



## A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS IN INSTAGRAM CAPTIONS

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### Abstract

*Mental health awareness has increasingly been communicated through social media platforms, particularly Instagram, which serves as a space for public education and advocacy. This study aims to examine how mental health awareness is discursively constructed in Instagram captions published by a mental health organization. Employing a qualitative approach, the research applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Teun A. van Dijk's framework to explore the underlying meanings and communicative strategies embedded within the texts. The data consist of six English-language Instagram captions posted by the account @mmha\_1968, selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to mental health awareness and public education. The analysis focuses on thematic, semantic, lexical, and rhetorical structures to reveal how mental health issues are represented and framed. The findings indicate that the captions consistently construct mental health as a shared social concern rather than an individual weakness. Through empathetic lexical choices, inclusive pronouns, and rhetorical strategies such as repetition and reflective questioning, the discourse promotes understanding, reduces stigma, and encourages collective responsibility. The study concludes that Instagram captions function not only as informational texts but also as powerful discursive tools that shape public perceptions of mental health. This research contributes to discourse studies by demonstrating the role of digital media in constructing mental health awareness and highlighting the relevance of CDA for analyzing contemporary social media discourse.*

**Keywords:** Critical discourse analysis; instagram captions; mental health awareness; public communication; social media discourse; stigma reduction.





## **Introduction**

Mental health has become a prominent global concern as psychological well-being increasingly influences individuals' quality of life, productivity, and social participation. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes that mental health is an essential component of overall health and well-being, affecting how individuals cope with stress, relate to others, and make decisions in everyday life (World Health Organization, 2022). Despite growing awareness, mental health issues continue to be associated with stigma and misunderstanding, which often discourage individuals from seeking appropriate support and treatment.

In recent years, public discussions surrounding mental health have expanded beyond clinical and institutional settings into digital environments, particularly social media platforms. Social media has become an important medium for health communication by facilitating education, awareness campaigns, information dissemination, and peer support (Naslund et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated that social media platforms can foster mental health literacy and encourage conversations that challenge stigmatizing attitudes toward mental illness (Robinson et al., 2019; Pretorius et al., 2019). As digital communication continues to shape public understanding of health issues, online platforms have become influential spaces where mental health meanings are negotiated and shared.

Among various social media platforms, Instagram plays a significant role in mental health communication because it combines visual content with written captions, enabling organizations to deliver messages in accessible and emotionally engaging ways. The platform's interactive features allow users to participate in conversations, share personal experiences, and engage with mental health advocacy campaigns. Previous studies have shown that Instagram is widely used for mental health-related communication and can contribute to both awareness-building and stigma reduction through user-generated and organizational content (McCosker & Gerrard, 2021; Andalibi et al., 2017).

Within critical discourse studies, language is not viewed as a neutral medium but as a form of social practice that actively shapes perceptions, values, ideologies, and power relations within society. Language operates across social, cultural, and institutional dimensions, influencing how issues are framed and understood in public discourse (Purnomo, 2017). In digital communication environments, discourse contributes to the construction of social realities by determining which perspectives are emphasized, legitimized, or marginalized. Therefore, Instagram captions can be understood as discursive spaces where meanings



concerning stress, stigma, emotional well-being, care, and responsibility are constructed and circulated.

Language plays a central role in shaping how mental health is represented and understood in public discourse. The ways mental health issues are described and framed may influence whether they are perceived as personal weaknesses or as shared social concerns requiring collective responsibility. From a critical perspective, discourse does not merely reflect reality; rather, it actively constructs social meanings and power relations through language use (Tannen et al., 2015). Moreover, media discourse has been shown to influence public attitudes toward mental illness by reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives and stereotypes (Klin & Lemish, 2008). Consequently, examining mental health-related discourse is essential for understanding how public perceptions and attitudes are formed and transformed.

Previous studies examining mental health and social media have primarily focused on content analysis, user engagement metrics, psychological outcomes, and behavioral impacts associated with social media use (Berryman et al., 2018; Naslund et al., 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between social media and mental health, research employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the linguistic and discursive construction of mental health awareness on Instagram remains limited. In particular, there is a scarcity of discourse-oriented studies exploring how textual structures, lexical choices, and rhetorical strategies are utilized to reduce stigma, foster empathy, and encourage supportive attitudes toward mental health issues.

To address this gap, the present study employs Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis framework to analyze English-language Instagram captions published by a mental health organization. This study aims to explore how mental health awareness is discursively constructed through thematic, semantic, lexical, and rhetorical structures. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What themes are constructed in Instagram captions related to mental health awareness? (2) How do lexical choices shape public understanding of mental health issues? and (3) How are rhetorical strategies used to promote empathy and reduce stigma in mental health discourse on Instagram?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Mental Health Discourse in Social Media***

Mental health has increasingly become a subject of public discourse, particularly within digital environments where social media platforms function as spaces for awareness, education,



advocacy, and community engagement. Social media enables institutions and organizations to disseminate mental health information rapidly while fostering interaction through emotionally resonant and accessible language. Previous studies have demonstrated that social media content related to mental health plays an important role in shaping public understanding, reducing stigma, and encouraging help-seeking behavior, particularly among younger populations who actively engage with digital platforms (Naslund et al., 2020; O'Reilly et al., 2018).

Recent research further suggests that online mental health communication contributes to the development of mental health literacy and provides opportunities for individuals to access informational and emotional support in non-clinical settings (Pretorius, Chambers, & Coyle, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019). Social media platforms have also been identified as important spaces where mental health narratives are shared, negotiated, and normalized, thereby influencing public perceptions of psychological well-being (Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte, 2017; Berry, Lobban, Belousov, Emsley, Nenadic, & Bucci, 2017).

Instagram, in particular, has attracted considerable scholarly attention as a platform for mental health communication because of its integration of visual imagery and textual captions. Captions enable content creators to frame mental health issues through narrative, empathetic, and persuasive language. Research has shown that mental health-related messages on Instagram frequently emphasize emotional validation, normalization of psychological struggles, and collective responsibility, which may positively influence users' attitudes toward mental health and encourage supportive interactions (Moreno et al., 2016; Pretorius et al., 2019). Moreover, Instagram has become a prominent venue for advocacy organizations seeking to challenge stigma and promote public awareness through strategic communication practices.

### ***Critical Discourse Analysis and Mental Health***

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conceptualizes language as a social practice that both reflects and constructs social realities, including power relations, ideologies, and systems of knowledge. CDA is particularly relevant for analyzing mental health discourse because it enables researchers to investigate how language frames mental health either as an individual concern or as a broader social issue. Through discourse, particular understandings of mental health may be legitimized, while alternative perspectives may be marginalized, thereby influencing public perceptions and policy discussions (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018; Wodak, 2022).

Studies employing CDA have demonstrated that health-related discourse often utilizes linguistic strategies such as inclusive pronouns, empathetic lexical choices, metaphorical expressions, and rhetorical questioning to foster solidarity and reduce stigma (Harwood & Sparks, 2003; Semino, Demjén, Demmen, Koller, Payne, Hardie, & Rayson, 2018). Such strategies position audiences not merely as passive recipients of information but as active participants in awareness-building and advocacy efforts. Consequently, discourse-oriented approaches provide valuable insights into how mental health narratives are constructed, circulated, and interpreted within public communication.

Studies within Critical Discourse Analysis consistently emphasize that language is never neutral but is always embedded within relations of power, ideology, and social positioning. An analysis of sexist language in contemporary Islamic literature demonstrates how linguistic choices function as carriers of implicit dominance and social hierarchies (Purnomo, 2013). This perspective highlights that discourse does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs and legitimizes particular worldviews through recurring patterns of representation.

This understanding is highly relevant to discourse studies in digital environments, including social media, where language is strategically employed to frame issues, assign responsibility, and generate emotional engagement. Although Purnomo's study focuses on religious discourse, the underlying principle—that discourse shapes perception and normalizes particular social meanings—can also be applied to mental health narratives circulating on Instagram. Within mental health awareness captions, similar discursive mechanisms are evident in the ways vulnerability, resilience, recovery, and social responsibility are represented and communicated.

### ***Instagram Captions as Discursive Texts***

Instagram captions function as concise yet meaningful discursive texts that simultaneously serve informational, persuasive, and relational purposes. Unlike longer textual forms, captions rely on carefully selected lexical choices, repetition, emotional framing, and rhetorical techniques to communicate complex messages within limited textual space. Research on social media discourse suggests that captions frequently employ affective language and moral positioning to guide audience interpretation and emotional responses, making them particularly suitable objects for discourse analysis (Page et al., 2022; Zappavigna, 2022).

In the context of mental health awareness, captions often emphasize empathy, understanding, inclusivity, and shared responsibility, thereby challenging dominant

stigmatizing discourses surrounding mental illness. Through strategic language use, organizations can frame mental health as a collective social concern rather than an individual deficiency. Despite the growing body of scholarship examining social media and mental health, discourse-oriented studies that specifically investigate Instagram captions through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis remain relatively limited. This gap highlights the need for further research exploring how linguistic and rhetorical strategies are employed to construct mental health awareness and influence public understanding within Instagram-based communication (Pretorius et al., 2019; Andalibi et al., 2017).

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

This study employed a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical approach. A qualitative design was selected because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, representations, and discursive strategies embedded within texts rather than measuring numerical variables. CDA is particularly suitable for examining how language is used to construct social realities and shape public understanding of mental health issues in digital communication.

The analytical framework adopted in this study is based on Teun A. van Dijk's model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which emphasizes the relationship between textual structures and social meaning. The analysis focuses on selected discourse structures, namely thematic, semantic, lexical, and rhetorical elements, to reveal how mental health awareness is discursively constructed in Instagram captions.

### ***Data Source and Participants (Location)***

The data source of this study consists of Instagram captions published by the official account @mmha\_1968, which belongs to the Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA). This account was selected because it serves as an organizational platform that regularly disseminates mental health awareness messages to the public through English-language captions. As the study focuses exclusively on textual data, no human participants were directly involved.

A total of six Instagram captions were used as the primary data. Although the dataset consists of only six captions, the selection was guided by information richness rather than quantity. In qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis, depth of interpretation is prioritized over

statistical representativeness. The selected captions were considered sufficiently information-rich to reveal recurring discourse patterns related to mental health awareness. The captions were posted between September and December 2024 and address various aspects of mental health awareness, including stress, emotional well-being, mental health rights, and stigma reduction. Instagram was selected as the research setting because it functions as a widely used digital platform for public mental health communication.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected using purposive sampling because the study required texts that met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The selection criteria included: (1) captions written in English; (2) captions focusing on mental health awareness or emotional well-being; (3) captions published by the same organizational account; and (4) captions intended for public education rather than commercial promotion.

Each selected caption was documented through screenshots and transcription to ensure accuracy and preserve the original content. The captions were subsequently organized chronologically and categorized according to their primary themes. Table 1 presents an overview of the data analyzed in this study.

**Table 1.** Overview of instagram captions analyzed.

No	Date	Account	Main Theme
1	Dec 15, 2024	@mmha_1968	Seasonal Affective Disorder
2	Dec 10, 2024	@mmha_1968	Mental Health as Human Rights
3	Nov 5, 2024	@mmha_1968	Stress Awareness and Burnout
4	Oct 4, 2024	@mmha_1968	OCD Awareness and Stigma
5	Sep 25, 2024	@mmha_1968	Supporting Others with Consistency
6	Sep 23, 2024	@mmha_1968	The Power of Words in Mental Health

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The data analysis followed the principles of van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis framework. The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, each caption was read repeatedly to identify its thematic structure, focusing on the central ideas conveyed regarding mental health awareness. Second, semantic analysis was undertaken to examine implicit meanings, presuppositions, and the ways mental health issues were framed within broader social contexts.

Critical Discourse Analysis enables researchers to investigate how linguistic choices reflect broader social values, ideologies, and power relations (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018). Consistent with this perspective, discourse has been recognized as an important mechanism

through which social awareness, moral understanding, and community values are constructed and communicated (Purnomo, 2016). By applying CDA to mental health-related captions, this study seeks to uncover how linguistic strategies such as empathy, normalization, inclusivity, and moral positioning are employed to shape audience perceptions and promote particular understandings of mental health.

Subsequently, lexical analysis was conducted to identify key word choices and expressions contributing to the construction of empathy, responsibility, and stigma reduction. Finally, rhetorical analysis examined the use of repetition, inclusive pronouns, and reflective questions as persuasive strategies. The findings from these analytical stages were then interpreted to explain how Instagram captions function as discursive tools in shaping public understanding of mental health.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the findings of the Critical Discourse Analysis of Instagram captions published by @mmha\_1968. The findings are organized according to key discourse features derived from van Dijk's CDA framework, namely thematic structure, semantic framing, lexical choices, and rhetorical strategies. The purpose of this section is to describe the dominant discourse patterns identified in the data without providing extensive interpretation, which is presented in the Discussion section.

The analysis indicates that language is employed not only as a means of communication but also as a medium through which social meanings, values, and ideologies are expressed and negotiated (Purnomo, 2017). Within the context of mental health discourse on Instagram, the captions consistently utilize empathetic and inclusive language when addressing mental health awareness, emotional well-being, and public understanding.

### ***Thematic Focus of Mental Health Awareness***

The analysis reveals that the Instagram captions consistently emphasize mental health awareness as a social and relational issue. Rather than presenting mental health as an individual or private concern, the captions highlight themes of shared responsibility, collective care, and public understanding. Specific mental health topics, including Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), stress, and emotional burnout, emerge as recurring themes across the dataset.

In addition to condition-specific awareness, several captions focus on broader themes such as emotional validation, supportive communication, and mental health as a human right. These themes are repeatedly foregrounded through explicit statements and reflective prompts. Overall, the thematic structure positions mental health awareness as an ongoing social concern that extends beyond individual experiences.

**Table 2.** Discursive features in instagram captions.

<b>Discursive Aspect</b>	<b>Dominant Features Identified</b>
Thematic Structure	Mental health awareness, emotional validation, collective responsibility
Semantic Framing	Mental health as socially shaped, understandable experiences
Lexical Choices	Empathetic vocabulary, inclusive pronouns, non-clinical language
Rhetorical Strategies	Reflective questions, repetition, direct audience address

As presented in Table 2, the Instagram captions demonstrate recurring patterns across thematic, semantic, lexical, and rhetorical dimensions. These patterns collectively characterize the discourse of mental health awareness constructed within the analyzed texts.

At the thematic level, the captions predominantly emphasize mental health awareness, emotional validation, and collective responsibility. The themes repeatedly refer to supporting others, recognizing stress as a common experience, and acknowledging mental health as a fundamental human right. The recurrence of these themes across different captions indicates a consistent thematic orientation throughout the dataset.

At the semantic level, mental health experiences are commonly framed as socially shaped and context-dependent. The captions frequently refer to environmental influences, social expectations, and emotional pressures when describing mental health challenges. For example, stress is associated with caregiving responsibilities and societal demands, while OCD is represented through descriptions of fear and internal struggle. These patterns demonstrate that mental health experiences are situated within broader social contexts.

Regarding lexical choices, the captions consistently employ empathetic and inclusive vocabulary. Terms associated with emotions, support, care, and understanding appear frequently throughout the dataset. Inclusive pronouns such as we, us, and our are repeatedly used, establishing a sense of connection between the organization and its audience. Furthermore, technical and clinical terminology appears less frequently than everyday language, making the messages accessible to a broader audience.

At the rhetorical level, the captions utilize reflective questions, repetition, and direct audience address. These features are evident in captions that invite readers to consider their



own experiences and perspectives regarding mental health. Repeated expressions and concise statements are also used to highlight key messages across several posts.

### ***Semantic Framing of Mental Health Experiences***

The semantic analysis shows that mental health challenges are framed as understandable experiences influenced by external pressures rather than solely by individual characteristics. Explanatory statements are frequently employed to clarify misconceptions, particularly in captions discussing OCD and stress. These explanations commonly refer to emotional responses such as fear, exhaustion, and worry in relation to environmental and social demands.

In addition, the captions contain implicit assumptions that mental health struggles are common and relatable experiences. References to caregiving responsibilities, social expectations, and emotional labor frequently appear across the dataset. Through these semantic patterns, mental health experiences are consistently situated within wider social contexts rather than presented as isolated individual concerns.

### ***Lexical Choices and Language Use***

The findings indicate that the captions employ language characterized by empathy, inclusivity, and accessibility. Inclusive pronouns such as we, us, and our occur repeatedly throughout the texts, creating a sense of shared experience between the organization and its audience. Lexical items related to emotional states, including fear, struggle, exhaustion, support, and care, are frequently used when describing mental health conditions and experiences.

Another notable feature is the preference for everyday language over specialized medical terminology. Rather than relying heavily on clinical vocabulary, the captions use expressions that are readily understandable to general audiences. This pattern is evident across all six captions included in the analysis.

### ***Rhetorical Strategies in Instagram Captions***

The rhetorical analysis identifies several recurring strategies, including direct audience address, reflective questioning, and repetition. Questions such as “Are we normalising burnout instead of balance?” directly engage readers and encourage reflection on personal and social experiences. Similar forms of questioning appear throughout multiple captions within the dataset.

The captions also employ short declarative statements and parallel structures to emphasize key messages. These rhetorical patterns are particularly evident in captions addressing stress awareness, emotional well-being, and supportive communication. Across the dataset, the tone remains consistently supportive, approachable, and audience-oriented, contributing to the overall communicative style of the captions.

### ***Discussion***

This study examined how mental health awareness is discursively constructed through Instagram captions using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. Building upon the findings presented in the Results section, this discussion relates the identified thematic, semantic, lexical, and rhetorical patterns to previous research on discourse, social media, and mental health communication. The findings indicate that mental health is consistently framed as a shared social concern rather than an individual or exclusively clinical issue. This finding also resonates with previous discourse-oriented studies conducted in Indonesian educational contexts. For instance, Hasibuan et al. (2025) demonstrated that meaning construction in multimodal texts is shaped not only through linguistic choices but also through broader social and contextual representations. As summarized in Table 2, themes such as emotional validation, collective responsibility, and social support recur throughout the analyzed captions. This finding supports van Dijk's (2021) argument that discourse plays a central role in shaping shared social knowledge and public understandings of social issues.

Contemporary mental health discourse increasingly recognizes that psychological well-being should be understood within broader social, cultural, and environmental contexts (World Health Organization, 2022). The Instagram captions analyzed in this study reflect this perspective by emphasizing relational support, community awareness, and shared responsibility. Such representations suggest a close alignment between organizational social media discourse and current global mental health frameworks. Similar findings have been reported in studies demonstrating that social media platforms increasingly function as spaces where mental health awareness is normalized and collective understandings of well-being are negotiated through public communication (Pretorius et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2019).

The semantic analysis revealed that mental health challenges are framed as understandable responses to social pressures, emotional demands, and everyday life circumstances. Conditions such as stress, OCD, and emotional exhaustion are represented not as personal failures but as experiences influenced by broader social and environmental

contexts. This finding is particularly significant because stigmatizing discourse often emerges when mental health problems are individualized or attributed solely to personal weakness. By contextualizing mental health experiences, the captions provide alternative representations that encourage understanding rather than blame. Previous research similarly suggests that contextualized mental health communication contributes to more supportive public attitudes and reduces stigmatizing perceptions toward individuals experiencing psychological distress (Henderson & Thornicroft, 2009; Corrigan, Druss, & Perlick, 2014).

The findings further demonstrate the frequent use of empathetic and inclusive lexical choices, particularly inclusive pronouns and affective vocabulary. Such linguistic features position the organization and its audience within the same social group, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared experience. According to van Dijk's perspective on discourse and ideology, lexical choices influence how social actors and social realities are represented and interpreted (Tannen et al., 2015). In the analyzed captions, words associated with care, support, understanding, and emotional well-being contribute to a discourse that is accessible and non-judgmental. The importance of lexical representation is further supported by Hidayah et al., (2025), who found that linguistic and visual elements jointly shape social representations in educational materials.

These findings are consistent with previous research on digital health communication, which has shown that empathetic and non-clinical language enhances audience engagement, trust, and message acceptance in online health contexts (Berry et al., 2017). Similarly, studies of mental health communication on social media indicate that supportive language can strengthen perceptions of social connectedness and encourage help-seeking behaviors among users (Naslund et al., 2016; Andalibi et al., 2017). The accessible vocabulary identified in this study therefore reinforces the role of Instagram captions as public education texts rather than expert-centered medical discourse.

Reflective questions, direct audience address, and repetition emerged as prominent rhetorical strategies across the dataset. These rhetorical features encourage active engagement by inviting readers to reflect on their own experiences, beliefs, and practices related to mental health. Rather than positioning audiences as passive recipients of information, the captions create opportunities for participation and self-reflection. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that interactive communication strategies enhance the effectiveness of online health messaging and improve audience involvement with health-related content (Vraga & Tully, 2021; Moorhead et al., 2013).

The rhetorical patterns identified in this study also reflect the communicative affordances of Instagram as a social media platform. Instagram supports interactive and dialogic forms of communication that encourage organizations to engage audiences through conversational and emotionally resonant discourse. By employing reflective prompts and direct forms of address, the captions foster emotional connection while simultaneously promoting awareness and social responsibility. These strategies contribute to the persuasive function of mental health communication by encouraging audiences to recognize mental health as a relevant social issue rather than a private concern. A comparable emphasis on multimodal communication was identified by Basri et al., (2025), who reported that learners' perceptions of educational content were strongly influenced by the integration of multiple communicative modes.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on digital mental health communication by demonstrating how mental health awareness is discursively constructed through organizational Instagram captions. By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis with contemporary social media research, the study highlights the continuing relevance of CDA for examining digital texts and online advocacy practices. The findings underscore the importance of language in shaping public perceptions of mental health and support the growing role of social media as a meaningful space for mental health education, awareness, and advocacy.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that Instagram captions function as an effective medium for constructing mental health awareness through discourse. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, the findings show that mental health is consistently represented as a shared social concern rather than an individual weakness. The analyzed captions emphasize emotional validation, collective responsibility, and supportive communication, thereby contributing to the normalization of mental health discussions within digital environments.

The discourse is characterized by contextual semantic framing, empathetic lexical choices, and engaging rhetorical strategies that encourage reflection, understanding, and audience involvement. These discursive features contribute to reducing stigma and increasing the accessibility of mental health messages for broader audiences. Through thematic, semantic, lexical, and rhetorical structures, the captions construct mental health awareness as a collective issue that requires empathy, support, and social engagement.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The analysis focuses on a single Instagram account and examines only textual content, limiting the generalizability of the



findings. Future studies may expand the dataset by incorporating multiple organizations, cross-platform comparisons, and multimodal elements such as images, videos, and audience interactions. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how mental health discourse is constructed and negotiated across digital communication environments.

This study highlights the significant role of language in shaping public perceptions of mental health and confirms the relevance of Critical Discourse Analysis for examining contemporary social media communication. The findings demonstrate that Instagram captions serve not only as informational texts but also as discursive tools that contribute to mental health awareness, public engagement, and stigma reduction.

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