

## **Abstract**

In this essay, Instagram as a medium of communication will be discussed. Firstly, a brief description of Instagram would be given. Next, the statistics with regards to Instagram would be presented for us to better understand the popularity of Instagram as a medium of communication. Finally, the properties of Instagram would be examined and compared to that of speech and text. The impact of some of these properties on the use of language would also be examined. Interestingly, it seems that Instagram has some properties similar to speech and other features that are similar to text.

## **Instagram as a Medium of Communication**

In recent years, the increased accessibility to the internet coupled with the creation of smartphones has contributed to the explosive popularity of social media platforms. Hence, more researchers have begun to pay attention to computer-mediated communication (CMC). The notion that CMC as a type of communication by itself has been debated on (Herring, 2007). More recent researches have proposed that perhaps, the properties of CMC are variable and are affected by the medium in which interaction occur online (Locke, 2000). In this essay, Instagram as a medium of communication would be discussed. Moreover, the properties of this social networking mobile application would be analysed and compared to both speech and text. Speech would refer to face-to-face interaction whereas text would strictly be used to refer to book publications. Additionally, the essay would also touch on how properties of Instagram would affect language use.

Instagram was launched in 2010 (Instagram, n.d.). Unlike other social networking sites, Instagram is a mobile application that focuses on photo sharing. One can simply snap a photo, choose a preferred filter, add a caption and post it using their accounts. More recently, the video function was introduced and this allowed users to post short videos of up to 15 seconds (McGarry, 2013). Similar to Twitter, Instagram has the option for one to follow other Instagram accounts. Whenever a user posts a picture or video, it will appear on their followers' Instagram feeds. In turn, followers can choose to leave comments or like the post by simply double-tapping on the photo. The user who has posted the photo would then receive notifications on who has liked or commented on his post.

According to Hempel (2014), Instagram was ranked third with 200 million users, following behind other social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter that have 1.2 billion and 225

million users respectively. Interestingly, Instagram was ranked second in terms of the amount of time people spend using it. On average, users spent 220 minutes on Instagram on a monthly basis (Hempel, 2014). In fact, Instagram not only serves as a platform to share personal moments of one's lives with friends and family but also for commercial purposes (Bercovici, 2014). According to statistics reported on Instagram's website (Instagram, n.d.), on average, there are around 60 million photographs being posted and 1.6 billion likes daily. These data highlight the significance of Instagram as a platform used by people to communicate online.

Communication on Instagram is visually decontextualized. However, despite so, just like verbal cues, non-verbal cues are also common. Verbal cues would include any cues used in communication that involves linguistic features and non-verbal cues would be ones that do not involve linguistic-related properties. As mentioned previously, Instagram users can caption their posts to provide explanations or to express their feelings. These serve as verbal cues. Additionally, users of Instagram can like other users' posts. When one likes someone else's post, the act of doing so can convey a non-verbal message that can be interpreted in many ways. Similar to that of Facebook, liking a post on Instagram can be seen as a form of approval, sympathy or simply wanting to hop onto the bandwagon (Kohl, 2014). In addition, like videos, photos posted on Instagram can convey a non-verbal message through facial expressions, gestures and body movements. This is supported by Cobley & Haeffner (2009) who discussed on domestic photography as a mode of non-verbal communication. As shown below, Picture 1 which is taken off Instagram (Lee, 2014) shows three girls. The non-verbal cues include their expressions that tell viewers that they are happy to be in the company of one another. Moreover, having positioned themselves close to one another could also indicate that they are close friends. The linguistic cues that are indicated by the caption of the photo inform viewers that the other girls in her photo are not her sisters or colleagues but her childhood friends. Like videos, photos and captions on Instagram can convey verbal and non-verbal messages. Hence, it is evident that Instagram relies heavily on both verbal and non-verbal cues for communication.



Picture 1: A photo of three girls and the captions for it on Instagram

While Instagram and text are visually decontextualized, there are differences in their reliance on verbal and non-verbal cues used in communication. Text relies more heavily on verbal messages although at times, it also makes use of diagrams, pictures, colours or fonts (Crystal, 2006). Although speech occurs face-to-face (Crystal, 2006), it comprises of extralinguistic cues akin to those used in Instagram. In both modes of communication, facial expressions and gestures are crucial in conveying a message (Khan, 2007). However, speech often involves more extralinguistic cues that are not possible in Instagram. For example, eye-contact and even smell are communicative cues used in speech but not in Instagram. In addition, being visually decontextualized would indicate that deictic expressions would not be as frequently used in Instagram as compared to in speech.

Moreover, text, speech and Instagram differ in the amount of time needed to receive feedback. Being visually decontextualized, communication via Instagram and text (Crystal, 2006) do not receive immediate feedback. This is because unlike in speech, in text and Instagram, it takes a while for the writer or user to be notified about the feedbacks. However, the time lag experienced by Instagram users is relatively shorter as compared to text because notifications would be given upon receiving likes or comments on one's post. In contrast, readers of a text might have to go through the trouble of acquiring the writer's contact details before being able to express their opinions.

On top of that, communication via Instagram is both time and space-bound and can either be direct or indirect. In speech, communication is bounded by time and is direct (Crystal, 2006). Utterances are generally targeted at a known addressee. In contrast, in text, there is normally

indirect communication that is bounded by space and the addressee unknown (Crystal, 2006). However, in Instagram, only videos of up to 15 seconds are allowed. This results in communication to be time-bound. On the other hand, captions are space-bound. The directness of communication on Instagram is dependent on the purpose of the Instagram user in creating an account. Users who have created a private account for the purpose of staying connected with their friends and family generally have their posts and messages directed to these people. However, for users who have created a public account for the purpose of advertising their company or products, their audiences are usually unknown.

Instagram is also graphically rich and at times, both prosodically and graphically rich. The photos, punctuations and capitalisation found in captions all contribute to Instagram being graphically rich. However, if users post messages that are expressed by speech in videos, communication through Instagram can also be prosodically rich. Intonation, loudness and rhythm can all be expressed in the video to make communication prosodically rich. Additionally, captions for the video can help enhance one's understanding of the message in the video, effectively making communication graphically rich. Hence, when compared to speech and text, communication via Instagram can be similar to both depending on the means used to convey the message.

Posts made on Instagram are immediately and repeatedly revisable. Errors made during the process of choosing a photo and writing captions for it can be repeatedly and immediately changed. Moreover, if one posts a wrong photo or has a mistake in the captions of his post, he can immediately delete it. This is similar in speech where one can revise what he said upon receiving feedback. However, while errors made in speech cannot be withdrawn without having the hearer know about it, it is possible in Instagram. This is so if one is quick at spotting his own mistakes and makes a change before other users of Instagram see his post. Similar to Instagram, for texts that have not been published, errors made can be changed without the addressee seeing it. However, unlike Instagram, once published, errors made are not revisable and one must undergo a tedious process to correct them.

Furthermore, a property of communication via Instagram that is similar to text is that both are contrived (Crystal, 2006). Contrary to speech, there is a lag between production and reception because people would need to take time off to read and process the sentences and to analyse the photo and watch. However, while both usually have clear word, sentence and even paragraph boundary, it is not always the case for Instagram as it is for text. The increasing

popularity of hashtag language (which will be further discussed later) has allowed for word boundary to become non-existent in tags. In a way, this aspect of Instagram is somewhat similar to speech as sentence boundaries in speech are often fuzzy.

Additionally, Instagram is a socially interactive medium of communication. It does not merely present captioned photos to your followers. Instead, it allows one to CONNECT to their friends, family or even clients (Donovan, 2014). For example, National Geographic has made use of social networking platforms like Instagram to engage and interact with people by requesting for them to share their photos (Raphael, 2014).

Just like speech, Instagram is socially interactive. Both mediums allow people to converse with nearly anyone at any time. Instagram, like Facebook which was found to have positive impacts on social interactions (Russell, 2012), can help maintain relationships among people. Furthermore, the comment function found in Instagram allows for the convenient exchange of ideas and opinions. One can simply write or reply a comment and tag the person he or she is directing the message to.

In contrast to Instagram, texts are usually factually communicative (Crystal, 2006). They are generally used to document factual information and convey ideas of the writer (Crystal, 2006). There is usually little interaction or exchange of views between the writer and his readers. However, an aspect of Instagram that is similar to text is that both can be read at one's own pace. Similar to text, one can take their time to read and craft captions and analyse photos.

As mentioned by Reed (2014), language used to converse with others is more informal and flexible to changes. Hence, as an interactive medium for communication, language used on Instagram tends to have a looser structure. Similar to properties of speech, conversations found on Instagram usually contain contractions (Crystal, 2006). Words like *didn't* would be used more frequently than *did not*. Abbreviations are also common on Instagram. For example *tyvm* may be used as the abbreviated form of *thank you very much*. In addition, Instagram as a platform for communication has given rise to the creation of informal vocabularies. For example, in the past, the word *Instagram* was used solely to refer to the social networking application. However, more recently, *Instagram* is no longer used as only a noun. Rather, it can also be used as a verb to refer to the action of snapping a photo and uploading it on the Instagram application (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, n.d.).

On the other hand, unlike in Instagram, the use of contractions and informal vocabularies would be rarely seen in formal writing. Sentences found in texts are more elaborately structured. However, when crafting caption on Instagram, time can be taken off for users to conscientiously craft a grammatically sound sentence. Hence, like in texts, longer sentences are more common on Instagram than coordinate sentences that are frequently used in speech.

As Instagram is socially interactive and visually decontextualized, it has affected language through the use of emoticons. In conversations on Instagram, emoticons are used frequently. This is because non-verbal cues like facial expressions that are lacking during an online conversation can be expressed through the use of emoticons (Storto, 2011). In fact, the use of emoticons can affect one's judgement on the message and person (Ganster, Eimler & Krämer, 2012) and this is crucial in social interaction. Hence, being socially interactive and visually decontextualized makes emoticons an essential part of communication on this social networking platform.

Moreover, as Instagram is socially interactive and allows language to be loosely structured, the use of hashtag is acceptable and becoming increasingly common on this social media platform. In turn, this affects language use and the way users communicate on Instagram. Hashtags originated from Twitter and serves the purpose of categorizing tweets into topics. The use of hashtags to categorize our posts has allowed us to be selective about information on social media. Moreover, in Instagram, instead of using only sentences to convey our thoughts, hashtags are utilized. In a way, it has allowed us to express our thoughts and ideas in a succinct manner. For example, a user who has posted a picture of the sky might add a comment on how beautiful the sky is today and add in *#happydays*. While the tag *#happydays* has no relation with his post, it cues the followers that seeing the pretty sky makes the user happy. As mentioned by Schuhmacher (2013), the use of a hashtag enables us to express another thought of ours that is totally unrelated to our original thought. Interestingly, instead of causing confusion, it enhances the meaning of the original thought. Hence, it is evident that hashtags have transformed how we use language and how we communicate.

In conclusion, Instagram displays the properties of both speech and text. It is a new medium of communication that is unique in its own way. In addition, it has properties that have impacted the use of language and how we communicate.

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