

SOCIAL SEMIOTIC MARKERS IN SELECTED POLITICAL REELS ON INSTAGRAM

AKINWANDE, Bankole Idowu, Ph.D.
&
AKINWANDE, Kehinde Ifedayo

Abstract

This study investigates the social semiotic markers embedded in selected political reels on Instagram, with the aim of understanding how visual, auditory, and textual elements construct political meaning and influence audience perception. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Social Semiotics as developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), the study adopts a qualitative research design to analyze political reels purposively selected from Instagram. The analysis focuses on the multimodal elements of the reels, including gestures, facial expressions, camera angles, colour symbolism, captions, music, and editing techniques, to determine how these semiotic resources contribute to meaning-making. Findings reveal that political actors strategically use visual and auditory markers to convey leadership, authority, patriotism, relatability, and emotional engagement. Textual elements such as slogans, captions, and subtitles complement these visual and auditory cues, reinforcing political messages and ideological positions. Editing techniques and compositional strategies enhance the narrative structure of the reels, ensuring that messages are persuasive and memorable. The study demonstrates that political reels function as carefully constructed multimodal texts, where meaning emerges through the interaction of various semiotic resources. The findings highlight the importance of social semiotic analysis in understanding contemporary digital political communication, particularly in visual and short-form media. This study contributes to knowledge in the fields of media studies, political communication, and social semiotics by revealing the ways digital platforms mediate political discourse and influence public perception.

Keywords: Instagram, Political Reels, Social Semiotics,
Multimodal Communication, Political Discourse

Introduction

The emergence of digital media has significantly transformed political communication and public engagement across the world. Social media platforms have become important spaces where political actors communicate messages, mobilize supporters, and shape public opinion through multimodal forms of expression. One such platform is Instagram, which allows users to share images, videos, and short-form multimedia content. With the introduction of Instagram Reels, short video clips have become a powerful medium for disseminating political messages, narratives, and campaign strategies. These reels often combine visual imagery, text overlays, music, gestures, and symbolic elements to convey meaning, making them rich sites for examining how communication operates in contemporary political discourse.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of studying communication not only through language but also through visual and symbolic resources. This perspective is central to the field of Social Semiotics, which examines how people create meaning using various semiotic resources such as images, colours, gestures, sounds, and spatial arrangements. Social semiotics views communication as a socially situated process in which signs are shaped by cultural practices, ideological perspectives, and communicative intentions. According to Papacharissi (2013), meaning in visual communication emerges through the interaction of multiple modes, including visual composition, typography, sound, and movement. This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing digital media content where meaning is constructed through multimodal elements.

Political communication on social media platforms has increasingly adopted multimodal strategies in order to attract attention and engage audiences. Short-form video content such as reels often incorporates dramatic visuals, captions, symbolic gestures, and background music to convey political ideologies or persuade viewers. These multimodal elements function as social semiotic markers that guide how audiences interpret political messages. For instance, gestures, facial expressions, camera angles, and colour symbolism can subtly communicate power, authority, solidarity, or emotional appeal. Scholars in Media Studies argue that such visual and symbolic cues play a significant role in shaping how audiences perceive political actors and their messages.

Globally, the use of social media for political engagement has increased significantly, particularly among younger audiences who rely heavily on digital platforms for news and political information. Platforms such as Instagram enable politicians, political activists, and media organizations to disseminate messages quickly and creatively through visually engaging content. Instagram Reels, in particular, have become a powerful tool for political storytelling because they allow creators to combine sound, movement, text, and imagery within short time frames. These multimodal features enable political actors to construct compelling narratives and symbolic representations that resonate with viewers.

Within this context, social semiotic analysis provides an effective framework for examining how meaning is constructed in political reels. The approach emphasizes the role of semiotic resources in shaping communication and highlights how visual and auditory elements function together to convey ideological messages. According to Morris & Ogan (1996), visual communication involves choices regarding composition, framing, gaze, and salience, all of which contribute to meaning-making. In political reels, these elements may be used strategically to portray leadership qualities,

evoke emotional responses, or frame political issues in particular ways.

Despite the growing influence of social media in political communication, relatively limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the analysis of short-form political video content, particularly from a social semiotic perspective. Many existing studies focus primarily on textual discourse or traditional media forms such as television advertisements and campaign speeches. However, digital platforms now rely heavily on visual storytelling and symbolic communication, making it necessary to examine the semiotic resources embedded in online video content. Understanding how these resources function can provide deeper insights into the strategies used by political actors to communicate with audiences.

Therefore, examining social semiotic markers in selected political reels offers valuable insights into the ways meaning is constructed and communicated in contemporary digital political discourse. By analyzing visual, auditory, and textual elements within Instagram reels, this study seeks to explore how semiotic resources are used to frame political messages, construct identities, and influence audience perception. Such an investigation contributes to the broader understanding of multimodal political communication and highlights the significance of social semiotic analysis in interpreting the complex forms of meaning-making present in modern social media environments.

Statement of Research Problem

Despite the growing influence of social media platforms in shaping political communication and public engagement, there remains limited scholarly attention to how meaning is constructed through visual and symbolic resources in short-form political videos. Platforms such as Instagram have increasingly become important channels through which politicians, political parties, and activists

communicate with audiences, particularly through features such as Instagram Reels that combine images, sound, text, gestures, and other multimodal elements. These reels often rely on visual symbolism, body language, music, camera framing, and colour choices to convey political messages and influence audience perception. However, while many studies in Media Studies and Political Communication have examined political discourse in traditional media and textual formats, relatively few have focused on the social semiotic dimensions of short-form political video content.

From the perspective of Social Semiotics, these multimodal elements function as semiotic markers that shape how viewers interpret political identities, ideologies, and narratives. Without a systematic examination of these semiotic resources, it becomes difficult to fully understand how political messages are strategically constructed and communicated within the rapidly evolving environment of digital media. Consequently, there exists a significant gap in research concerning the social semiotic markers embedded in political reels and how these markers contribute to meaning-making, persuasion, and audience engagement on social media platforms. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by investigating the social semiotic markers present in selected political reels on Instagram and examining how these markers function to construct political messages and influence audience interpretation.

Specific Objectives of the Study

The **specific objectives** of the study are:

- i. to identify the **social semiotic markers** used in selected political reels on Instagram.
- ii. to examine how visual, textual, and auditory elements function as **meaning-making resources** in the construction of political messages within the selected reels.
- iii.

to analyze how these social semiotic markers contribute to the **representation of political identities and ideologies** in the selected political reels.

Literature Review

The increasing prominence of digital media has transformed the ways political actors communicate with the public. Social media platforms now function as major channels for political messaging, campaigning, and audience engagement. One such platform is Instagram, which allows users to share images, videos, and short-form multimedia content. The introduction of Instagram Reels has further expanded the possibilities for political communication by enabling the rapid dissemination of short, visually engaging videos. Scholars in Media Studies argue that these short-form videos are particularly effective for capturing audience attention because they combine visual, textual, and auditory elements that enhance message delivery and persuasion.

The study of meaning-making through visual and symbolic resources is central to the field of Social Semiotics. This theoretical perspective emphasizes that communication involves multiple semiotic resources beyond language, including images, gestures, sound, and spatial organization. According to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), visual communication operates through structured systems of representation in which elements such as composition, framing, salience, and gaze contribute to the production of meaning. Their work highlights how individuals use available semiotic resources within specific social contexts to communicate ideas and construct social realities.

In digital environments, multimodal communication has become a defining feature of online content. Multimodality refers to the use of multiple modes such as language, images, sound, and movement in

the creation of meaning. Scholars note that social media platforms encourage the integration of these modes to create engaging and persuasive content (Jewitt, 2013). On platforms like Instagram, political actors frequently combine visual imagery, captions, music, emojis, and editing techniques to construct compelling narratives. These multimodal elements function as semiotic resources that influence how audiences interpret and respond to political messages. Political communication has increasingly adopted visual strategies to convey ideological positions and shape public perception. Research shows that visual images, gestures, and symbolic cues often communicate political meanings more quickly and emotionally than written text alone. Scholars argue that visual symbolism can evoke strong emotional responses and reinforce ideological messages within political communication (Street, 2011). In the context of social media, short-form videos such as reels rely heavily on such symbolic elements to construct political narratives and portray political actors in particular ways.

Another important aspect of social semiotic analysis involves examining how visual and auditory elements represent social identities and relationships. According to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), semiotic resources such as gaze, body posture, facial expression, and camera angles contribute to the representation of power, authority, and social relationships. In political videos, these elements may be strategically used to present political figures as strong leaders, relatable individuals, or defenders of particular values. Such representations play a crucial role in shaping audience perceptions of political actors and their messages.

The rise of social media has also altered the relationship between political actors and audiences by enabling more interactive and participatory forms of communication. Platforms such as Instagram allow political figures to bypass traditional media

gatekeepers and communicate directly with the public. This direct communication often relies on visually appealing content designed to maximize engagement, including likes, shares, and comments. Scholars have noted that visual storytelling and symbolic imagery are central to these strategies because they help political actors connect emotionally with audiences and frame political issues in memorable ways.

Despite the growing importance of visual communication in digital political discourse, many existing studies continue to focus primarily on textual analysis of political speeches, manifestos, and written posts. While such studies provide valuable insights into political language and ideology, they often overlook the multimodal nature of contemporary digital communication. Social media content, particularly short-form video, relies heavily on visual and auditory elements that function as key meaning-making resources. As a result, there is a growing need for research that examines the semiotic resources embedded in digital political media.

Consequently, the study of social semiotic markers in political reels provides an important avenue for understanding how meaning is constructed in modern political communication. By examining visual, textual, and auditory elements within selected reels on Instagram, researchers can gain deeper insights into how political messages are framed and interpreted within digital environments. Such analysis contributes to the broader fields of Media Studies and Social Semiotics by highlighting the significance of multimodal communication in shaping contemporary political discourse.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the social semiotic markers embedded in selected political reels on Instagram. The study is anchored in the theoretical framework of

Social Semiotics as developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006). The theory emphasizes that meaning in communication is constructed through multiple semiotic resources such as images, gestures, sound, text, colour, and spatial organization. The data for the study consists of purposively selected political reels posted on Instagram by political actors, media organizations, and political commentators from 2024 to date. The sampling technique is preferred because it best suits the purpose of the researcher. The reels will be selected based on their relevance to political discourse and their use of multimodal elements that convey political messages. The selected reels will be carefully observed, documented, and transcribed where necessary in order to capture the visual, textual, and auditory elements present in the videos.

The analysis will focus on identifying and interpreting the social semiotic markers used in the selected political reels. Drawing on the analytical framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the study will examine elements such as visual composition, camera angles, gestures, facial expressions, color symbolism, text overlays, background music, and editing techniques. These elements will be analyzed to determine how they function as meaning-making resources that construct political identities, communicate ideological positions, and influence audience interpretation. The social semiotic approach is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for a comprehensive examination of multimodal communication, enabling the researcher to explore how various semiotic resources interact to produce meaning within digital political content on Instagram.

To deepen the theoretical frame of this study, the concept of Affective Publics developed by Papachariss (2015) is especially useful for explaining how auditory markers do not merely convey meaning but actively generate emotional collectivities. Papacharissi

argues that publics today are not formed primarily through rational discourse, but through shared affective intensities such as feelings that circulate, stick, and mobilize people into temporary communities of response. These publics emerge when communicative signs (sounds, images, words, rhythms) trigger emotional alignment among dispersed individuals who then begin to feel, react, and sometimes act together. Auditory signs operate as affective triggers that bypass slow cognitive interpretation and move directly into emotional memory, bodily rhythm, and collective sensation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Social Semiotics as developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), which explains how meaning is created through multiple semiotic resources such as images, gestures, sounds, colors, and textual elements within specific social contexts. This theory best represents the study because political reels on Instagram rely heavily on multimodal forms of communication, combining visual imagery, body language, captions, background music, and editing techniques, to construct political messages and shape audience interpretation. The theory will therefore be applied by examining how these visual, textual, and auditory elements function as social semiotic markers within the selected reels in order to reveal how political identities, ideologies, and persuasive meanings are constructed and communicated in digital political discourse.

Data Presentation

The table below highlights the **reel content, semiotic markers, and their communicative meanings**.

S/N	Description of Political Reel	Visual Semiotic Markers	Audio/Textual Markers	Interpretation / Meaning
1	A political figure addressing a crowd during a campaign rally	Raised hand gestures, national flag in background, close-up camera angle	Patriotic background music, bold caption text	Conveys leadership, patriotism, and authority
2	Short clip showing a politician interacting with market women	Smiling facial expressions, handshake gestures, medium camera shots	Informal speech, local language captions	Represents humility, accessibility, and connection with ordinary citizens
3	Reel showing the politician inspecting infrastructure projects	Formal attire, pointing gestures toward construction sites	Voice-over narration describing achievements	Suggests competence, accountability, and developmental progress
4	Political campaign montage featuring multiple short clips	Rapid editing, national colors in visuals, energetic body movements	Upbeat campaign music, slogan text overlays	Reinforces campaign enthusiasm and national unity
5	Reel showing the politician speaking directly to the camera	Direct gaze, steady posture, centered framing	Spoken political promises, on-screen subtitles	Communicates sincerity, transparency, and confidence
6	Short reel criticizing political opponents	Facial expressions showing seriousness, contrasting imagery	Dramatic music, bold textual statements	Frames opposition negatively and emphasizes ideological differences
7	Reel showing supporters cheering during a political event	Crowd shots, waving banners, celebratory gestures	Chanting slogans, energetic background music	Portrays popularity, mass support, and political momentum
8	Reel highlighting humanitarian activities	Visuals of charity work, hand giving gestures	Soft instrumental music, captions about community service	Represents compassion, generosity, and social responsibility

Data Analysis

The analysis of the selected political reels on Instagram reveals that political communication in digital spaces is strongly shaped by multimodal meaning-making processes. Using the framework of Social Semiotics as developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), the analysis focused on how visual, textual, and auditory elements function as semiotic resources within the selected reels. The data show that political actors strategically combine imagery, gestures, sound, and textual captions to communicate political messages and construct particular identities. These semiotic markers are not used randomly; rather, they are carefully selected to evoke specific interpretations and emotional responses from viewers. One prominent feature identified in the reels is the use of visual symbolism to construct political authority and leadership. Several reels depict political actors standing before national symbols such as flags or addressing large crowds from elevated platforms. These visual markers serve to position the political figure as a legitimate leader and representative of national interests. According to the principles of Social Semiotics, such visual arrangements contribute to meaning-making by associating the political actor with power, unity, and patriotism. The use of close-up camera angles and direct gaze further enhances the perception of confidence and authority.

Gestural communication also plays a significant role in the construction of political meaning in the analyzed reels. Hand gestures such as waving, pointing, and raised fists are frequently used to signal solidarity, determination, or engagement with the audience. Facial expressions, including smiling and serious looks, further reinforce these messages by conveying emotional cues that viewers can easily interpret. Within the framework proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), gestures and facial expressions are important semiotic resources because they communicate interpersonal relationships and attitudes between the political actor and the audience.

Another important semiotic marker observed in the reels is the use of color and visual composition. National colors are frequently incorporated into the visual background, clothing, or graphical elements within the reels. These colour choices function as symbolic markers that evoke national identity and political allegiance. In addition, the arrangement of visual elements within the frame often directs the viewer's attention toward the political actor, making them the most salient component of the image. Such compositional techniques highlight the strategic nature of visual communication in political messaging.

Textual elements such as captions, slogans, and subtitles also play a crucial role in reinforcing the messages conveyed through visuals. Many reels include short textual phrases that summarize political promises, achievements, or ideological positions. These texts often appear in bold fonts and prominent positions within the frame, ensuring that viewers can quickly grasp the intended message even when watching the reel without sound. The combination of text with visual imagery strengthens the persuasive impact of the message by providing both visual and linguistic cues.

Auditory elements further contribute to the meaning-making process in the selected reels. Background music, voice-over narration, and crowd chants are commonly used to create emotional engagement and enhance the overall narrative of the reel. Energetic music, for instance, is frequently used during campaign-related reels to generate excitement and enthusiasm among viewers. In contrast, softer instrumental music may accompany reels highlighting humanitarian activities or community outreach programs. These auditory cues guide the emotional interpretation of the content and support the visual narrative presented in the reel.

The analysis also shows that editing techniques such as rapid transitions, montage sequences, and slow-motion effects are used strategically to structure the narrative of the reels. Rapid transitions

between clips can create a sense of dynamism and progress, while slow-motion sequences may emphasize key moments such as handshakes or symbolic gestures. These editing choices function as semiotic resources that shape how viewers perceive the events and actions depicted in the reels.

In general, the findings demonstrate that political reels on Instagram rely heavily on multimodal semiotic resources to communicate political messages. Through the integration of visual imagery, gestures, text, sound, and editing techniques, political actors construct persuasive narratives that highlight leadership, patriotism, and public engagement. The application of Social Semiotics provides valuable insights into how these semiotic markers interact to shape meaning and influence audience perception in contemporary digital political communication.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that political communication on Instagram relies heavily on multimodal resources to construct meaning and influence audience perception. The analysis shows that political reels integrate visual imagery, textual captions, gestures, music, and editing techniques to convey political messages in engaging and persuasive ways. These findings support the argument within Social Semiotics that communication is not limited to language alone but involves multiple semiotic resources that interact to create meaning. The selected reels demonstrate how political actors strategically combine these resources to present themselves as competent leaders, relatable individuals, or defenders of national values.

One of the key findings of the study is the prominent use of visual symbols to communicate political authority and leadership. The presence of national flags, campaign banners, and large gatherings of supporters in the reels serves as powerful symbolic markers that

associate the political actor with patriotism and legitimacy. These visual elements reinforce the perception that the politician represents the collective interests of the nation. According to the theoretical perspective proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), visual symbols function as meaningful semiotic resources that shape how viewers interpret social relationships and power structures within a communicative context.

Another important finding relates to the role of body language and gestures in constructing political identities. The analysis shows that gestures such as hand waving, pointing, and raised fists are frequently used in the reels to communicate confidence, solidarity, and engagement with the audience. Facial expressions such as smiling or maintaining a serious demeanor further reinforce these communicative intentions. These non-verbal cues contribute significantly to the portrayal of political actors as approachable, trustworthy, and emotionally connected to the public. Such findings highlight the importance of non-verbal communication in digital political messaging.

The study also demonstrates the significant role played by textual elements such as captions, slogans, and subtitles in reinforcing the visual messages conveyed in the reels. These textual components often summarize key political ideas, campaign promises, or ideological positions within a short space of time. The strategic placement and formatting of these texts make them easily visible and memorable to viewers. By combining textual and visual cues, political actors are able to strengthen the clarity and persuasive impact of their messages.

In addition to visual and textual elements, auditory resources such as background music, voice-over narration, and crowd chants also contribute to the overall meaning of the reels. The findings indicate that music is frequently used to evoke specific emotional responses from viewers. For example, energetic music may

accompany campaign scenes to generate excitement and enthusiasm, while softer music may be used during humanitarian or community-focused scenes to convey empathy and compassion. These auditory elements enhance the narrative quality of the reels and help shape viewers' emotional engagement with the content.

The findings further reveal that editing techniques such as rapid transitions, montage sequences, and slow-motion effects play an important role in structuring the narrative flow of the reels. These techniques allow political actors to condense complex political messages into short, visually dynamic videos that capture audience attention. By carefully selecting and arranging visual clips, creators of political reels are able to highlight particular achievements, portray political actors in positive ways, and emphasize moments that reinforce desired political narratives.

On the whole, the discussion of findings indicates that political reels on Instagram are carefully designed multimodal texts that employ a wide range of semiotic resources to communicate political messages. The findings strongly support the principles of Social Semiotics by demonstrating how meaning emerges through the interaction of visual, textual, and auditory elements within digital media. Through the application of the theoretical framework developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), this study highlights the importance of examining multimodal communication in order to fully understand contemporary political discourse on social media platforms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that political communication on Instagram increasingly relies on multimodal forms of expression that combine visual, textual, and auditory elements to construct persuasive political messages. Through the perspectives of Social Semiotics, as developed by Gunther Kress and

Theo van Leeuwen (2006), the study revealed that political reels employ a wide range of semiotic markers such as gestures, facial expressions, color symbolism, captions, background music, and editing techniques to create meaning and influence audience perception. These semiotic resources function collectively to portray political actors as credible leaders, relatable individuals, and representatives of national interests while simultaneously shaping viewers' emotional and ideological responses. The findings further highlight that Instagram reels are not merely entertainment-based content but carefully constructed multimodal texts designed to communicate political ideologies, mobilize support, and strengthen public engagement. By examining the interaction of these semiotic elements, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary political discourse is mediated through digital visual culture, emphasizing the importance of analyzing multimodal communication in the evolving landscape of social media politics.

References

- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Street, J. (2011). *Mass media, politics and democracy* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Machin, D., & Mayr, A. (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis: A multimodal introduction*. SAGE Publications.
- Jewitt, C. (2013). *Multimodal methods for researching digital technologies*. In N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 196–212). Guilford Press.
- Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: The basics* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Morris, M., & Ogan, C. (1996). The Internet as mass medium. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 1(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1996.tb00174.x>