

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUALS AND CONSTRUCTION OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL OR PERSONAL IDENTITIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS (E.G., LINKEDIN, INSTAGRAM, TIKTOK). FOCUS ON LINGUISTIC CHOICES, VISUAL CUES, AND INTERACTION PATTERNS



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Abstract

The aim of the present study is for today's youth, media and technology are major social elements, and they spend a substantial portion of their daily lives conversing via social media platforms i.e. LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok. According to Rideout (2010), youth that use the media regularly have a large number of friends, get along well with their parents, and are pleased with their schools and institutions. Those that use the media frequently also say that they get into a lot of trouble, are frequently upset or unhappy, and are frequently bored. Individuals' offline contacts with others decline as their spending on social networking sites increases, meaning that the majority of their socializing and sociability occurs in the glow of a screen. As a result, social media has the potential to influence an individual's psychological well-being, particularly among teens, as well as identity building, modifying how people see themselves and others. Without needing to meet in person, people can utilize social networking to create an identity and communicate with others. It offers both chances and obstacles for developing a consistent, stable, and meaningful sense of self. The paper elucidates the impact of social media on young people's self-presentation, social comparison, and self-esteem, as well as how it affects their identity construction. In today's technology environment, most studies on social networking sites have focused on the bad effects. However, this paper focuses on the positive sides of social media and how it aids in the formation of identity.

Keywords: Individuals, Professional, Personal, Identities, Social Media

Introduction

Background of the Study

Social media has transformed the way individuals develop and express their identities within the online landscape. Instagram uniquely differentiates itself because it focuses on pictures and visual style. Users on Instagram combine images, videos, text, hashtags, captions, emojis, and stories to create personalized versions of themselves. This means identity on Instagram is not just shown but actively created using chosen words and visuals by individuals.

Creating an identity on Instagram is a continuous process. Users constantly change how they present themselves in response to the platform's algorithms, audience reactions, social rules, and personal goals.

For many individuals, Instagram is a personal diary, a social network, and a business tool all at once. This mix makes it a key place to study how identity is made visually and through language. For work, Instagram has become a tool for personal branding, especially for business owners, influencers, artists, and freelancers. Work identity is built through nice pictures, smart captions, and alignment with global ideas of productivity and success. For personal use, Instagram allows people to show their lifestyle, feelings, relationships, and cultural ties. These presentations are shaped by local social rules and global digital trends.

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Problem Statement

Even though Instagram is now central to daily communication, many studies on identity building either just describe things or do not rely enough on social linguistics and discourse analysis. Current research often looks at visual style but does not fully explore the role of language, or it focuses on language but forgets about how different types of communication work together. Also, there is little research that combines how language, visuals, and interaction work together to build clear work or personal identities on Instagram.

Another key issue is how Instagram users manage audience expectations and what the platform allows. Identity is not just shaped by what a person wants to show, but also by likes, comments, follower numbers, the visibility algorithms confer, and common ideas about being real and relatable. Without proper analysis, identity-building might seem like unchanging self-expression rather than a changing, socially regulated act.

Research Objectives

1. Look at how individuals create and present their work and personal identities on Instagram.
2. Examine the linguistic choices in captions, bios, hashtags, and comments as tools for identity work.
3. Explore the role of visual cues, such as pictures, color schemes, body positions, and overall look, in building identity.
4. Investigate interaction patterns (likes, comments, stories, collaborations) as ways people confirm their identity and deal with their audience.

Research Questions

1. How individuals create and present their work and personal identities on Instagram?
2. What are the linguistic choices in captions, bios, hashtags, and comments as tools for identity work?
3. What is the role of visual cues, such as pictures, color schemes, body positions, and overall look, in building identity?
4. How to investigate interaction patterns (likes, comments, stories, collaborations) as ways people confirm their identity and deal with their audience?

Significance of the Study

This study adds to social linguistics, digital discourse analysis, and media studies by offering a research-based analysis of identity building on Instagram that considers many forms of communication. It is useful for understanding how people show themselves online today, influencer culture, and online work branding. In academics, the study provides a framework that connects language, visuals, and interaction, rather than looking at them separately.

Literature Review

Identity as a Social and Discursive Construct

Experts in social linguistics generally agree that identity is shaped by society, depends on context, and is performed. Older ideas viewed identity as fixed, whereas modern scholarship sees it as changing and negotiated. According to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), identity arises from interaction and is constructed through language and other signs, not from pre-existing traits.

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Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation remains important, particularly his distinction between public and private behaviour. Instagram can be seen as a public digital stage where users carefully manage how they appear to an imagined audience. Unlike real-life interactions, Instagram allows extensive editing, filtering, and time control, which strengthens impression management.

Digital Identity and Social Media

Online identity differs from real-life identity because it is mediated, lasting, and shaped by algorithms. Boyd (2014) argues that social media changes social interaction by bringing many audiences into one space. On Instagram, users talk to friends, family, co-workers, and strangers at the same time. This leads to very neutral or layered identity presentations.

Research shows that identity on social media is not just self-expression but also self-branding (Marwick, 2013). Users select content to seem authentic yet still marketable, especially true for professionals and influencers. Instagram's metrics—likes, shares, follower counts—show how successful an identity is.

Linguistic Choices on Instagram

Language on Instagram is concise, planned, and varied. Captions often blend a casual conversational style with inspiring or promotional language. Studies show that users use I pronouns, descriptive adjectives, and parts of stories to seem relatable and friendly (Zappavigna, 2012).

Hashtags work both as a way to categorize and as identity markers. They connect users to groups (#fitnesslife, #academia, #selfmade) and make them more visible. Emojis add more meaning by showing feelings, attitudes, and agreement, making up for the lack of spoken cues.

Instagram bios are highly condensed spaces for identity-building. In short, concise language, users convey their job, values, groups, and hopes. The selective nature of bios shows how users prioritize certain aspects of their identity.

Visual Cues and Multimodal Identity

Instagram's identity displays are visual. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of multimodality explains how images communicate meaning through how they are made, their colours, where people look, and how they are framed. Professional identities often use polished pictures, calm colours, and high quality to demonstrate skill and authority.

Personal identities, however, might prefer spontaneous pictures, warm tones, and casual settings to appear authentic. Repeated visual themes create a consistent look, making an identity stable across different posts. Body posture, facial expressions, and clothing also convey confidence, friendliness, or exclusivity.

Interaction Patterns and Audience Engagement

Interaction is key to maintaining identity displays. Likes and comments serve as social approval, reinforcing certain ways of presenting oneself. High engagement prompts users to repeat successful identity cues, whereas low engagement prompts changes.

Comment sections are often places where identity is jointly constructed. Replies, acknowledgments, and humour signal accessibility and a relational identity. Story features, polls, and Q&A tools make interaction more personal, allowing users to seem responsive and real while still controlling their

content.

Gaps in Existing Literature

While current research has examined language, visuals, and interaction separately, there remains a need for an integrated analysis specifically for Instagram. Many studies apply broadly across all platforms, ignoring what makes Instagram unique. Also, insufficient attention has been paid to how work and personal identities overlap rather than remain separate.

Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that views identity construction on Instagram as an ongoing, performative process rather than a static self-expression. It considers how identity develops through the deliberate use of language, visuals, and interactions, shaped by the platform's features and audience expectations.

Instagram functions as a structured digital space where users combine captions, bios, hashtags, images, and engagement practices to present professional, personal, or hybrid identities. Linguistic choices serve as positioning tools through which users signal expertise, authenticity, emotional openness, or aspiration. These choices are shaped by imagined audiences and by norms associated with visibility and engagement on the platform.

Visual cues work alongside language to stabilize identity performances. Image composition, color schemes, body posture, and aesthetic consistency contribute to how credibility, relatability, and lifestyle are communicated. Repeated visual patterns enable audiences to recognize and categorize identities over time.

Interaction patterns, such as likes, comments, and story engagement, act as feedback mechanisms that validate or reshape identity displays. High engagement reinforces certain identity performances, while low engagement often leads to adjustment. Identity on Instagram is therefore co-constructed through ongoing interaction between the user, the audience, and the platform.

Instagram Examples

Professional caption:

"Progress looks boring most days, but it adds up."

Hybrid caption:

"Still learning. Still showing up. That's the process."

Personal caption:

"Didn't post much today. Needed the quiet."

Professional bio:

Content creator | Building things online

Sharing lessons, not shortcuts

Hashtags:

#workinprogress #creatorspace / #everydaymoments #quietdays

Interaction example:

A user replies to a comment with “*Appreciate this means a lot,*” maintaining professionalism while showing accessibility.

Identity as Performance

The idea of identity as a performance draws heavily on Goffman’s (1959) model, which views social interaction as a staged act. Instagram serves as a constant public stage, where users have considerable control over how they present themselves through editing, filtering, and choosing what to share. Unlike face-to-face interactions, Instagram allows users to practice and refine their performances before posting, strengthening the management of impressions.

From this perspective, work and personal identities on Instagram are deliberate acts, shaped by what the audience expects and by social norms. Users anticipate how posts will be received and strategically align content with desired impressions, such as professionalism, authenticity, creativity, or relatability.

Sociolinguistic and Discursive Identity

Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) social and linguistic framework guides the analysis of how identity is constructed through language. Identity is seen as emerging from communication practices, including expressing opinions, evaluating, positioning, and aligning in interactions. On Instagram, captions, bios, and comments are important places where users display social roles and values.

Language choices such as pronoun use, tone (formal versus informal), motivational talk, and story snippets are not random; they signal specific identities. For example, using technical terms, standard English, and an authoritative tone signals expertise, while casual language and humour suggest friendliness and personal authenticity.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Given Instagram’s visual dominance, multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) is central to this study. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), meaning is understood as the interplay of multiple forms of communication: images, text, colour, layout, gaze, and typography.

Images on Instagram do not merely illustrate captions; they actively build identity by showing lifestyle, skill, emotion, and social standing. Visual repetition, a consistent look, and framing all help create what can be called visual identity coherence, making an online persona stable across different posts.

Self-Branding and Platform Logic

Marwick’s (2013) concept of self-branding offers an important way to understand work identity on Instagram. Platform culture implicitly and influencer economics explicitly encourage users to treat themselves as a marketable product. Work identity then becomes a carefully crafted brand known for consistency, recognition, and audience engagement.

Instagram’s algorithm supports this process. Visibility depends on engagement metrics, which encourages users to align their identity performances with platform norms, such as being positive, productive, and visually appealing. As a result, identity is not only self-directed but also regulated by the platform.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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Integrated Framework

This study uses an integrated framework where:

- Identity is performed (Goffman),
- Built through language (Bucholtz & Hall),
- Achieved through many forms of communication (Kress & van Leeuwen),
- Shaped by self-branding and platform features (Marwick).

This framework allows for a systematic analysis of how language choices, visual cues, and interaction patterns come together in identity building on Instagram.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative design grounded in discourse analysis and digital ethnography. The aim is not to make general statistical claims but to offer a deep, context-specific analysis of how identity is performed on Instagram. A qualitative approach suits the interpretive nature of identity, meaning-making, and social interaction.

Data Selection and Size

The data consists of public Instagram profiles that display both professional and personal identities. A targeted sampling method was used to select profiles that are highly active and have a clear identity.

Data size:

- 15 Instagram profiles
- Around 300 posts (including images, captions, and comments)
- Profile bios and highlighted descriptions
- User-audience interaction in comment sections

The chosen profiles include content creators, professionals, and individuals who use Instagram mainly for personal expression. Only publicly available content was analyzed to ensure ethical compliance.

Units of Analysis

The study looks at several units of meaning to capture identity building completely:

1. Language units: captions, bios, hashtags, comments
2. Visual units: images, videos, color schemes, composition, body positioning
3. Interaction units: likes, comments, replies, story interactions, tagging practices

These units are examined both alone and in relation to each other.

Analytical Tools and Procedures

The analysis uses the following tools:

- Discourse analysis to examine language use, stance, and how identity is positioned
- Multimodal analysis to understand visual meaning and aesthetic patterns
- Interactional analysis to check engagement, audience alignment, and feedback loops

Data were coded by theme, focusing on recurring identity markers such as professionalism, authenticity, aspiration, relatability, and expertise. Patterns were identified across profiles to examine how identity performances remain stable or change over time.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical rules for online research were followed. Usernames were anonymized, and no private or restricted content was accessed. The analysis focuses on general patterns rather than on judging individuals.

Analysis and Findings

Overview of Analytical Focus

This chapter offers a detailed analysis of how individuals construct and present their work and personal identities on Instagram through language choices, visual cues, and interaction patterns. The findings indicate that identity on Instagram is not accidental or merely expressive; rather, it is carefully curated and continually adjusted in response to audience engagement and platform norms. The analysis reveals three related aspects of identity performance: how people position themselves through language, how they present themselves visually through images and aesthetics, and how they negotiate relational identity through interaction.

Linguistic Choices and Identity Construction

Captioning Practices

Captions are key to building identity through language. Users employ short but purposeful language to frame visual content and guide its interpretation. Professional identities are often built with informative and motivational language, using clear sentences, work-specific terms, and stories of success. Such captions often express thoughts on work ethic, growth, or expertise, presenting the user as skilled and ambitious.

In contrast, personal identity displays use conversational and emotional language. Casual sentence structure, ellipsis, and story fragments mimic spoken interaction and immediate feelings. This style builds authenticity and relatability, linking the user to everyday experiences rather than to official authority.

Pronouns, Stance, and Voice

Pronoun choice plays a key role in identity positioning. I and my pronouns highlight individuality and personal experience, while inclusive pronouns (we, our) foster a sense of community, especially among professionals who want to create a shared identity with their audience.

Using descriptive adjectives and modal verbs to take a stance helps users convey confidence or humility. Professional profiles typically include assertive markers like "I believe," "This proves," or "Key takeaway" to emphasize authority. In contrast, personal profiles tend to adopt more cautious or emotional stances, such as "felt like" or "just one of those days," reflecting vulnerability and emotional openness.

Hashtags and Indexicality

Hashtags serve as signs of identity and connection. Work-focused hashtags (#entrepreneurlife, #digitalmarketing, #creatoreconomy) demonstrate expertise and connect users to professional networks. Personal hashtags (#memories, #selfreflection, #everydaylife) emphasize emotional moods and lifestyle.

Beyond categorization, hashtags expand audience reach and visibility, showing a strategic

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

awareness of Instagram's algorithm. Their selective use shows how identity is shaped not only by self-expression but also by the need to be found.

Visual Cues and Aesthetic Self-Presentation

Image Composition and Framing

The way images are composed plays a key role in identity presentation on Instagram. Professional personas are associated with carefully crafted visuals, featuring balanced framing, managed lighting, and colour schemes that are either neutral or align with brand identity. These visual elements convey competence, seriousness, and dependability.

Personal identity displays often feature casual framing, spontaneous angles, and natural lighting. These choices evoke immediacy and emotional authenticity, reinforcing claims of genuineness. The absence of polished appearance itself acts as a symbolic element in constructing identity.

Body Language, Gaze, and Appearance

Body posture and eye direction are non-verbal cues of identity. Direct eye contact with the camera signals confidence and friendliness, typical for professional branding images. In personal posts, a relaxed posture and indirect gaze suggest contemplation or emotional depth.

Clothing and styling serve as signals of identity. Professional profiles tend to maintain consistent dress styles aligned with work standards, whereas personal profiles often display greater variety that reflects emotional conditions, life events, or lifestyle shifts.

Aesthetic Consistency and Visual Narratives

A key insight is that consistent aesthetics reinforce identity. Using repeated color schemes, visual themes, and editing styles provides a cohesive look across posts. This helps audiences easily recognize and categorize the user's identity. Such consistency is particularly evident in professional profiles, where maintaining a stable identity is crucial for credibility and brand recognition.

Interaction Patterns and Relational Identity

Likes and Algorithmic Validation

Likes serve as clear indicators of social approval and successful identity expression. When engagement is high, it strengthens certain identity displays, motivating users to replicate popular content styles. This establishes a feedback cycle where the audience's reactions help shape and co-create the user's identity.

The pursuit of engagement subtly influences how people present themselves, emphasizing positivity, productivity, and visual appeal while downplaying ambiguity or disagreement. Consequently, Instagram identities tend to mirror the platform's favored norms instead of offering unfiltered self-expression.

Comments and Dialogic Identity Construction

Comment sections serve as interactive spaces where users negotiate their identities. Professional users tend to respond thoughtfully and strategically, maintaining authority while seeming approachable. In contrast, personal users engage more openly, incorporating humor, emojis, and emotional expressions to foster closer connections.

Replies, acknowledgements, and tagging show that identity on Instagram is relational, emerging

through interaction rather than isolated posts.

Stories and Temporality

Instagram stories enable users to perform temporary and informal identities. They use stories to share behind-the-scenes moments, daily activities, or spontaneous ideas. This fleeting nature helps users maintain a polished profile while also showing authenticity, resulting in layered identity expressions across different platform features.

Blurring of Professional and Personal Identities

A significant observation is that the distinct boundaries between work and personal identities are becoming less defined. Many users incorporate personal stories into their work-related content to appear more human, while personal profiles are increasingly adopting professional aesthetics. This blending reflects a wider cultural shift towards valuing authenticity among professionals, with emotional openness intentionally incorporated into their identity presentation.

Discussion

Instagram as a Structured Space for Identity Performance

The findings show that Instagram is not merely a neutral space for self-expression but a highly organized social and technical system that shapes how individuals present their identity. Echoing Goffman's concept of public behavior, Instagram enhances impression management by giving users extensive control over when, how, and to whom their content is visible. However, unlike traditional public spaces, Instagram posts are permanent, searchable, and ranked by algorithms. This introduces an additional level of technological influence in the process of shaping identity.

This aligns with Boyd's (2014) observation that social media consolidates audiences while demanding consistency. Users need to craft identity displays that are adaptable to different viewers but still stable enough to be recognizable. The balance of personal and professional content observed in this study demonstrates this ongoing effort to fine-tune identity.

Linguistic Choices as Strategic Identity Work

Analysis reveals that language on Instagram functions as strategic identity work rather than casual communication. Elements such as caption styles, pronoun usage, stance markers, and hashtag choices collectively position users within particular social and professional groups. These results support Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) perspective that identity is relational and indicator-based, developing through consistent language practices.

Professional identity displays emphasize authority, motivation, and expertise by using controlled language, whereas personal identities focus on emotional authenticity and relatability. The growing use of informal language in professional posts indicates a shift toward mixed discourse, blending trustworthiness with approachability. This trend mirrors wider cultural changes in digital professionalism, where establishing emotional connections is seen as an advantage rather than an obstacle.

Visuality, Aesthetics, and Multimodal Meaning

The emphasis on visual cues aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) view that images are integral to meaning, not just supplementary to text. On Instagram, visual appeal often takes

precedence over language, influencing how captions are understood and identities are perceived. Professional identities depend significantly on visual consistency, which underpins the self-branding practices outlined by Marwick (2013). Using consistent color schemes, polished images, and predictable visual narratives enhances perceived credibility and trustworthiness. Although personal identities often seem spontaneous, they also employ patterned visual elements that convey authenticity. This indicates that even natural or casual self-presentation is deliberately styled and culturally recognizable.

Interaction Patterns and Co-Construction of Identity

On Instagram, identity is shaped through interaction. Likes, comments, and story engagements act as indicators that support or criticize specific identity presentations. This aligns with social linguistic perspectives, viewing identity as something constructed via interaction rather than something an individual inherently possesses.

The cycle of audience engagement influencing content creation illustrates how identity adapts to market demands, particularly in work environments. Algorithmic visibility amplifies this effect by favoring specific identity traits—such as positivity, productivity, and visual appeal over others. Consequently, identity displays often align with platform-approved standards, which reduces the variety of expressive forms.

Blurring Boundaries Between Professional and Personal Selves

A key discovery is the blurred boundary between work and personal identities. Users often incorporate personal stories into their work branding to seem genuine, while personal profiles adopt a more professional look to boost visibility and social status.

This blending emphasizes ongoing critiques of digital labor, where people are required to continuously appear employable, engaging, and emotionally accessible. Consequently, Instagram transforms into a platform where identity is not only displayed but also commodified, highlighting the importance of ongoing self-curation.

Conclusion

This study examined how individuals construct and showcase their work and personal identities on Instagram through linguistic choices, visual cues, and interaction styles. The results indicate that identity-building on Instagram is a strategic process involving various communication forms and relationships, influenced by platform features, audience expectations, and larger social norms.

Linguistically, users use captions, hashtags, and stance-taking to demonstrate expertise, authenticity, and a sense of belonging. Visually, they rely on consistent aesthetics, composition, and body presentation as key identity markers. Through interactions like likes, comments, and stories, users continually negotiate and reaffirm their identity displays.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study contributes to social linguistics and digital discourse research by presenting an integrated Instagram-specific framework that connects language, visuals, and interaction. It questions the notion of online identity as just self-expression, emphasizing its performed and regulated aspects.

The findings are practically useful for content creators, professionals, and educators seeking to understand how individuals present themselves, build personal brands, and connect with audiences

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

on visual social media platforms.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses solely on a qualitative analysis of public Instagram profiles and does not incorporate private messages or algorithmic data. Future research might explore long-term trends, cross-cultural differences, or employ mixed methods to better understand how identity evolves.

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