self-confidence (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). On the other hand, the caption that consists of emojis and mentions use and anchorage that strengthen Ferragin's position as a public figure globally (Barther, 1977). This is going to be how the researcher analyzed the data. Of course, with more relevant theory and deeper analysis, the findings and results can be accurate and clear.

METHOD

This study analyzes the content of the document to find specific features using a qualitative method. Ary et al (2002) state that content and document analysis is the method of research that is used to analyze written or visual items, aiming to identify the specific characteristics of the items. Therefore, this type of analysis is particularly matched for this study, because this study analyzes the visual (images and videos) and textual elements of Chiara Ferragni's Instagram account.

The data were taken from the Instagram account of Ciara Ferragni (id: @chiaraFerragni). This study selected content posted by Chiara Ferragni on his Instagram account to find the representation of women on Instagram through his Instagram post. The content chosen by some consideration to find the most related and relevant results of women's representation on Instagram.

Two posts of Chiara Ferragni's Instagram account will be selected purposively, with the consideration that the two posts represented the important performative moment in constructing Ferragni's public identity. The first selected content is posted by Ferragni on February 28th, 2025. This post contains 12 slides, which consist of 4 short videos and 8 pictures. Ferragni uses clothes that are quite striking here, and in the caption, Ferragni uses some emojis that are often used in his other Instagram posts. The second selected content was posted by Ferragni on February 9th, 2025. This post contains 9 slides, which consist of 2 short videos and 7 pictures. Ferragni attends the Goya awards in Granada, and she posts the documentation of his presence at the awards. This post became one of three posts that Ferragni pinned to his main grid, and this picture received 790,058 likes, which made it the highest-liked post of February 2025. This research will be focused on analyzing the photos and excluding the videos. The consideration was made because of the different characteristics of photos and videos. The photo is static, so elements such as composition, framing, salience, pose, gaze, and background can be analyzed deeply using the selected theory.

In collecting the data, the researcher used several steps in collecting the data as follows:

1. Accessing the social media Instagram of Chiara Ferragni by typing @chiaraFerragni in the search tab on the Instagram application.
2. Downloading all pictures posted by Chiara Ferragni using the *Snapinst* website. This website allowed its users to download photos and videos from Instagram by copying the URL link of the post. A screenshot will also be taken to take the picture of the caption of the selected posts.
3. The selected content posted by Chiara Ferragni should be posted between February 2025 and March 2025, because the researcher wants to focus on the recent content of Chiara Ferragni.

All collected data will be analyzed by using the MDA method, MDA helps to examine how different modes of communication contribute to the production of meaning. Moreover, the analysis will just focus on the women's representation that is found in the data selected of Chiara Ferragni's Instagram account. Visual and textual elements became the main concerns to be analyzed. Furthermore, this study will examine how some of those modes of communication construct women's representation on Instagram.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the representation of Women through Chiara Feraagni's Instagram Account. Focusing on how the visual elements and textual elements constructed the identity of women on Instagram from Ferragni's Instagram account.

Table 1. Multimodal features overview

No.	Date Posted	Slide Number	Dominant Multimodal Features	Preliminary Interpretation
1	February 09, 2025	First slide	Color, gaze, background, composition	Prestige and power
2	February 09, 2025	Third slide	Direct gaze, leaning posture, warm tone filter, setting	Glamour and emotional warmth
3	February 09, 2025	Forth slide	Natural lighting and back-ground, framing, transition	Elegant, natural, transition room
4	February 09, 2025	Fifth slide	Direct gaze, hand placement, framing, soft lighting, warm tone, background	Intimacy, luxury, hospitality
5	February 09, 2025	Seventh slide	Pose, formal and luxurious dress,	Social status, emotional closeness
6	February 09, 2025	Ninth slide	Monochrome filter, pose, facial expression, tattoo	Elegant, artistic, authentic
7	February 28, 2025	Second slide	Direct gaze, over the shoulder pose, exotic dress	Confidence, elegant

8	February 28, 2025	Third slide	Pose, hand placement, low angle, background	Authority, professionalism
9	February 28, 2025	Forth slide	Tight framing, warm smile, blotting paper on the forehead	Warmth, closeness
10	February 28, 2025	Fifth slide	Tight framing, color contrast, texture	Social status, wealth
11	February 28, 2025	Sixth slide	Hand placement, composition, warm filter	Glamour, confidence
12	February 28, 2025	Seventh slide	Composition, framing, gaze, dress color	Exclusivity, proximity
13	February 28, 2025	Tenth slide	Framing, composition, gaze, smile	Flexibility, elegant
14	February 09, 2025	Caption	Emoji, hashtag, mention, language	Emotional relation, social affiliation, professionalism
15	February 28, 2025	Caption	Emoji, hashtag, mention, language	Emotional relation, social affiliation, professionalism

Among those selected photos, the researcher chose one of the photos that would represent the whole analysis of the research, which is the fourth slide of February 28, 2025, post.



Figure 1. The Fourth Slide

This photo is a pretty unique photo, especially the angle and proxemics. Edward T. Hall (1966) explained the concept of proxemics, which is the distance division between people in communication that can be used in the visual representation. Personal close range, just like a selfie, gives an intimate impression, whereas long range creates social distance and formality (Hall, 1966). In the case of this photo, the close-up and selfie placed the audience in the personal range, so it gives a sense of being present in person.

Furthermore, the camera angle goes either way with the previous photo. If the previous photo uses a low-level angle, this photo uses a high-level angle for a selfie. Women often use selfies with a slightly above eye level angle to create a slimming face effect and highlight profitable facial parts (Sedgewick et al., 2017). Senft & Baym (2015) emphasize that selfie practices are a global discourse which more than documentation, but a way of communication through angle and range to create affectivity. In short, the combination of a high-level angle and close-up selfies constructs intimacy because of the range, and approachability because of the angle of the camera.

Moreover, gaze and expression suit the identities that are constructed by the angle and the proxemics. Once again, Ferragni stares directly at the camera, or what we call a demand image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). As the researcher already explained frequently, the demand image is used to ask for audience interaction and establish social interaction. Ferragni stares at the camera directly while smiling. This thing makes social closeness and gives a friendly impression. Machin (2007) argued that

facial expression is a form of non-verbal code that conveys some specific meaning. In this case, smile can be translated as a form of warmth and a way to create an approachable charm. Through direct gaze and warm smile, the subject is trying to construct identity as a friendly, warm, and approachable person. She is also trying to show the audience that, even though she is a big influencer, but still maintaining the relatability and closeness with the audience.

On top of that, we can see a small detail, but striking, which is the blotting paper on her forehead. Barthes (1981) explained about the punctum, punctum is the small detail that distracts attention, it is unexpected and often adds an emotional or humorous layer. So, the blotting paper became the punctum in this photo. The appearance of the blotting paper is not in line with the elegance, but it gives a sense of humor and spontaneity. Blotting paper appears as an unexpected thing, and it creates emotional closeness with the audience, because it is giving realness impression (Tiidenberg, 2018).

Furthermore, Abidin (2017) stated that calibrated amateurism is a strategy where the influencer presents natural content or imperfect content, in fact, carefully curated. The blotting paper becomes the calibrated amateurism in this photo, which shows the backstage side while maintaining the glamour side of the dress and facial expression. Dynel (2020), in the study of visual humor, small humorous elements in the images are often used to create a bond with the audience. It can be concluded that the identity that wants to be constructed through this blotting paper is a glamorous figure, but a humanist. The subject is not only seen as an exclusive person, but with this small detail, once again, the subject gives another relatable feeling to her audience.

Subsequently, setting or place semiotics became the thing that can not be forgotten. In this photo, the visible background is a car interior with dark lighting and a faint seat. Semiotically, a car is an in-between room, which is a room between the public and private situations. Supported by Auge (1995) about non-places, he argued that things such as a car and an airport are temporary, these places are used for the transition from one social activity to another activity. Humphreys (2010) explained that this kind of case creates identity “always on the move”, where the room of transition (including the car) became a natural background for self-construction on social media. It shows Ferragni as a glamorous figure that always on the move, but still able to share moments with her audience even in the transition room. Authentic but flexible, these are the suitable words for Ferragni in this photo, where the luxury collapses with the simplicity.

CONCLUSIONS

This research showed that the women’s representation on Instagram, specifically through Chiara Ferragni’s Instagram account, was constructed consciously from the combination of several multimodal elements. The approach of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) emphasized that meaning is not only produced by the text, but also through the composition of visual, color, lighting, gesture, pose, filter, and background selection. Each of the have representational, interpersonal, and textual, which are interconnected to form an identity.

The result of the research found that gaze use appears to the the internal metafunction. Direct gaze is frequently used by Ferragni to create emotional closeness with her audience, in line with the concept of *demand image* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Whereas body movement that is under control and symmetrical strengthens the confidence and authority (Goffman, 1979). Saliency became an important strategy; either the placement of Ferragni in the center of the frame, with a contrast dress, makes her the main focus, and supports the glamour and identity construction in power (Jweitt & Oyama, 2001; Rose, 2016).

Moreover, technical aspects such as lighting and filters are used to create a deeper social meaning. For instance, a warm tone filter increases the emotional experience of the audience (Lin et al., 2024). In the side of setting, Scollon & Scollon (2003) emphasized that the background can speak as a social marker; if the subject poses in front of a huge brand logo, it associates the subject with a prestigious, cultural legitimation and high social status.

Another important element is the caption. Caption binds the visual meaning through *anchorage* (Barthes, 1977). It also expresses the emotion, moral value, and appreciation of the aestheticness in accordance with *appraisal* theory (Martin & White, 2005). Added with the use of hashtags, mentions,

and emojis that create solidarity and emotional closeness with the audience (Zappavigna, 2015; Danesi, 2017). Therefore, the identity that is being constructed became deeper and layered.

As a whole, this research concludes that the representation of women in Instagram, in the case of Chiara Ferragni's, is a result of a complex multimodal strategy. Ferragni's identity is constructed through the combination of performativity (Goffman, 1959), capital symbol (Bourdieu, 1984), digital aesthetic (Manovich, 2016), and authenticity strategy (Abidin, 2017). Based on these two posts of Chiara Ferragni that are being analyzed, this research shows that the representation of women's identity that is being constructed through the Instagram content reflects women as a figure that is glamorous, authoritative, and influential in the context of formal events and elite public representation.

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