



Scroll, watch, react: Perceived information through multimodality in sludge content on Instagram reels

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ABSTRACT

The presence of multimodal culture on social media platforms, primarily on Instagram Reels ground, is composed of disputable perceived information, where comprehended information cannot be instantly sought as a sole interpretation. In the approach of the multimodality concept and engaging in the combination of visual, text, and auditory analyses, which compares plenty of relevant algorithm content, the present research examines the presence of *sludge content* as one of the various social media content ideas. This paper proposes to define sludge content or split screen video multimodality characters as a mass media technique, particularly on Instagram reels for starring in education, marketing, and entertainment, and how they impact the perceived messages. It discusses whether the presented frames contribute to each other's connections and intentions in constructing the same services. The analysis of the valuation implies that in circumstances where there are multimodal elements in the videos, the two screens intend to serve each other purposes not necessarily the same meaning, but instead support each other with disparate roles in constructing one delivery. The study contends that the appearance of sludge content is not meant to be conceived in only one way. Instead, different individuals might perceive a different sense of understanding, which leads to a varied interpretation or potential misunderstanding.

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Introduction

Social media has played a significant role in shaping world society, impacting how culture and economies were built, as well as the way we perceive the world. It also serves as a new mechanism that allows society to exchange ideas, connect, and interact (Amedie, 2015). It is recognized that social media is not solely an interactional digital platform but also a transformative cultural authority that has reformulated how information is assembled, spread, and absorbed (Rachmad, 2023). Kiedmann et al. (2011) state that social media proposed substantial and prevalent advances in communication among organizations, communities, and individuals. The globalized use of social media has not only created accessible communication but also introduced challenges as emotions are hard to detect and distinguish (Dwivedi et al., 2018).

Within the educational context, young people are engaged in the learning process by utilizing a collaborative platform to enrich their knowledge and experience through applying the learning attributes of social media (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Opportunities for marketers undoubtedly exist in the social media realm. According to Husain et al., social media platforms are substantial podiums for retailers to create an experience and utilize social media information to improve user experience with their product. New forms of content in social media are evolving and addressing different kinds of online entertainment in the cause of production with distribution and consumption and also mass media functions with leisure activities and interpersonal communication (Stollfuß, 2020).

Without hesitation, social media topics are an area that is considerably acknowledged worldwide due to the existence of the contemporary digital realm and culture.

Scholars around the world, with their various interests and concerns, have researched the effects of social media on viewership and user experience. We have looked at several studies of research related to the discussion, specifically to the outcome of social media for users, such as networking (Markham et al., 2017; Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013; Leskovec et al., 2010), learning (Liu, 2010; Balakrishnan & Gan, 2016; Evans, 2014), influence (Romero et al., 2011; Diba et al., 2019) and engagement (Voorveld et al., 2018; Alalwan, 2022).

The combination of text, visual, and audio in multimodal communication produces a layered context (Jewitt & Leder Mackley, 2019; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). On social media platforms, particularly Instagram Reels, the algorithms prioritize engaging visual content and contextual accuracy (Bucher, 2018). While some studies explore multimodal production (Zappavigna, 2016), few analyze how users and viewers solve contrary cues (e.g., ironic audio over serious visuals, etc.). This severity indicates the need to resolve perception as a compelling, user-steered process.

Perceived information is increasingly fragmented, and users often rely on heuristics (e.g., visual appeal) over critical analysis (Medger et al., 2010). Research on misinformation focuses largely on text-based platforms (e.g., Twitter) (Vosoughi et al., 2018), neglecting how multimodal design exacerbates ambiguity (e.g., misleading video edits with credible captions). Instagram Reels' transitory, emotive format may further distort interpretation (Tucker et al., 2018), yet no framework exists to map these effects systematically.

Most research studies TikTok (Abidin, 2021) and YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018), while Instagram Reels' unique algorithm, through entertainment, activism, and advertising, builds a recognizable ecology of perception (Kaye et al., 2021). For

example, Reels' "remix" feature permits decontextualized content reuse, which potentially thrives on misinterpretation (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

This study employs a multimodal lens to investigate how Instagram Reels' sludge content feature constructs cultural meaning through its forced juxtaposition of visual, textual, and auditory elements. First, it examines how the platform's technical constraints (such as the 90-second format and mandatory audio tracks) structurally privilege certain modal combinations over others, creating inherent power imbalances in what sludge content can effectively communicate. Second, the research explores how different demographic groups navigate these multimodal demands, particularly focusing on how marginalized users creatively subvert expected modal relationships—for instance, by pairing establishment imagery with dissenting audio or by using text overlays to reframe dominant visual narratives. Third, the study critically assesses how Reels' algorithmic promotion of specific modal configurations (such as, visually dominant "meme formats") effectively establishes a hierarchy of cultural legitimacy, where certain ways of multimodal storytelling become institutionally favored while others are suppressed. Through a multimodal discourse analysis of trending Reels, this research ultimately aims to reveal how Instagram's technical infrastructure actively shapes cultural discourse by controlling over permissible modal relationships.

Method

The research object relied on samples of sludge content on the Instagram Reels platform. The focus of this research is the representation of multimodality in sludge content and its outcomes on users' perceived information through multimodal

juxtapositions. Firstly, we collected fragments of split-screen videos throughout Reels. A sample of 37 sludge Reels was collected with uploaded dates ranging from November 2024 to April 2025 consisting of different types of sludge genres (e.g. podcasts, gaming, reaction, ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response)). Users' engagements (e.g. likes, shares, views, video plays) were considered to assess pattern performance.

The approach of the analysis was framed through the modal disruption model developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001). The clashes between visual, auditory, and textual elements were analyzed by applying this model to sludge content. Danesi (2019) used absurdist memetics to analyze how different generations responded to incoherence and absurdity. This involved both the students' smooth experience with messy content and the common confusion experienced by older users. Jenkins et al. (2015) provided a substantive analysis of sludge in relation to participatory culture as the trend in which sludge emerges tends to be driven by community practices. Bucher (2018) worked on algorithmic culture and analyzed how platform mechanisms rewarded or suppressed that kind of content. Bird (2011) culturally connected sludge users with their rituals and practices.

The findings were presented through screenshots of selected video samples extracted from Instagram Reels, followed by an analytical review, breaking down the elements of the consisted modals: visual, textual, and auditory components. It involved the investigation that examined how deliberate juxtapositions produced different interpretive outcomes across demographic groups and the platform metrics revealed their algorithmic performance. Most of the theoretical lenses that were examined, especially modal disruption (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) and absurdist memetics (Danesi, 2019), were relevant in interpreting

the compositional strategies and audience receptions observed from the visual examples. This dual presentation method allowed for a thorough investigation of how the chaotic surface structures of sludge content revealed vital cultural meanings through their very incoherence, by combining tangible visual documentation and layered theoretical interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Multimodal disruption and generational meaning-making

With sludge content on Instagram Reels, traditional theories of multimodal communication face a serious challenge and are thus forced to reconsider how meaning arises in digital spaces (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Manovich, 2017). Classical semiotic theories emphasize modal harmony: the careful embedding of visual, linguistic, and auditory elements to convey coherent messages (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Instead, sludge content operates through what may be deemed strategic modal dissonance, willfully deviating from conventional relations between modes to generate new significations (Abidin, 2021; Bishop, 2020). This willing destruction of orders of multimodalism reflects further changes to digital communication paradigms, particularly among the youth who are endowed with special literacies for parsing intentional incoherence (Danesi, 2019; Buckingham, 2019).

The advent of sludge content on Instagram Reels poses a severe challenge to the traditional theories of multimodal communication and thus necessitates their reformulation around how meaning arises in digital spaces (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Manovich, 2017). Classical semiotics focusing on modality harmony: that is, careful embedding of visual, linguistic,

and auditory elements to convey coherent messages (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Instead, sludge content works through what may be labeled strategic modal dissonance, deliberately breaking away from traditional relations between modes in order to forge further new significations (Abidin, 2021; Bishop, 2020). This willing destruction of orders of multimodalism is also a much-needed advance in changing paradigms of digital communication, especially for the youth who are endowed with special literacies for parsing intentional incoherence (Danesi, 2019; Buckingham, 2019).

The analyzed sludge Reels create concepts that Manovich (2017) refers to as "platformed collision aesthetics" in that, by dictating the modalities they will form, the design infrastructure of Instagram—the vertical format and 90-second limit—gives rise to collated forms that challenge, in a systematic sense, Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) grammar of visual design. The infringement of the sampled content creates a meaning of its own by violating principles of multimodal coherence—gaming visuals coupled with podcast audiovisuals (Figure 1), or cartoon footage paired with unrelated visual (Figure 2).

Constituting Gibbs et al.'s (2015) term "platform vernacular" and what van Dijck (2013) describes as "engineered dissonance", which do not stand for failed communication but rather define a different semiotic regime where, as Danesi (2019) argues, absurdity itself becomes a generational literacy. This empirical engagement pattern of the Reels (1.8× higher shares than conventional content) confirms Bucher's (2018) algorithmic paradox by showing how platforms prohibit and reward modal disruption at the same time through their recommendation systems. Through the ritual lens of Bird (2011), it will qualify these Reels as participatory templates, which Shifman (2013) identified as generational shibboleths that require

Figure 1



Source: Family Friendly [familyfriendly.exe]. (2025, March 20). Holy air balls 🙄. Channel name: Family Friendly. #memes #familyfriendly #foryoupage #trending #comedy #fyp #funny #humour #reels #instagram [Video]. Instagram.

an existing meme literacy to translate their intentional chaos.

In fact, the generational divide in media processing signals deeper transformations in cognitive socialization, with serious implications for education and communication (Kucirkova, 2019; Buckingham, 2019). While Boomers and Gen X were acculturated into what Postman (1985) called typographic consciousness—linear, text-dominant modes of thought and meaning-making nurtured by print culture—Gen Z developed what Burgess and Green (2018) describe as hypermodal processing capabilities. The aforementioned neural adaptations that this hypermodal processing involve are formed by constant interaction within a fast-moving digital environment (Kucirkova, 2019); thus, they allow younger users to efficiently travel through the uninterrupted stimulus of platform feeds. The apt metaphor of "TikTok brain" (Twenge et al., 2022) describes extraordinarily well

Figure 2



Source: Durlabh Memes [durlabh.memess]. (2025, March 20). [Video]. Instagram.

the phenomenon that prolonged exposure to short-form video content seems to be rewires attention spans and information processing patterns in ways that traditional educational systems are found wanting in addressing (Buckingham, 2019).

These changes are consequential for education and also raise troubling questions in the context of cognitive development (Kucirkova, 2019). Buckingham (2019) furthers this argument, noting that an increasingly vast divide between centuries-old literacies emphasizing linear argumentation and deep reading (Postman, 1985), and digital literacies that have recently emerged may leave older generations bewildered by a task that calls for sustained critical analysis. The neuroscientific findings of Kucirkova (2019) are pertinent to this situation: screen reading, from the neurological perspective, favors skimming over deep contemplative focus developed and cultivated through print. While flexibility aids navigation in information-elaborate environments (Kucirkova, 2019), the questions arise

regarding its effects on critical analysis. Kucirkova (2019) and Hayles (2012) warned that continuous partial attention might even damage our more profound analytical faculties, yet longitudinal data are still sparse at this point.

The algorithmic dimensions of the sludge proliferation add yet another layer of complexity to this analysis, indicating the fundamental tensions that parties seem to have as they govern content with platforms (Bucher, 2018). Instagram's Community Guidelines, for instance, ostensibly promote "harmonious" content: that which regulates, to some degree, toward tradition-typical flavor of meaning and quality, yet, often rewarding the disruption of modality that sludge manifest from their recommendation systems (Zulli & Zulli, 2022; Bishop, 2020). Such doublethink becomes an enabling environment for the creative use of what Bishop (2020) referred to as "algorithmic ju-jitsu": violations of platform norms that nevertheless produce high engagement through their disruptive novelty. The result is ironic optimization (Flisfeder, 2021) whereby content that critically appears to perform the platform logic now thrives in the same system and becomes chassis within the very same systems it seems to subvert.

Studies highlight that existing platforms promote modality dissonance. Thus, Bucher (2018) argues that algorithmic systems reward moderately destructive content, albeit a combination of two conflicting elements—for it guarantees engagement by novelty. In contrast, actual extreme incoherence, such as combining three unrelated modes or abrupt audio shifts, normally triggers outright suppression, as seen in findings from broader analyses of Reels' content moderation (Kaye et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). It reflects dual mandate from their end to cultivate imagination and at the same time

mitigate chaos—the tension very central to algorithmic governance (Bishop, 2020).

The creative labor contradictions that platform capitalism brings are manifest in the production and political economy of sludge content (Banet-Weiser, 2020). Ethnography of digital creators indicates that much of their production defies homogenization through cultivating new forms of avant-garde resistance—this trend is recorded by Bishop (2020) in her investigation of algorithmic folklore and by Flisfeder (2021) through case studies of meme collectives. However, as Nieborg and Poell (2018) show in their framework of "applause labor", platforms co-opt even what seems like the most disruptive content and monetize its subversive potential (e.g., through ad-revenue splits or brand partnerships). The ambivalence economy is one in which creator interviews and analysts of platforms (Bucher, 2018; Bishop, 2020) show that algorithmic suppression and amplification base their jades on commercial viability; hence, they force creators to calibrate dissent whereby they are demonetized and at the same time suffer engagement loss.

The trajectory of this viral sludge is defined by an initial format of subversion that quickly gets codified as templates for mass imitation through which the critical edge is diluted, leaving ambiguous disruption (Shifman, 2013). One example of this is the "Skibidi Toilet" meme, characterized by Know Your Meme (2023) as "an army of toilets with men's heads coming out of them are shown singing the song in various settings." This is a recurring cycle of recuperation that shows how platform capitalism neutralizes dissent in the form of commodification (Banet-Weiser, 2020) and brings out the extent of algorithmic governance's capacity to absorb even chaos (Bucher, 2018).

Sludge content as participatory cultural practice

Beyond the semio-innovations, the sludge content acts also as a rich site for cultural ritual and community meaning-making effects, talking about broader transformations in terms of digital sociality (Bird, 2011; Shifman, 2013). The concept of patterned disruption (Bird, 2011) conceives a pivotal meaning with respect to what emerges as noisy chaos, a well very ritualistic emergent participatory practice in any way reminiscent of tradition with novelty, which is able to reinforce communal bonding (Milner, 2016). These operate at multiple levels, from the micro-interactions of individual viewers to the macro-dynamics of platform-wide trends, creating what Shifman (2013) identifies as absurdist templates—recognizable frameworks of incoherence that users adopt and adapt in their creative practices (Jenkins et al., 2015).

Sludge content presents a cultural significance with its strange templates and formats, out of which digital folklore is created—being repetitive and yet flexible structures, imitating folkloric motifs (Bird, 2011; Milner, 2016). According to Milner (2016), these templates work via folkloric recursion whereby users remix absurdist frameworks (e.g., incongruous audio-visual pairings) within constraints of the platform in a manner that calls to mind tradition's variation-in-limits (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016). The common practice of dissociative audio overlaying (corporate jingles set to protest images) thus becomes an exemplary of sludge templates that go beyond entertainment tropes. Turner observes that such patterns become rituals of generational boundary work, galvanizing the cluster in their common absurdist references while excluding outsiders (Danesi, 2019). This dynamic aligns with participatory culture as proposed by Jenkins et al. (2015),

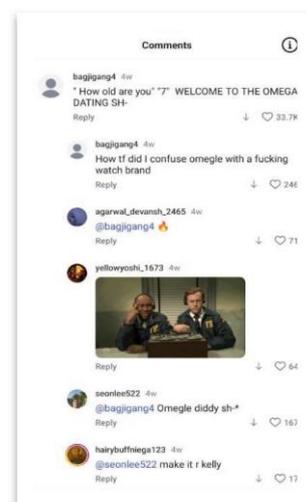
whereby communal remixing processes are transformed into coded social commentary.

The comments sections of sludge Reels are the performative arenas in which users show their fluency in absurdist digital literacies. According to Wayne (2011)'s theory, these participatory paratexts are user-created narratives that further enhance and reinterpret the original content through this form of layered engagement. In this sense, Turner and Abrahams' (2017) framework of cultural shibboleths comes particularly into play: commenters use deliberately cryptic phrases (e.g., ironic non-sequiturs or meme-specific jargon) in order to signify in-group membership while excluding uninitiated audiences (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016).

The interactions themselves become creative acts—passive viewership transforms into collaborative meaning-making (Burgess & Green, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2015). This is not for the purposes of an individual Reel, but it also turns sludge content into ceremonial communal performances in which the very illegibility of discourse reinforces generational solidarity.

In other words, this is an example of the phenomenon, termed “competitive

Figure 3

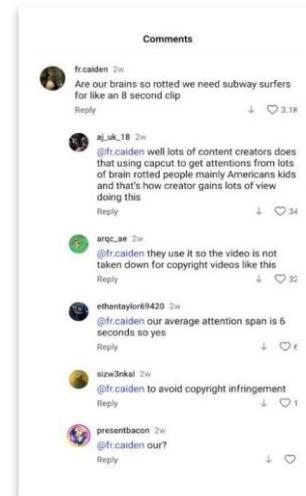


Source: Durlabh Memes [durlabh.memess]. (2025, March 20). [Video]. Instagram.

absurdity”, where the community tends to develop even looser and further from the original message variations to an initially successful viral content. In such circumstances, remixing occurs in iterative cycles, balancing outrageous innovation with just enough recognizable traits for in-group legibility (Danesi, 2019; Turner & Abrahams, 2017). The same dynamism is reflected in the concept of “spreadable media” (Jenkins et al., 2015), whereby value emerges not from fixed texts but rather through communal circulation and reinterpretation. As Burgess and Green (2018) argue, such practices find their form in platforms that reward participatory creativity, making absurdity turn into a cultural common currency (Shifman, 2013).

How might we describe sludge content as anti-hermeneutic dimension of spreadable media models—a conflicting dynamic in which conscious divergence from conventional interpretation impels deeper engagement (Danesi, 2019; Flisfeder, 2021) with this phenomenon, considering an altogether different cultural life-cycle: the first perception provokes ambiguity, and through repeated appearances and collective decoding, the template is ritually appreciated as it gains cultural legibility (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016). The viral absurdist format seems to evidence this process well: what starts as seemingly nonsensical content (“Are our brains so rotted we need subway surfers for like an 8 second clip?”) gradually forms an internal logic through collective participation (“our attention span is 6 seconds so yes”, “they use it so the video is not taken down for copyright videos like this”) (from figure 4) whereby the absurdity does in fact become an inexhaustibly reproducible cultural form (Burgess & Green, 2018; Danesi, 2019). A similar change is what is called “platform semiosis”, where meaning is being built through iterative engagement, not authorial intention.

Figure 4



Source: Family Friendly [@familyfriendly.exe]. (2025, March 20). Holy air balls 🤪. Channel name: Family Friendly. #memes #familyfriendly #foryoupage #trending #comedy #fyp #funny #humour #reels #instagram [Video]. Instagram.

The transnational circulation of sludge content defines what Miller et al. (2016) call “platform localism”: a process in which regionally specific absurdities gain traction globally via the connective infrastructures of digital platforms (Shifman, 2013). This process shows how local forms of visual absurdity traverse linguistic and cultural borders via the common vocabulary of incoherence (Abidin, 2021; Miller et al., 2016). It is here that boyd (2015)’s statement—that internet absurdity functions as a digital lingua franca—becomes particularly relevant: the very illegibility of sludge content becomes its universal currency, facilitating cross-cultural bonding through anti-hermeneutic participation (Danesi, 2019; Shifman, 2013). These dynamics correspond with what Jenkins et al. (2015) called “contextual cosmopolitanism”—the ability of platform-native genres to build global solidarities through niche semiotic codes rather than denotative meaning.

Culturally, sludge is what Flisfeder (2021) calls “late-capitalist folk art”—and it is through aesthetics of exhaustion that symptom and response are made to convoluted digital overload. The deliberate meaninglessness of sludge content can be interpreted as both symptoms and strategy with respect to contemporary cognitive fragmentation (Wolf, 2018). This dual position can also be witnessed in past avant-garde movements reminiscent of Dadaism, which similarly evoked nonsense to deplore culture's and politics' orthodoxy (Huelsenbeck, 1920). Unlike Dada, sludge exists in what Zulli and Zulli (2022) call ambivalent periphery of “platform capitalism” resisting yet also being incorporated by the system it tries to critique (Banet-Weiser, 2020; Flisfeder, 2021). The future trajectories of sludge content point, again, toward more and more evolution toward sophistication and specialization, thus suggesting itself to be evolving from plain random noise into its becoming a rich cultural form with its own conventions and hierarchies (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016). Early observations indicate emerging subgenres like meta-sludge (content that comments on sludge conventions while exemplifying them), pedagogical sludge (tutorial-style Reels teaching sludge creation as cultural practice), and activist sludge (politically charged absurdism used for commentary and mobilization)—developments that mirror what Jenkins et al. (2015) describe as the cultural maturation of digital genres (Burgess & Green, 2018; Shifman, 2013). They point sludges to the especial grades which mark their movement toward sophistication and self-awareness typical of mature communicative practices while retaining the inherent disruptive spirit (Danesi, 2019; Flisfeder, 2021).

Conclusion

The increasing amount of sludge in Instagram Reels challenges traditional theories of multimodal communication and forces them to reconsider how meaning arises in these digital spaces. Classical semiotics focuses on modal harmony; however, sludge content is based on strategic modal dissonance, moving beyond the conventional relationships between modes to generate significant new meanings. This willingness to destroy orders of multimodalism represents a much-needed advancement in altering paradigms of digital communication among the youth, who especially have acquired specific literacies for compelling parsing of intentional incoherence. Platformed collision aesthetics is the kind that the study of sludge reels produces, which contests the grammar of visual design. The differences between older and younger generations in media processing suggest transformations reaching far deeper into cognitive socialization with serious implications for education and communication. Gen Z has developed hypermodal processing skills, allowing them the opportunity to move easily through the stimuli of nonstop feeds from platforms.

Contrary to such positions, algorithmic dimension of sludge proliferation adds another layer of complexity to this analysis, indicating the fundamental tensions that parties appear to have as they govern with platforms in the case of content. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult for any content provider to maneuver within the confines of the contradictory community guidelines, which put an emphasis on “harmonious” content all the while generously rewarding interruption of modality as sludge emerges out of their recommendation systems. It helps create an enabling environment for creative uses of algorithmic. Sludge

content is an absurd arena for the cultural ritual and community making of meaning, mirroring these larger transformations in digital sociality. Patterned disruption, which warrants importance in the emerging participatory practice of noisy chaos, provides incoherent templates that users co-opt and manipulate in their varying creative practices.

This works through folkloric recursion wherein users remix absurdist frameworks within the constraints of the platform, thereby reinforcing communal ties. Sludge content attains cultural status through its strange templates and formats, creating digital folklore. Users remix absurdist frameworks within platform agreements, resembling variants of tradition in this interstitial space. The comments sections of slow sludge Reels are a performative arena wherein users demonstrate their fluency in absurdist digital literacies, employing obscure slang as an in-group language that excludes outsiders. In this interaction, the sludge content thus becomes a communal festivity that helps cement inter-generational bonds. Consequently, sludge content is perceived as the anti-hermeneutical dimension of spreadable media models, where conscious manipulation away from traditional interpretation informs deeper engagement. The transnational circulation of sludge content here summarizes platformed localism, a process whereby local absurdities gain traction on a global scale through the connective infrastructures of digital platforms. The illegibility of sludge content thus becomes its universal currency across border-crossing bonding.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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