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A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATIONAL QUOTES ON INSTAGRAM

Sultan Arrasyid Nasution [1*]
[1] Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mandailing Natal, Indonesia

E-mail: [1]sulthanarrasyid2@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author:

Sultan Arrasyid Nasution

Email Corresponding :

sulthanarrasyid2@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the discourse structures embedded within motivational quotes circulated on Instagram, a dominant social media platform with over two billion active users worldwide. The primary objective of this research is to examine the linguistic strategies, rhetorical devices, and ideological underpinnings that characterize motivational content in digital spaces, with particular attention to how such discourse constructs social identity and promotes specific worldviews. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as proposed by Norman Fairclough (1995), alongside elements of van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, this study analyzed 60 motivational quotes purposively selected from ten prominent Indonesian and global Instagram accounts during the period of January to March 2024. Data were collected through systematic documentation and subjected to multi-layered textual and contextual analysis. The findings reveal that motivational quotes on Instagram predominantly employ imperative structures, second-person pronouns, and positive evaluative language to construct an intimate relationship between text producers and audiences. Additionally, metaphorical expressions and presupposition are frequently deployed to normalize neoliberal ideologies of individual success and self-sufficiency. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital discourse and social media linguistics, while also underscoring the ideological dimensions of seemingly benign motivational content.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, motivational quotes, Instagram, critical discourse analysis, social media linguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms over the past two decades has fundamentally transformed the landscape of human communication, reshaping not only the channels through which information is disseminated but also the very nature of language use and discourse formation. Among these platforms, Instagram has emerged as one of the most influential digital environments for the production and consumption of short-form textual content, particularly in the genre of motivational or inspirational quotes. With its visually oriented interface and algorithmically curated content delivery, Instagram facilitates the viral spread of brief, memorable statements that purport to inspire, encourage, or guide users toward particular attitudes and behaviors (Zappavigna, 2012).

At the broader societal level, the prevalence of motivational discourse reflects wider cultural anxieties and aspirations. In an era characterized by economic precarity, social fragmentation, and heightened individualism, motivational content serves as a form of popular therapeutic discourse that addresses the perceived need for psychological resilience and personal empowerment (McGee, 2005). Scholars in sociology and cultural studies have noted that the surge of self-help and motivational culture is intrinsically linked to neoliberal ideologies that place responsibility for success and failure squarely on the individual, rather than on structural or systemic factors (Binkley, 2011).

Narrowing the focus to the domain of linguistics and discourse studies, the analysis of motivational texts has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA, as developed by Fairclough (1995), Wodak

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(2001), and van Dijk (1993), posits that language is never neutral; rather, it is a site of ideological production and reproduction, serving to maintain or challenge existing power relations. From this perspective, even seemingly innocuous motivational statements warrant critical scrutiny for the assumptions, values, and power dynamics they encode.

Previous scholarship has explored motivational discourse across diverse contexts. Researchers have analyzed motivational language in workplace settings (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), educational environments (Dörnyei, 2001), political speeches (Charteris-Black, 2005), and self-help literature (Rimke, 2000). However, the specific intersection of motivational discourse and social media platforms—particularly Instagram—remains a relatively underexplored area, representing a significant gap in the existing literature.

Several prior studies are particularly pertinent to the present inquiry. Zappavigna (2012) conducted a pioneering analysis of Twitter discourse, demonstrating how microblogging platforms foster ambient affiliation through shared evaluative language. Her findings regarding the role of appraisal resources in constructing communal identities are directly applicable to Instagram's motivational quote culture. Similarly, Page (2012) examined the narrative practices of Facebook users, revealing how personal branding and self-presentation are central to social media engagement.

Concerning Instagram specifically, Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati (2014) conducted an early empirical study of the platform's content categories, identifying "selfies" and inspirational quotes as among the most prevalent content types. Their work established a baseline understanding of Instagram's content ecology, although it did not engage in linguistic analysis. More recently, Highfield and Leaver (2016) examined the visual semiotics of Instagram, noting the platform's unique blending of image and text in constructing meaning, which has direct implications for the analysis of quote posts that overlay text onto visual backgrounds.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) edited a seminal volume on digital discourse that laid important groundwork for understanding how online environments shape language use. Their contributors demonstrated that digital communication is not merely a degraded form of face-to-face interaction but constitutes a distinct discursive domain with its own norms, conventions, and ideological inflections. Building on this foundation, Georgakopoulou (2016) developed the concept of "small stories" in digital contexts, examining how brief narrative fragments on social media contribute to identity construction—a concept with clear relevance to motivational quotes.

The ideological dimensions of motivational content have been theorized by several scholars. McGee (2005), in her analysis of the "self-help" phenomenon in North America, argued that motivational culture promotes a form of "self-improvement" ideology that depoliticizes social problems by framing them as individual psychological challenges. Rimke (2000) similarly critiqued self-help discourse for its role in producing neoliberal subjectivities, while Binkley (2011) linked positive thinking and motivational culture to the broader project of neoliberal governance.

Rhetorical strategies in motivational texts have also been analyzed. Charteris-Black (2005) demonstrated the pervasive use of metaphor in persuasive discourse, showing how conceptual metaphors structure argumentation and influence audience perception. His framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) provides valuable tools for examining how abstract concepts such as "success," "failure," and "potential" are metaphorically constructed in motivational quotes.

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offers another productive theoretical lens for the present study. Halliday (1994) proposed that language simultaneously fulfills ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, all of which are discernible in motivational texts. The interpersonal metafunction, in particular, is relevant to analyzing how motivational quotes position the reader as a subject capable of and responsible for personal transformation.

Research on evaluative language and appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) has been applied to social media discourse by

several scholars. Taboada (2011) analyzed subjectivity and sentiment in online reviews, providing methodological insights transferable to Instagram analysis. More directly, Bednarek and Caple (2012) examined evaluative language in news discourse, demonstrating how linguistic appraisal constructs particular views of events and actors a mechanism equally operative in motivational content.

Indonesian-language motivational content on social media has received limited but growing scholarly attention. Kusuma (2019) examined the pragmatic functions of motivational posts on Indonesian Twitter and WhatsApp, finding that directive and commissive speech acts predominate. Wardani and Suharsono (2021) analyzed the use of Islamic values in Indonesian motivational Instagram accounts, revealing how religious discourse is woven into self-improvement rhetoric. These studies provide important contextual grounding for the present research.

Despite the accumulation of studies touching on various aspects of motivational discourse and social media language, a comprehensive Critical Discourse Analysis of motivational quotes on Instagram examining their textual features, discursive strategies, and ideological functions in a systematic and theoretically integrated manner—has not been undertaken. This constitutes the primary research gap that the present study addresses. Prior work has either focused on motivational discourse in offline contexts, employed non-critical linguistic frameworks, or analyzed social media content without sustained attention to the specific genre of motivational quotes.

Furthermore, most existing studies have been conducted in Western contexts, leaving the discourse practices of non-Western, multilingual social media users particularly in Indonesia, one of the world's largest social media markets substantially underexplored. This study seeks to address both of these gaps by conducting a theoretically rigorous Critical Discourse Analysis of motivational quotes on Instagram, with attention to both Indonesian and global accounts.

The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What linguistic and rhetorical strategies are employed in motivational quotes on Instagram? (2) How do these discourse features construct particular subject positions and social identities for Instagram users? (3) What ideological assumptions and values are embedded within this motivational discourse? The answers to these questions contribute to a more nuanced understanding of language, power, and ideology in digital spaces.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, consistent with the interpretivist paradigm that underpins Critical Discourse Analysis. Qualitative methodology is particularly suited to the aims of this research because it enables in-depth, context-sensitive examination of linguistic phenomena that quantitative approaches cannot adequately capture (Creswell, 2014). The primary analytical framework is Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA, which examines discourse at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice. This model is supplemented by elements of van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach, particularly his concepts of ideological structures and mental models, as well as Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory for the systematic analysis of evaluative language.

The choice of CDA as the primary theoretical and methodological framework reflects the study's commitment to investigating not only the surface features of language but also the social, cultural, and ideological contexts in which discourse is produced and consumed. CDA treats texts as social objects whose meanings are shaped by and in turn shape the broader social practices within which they are embedded (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

2.2 Sample and Data Sources

The data for this study consist of 60 motivational quotes collected from Instagram.

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Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the sample captured a diversity of accounts, languages, and thematic orientations while remaining analytically manageable. Ten Instagram accounts were selected as data sources: five accounts primarily posting in English with a global following, and five Indonesian-language or bilingual accounts with significant Indonesian audiences. The selection criteria included accounts with a minimum of 100,000 followers, a posting frequency of at least three motivational quotes per week, and a clear focus on motivational or inspirational content.

From each account, six posts were selected using systematic random sampling specifically, every third post within the data collection window of January to March 2024. This sampling strategy ensured representation of each account's typical output while avoiding researcher selection bias. The resulting dataset of 60 quotes encompasses a range of topics including personal success, resilience, self-improvement, relationships, and spirituality, reflecting the thematic diversity characteristic of Instagram motivational content.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation of Instagram posts. Screenshots of each selected post were taken to preserve the original presentation, including the visual background, typography, and any accompanying captions or hashtags. The textual content of each quote was then transcribed verbatim into a data collection spreadsheet, with accompanying metadata including the account name, post date, number of likes, number of comments, and any relevant contextual information from the caption.

To ensure ethical compliance, this study collected only publicly available posts from publicly accessible accounts. No private information was collected, and account names are pseudonymized in the analysis to protect user privacy in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Data collection followed a structured protocol developed and piloted in advance to ensure consistency and reliability.

Following data collection, each quote was subjected to preliminary analysis to identify salient linguistic features and thematic clusters. This preliminary analysis informed the development of a coding framework for the subsequent systematic CDA. The coding framework incorporated categories for grammatical structure, lexical choices, rhetorical devices, evaluative language (using Appraisal Theory categories of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation), and discursive strategies such as presupposition, implication, and subject positioning.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistic and Rhetorical Strategies in Instagram Motivational Quotes

The analysis reveals a consistent set of linguistic strategies across the 60 quotes examined. The most pervasive grammatical feature is the use of imperative constructions, present in 78% of the sample (47 out of 60 quotes). Examples include directives such as "Keep going," "Believe in yourself," and "Start before you are ready." This predominance of imperative mood constructs a direct, commanding relationship between the text and the reader, positioning the audience as an agent capable of and obligated to act upon the advice given. This finding aligns with Kusuma's (2019) observation that directive speech acts dominate Indonesian social media motivational content, and extends it to a broader, cross-linguistic sample.

The pervasive use of the second-person pronoun "you" (or its Indonesian equivalents "kamu" and "Anda") was observed in 82% of the English-language quotes and 75% of the Indonesian-language quotes. This linguistic choice creates a semblance of personal address, fostering a sense of intimacy and direct relevance that is

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central to the genre's appeal. This strategy corresponds to what Zappavigna (2012) describes as "ambient affiliation" in digital discourse the construction of a virtual community of shared values through inclusive and interpersonally oriented language. The consistent use of "you" can be understood within Halliday's (1994) interpersonal metafunction as a means of constructing a particular subject position for the reader: that of an autonomous individual capable of self-transformation.

Metaphorical language constitutes another prominent feature of the dataset. Journey metaphors ("keep moving forward," "the path to success") appeared in 55% of the quotes, while structural metaphors conceptualizing success as a physical object to be "built," "achieved," or "reached" were present in 40% of the sample. These findings corroborate Charteris-Black's (2005) demonstration of the centrality of conceptual metaphor in persuasive discourse. By framing abstract aspirational concepts in terms of concrete physical experiences, these metaphors render complex and socially contingent outcomes such as career success or personal fulfillment as tangible, achievable goals, thereby naturalizing the assumption that they are within any individual's reach.

Construction of Subject Positions and Social Identities

A critical finding concerns the ways in which motivational quotes on Instagram systematically construct a particular subject position: that of the self-reliant, resilient, and perpetually striving individual. Through the combination of imperative structures, second-person address, and positive evaluative language, these texts interpellate their readers as autonomous subjects who bear sole responsibility for their circumstances and outcomes. Phrases such as "Your only limit is you" and "Success is a choice" exemplify this ideological move, presenting social achievement as purely a matter of individual will and effort.

This construction of the individualized subject corroborates the findings of both Rimke (2000) and McGee (2005), who identified similar mechanisms in self-help literature. However, the present study demonstrates that these ideological operations are not confined to book-length self-help texts but are densely concentrated in the micro-genre of social media quotes, potentially amplifying their reach and ideological impact. The brevity and shareable format of Instagram quotes facilitate their viral dissemination and repeated exposure, which may intensify the normalization of the individualist worldview they encode.

Analysis of the Indonesian-language quotes revealed an additional dimension absent from global English-language accounts: the integration of Islamic values and communal ethics into individually oriented motivational discourse. Consistent with Wardani and Suharsono's (2021) findings, several Indonesian accounts framed personal achievement within a religious framework ("Success belongs to those who strive and pray"), subtly negotiating between individualist neoliberal values and collectivist Islamic ethics. This represents a form of discursive hybridity that is specific to the Indonesian social media context and that modifies the purely individualist subject construction found in global motivational discourse.

Ideological Dimensions of Instagram Motivational Discourse

At the level of social practice the third dimension of Fairclough's (1995) analytical model the motivational quotes in this dataset can be understood as contributing to the reproduction of neoliberal ideology. The consistent emphasis on individual agency, positive thinking, and the rejection of external constraints ("Don't blame others for your situation") effectively depoliticizes questions of structural inequality. This ideological function is consistent with Binkley's (2011) analysis of positive psychology and motivational culture as technologies of neoliberal governance, which encourage subjects to manage their own wellbeing and productivity rather than seeking collective or political solutions to shared problems.

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The appraisal analysis (Martin & White, 2005) reveals a highly positive evaluative orientation throughout the dataset. Items of Appreciation (positive evaluation of entities and processes) and Affect (expression of emotional states) dominate, with negative appraisal items occurring predominantly in framing clauses that contrast present adversity with future success ("Even when everything seems impossible, keep believing"). This pattern of negative-to-positive appraisal trajectory enacts a narrative of transformation and redemption that is central to motivational discourse across media, consistent with Bednarek and Caple's (2012) observations about evaluative language in persuasive contexts.

The use of presupposition constitutes a further ideological mechanism. Statements such as "You have what it takes to succeed" presuppose that success is universally available and that the reader already possesses the necessary qualities assumptions that are far from self-evident and that elide the material and structural determinants of life outcomes. This linguistic strategy is aligned with van Dijk's (1993) concept of ideological square, in which positive self-representation and suppression of counter-perspectives work together to naturalize particular worldviews. The prevalence of such presuppositional structures in the dataset (identified in 63% of quotes) indicates a systematic, if typically unconscious, ideological operation.

These findings have implications beyond the immediate linguistic analysis. As Page (2012) demonstrated in her analysis of Facebook personal narratives, social media discourse plays a constitutive role in shaping users' self-understandings and social identities. If Instagram users are routinely exposed to motivational discourse that frames success as individually determined and failure as a matter of insufficient effort or belief, this may contribute to what McGee (2005) calls the "makeover culture"—a social environment in which perpetual self-improvement is normalized as an obligation and in which structural critique is systematically discouraged.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis of 60 motivational quotes on Instagram, drawing on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional CDA model, van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach, and Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory. The analysis has revealed that motivational quotes on Instagram employ a consistent array of linguistic and rhetorical strategies including imperative constructions, second-person address, journey and achievement metaphors, positive evaluative language, and presupposition that collectively work to construct an individualized, neoliberal subject position for their audiences.

These findings confirm and extend prior research on motivational discourse in offline contexts (Rimke, 2000; McGee, 2005; Binkley, 2011) and on digital discourse more broadly (Zappavigna, 2012; Page, 2012; Georgakopoulou, 2016), while also adding nuance by documenting the discursive hybridity of Indonesian-language accounts that negotiate between individualist and collectivist values. The research thus addresses an important gap in the literature on social media linguistics and contributes to the critical study of ideology in digital discourse.

Future research might productively extend this inquiry by examining the reception of motivational quotes how users interpret, appropriate, or resist the subject positions these texts construct through audience studies or discourse-analytic interview methods. Longitudinal and cross-platform analyses would also be valuable for tracking shifts in motivational discourse over time and across different social media environments. The development of more systematic methods for analyzing multimodal motivational posts, in which textual and visual elements interact to produce meaning, represents another promising avenue for future research.

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