

Multimodal Meaning-making in Celebrity-endorsed Instagram Advertisements: A Study of Selected Beauty Brands

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Abstract

This paper investigates the multimodal interaction between verbal and visual resources in celebrity-endorsed Instagram advertisements for selected beauty brands. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of multimodal discourse analysis, the study examines how captions and images jointly construct persuasive meanings in digital advertising. The data comprise twenty advertisements purposively selected from ten verified beauty brand Instagram accounts between January 2024 and April 2025. The analysis reveals that verbal and visual modes interact through reinforcement, affective amplification, narrative extension, and strategic contrast. These multimodal relationships further facilitate meaning-making through semantic congruence, attentional guidance, and interpersonal engagement, enabling advertisements to attract audience attention, enhance engagement, and promote brand messages. The findings demonstrate that persuasion in Instagram beauty advertising emerges from the coordinated deployment of multiple semiotic resources rather than from language or imagery in isolation. The study highlights the significance of multimodal communication in understanding contemporary social media advertising and contributes to growing scholarship on digital discourse and visual communication.

Keywords: multimodality, Instagram advertising, celebrity endorsement, beauty brands, meaning-making, persuasion.

Introduction

The emergence of social media has transformed the nature of advertising, creating new forms of communication that blur the boundaries between interpersonal interaction and commercial promotion. Among the various social media platforms, Instagram has become one of the most influential spaces for digital advertising due to its visual orientation, interactive features, and vast global user base. Beauty brands in particular have embraced Instagram as a marketing tool, relying heavily on celebrity endorsements to increase visibility, strengthen brand identity, and influence consumer behaviour. Through carefully curated images and captions, brands can craft persuasive messages that extend beyond product promotion to encompass lifestyle, identity, and aspiration. The effectiveness of celebrity endorsements has long attracted scholarly attention.

Although previous studies have examined celebrity endorsement, consumer engagement, and the visual aesthetics of social media advertising (McCracken, 1989; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Hidarto, 2021; Hidarto & Andrieza, 2022), relatively little attention has been devoted to how verbal and visual resources interact to construct persuasive meanings in celebrity-endorsed Instagram advertisements. Existing research has largely prioritised marketing effectiveness, brand equity, and audience responses (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021; Gui et al., 2025), leaving the multimodal mechanisms through which captions and images jointly shape meaning underexplored. This gap is particularly evident in the beauty industry, where persuasion depends heavily on the

interplay of celebrity identity, visual aesthetics, and textual communication. Consequently, there remains a need for studies that examine how different semiotic resources interact to generate persuasive meanings in contemporary social media advertising.

This paper investigates the multimodal interaction between verbal and visual resources in celebrity-endorsed Instagram advertisements for selected beauty brands. Specifically, it examines the patterns through which captions and images interact, analyses how meaning is jointly constructed through semantic congruence, attention direction, and interpersonal appeal, and explores how these multimodal resources function as persuasive strategies in digital advertising. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of multimodality, the study contributes to scholarship on social media discourse by demonstrating how meaning and persuasion emerge from the coordinated deployment of multiple semiotic modes.

Literature Review

Advertising as Persuasive Discourse

Advertising has long been understood as a form of persuasive discourse designed to influence attitudes, desires, and consumer behaviour. Marketing studies have consistently demonstrated the capacity of advertising to shape purchasing decisions and brand preferences (Dhaliwal, 2016; Soti, 2022; Selvi, 2023). Beyond its commercial function, advertising has also attracted attention within discourse studies because of its ability to construct meanings and social identities through carefully selected linguistic and symbolic resources.

Within linguistic scholarship, advertisements have been conceptualised as communicative events in which language and context work together to influence interpretation. Cook (2001) argues that advertising relies on both linguistic and non-linguistic elements to create persuasive effects, while Fairclough (1995) highlights the ideological dimensions embedded in advertising discourse. Pragmatic studies further reveal that advertisers employ implicatures, emotive expressions, and interpersonal strategies to shape audience responses. In digital environments, Luangrath, Peck, and Barger (2017) demonstrate that textual paralanguage, including emojis and expressive punctuation, contributes significantly to brand-consumer interaction. Consequently, persuasion in advertising extends beyond information transmission to encompass emotional appeal, identity construction, and relationship building.

Celebrity Endorsement and Social Media Advertising

Celebrity endorsement constitutes one of the most influential strategies in contemporary advertising. McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Model explains how celebrities transfer symbolic meanings and cultural values to products, while Ohanian (1990) identifies attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness as important determinants of endorsement effectiveness. Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011) further establish a positive relationship between celebrity endorsement, brand credibility, and brand equity.

The emergence of social media has transformed traditional endorsement practices by creating more interactive and personalised forms of promotion. Studies have shown that social media celebrities and influencers cultivate perceptions of authenticity and intimacy that enhance consumer trust (Abidin, 2016; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). More recent scholarship has highlighted the increasing professionalisation of influencer marketing

and the changing dynamics of sponsored content on Instagram. Bertaglia et al. (2024), for example, demonstrate that creators adapt their disclosure practices and engagement strategies according to platform developments and regulatory environments. Although these studies have enriched understanding of digital endorsement, they have largely focused on marketing effectiveness and audience behaviour, leaving the multimodal mechanisms underlying persuasion relatively underexplored.

Multimodality and Meaning-Making in Advertising

The increasing complexity of digital communication has generated growing interest in multimodality as a framework for understanding meaning-making. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that communication is realised through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources rather than through language alone. Building on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, O'Halloran (2008) proposes multimodal discourse analysis as a means of examining how verbal and visual modes jointly contribute to meaning construction.

Advertising discourse provides an ideal context for multimodal analysis because persuasive meanings are distributed across images, typography, colour, gaze, gestures, and language. Hidalgo-Downing and Kraljevic-Mujic (2016) demonstrate that metaphor and visual symbolism contribute to persuasive communication, while Zhang (2017) argues that advertising messages can only be fully understood when verbal and non-verbal resources are examined together. More recently, Aleksić-Hajduković (2025) emphasises that advertising discourse is characterised by the interaction of multiple semiotic modes whose effectiveness depends on audience perception and interpretation. These studies reinforce the argument that meaning and persuasion are multimodal achievements rather than products of isolated linguistic structures.

Multimodal Studies of Instagram Advertising

The growing prominence of Instagram as a marketing platform has stimulated increasing interest in multimodal analyses of social media advertising. Hidarto (2021) demonstrates that captions and images interact to strengthen persuasive intent in influencer advertisements, while Hidarto and Andrieza (2022) show that captions frequently perform interpersonal functions whereas images foreground visual identity.

Recent studies have further expanded multimodal investigations of Instagram communication. Haider and Khan (2025) observe that influencer advertisements rely on informal language and visual cues to construct trustworthiness and authenticity. Jamshaid and Amir (2025) reveal that Instagram personalities construct identities through the combined deployment of linguistic and visual resources. Research on Instagram Reels by Boonnithi and WasunthornSophit (2025) further shows that verbal and visual resources work together to produce persuasive meanings in short-form advertising.

Despite these contributions, existing studies have tended to focus broadly on influencers, public campaigns, or general social media advertising. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to celebrity-endorsed beauty advertisements and the specific ways captions and images interact to generate persuasive meanings. Furthermore, while many studies acknowledge the coexistence of verbal and visual resources, relatively few investigate how these resources reinforce, extend, amplify, or strategically diverge from one another in meaning-making processes.

It is this gap that the present study seeks to address by examining patterns of text-image interaction and their contribution to multimodal persuasion in celebrity-endorsed Instagram advertisements for selected beauty brands.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The data for this study consisted of twenty Instagram advertisements purposively selected from ten verified beauty brand accounts, namely Rare Beauty, Fenty Beauty, Maybelline, Revlon, Chanel Beauty, Dior Beauty, Charlotte Tilbury, Kylie Cosmetics, L'Oréal Paris, and Glossier. Two advertisements were selected from each brand, yielding a corpus of twenty posts published between January 2024 and April 2025.

Purposive sampling was employed because the study required advertisements that clearly demonstrated celebrity endorsement and multimodal interaction. To qualify for inclusion, each post had to satisfy three criteria: (i) the presence of a celebrity through visual appearance, explicit tagging, or textual reference; (ii) the availability of both caption text and accompanying visual content; and (iii) relevance to beauty product promotion. All advertisements were retrieved from publicly accessible verified Instagram accounts. Both captions and screenshots of the accompanying images were archived to facilitate analysis.

The study is anchored in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of multimodality, which conceptualises communication as the interaction of multiple semiotic resources rather than as a purely linguistic phenomenon. According to the theory, meaning is distributed across different modes, including language, images, colour, composition, gaze, and layout. These semiotic resources work together to produce meanings that cannot be fully explained through language alone.

Kress and van Leeuwen's framework is particularly relevant to Instagram advertising because the platform relies heavily on the integration of verbal and visual modes. Captions, celebrity images, product placement, colour schemes, gaze, and composition function simultaneously to communicate persuasive meanings. Consequently, understanding Instagram advertisements requires an analytical framework capable of accounting for the relationships among these multiple modes.

The study is further informed by Jewitt's (2014) conception of multimodal analysis, which emphasises the complementary and interdependent nature of semiotic resources, and Bateman's (2014) work on text-image relations, which highlights how verbal and visual elements interact to create coherent meanings. These perspectives provide analytical tools for examining the different forms of interaction between captions and images and for understanding how such interactions contribute to meaning-making and persuasion.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis examines the interaction between verbal and visual resources in celebrity-endorsed Instagram advertisements for selected beauty brands. In line with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal framework, the study treats meaning as emerging from the interplay of multiple semiotic resources rather than from language or images in isolation. The analysis is organised into two broad dimensions. The first focuses on patterns of text-image interaction, while the second examines how these interactions contribute to multimodal meaning-making and persuasion.

1. Patterns of Text–Image Interaction

The relationship between captions and images in Instagram advertisements is characterised by varying degrees of complementarity. In some instances, captions reinforce what is visually represented, while in others they amplify emotional meanings, extend narratives, or deliberately create incongruence. These forms of interaction demonstrate how meaning is distributed across verbal and visual modes. They are discussed in the sections below under four headings: reinforcement, affective amplification, narrative extension and strategic contrast.

Reinforcement

Reinforcement occurs when caption language corresponds closely with visual content. In such cases, both modes communicate similar information, thereby strengthening message clarity and facilitating product recognition.

Illustration as seen in post 15

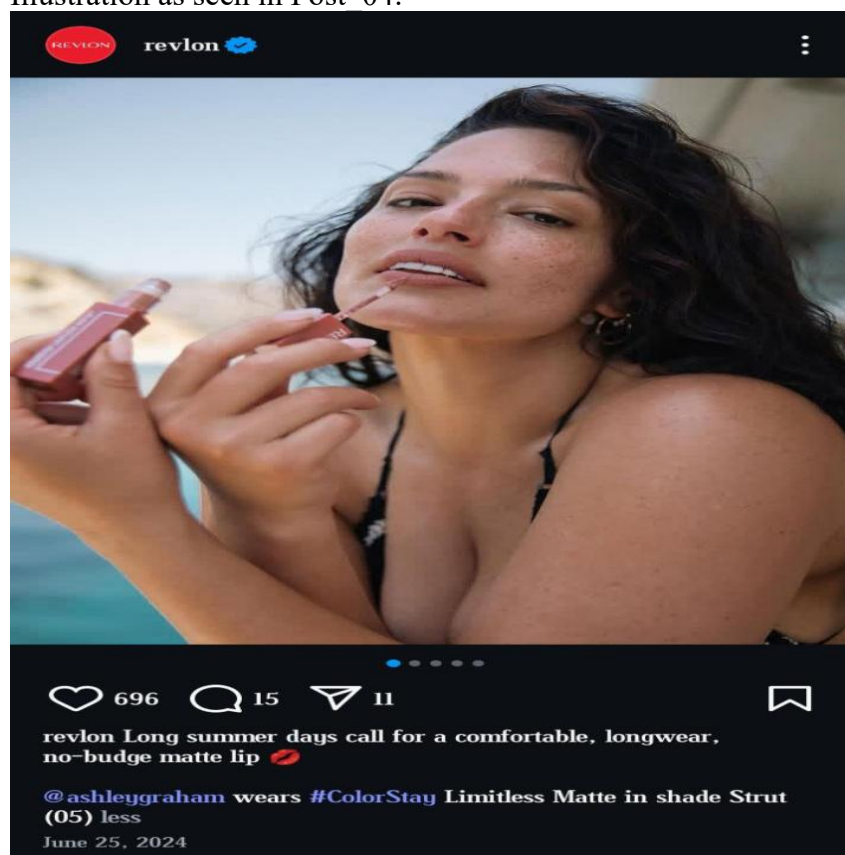


In Post 15, the caption identifies the celebrity as wearing the product, Soft Pinch Luminous Powder Blush, and specifies the shade “Cheer”, while the accompanying image foregrounds the celebrity’s made-up cheeks and the blush container in her hand. The caption therefore directs viewers’ attention to the exact features visually highlighted in the image. This complementary relationship between verbal and visual modes creates semantic cohesion and enhances brand recall through repeated exposure to the same product cues across multiple semiotic resources.

Affective Amplification

Affective amplification occurs when captions reinforce or intensify the affective atmosphere conveyed by visual elements.

Illustration as seen in Post 04:



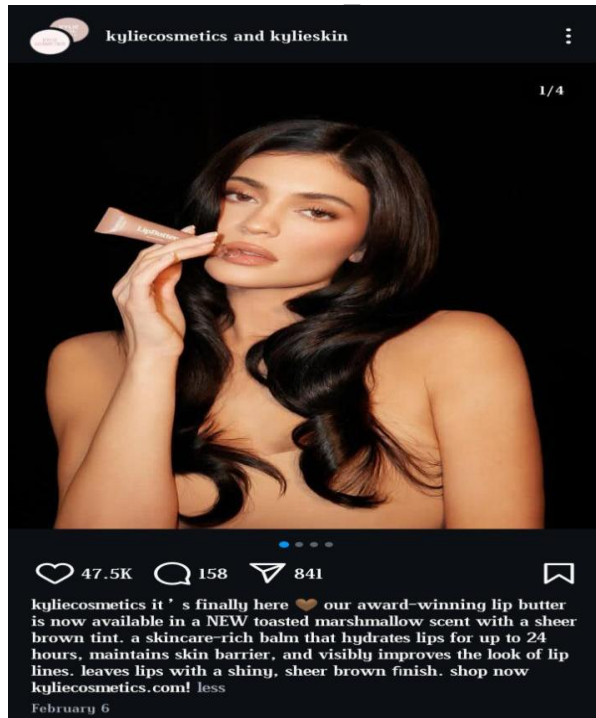
In Post 04, the image depicts a celebrity relaxing beside a swimming pool while applying lipstick. The visual composition evokes leisure, elegance, and comfort. These affective meanings are reinforced by the caption, which references summer and emphasises the suitability of a long-lasting lipstick for the season. Rather than merely describing the image, the caption amplifies its emotional appeal by associating the product with relaxation and pleasure. The interaction between

the two modes appeals to viewers' emotions and positions the product within a desirable lifestyle context.

Narrative Extension

Unlike reinforcement, narrative extension occurs when captions provide information unavailable in the image.

Illustration as seen in Post 07:

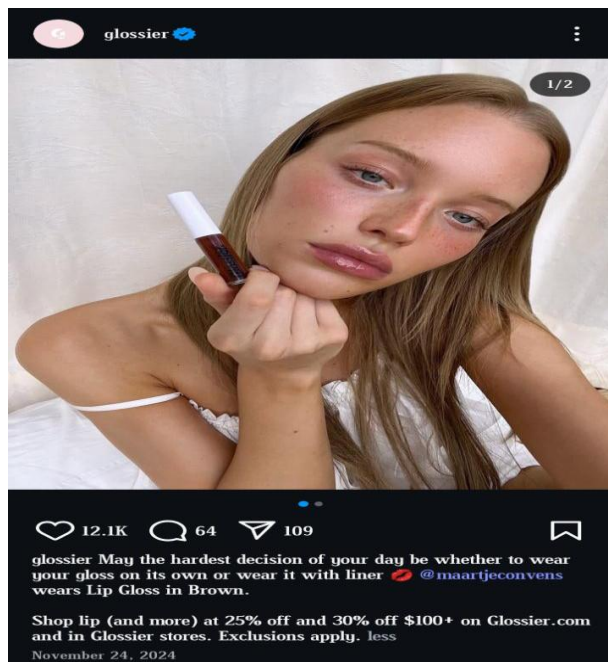


In Post 07, the image simply presents a woman holding a cosmetic product. The caption, however, reveals that the product is a newly released lip butter and further explains its skincare benefits, including hydration, skin barrier support, and improvement of lip lines. The verbal mode thus extends the informational content of the image by transforming a static visual representation into a broader product narrative. Such multimodal complementarity allows audiences to interpret the image beyond its immediate visual appearance and contributes to a richer understanding of the advertised product.

Strategic Contrast

Strategic contrast occurs when captions initially depart from overt product promotion in order to attract attention and stimulate audience engagement.

Illustrated by post_14



In Post 14, the caption begins with the playful statement, “May the hardest decision of your day be whether to wear your gloss on its own or with liner.” This humorous expression momentarily shifts attention away from the commercial purpose of the post and creates an impression of informality and intimacy. The image subsequently reconnects the audience to the product through the celebrity's display of the lip gloss. The temporary divergence between verbal and visual elements functions as an engagement strategy that softens the promotional character of the advertisement while maintaining audience interest.

2. Multimodal Meaning-Making and Persuasion

Beyond the relationships between captions and images, multimodal interaction also contributes to the construction of meaning and persuasion. Through semantic congruence, attentional guidance, and interpersonal engagement, verbal and visual resources work together to shape interpretation, guide audience focus, and establish relationships between celebrities and consumers.

Semantic Congruence

Semantic congruence refers to the degree to which the meaning conveyed by the caption aligns with the meaning conveyed by the visual content in a multimodal message. In other words, it is about whether the text and the image are “saying” the same thing in a consistent way. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), meaning becomes more coherent when multiple modes converge around similar semantic content. This increases clarity, persuasiveness, and audience trust because the viewer receives a single, coherent idea from both modes. Low semantic congruence, on the other hand, occurs when the caption and image present conflicting or unrelated

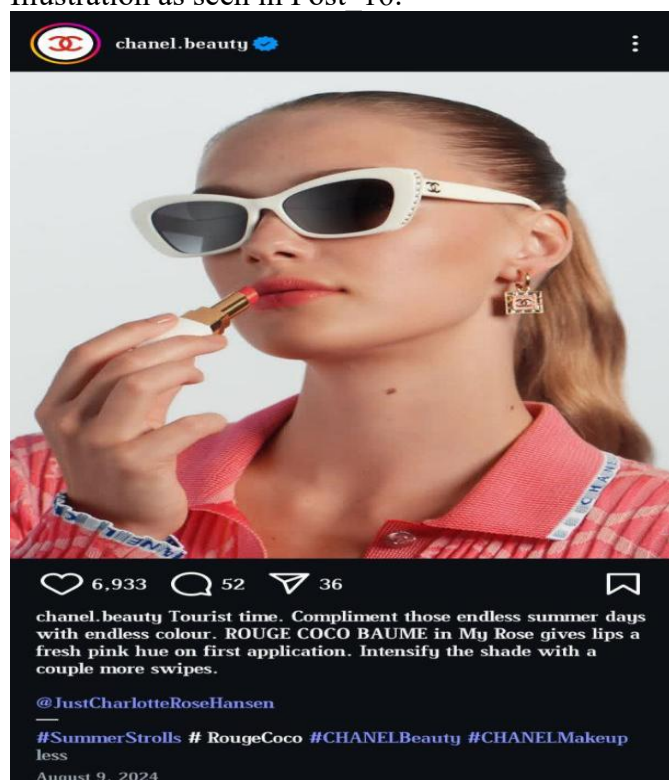
messages. This can be intentional (for humour, irony, or to provoke curiosity) or unintentional (leading to confusion or misinterpretation).

Illustration as seen in Post 11:



The above illustration has a high semantic congruence. The image shows a celebrity in makeup, holding a product up close to the camera, and the caption, on its own, describes the celebrity wearing the new advertised product. These two modes don't just simply align; they support, reinforce and expand each other.

Illustration as seen in Post 16:



In the above illustration, there is a low semantic congruence. The image simply shows a celebrity applying lipstick with sunglasses on. The caption, on the other hand, makes reference to tourism and summer, before mentioning the product. This is done intentionally to provoke curiosity in the audience as they would want to know how and why makeup is related to tourism and/or summer. Charlotte Rose Hansen's collaboration with Chanel Beauty has served as a highly visible visual anchor for the luxury brand's shift toward effortless, modern elegance. Rather than acting as a traditional celebrity ambassador who drives narrative-driven press, Hansen's influence is based on her role as a high-fashion canvas. Her work directly shapes how consumers interact with the brand's premium product lines.

Attentional Guidance

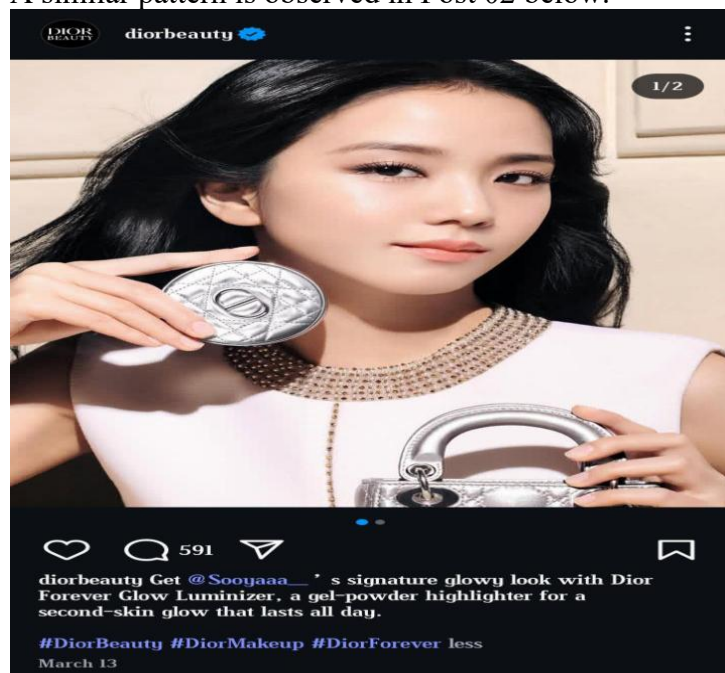
Attentional guidance refers to the ways verbal and visual resources jointly direct viewers' attention towards salient elements within an advertisement. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), salience is achieved through compositional resources such as size, foregrounding, colour contrast, framing, and gaze, all of which determine which elements attract immediate visual attention. In Instagram advertising, captions further complement these visual resources by guiding viewers towards specific product attributes and intended meanings. Consequently, attentional guidance emerges from the interaction between textual cues and visually salient elements.

Illustration as seen in Post 09:



This relationship is evident in Post 09. At first glance, the image depicts a celebrity holding a cosmetic product while looking directly at the camera. Through close framing and the strategic placement of the mascara within the foreground, the image establishes the product as a visually salient element. The celebrity's direct gaze simultaneously creates an interactive relationship with viewers and encourages sustained attention. The caption reinforces these visual cues by referring explicitly to the celebrity's "bold, stunning lashes," thereby directing viewers' attention to the eyelashes and identifying the product as mascara. The verbal mode thus complements the visual composition by guiding viewers toward those features intended to function as the focal point of the advertisement.

A similar pattern is observed in Post 02 below.



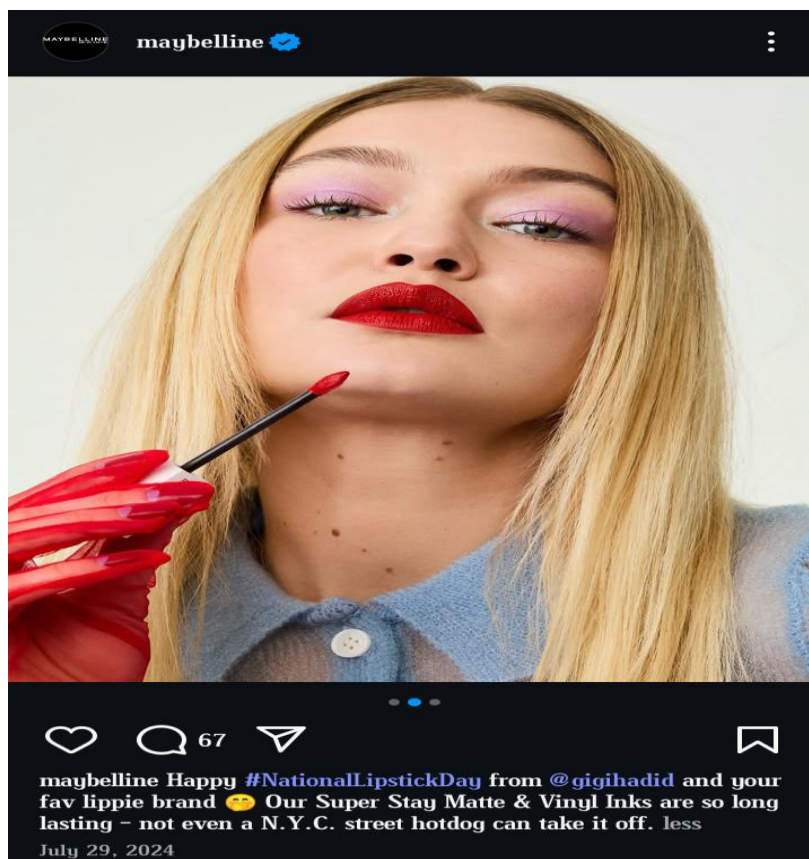
The image presents a celebrity surrounded by an aesthetically luxurious setting, with the product and the celebrity's luminous complexion occupying prominent positions within the frame. Through foregrounding and close-up visual presentation, these elements acquire greater salience. However, the caption plays an equally important role in directing interpretation by shifting viewers' attention from the overall elegance of the scene to the specific features associated with the advertised product, particularly the powder case and the glowing effect on the celebrity's face. In this way, the caption transforms the image from a merely aesthetic representation into a product-centred message.

These examples demonstrate that attentional guidance in celebrity-endorsed Instagram advertisements is achieved through the coordinated deployment of visual salience and verbal cues. Product placement, close-up shots, celebrity gaze, and foregrounding establish visually prominent elements, while captions direct viewers towards the meanings that advertisers wish to emphasize. Persuasion therefore depends not only on what is shown, but also on how verbal and visual modes work together to organise audience attention and facilitate interpretation.

Interpersonal Engagement

Interpersonal engagement refers to the ways verbal and visual resources jointly construct a sense of intimacy and social connection between celebrities and audiences. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), interactive meaning concerns the relationships established between represented participants and viewers through resources such as gaze, social distance, and perspective. In social media environments, these visual resources are complemented by conversational forms of language that contribute to what has been described as the conversational ethos of digital communication. Consequently, celebrity-endorsed Instagram advertisements often blur the

boundaries between commercial promotion and interpersonal interaction, presenting celebrities not merely as endorsers but as relatable and approachable figures. This pattern is evident in Post 08.



The caption employs an informal and conversational style characterised by abbreviations such as "fav" and "lippie", expressions commonly associated with everyday digital communication. Rather than adopting the formal language traditionally associated with advertising, the post simulates the tone of a friendly conversation. Such lexical choices reduce social distance and position the celebrity as a peer rather than an inaccessible public figure. The use of colloquial language aligns with the broader communicative culture of Instagram, where authenticity and informality are valued forms of interaction. The caption further employs indirect persuasion. Instead of explicitly instructing viewers to purchase the product, it highlights the lipstick's durability through the playful claim that even "a N.Y.C. street hotdog couldn't take it off." By foregrounding personal experience rather than direct commands, the post adopts a recommendation-like style that resembles everyday conversation. This indirect approach softens the commercial intent of the advertisement and enhances the impression of authenticity. Persuasion is therefore achieved not through overt promotional language but through the suggestion that the product has already been incorporated into the celebrity's lifestyle.

The image complements these linguistic choices through visual resources associated with interactive meaning. The close framing of the celebrity reduces social distance, while the direct gaze establishes an imaginary interaction with viewers. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), such gaze structures invite viewers into a symbolic relationship with represented participants. Combined with the conversational tone of the caption, these visual features contribute to the construction of parasocial intimacy, whereby audiences experience a sense of familiarity and emotional connection with media personalities despite the absence of actual interpersonal interaction. The celebrity is therefore represented not simply as a glamorous spokesperson but as an approachable and trustworthy individual whose recommendations appear personal rather than commercial. Through the combined deployment of conversational language, informal abbreviations, direct gaze, and intimate visual framing, the advertisement constructs a relationship that mirrors friendship and shared experience. This interpersonal engagement ultimately enhances persuasion by fostering trust, relatability, and emotional proximity between the celebrity, the brand, and the audience.

Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

This study investigated the multimodal interaction between verbal and visual resources in celebrity-endorsed Instagram advertisements for selected beauty brands. The analysis revealed that captions and images interact through reinforcement, affective amplification, narrative extension, and strategic contrast, demonstrating that meaning in digital advertising emerges from the coordinated deployment of multiple semiotic modes rather than from language or imagery in isolation. The findings further showed that semantic congruence, attentional guidance, and interpersonal engagement enable verbal and visual resources to work together in directing interpretation, enhancing salience, and fostering audience engagement.

The study found that persuasion in celebrity-endorsed Instagram advertising is achieved through multimodal orchestration. Captions reinforce, extend, and amplify visual meanings, while visual resources such as framing, gaze, colour, and product placement establish salience and strengthen credibility. Through these interactions, advertisements construct beauty products not merely as commodities but as symbols of lifestyle, aspiration, and self-expression. Celebrities function as mediating figures through whom these meanings are naturalised and rendered socially desirable, thereby enhancing the persuasive potential of brand messages.

The findings also indicate that Instagram advertising reflects the conversational ethos of social media. Informal language, conversational expressions, and intimate visual framing contribute to the construction of parasocial relationships in which celebrities are represented as approachable and trustworthy figures rather than distant endorsers. Consequently, persuasion is realised not only through product representation but also through the interpersonal relationships established between celebrities, brands, and audiences.

The study therefore underscores the importance of multimodality in understanding contemporary advertising discourse. By demonstrating how verbal and visual resources interact to construct persuasive meanings, it contributes to scholarship on multimodal discourse analysis and social media communication. Specifically, the study extends existing research on Instagram advertising by showing how different forms of text–image interaction and multimodal meaning-making operate in celebrity-endorsed beauty advertisements. More broadly, it highlights the need

to examine digital advertising as a multimodal communicative practice in which meaning and persuasion emerge from the orchestration of multiple semiotic resources.

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