

A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Pakistani Instagram Food Blogs

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Abstract

Instagram is one of the social media platforms that cater to the users with infotainment, blogging opportunities, freedom to start or promote businesses, and so on. In addition to these functions, it opens the window to free marketing and advertising. To engage its users, Instagram uses various kinds of semiotic resources, making the content aesthetically appealing. This paper examines how Instagram food blogs control the masses by re-contextualization of discourses to promote neoliberalism and unequal power relation by exploiting multimodal resources. The qualitative content analysis is performed keeping in view the research questions: How various semiotic approaches are deployed by Instagram food blogs in Pakistan? How re-contextualization is used as a marketing tool in food blogs? How food blogs are a source of neoliberalism in Pakistan? This research is conducted to make the implicit impact of the social actors explicit in the context of Instagram food blogs and to unveil the neoliberal market hidden under the cover of infotainment. The descriptive exploratory research design is utilized and the qualitative content analysis is conducted by using posts from six Pakistani food blogs with wide followership. The theory of social semiotics by van Leeuwen (2005) along with notions from Machin and Mayr (2012) is used as a framework to carry out multimodal critical discourse analysis. The analysis shows that food blogs employ visual semiotic resources (images) and verbal resources (captions) to entrap the audience and inject a consumerist ideology in them that promotes neoliberalism in society. The study concludes that bloggers act as social actors who direct the actions of the audience by making capital out of semiotic multimodal resources and it manifests unequal power relations in society because the audience act as consumers and bloggers act as social actors. This research is intended to create awareness by highlighting the changing dimensions of power relationships in the digital world of the 21st century.

Keywords: food blogs, multimodal semiotic resources, neoliberalism, recontextualization, MCDA

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Introduction

In recent times, social media emerged as a powerful source human communication. Various social media applications make use of multimodal semiotic resources to attract the users. Instagram is one of the social medium platforms that cater the users with infotainment, blogging opportunities and freedom to start, promotes businesses and so on. In addition to these functions, it opens the window to free marketing and advertising. To engage the users, Instagram uses various kinds of semiotic resources to make the content more appealing aesthetically. The semiotic resources are deployed by the users in various ways to design their content for multiple purposes. One significant use of Instagram is manifested in form of blogs. Users can make their own blogs according to their content some famous types of blogs include fashion, artist, personal, education, travel and food blogs. The content of each blog is designed differently to catch the audience by exploitation of semiotic modes such as photographs, videos, paralinguistic elements of social actors and language in accordance with context and culture. Liu J. (2013) argues, "...image and other visual modes have the capacity to form texts, complexes of signs which internally cohere with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced." Furthermore, the integration of several modes in a single discourse in a CDA is analyzed by an approach called as Multimodal Critical discourse Analysis (MCDA).

MCDA has its roots from Halliday's (1961) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). He also proposes the three meta-functions, Ideational; interpersonal and textual, a language performs in a social context. Panofsky (1995) proposed a theory for visual analysis that comprised of three levels: pre-iconographic level, iconographic level and iconological level. Then Kress and Leeuwen (1996) put forward their notions in their book *Reading Images* and they extended the three meta-functions of Halliday to visual communication. They named the three meta-functions as representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. Afterwards, van Leeuwen (2005) designed a framework for visual social semiotic analysis and this framework is adapted for this research along with notions from the Machin and Mayr's (2012) book "How to do Discourse Analysis".

Instagram is one of the widely used apps around globe. Only in Pakistan 10787000 Instagram users are active in 2022 out of which 44.5% are from the 18-24 age-group. This vast number of young populations is exposed to novel marketing strategies and manipulative tactics of the marketers. So, in order to unveil the impact of implicit

marketing in the name of reviews and food blogs this research is conducted. This study is focused on famous Instagram food blogs only in Pakistani context and how they are controlling the masses by recontextualization of discourse to promote neoliberalism and unequal power relation by exploiting multimodal resources. As Instagram is a multimodal social medium that is why “Social Semiotic theory in relation MCDA” is utilized for in depth analysis. The data consists of posts from food blogs and is analyzed by the developed framework as it can be seen in fig. 1 and 2.

Review of the Literature

A Chen and G. Eriksson (2019) explored the websites of the companies selling healthy snacks. They basically analyzed how the corporate stories of these companies used as tool to promote their brand in the market by the help of multimodal CDA. Also, this study concludes that corporate stories are a source of branding which can mislead consumers to indulge themselves in less healthy eating because of the manipulative tactics of these companies.

Another study, X. Tang (2018), is focused on the Tesco’s annual corporate report and it scrutinized the visual and verbal modes of the selected text and concluded that the company was intended to build a positive self-image in front of the target readers. This paper carried out its multimodal critical discourse analyses (MCDA) in three layers including individual mode analysis, integrated analysis and a broader discourse analysis.

Another study explained the social semiotic multimodality and the key elements of this approach are discussed and after applied the social semiotic multimodality approach on the social medium Pinterest (Jewitt & Henriksen, 2016). The multimodal layouts of homepages of the social medium were examined by considering the resources such as color, images and written texts. The main of this study is to elaborate social semiotic multimodality approach by its sample application on social medium Pinterest.

Additionally, a study demonstrated that advertisements deploy gendered body representations in which women are showed as concerned about health, responsible and successful (G. Bouvier & A. Chen, 2021). Various advertisements are analyzed by using MCDA. Various advertisements that included a cultural and prototypical

gendered representation are examined and the products were marketed by highlighting a need for a more precise body management.

This research is conducted to unveil the hidden tactics of the food bloggers to manipulate the audience and how the multiple semiotic modes play a key role in forming consumer mindset of the masses by controlling their subconscious mind. The significance of this research is that till date food blogs on Instagram are not analyzed by using van Leeuwen's social semiotic approach in MCDA.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is drawn on the Social Semiotics theory and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis MCDA (Machin and Mayr, 2012; van Leeuwen, 2005). The framework is developed for an in-depth analysis of the data on three levels of van Leeuwen's (2000) social semiotic approach to CDA. The three levels are called as representational meaning; interactive meaning and compositional meaning by van Leeuwen (2005). Thus, social semiotic approach to MCDA is employed for the analysis. The figure 1 explains the theoretical framework of the analysis which is given below. The framework consists of three levels of analysis. The first layer, representational meaning, will be focused on the individual analysis of visual and verbal modes. The verbal analysis will look for the vocabulary, personal pronouns, hash tags and mentions in the Instagram posts of food blogs while the visual analysis will cover the features like social distance, gaze, camera angles, layout, color, lightening and font of the photographs. After that in the second level, interactive meaning, the integrated messages conveyed by both the modes will be scrutinized. Subsequently, a broad contextual analysis will be carried out to examine the relationship of modes with the social reality along with a critical evaluation on the third level which is called as compositional meaning.

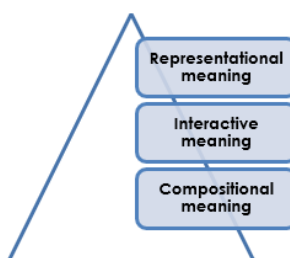


Fig. 1 Social Semiotics MCDA Framework

| | | | |
|--------------|--------------------------|------------------------|---|
| First Layer | Representational meaning | ▪ Visual | gaze, social distance, camera angles, layout, color, font |
| | | ▪ Verbal | vocabulary, personal pronouns, hash-tags, mentions |
| Second Layer | Interactive meaning | Visual + Verbal | relationships between modes |
| | | | Integrated messages |
| Third Layer | Compositional meaning | Social context + Modes | relationship of context and modes |
| | | | critical evaluation |

Fig. 2 Tabular representation of Social Semiotic CMDA Approach

Methodology

The present research employs Social Semiotics Approach of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) as a tool for analysis. The data was collected from Instagram, a social medium which is comprised of three pictures from various food blogs. For data collection, particularly Pakistani food blogs were targeted with massive followership. After the data collection a theoretical framework is developed on the basis of work of van Leeuwen (2005); Machin and Mayr (2012) as elaborated in previous section. This study was based on a multilayered framework to explore how the multimodal discourses were recontextualized to convey an intended message to the audience and how the food posts are used to support neoliberal market in Pakistan. Then a detailed analysis was carried out with the help of developed framework which is shown in the section 5 of this paper. Each post is analyzed by the three layered detailed analysis was based on both the visual and verbal modes of communication that were employed by the food bloggers in their Instagram posts. After the food blogs, as multimodal resources, are elaborated in relation to power, ideology, inequality and neoliberalism in the discussion section. Moreover, the data retrieval sources are mentioned in next section.

Data Sources

The data is collected from the following Pakistani food bloggers' Instagram feed:

- @alirehman
- @thefoodloverfromcapital
- @foodie_nextdoor

Analysis

A thematic qualitative analysis is carried out in this paper. The selected Instagram posts are scrutinized on the basis of above-mentioned theoretical framework separately. All the semiotic resources employed by each post and the ideology they promote are explored in depth by the researcher. Moreover, the relation of semiotic resources, power, ideology and marketing is explained in detail in the later part of discussion.

Post 1



This is a screenshot of @foodie_nextdoor’s post. Initiating with the verbal analysis, the orange box shows the topical sentence of the caption. The use of second pronoun and imperative verb indicates command and shows that the blogger holds power over audience. The emoticon of honey along with the word ‘healthy’ represents that the breakfast can be made nutritious with the use of honey.

The green box indicates the information provided by the blogger about the product. The words ‘organic’ is overlexicalisation that is inducing the ideology that this honey is healthy and nutritious for the consumer. The phrase ‘got this’ emphasizes on the

reliability of the product as the speaker herself bought and also there is informality in the expression which reveals her intent to make a connection with the audience. In the purple box, the possible uses of the product are described by her as “the dry-fruit honey goes perfectly with oats, porridges, cereal, tea, cakes, French toasts and much more”. Right after this she again uses personal pronoun ‘I’ and the verb ‘loved it’ are employed to emphasize the validity of the product. Firstly, she is focused on ‘dry-fruit honey’ after that she names other honey products from the same brand. Lastly, when she uses second person pronoun and a modal verb in the phrase “you can check”, it sounds like an offer to the consumers.

Moving to the red box, the price of the reviewed product is mentioned and here the blogger remains specific to the product she used herself which increases the reliability of the reviewer in the eyes of consumers. After that as highlighted by black box, she again uses an imperative verb and is asking the audience to follow her Instagram account in a very informal way. Lastly, the comment of the viewer is given in yellow box who asks about the coconut utensil used in the photograph. This comment is an indication that audience is concerned about the minute details.

For visual semiotic analysis, the photograph is categorized into three different colored boxes: blue, white and pink. The white boxes show the products, berry honey and dry-fruit honey. The name of brand is elaborated on the bottles and is very clear to the reader. In the blue box, a wooden spatula is immersed in the honey and it shows that the product is used by the blogger herself that gain adds to the reliability of the product for the consumers. Furthermore, the pink box describes that the reviewer added the honey to her breakfast bowl. The layout of the photograph shows that all the things are placed near to each other and has very low spacing among another that implies a close relation between oatmeal and honey.

Additionally, due to a close angle shot, the recontextualization of the actual situation helps the viewers feel a connection with the product. The absence of people from the picture allows the consumers to idealize themselves in that setting. The brown colored ensemble of photograph along with coconut bowl and wooden spatula represents deep cultural vibe and tends the consumer to idealize organic and natural lifestyle. This post employs several semiotic resources that manipulate the audience to buy the product. The blogger’s personal view about the product and its benefits accompanied by a sample photograph are justifying the price given in the end of the caption.

In the broader context, the featured product is painted as pure, organic, nutritious and healthy for the promotion purposes. All in all, this post is actually a marketing strategy that makes the people to buy the personally reviewed product. Here @foodie_nextdoor acts like an implicit brand ambassador who is sharing their personal experience and persuading the audience to buy the product for their own better health and organic lifestyle. The portrayal of organic and healthy lifestyle is implicit in this post but the overall post makes the audience to idealize this lifestyle and consequently consumer feels concerned about their health while viewing the post. Furthermore, this post is an advertisement and targets the audience who are suffering from various lifestyle and health issues. It also targets the population who in search of organic, pure and trustworthy honey. So, the blogger is employed as a reliable bridge between the producer and consumers.

Post 2



This post is from @thefoodloverfromcapital's Instagram account. Here a picture is posted along with a caption as shown in the screenshot above. For verbal semiotic analysis, the caption is divided into various sections with the help of colored boxes. The green box specifies the personal experience of the blogger, blue one shows the possible use of the product and the orange one indicates the subject of this post. The blogger shares her personal experience regarding the taste of the sauce that is made with Hellmann's Mayonnaise. She also elaborates the hype of product in the

phrase, “heard so much about @hellmannspk Mayonnaise”, after that she offers the viewers to try this product. Then she describes her excitement as “Absolutely loved the taste!!”

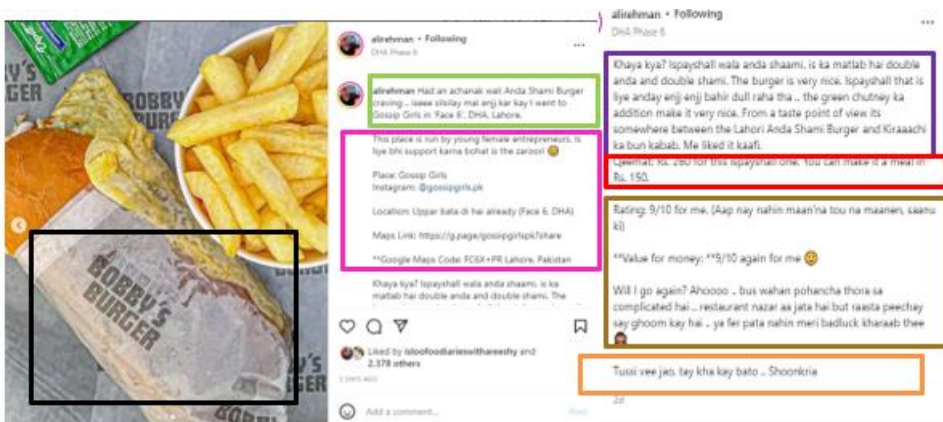
Also, the level of excitement is shown by the use of double exclamation mark. Moreover, the related brand is mentioned in the third line as @hellmanns.pk so that the consumers can tap to check the Instagram page of the brand immediately. This is a marketing tactic to trap the customers by targeting their subconscious thought process. Additionally, in the purple section, the recipe of the sauce is given which can be prepared by adding “garlic, yogurt, lemon, hot sauce...” in the Hellmann’s mayonnaise. Moreover, in the orange outline, the final remarks are given about the signified product. The language of gratitude, “so glad Hellmann’s is available here now”; a prescription to the audience, “do try this Mayonnaise”; and a predicted experience of the audience, “you’ll love it”, signifies the marketing purpose behind this post.

Viewing the photograph in the post, the visual semiotic resources are intelligently used by @thefoodloverfromcapital. The close up and vertical straight shot allows the viewer to feel connected with the product. The narrative presented well in the image by the use of hand pouring some mayonnaise in the bowl surrounded by the snacks. The aesthetic presentation of food in the picture invokes an urge in the consumer to buy the product. Moreover, a beautiful female hand filling the bowl shows the practical use of this product that makes the viewer feel connected with the process. The recontextualization of the picture is performed by zooming in the picture to focus on the food and the products. The absence of other human beings from the frame allows the viewers to imagine themselves in the place and enjoy the flavorsome meal. The plant leaves in the background, the bright lightening, the overall organized snacks in a tray and the still hand pouring some mayonnaise portrays a peaceful environment.

Together both the verbal and visual semiotic resources are completely concentrated on the promotion of the product. The recontextualization tends the consumers to fantasize themselves consuming the mayonnaise and enjoying an appetizing meal. The semiotic modes are utilized to portray in a very systematic way that the viewer feels fascinated and it compels the people to go for product. Firstly, the customers are served with the aesthetic image and persuasive caption in order to control their subconscious mind and afterwards they are motivated enough to buy the product.

The social practices of the people are controlled and guided by the stakeholders, capitalists and marketers. They intentionally throw a trap to catch the consumers. Simply, in this picture, food is used as a tool to fulfill these purposes. The seller creates a need for a product by the help of an Instagram blogger while remaining hidden. The customer takes the review as a key to develop an interest in the product and the brand before buying blindly without any evidence of the goodness of the product. So here the blogger acts as a chain that connects the consumer and the seller.

Post 3



This post is from @alirehman’s Instagram food-blog. Like all the previous posts, this one is also divided into various sections in order to make it easily analyzable. The verbal semiotic analysis shows that @alirehman uses highly colloquial language in captions. The caption is a mixture of Punjabi, Urdu and English languages.

Moreover, the deviation from the standard language is evident in his caption. The words are spelled wrong in order to make them sound like the local Pakistani accent. The green boxed part of the caption is translated as “I had a sudden craving for egg & patty burger so I just went to Gossip Girls in DHA phase 6, Lahore”. Basically, the intention behind using multilingual sentences here is to connect with the Pakistani people. Moreover, in this part eh refers to the place by creating a background why he went to that place. In the pink box he says, “This place is run by young female entrepreneurs that is why it was mandatory to support the”. After that he shares the information and location about the restaurant.

Here, a thing to be noted is that he specifically said that the reason to visit that place is the young female entrepreneurs and by elaborating this, he finally addresses an important issue of our society. As females constitute up to 51% of population but majority of them are not allowed to work due to various reasons. He uses word connotations to address to the issue and make people aware that it is necessary to support female entrepreneurs as well in comparison to the male population of the society. Here overlexicalisation can also be seen as 'Gossip Girls' are mentioned several times in this caption which brings the attention of readers towards this restaurant.

Moving towards the purple box, he tells the audience what he ate there, what kind of texture the burger had and how much fulfilling it was! The use of word 'ispayshall' describes the pronunciation of word 'special' by Urdu or Punjabi speakers. In the ending lines of purple box, he used structural oppositions to describe the taste of the burger and he says, "it was somewhere between Lahore's egg & patty burger and Karachi's kebab burger". This way he makes the reader to think about the taste of this product. Again, in the red layout, the structural opposition is used by giving two different prices of two separate burgers. After telling high price first, he tells minimum price of the other meal. This way he persuades the audience to try this product because they can adjust according their own budget.

In the brown outline, he rates the product and then in parenthesis he tries to sound more causal just like a friend by saying a sentence in Punjabi which shows his informality with the consumers. By sounding friendly and causal he's convincing the audience that this burger is really worth trying even if they agree or not. The use of Punjabi expression, he is connecting particularly with the people of Punjab province and specifically with the people of Lahore where that restaurant is situated. The overlexicalisation is explicit when he talks about the worthiness of spending money by rating it same as taste. Additionally, his eagerness to try this place again despite of the difficult route is another way to persuade the food lovers. In the last box, he says in Punjabi, "you go and eat there too", defines the whole purpose of this post. He is marketing about the restaurant in such a friendly and colloquial way that it definitely manipulates the consumers to try that place.

The visual semiotic analysis depicts that there are several iconographic elements that are employed in this picture. The camera shot is close and angle is tilted. This bright lightening makes it appealing to the eyes. The close shot allows the reader to

focus on the name of the brand, “Bobby’s Burger”. The frame contains a bowl of French fries which is not mentioned in the caption of the post. On the top of the photo there is a sauce sachet and this tends the viewer think that it is complementary along with French fries with the burger. The close view of the burger makes it appear larger than it actually is and it enforces that concept that this burger is worth trying in such a low amount of money. Thus, the consumer is injected to build a desire for that product by just looking at the picture.

Combining the visual and semiotic resources, the post is compelling for the viewers that develops an urge in them to buy that product out of their own will. While in fact, they are manipulated and motivated by the person behind the screen. This simple looking post is factually an advertisement of the product which is presented in really a friendly and informal way to the audience. The funny and amiable caption is created by the help of mixing of three different languages, deviated spelling and emoticons.

Viewing the context, this egg and patty burger is one of the most likeable and delicious street foods of Punjab in Pakistan, the location of motioned restaurant as well. So, for targeting the Punjabi population Punjabi language is included along with Urdu, the national language and English, the second language of Pakistan. The manipulation is the most essential tool of successful advisement which is apparent from the above analysis of the post. The imagination of the consumers is triggered in order to generate a desire in them for the product which effectively achieved through the semiotic resources in the caption and the photograph.

Discussion

The discussion part is widely focused on the second and third objectives which are aimed to explore the relation of recontextualization and ideological manipulation of the consumers and food blogs as novel source of inequality and neoliberalism. While the analysis has covered mainly the first objective of this paper and also second one to some extent. So, looking at the analysis, it is clear that Instagram food blogs employ multimodal semiotic resources to convey their message to the audience to promote a consumerist ideology in them while controlling their subconscious thought process. The fancy edited pictures along with genial, warm and convincing captions and the recontextualization of the actual context of the food items and experiences of the bloggers instill a consumerist mentality in to the

viewers. Food is necessity of life which has now turned into a luxury by the capitalism and now neoliberalism.

The captivating implicit advertising is also source of neoliberalism in the society that then induces inequality by affecting the social practices. To demonstrate the preceding point, Harris (2014) impacts of neoliberalism in the society that includes marketization, consumerization and materialization are elaborated here in the view of above analysis of the data. So, the neoliberalism supports free market and it allows the individuals to flourish well in business but on the hand, it promotes consumerism as well. The food blogs are a source of free market because they promote the businesses by advertising their products in the name of reviews. It compels their audience to trust them blindly just by believing their words as a complete truth and ultimately end up buying the recommended food items. Also, the viewers are made to live an imaginary experience of eating the food items by using prompting vocabulary items like mouth-watering, craving, appetizing, yummy, flavor-some and many more to activate the fantasy processes of the consumer that made them go for those food brands in order to live their ideation in reality.

The marketisation and consumerization are two main impacts of neoliberalism that brings inequality among the individuals in society. The people recognize themselves with the social medium perfection and try to attain the perfection, happiness and luxurious experiences by going to the advertised restaurants that makes them spend money. The marketers gain financial benefits on the cost of consumers' consumerist ideology. People want to get recognized as up-to date in the society in order to improve their social standards so they get trapped by the sellers. The advertisements doctor their ideology and they feel like they want to go to a particular place, eat a specific food item, enjoy an experience by themselves but in reality, they are made to do so. They are made to spend by inculcating a desire by the help of sumptuous photographs and captions. The semiotic resources are intently deployed to build up a consumerist mindset and then inspiring agents, food bloggers, are used to target a particular audience in order to forge the ideology of the public. All of this process is well planned and organized in which many social actors are involved, significantly food bloggers, who control and guide the social actions of masses in a society.

The social actors, food bloggers, dominate the audience by showing them bright side of the food products and restaurants and hiding the other face of food industry.

People are directed to spend money to gain the live the satisfied ideation they get by seeing the posts. Moreover, all of this is achieved at expense of health of the audience as the surety given by a food blogger is not a legal proof of healthiness of food items. Consumers are made to spend for the happiness they can get by delicious food but who knows how those items are prepared and how they affect the physical health of a consumer. Additionally, inequality increases as the consumers spend more the more revenue the marketers produce and the more they get rich. All of this is done just to benefit the businesses. Also, going to a particular restaurant or buying a particular product creates a sense of knowledgeable in the consumers so, they spend more to get to know more about food items, a very crucial part of life.

Final Remarks

The Social Semiotic Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Instagram Food Blogs in Pakistani context is carried out to scrutinize the role of food blogs as a marketing strategy. The research objectives included the exploration of semiotic resources of the food blogs posts; unveiling the recontextualization as marketing tool in the food blogs; and elaboration of food blogs as a source of neoliberalism. The thematic qualitative analysis is performed which shows that multimodal resources like photographs and verbal captions in the posts are intentionally designed to control the choices of the consumers. The content of food blogs is effective enough to manipulate the audience to develop a consumerist ideology without being informed and this ultimately induces neoliberalism in society by successful marketization of products through blogs. The bloggers act as social actors who guide and control the social actions of people in society. They set standards and people are persuaded to follow those standards. This hidden unequal power relation between the social actors behind posts and audience is revealed in this study. All in all, the stakeholders then exploit the bloggers for their marketing purposes and indirectly but, in reality these are the business owners who control the social actions of the masses.

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