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A SEMANTICS ANALYSIS OF REFERENCE AND REFERENT FOUND IN INSTAGRAM CAPTIONS BY PUBLIC FIGURES

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Abstrak

This study analyzes reference and referent in Instagram captions uploaded by public figures. The background of this research is based on the phenomenon of public figures using short, concise, and often ambiguous language on social media, while research on the semantic analysis of reference and referent in the context of Instagram captions remains limited, particularly studies that systematically consider visual context. This study aims to identify the types of references, determine the referent of each reference, and describe the dominant patterns of reference and referent usage in those captions. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach with data sources consisting of six Instagram captions from six public figures, namely Jennie (@jennierubyjane), Rose (@roses_are_rosie), Katarina Blue (@katarinabluu), Maudy Ayunda (@maudyayunda), Cinta Laura (@claurakiehl), and Hailey Bieber (@haileybieber). Data were collected using documentation techniques and analyzed through identification, classification, referent identification based on textual and visual context, and pattern description. The findings reveal that exophoric reference (54.55%) is more dominant than endophoric reference (45.45%), with person deixis as the most frequent type (31.82%), followed by time deixis (13.64%) and place deixis (9.09%). Visual context proved to be crucial in identifying referents, especially for place deixis. These findings enrich semantic studies on multimodal social media discourse and provide insights for both public figures and audiences in understanding Instagram captions.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary digital era has ushered in profound transformations in the ways human beings communicate, share information, construct social identities, and

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negotiate meaning across various spheres of life. The rapid evolution of digital technologies, particularly the emergence and proliferation of social media platforms over the past two decades, has fundamentally altered the landscape of public and private discourse, creating new genres of communication that differ significantly from traditional face-to-face interaction, print media, broadcast journalism, or even earlier forms of computer-mediated communication such as email and discussion forums. Unlike earlier communication technologies that primarily transmitted text or voice in relatively linear, asynchronous, and often impersonal formats, contemporary social media platforms integrate multiple semiotic modalities simultaneously, including written language, still images, moving images, sound, music, emojis, stickers, GIFs, and interactive features such as likes, shares, comments, and direct messages. This multimodality, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have extensively documented, means that meaning is no longer carried by language alone but emerges from the complex, dynamic, and often unpredictable interactions between different semiotic resources, each with its own affordances and constraints. Among the various social media platforms that have achieved global dominance in recent years, Instagram stands out as one of the most influential, visually oriented, and culturally significant spaces, particularly for public figures such as celebrities, politicians, athletes, models, musicians, actors, television personalities, and the increasingly important category of social media influencers who have built their fame and careers entirely through digital platforms. By 2024, Instagram had surpassed two billion active users worldwide, making it one of the most widely used social media platforms on the planet alongside Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp (Statista, 2024). For younger generations, particularly Generation Z and millennials, Instagram has become a primary source of news, entertainment, social interaction, cultural trendsetting, and even identity formation.

The unique combination of visual content and written text that defines the Instagram user experience has made the platform a particularly attractive and effective medium for public figures who wish to connect with their audiences, promote their professional work, share curated glimpses of their personal lives, shape their public personas, and build or maintain their personal brands. Unlike traditional mass media such as newspapers, magazines, television networks, or radio stations, where messages are meticulously crafted, edited, fact-checked, vetted, and approved by multiple layers of professional gatekeepers including editors, producers, legal teams, and public relations specialists before they ever reach the public, Instagram captions offer public figures a much more direct, personal, spontaneous, and often ambiguous channel of communication with their followers. A public figure can, within seconds, compose a caption, attach a photograph or video, and broadcast that message to tens of millions of followers worldwide without any intermediary editing, approval, or censorship, apart from the platform's content moderation policies which are typically applied reactively rather than proactively. This directness creates a powerful sense of immediacy, authenticity, and intimacy that traditional media cannot replicate, which is precisely why so many public figures have embraced Instagram as their primary or secondary communication channel. However, this same directness and spontaneity also carries significant risks. A caption written hastily, carelessly, or ambiguously can reach millions of people within minutes and can be screenshotted, shared, memefied, misinterpreted, and weaponized against the public figure before they have any

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opportunity to clarify, delete, or amend their words. The pressure to post regularly and remain visible in a highly competitive attention economy incentivizes public figures to produce a high volume of content quickly, which can lead to less careful linguistic choices, greater reliance on vague or ambiguous referential expressions, and increased potential for misunderstanding and controversy.

This distinct characteristic of Instagram communication, where brevity, visual appeal, emotional expressivity, and speed of publication often take precedence over linguistic precision, explicitness, and clarity, renders Instagram captions a particularly rich, fascinating, and underexplored object of study for linguistic analysis, especially within the subfield of semantics. Semantics, as a core and foundational branch of linguistics, is concerned with the systematic, scientific study of meaning in human language. Unlike phonology, which focuses on the systematic organization of speech sounds; morphology, which examines the internal structure of words; syntax, which investigates the rules governing the combination of words into sentences; or pragmatics, which studies how context influences the interpretation of utterances in actual communicative situations, semantics focuses on the relationship between linguistic expressions, the concepts they encode, and the world they represent. Within this rich and diverse field of inquiry, few concepts are as fundamental, as widely studied, or as practically important as the distinction between reference and referent, a distinction that can be traced back to the pioneering work of philosophers and logicians such as Gottlob Frege (1892) and Bertrand Russell (1905), who grappled with the puzzling behavior of referring expressions in natural language and the relationship between linguistic signs and the objects, concepts, or states of affairs they denote. According to the more accessible formulation provided by Kreidler (1998, pp. 51-53) in his influential textbook "Introducing English Semantics," reference is the abstract, conventional, and systematic relationship that holds between a linguistic expression and the entity or set of entities that the expression points to, picks out, denotes, or designates in the world. The referent, by contrast, is the actual entity itself that is being referred to, which may be concrete and physically present in the immediate environment of the speaker and hearer, concrete but not physically present such as an object in another room or a person in another city, abstract and intangible such as a concept, idea, emotion, or relationship, or even entirely imaginary or non-existent. For example, in the simple sentence "She will arrive tomorrow," the word "she" functions as a reference, but its specific referent can only be identified through contextual information. Similarly, "tomorrow" is a time deixis whose referent shifts depending on the day of utterance. Without a clear understanding of how reference operates and how referents can be reliably identified, accurate interpretation of any utterance becomes impossible.

When this foundational semantic framework is applied to Instagram captions written by public figures, the importance of careful, systematic analysis becomes even more pronounced. Public figures, by virtue of their enormous followings, social influence, cultural capital, economic power, and media visibility, do not use language casually or without consequence. Unlike ordinary social media users who post primarily for a small network of friends and family, public figures address audiences that can number in the tens of millions. These audiences include devoted fans, harsh critics, entertainment journalists, business partners, legal teams, and sometimes malicious actors who actively seek to misinterpret ambiguous statements. Every word that a public figure publishes online has the potential to be seen, interpreted, shared, screenshotted,

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memefied, criticized, or misrepresented by millions of people within hours of posting. A single ambiguous caption can trigger widespread speculation, generate viral controversies, damage reputations, or even create legal liability (Nugroho, 2021; Marwick & boyd, 2014). At the same time, public figures often deliberately manipulate referential ambiguity for strategic purposes. Some use vague references as a marketing tool to generate curiosity and boost engagement. Others use ambiguous references to create a sense of intimacy and parasocial closeness with followers. Still others use referential vagueness to manage legal risk or discuss sensitive topics without explicitly naming targets (Bull & Mirón, 2016; Oh, 2020). Therefore, the systematic semantic analysis of reference and referent in public figures' Instagram captions is not merely an academic exercise but a project with genuine practical and social importance.

From a formal typological perspective, referential expressions have been extensively classified into two major categories: endophoric reference and exophoric reference. Endophoric reference, from the Greek "endo-" meaning within, refers to instances where the interpretation of a referential expression lies within the linguistic text or discourse itself, without requiring external situational context. This category is subdivided into anaphora (pointing backward) and cataphora (pointing forward). Exophoric reference, from the Greek "exo-" meaning outside, depends on elements outside the text, drawing upon situational, physical, spatial, temporal, or shared contextual knowledge. Exophoric reference most commonly manifests as deixis, which includes person deixis (I, you, we), place deixis (here, there), and time deixis (today, yesterday). In Instagram captions, exophoric reference is particularly significant because visual content provides essential cues for identifying referents. Unlike traditional written texts, Instagram captions are always paired with photographs or videos. This visual content is not merely supplementary; it is the primary content that provides critical contextual information for interpreting referential expressions. When a public figure posts a photo at the beach with the caption "Finally here," the referent of "here" is immediately identifiable from the image. When a public figure posts a photo of two people with the caption "So proud of her," the referent of "her" can be identified as the female person in the photo. This multimodal, text-image interdependence is a defining characteristic of Instagram discourse.

Despite the clear relevance of reference and referent analysis to understanding Instagram captions, existing linguistic research on social media has largely focused on other areas. Studies have examined speech acts (Sari & Utami, 2022), politeness strategies (Lestari & Hidayat, 2021), code-switching (Pratiwi, 2020), and figurative language (Fauzi & Rahmawati, 2023) in Instagram captions. Some have applied Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion theory, treating reference as one cohesive device among several. However, most studies treat captions as purely linguistic texts, overlooking the crucial role of visual context in determining referents. Moreover, few studies have specifically targeted public figures as their primary object of analysis. This is a significant gap because public figures are not ordinary language users; they are professional communicators who often strategically manipulate referential ambiguity. Based on this background, this study aims to: (1) identify the types of references found in Instagram captions by public figures, (2) determine the referent of each reference based on textual and visual context, and (3) describe the dominant patterns of reference and referent usage. The scope is limited to six captions from six public figures: Jennie (@jennierubyjane), Rose (@roses_are_rosie), Katarina Blue (@katarinabluu), Maudy

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Ayunda (@maudyayunda), Cinta Laura (@claurakiehl), and Hailey Bieber (@haileybieber), posted between 2021 and 2025. The significance of this study is both theoretical, enriching semantic studies on multimodal discourse, and practical, helping followers understand captions and providing insights for public figures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on classical and contemporary works in semantics concerning reference and referent. Kreidler (1998, pp. 51-53) defines reference as the relationship between a linguistic expression and the entity it identifies in the world, while the referent is the actual entity being referred to. This distinction is fundamental because the same expression can have different referents in different contexts. Lyons (1995, pp. 64-67) adds that reference is inherently context-dependent, a point particularly relevant to Instagram captions where deictic expressions such as "here," "today," and "I" shift referents based on the time, place, and speaker. Yule (1996, pp. 17-20) emphasizes that successful reference requires the hearer to recognize the speaker's communicative intention, which is especially important when analyzing public figures who often deliberately manipulate referential ambiguity for strategic purposes.

Previous research on social media discourse has examined various linguistic phenomena but has rarely focused specifically on reference and referent from a semantic perspective. Herring (2013, pp. 12-15) provides a framework for computer-mediated discourse analysis, noting that digital communication blurs traditional deictic anchors. Zappavigna (2016, pp. 34-37) analyzes how first and second person pronouns in social media create "ambient affiliation" between public figures and their followers. Lee (2021, pp. 88-94) specifically studied K-pop idols' Instagram captions, finding that they frequently use first-person and second-person pronouns to maintain parasocial intimacy, a pattern consistent with the data analyzed in the present study. However, Lee's analysis focused exclusively on textual features without systematically incorporating visual context.

Other studies have examined deixis in digital contexts. Fuchs (2015) argues that time deixis in social media operates differently than in spoken conversation because timestamps preserve the original context indefinitely. Rellstab and Schlüter (2017, p. 205) find that place deixis in Instagram travel posts almost always relies on accompanying photographs for referent identification, concluding that "Instagram has transformed place deixis from a primarily linguistic phenomenon into a multimodal one." This finding directly supports the present study's methodological commitment to incorporating visual context into referent identification.

The integration of text and image in meaning construction has been theorized by Bateman (2014) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), who argue that text and image are co-constitutive of meaning rather than merely complementary. Despite these theoretical advances, empirical applications to referent identification in Instagram captions remain limited. Djenar, Ewing, and Manns (2018) analyzed referential expressions in Indonesian social media but considered only textual data. Nilsson (2019, pp. 112-114) explicitly calls for further research that integrates visual and linguistic analysis for referent identification, a gap the present study directly addresses.

Research on strategic referential ambiguity by public figures has been conducted by Bull and Mirón (2016, pp. 45-47), who document how politicians use vague

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expressions such as "they" to criticize opponents without explicit naming. Oh (2020, pp. 128-130) finds similar strategies among K-pop idols discussing sensitive topics. These studies establish that referential ambiguity is not accidental but often strategic, a point that informs the present study's interpretation of public figures' linguistic choices. Finally, Buckingham (2019, p. 156) argues that digital media literacy requires understanding how meaning is constructed through both language and image, underscoring the practical significance of this research.

In summary, the literature reviewed reveals a clear gap: while reference and referent have been extensively theorized in semantics, empirical application to multimodal Instagram discourse remains limited, and no study has systematically integrated visual context into the identification of referents in public figures' captions. The present study fills this gap by analyzing six captions from diverse public figures using an integrated text-visual methodology.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach

The approach used in this study is qualitative descriptive. This approach was chosen because the research aims to understand and interpret meaning deeply, specifically the relationship between reference and referent in Instagram captions. Qualitative research is considered appropriate because it is able to capture linguistic reality as it is without reducing phenomena to mere numbers or statistics (Creswell, 2014, p. 32). The descriptive nature of this study means that the findings will be presented in the form of detailed descriptions and interpretations, not statistical generalizations or numerical data. Thus, the results of this study are not only descriptive but also provide a comprehensive overview of the patterns of reference and referent usage in public figures' Instagram captions.

Research Subjects and Objects

The object of this research is Instagram captions uploaded by public figures. The research subjects consist of six public figures selected purposively (purposive sampling) based on the following criteria: they have more than one million followers on Instagram, they come from different professional backgrounds, and they actively post original captions in English or Indonesian regularly. The six public figures are: **Jennie** (@jennierubyjane) and **Rose** (@roses_are_rosie) from the K-pop group BLACKPINK; **Katarina Blue** (@katarinabluu) from the K-pop group AESPA; **Maudy Ayunda** (@maudyayunda) as an Indonesian singer and public intellectual; **Cinta Laura** (@claurakiehl) as an Indonesian actress, singer, and education activist; and **Hailey Bieber** (@haileybieber) as an American model and media personality. A total of six captions were analyzed in this study, taken from posts made between 2021 and 2025. The selected captions contain referential expressions such as pronouns (I, you, we, she), place deixis (here, there, out), time deixis (today, the night, the weekend), and definite noun phrases (my parents, the ocean, some lemonade, a bed of grass).

Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique used in this research is documentation. The researcher manually visited the Instagram profiles of the six selected public figures and took screenshots of posts containing relevant captions. For each post, the researcher

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recorded four main components: the caption text, the accompanying photo or video, the location tag (if any), and the timestamp. These four components were recorded because visual and contextual information plays a crucial role in identifying referents, especially for exophoric references such as place deixis and time deixis (Lyons, 1995, pp. 72-75). From this documentation process, six captions that met the inclusion criteria were collected. Captions that contained no referential expressions at all, such as those consisting solely of emojis or hashtags, were excluded from the analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis in this research was conducted qualitatively by following four systematic steps based on the theoretical frameworks of Kreidler (1998), Lyons (1995), and Yule (1996). The first step is identification, in which the researcher carefully reads each caption and marks every word or phrase that functions as a reference. The second step is classification, in which each identified reference is categorized into endophoric reference (anaphora and cataphora) or exophoric reference (person deixis, place deixis, and time deixis). The third step is referent identification, the most important step, in which the researcher determines the specific referent of each reference by examining the accompanying visual and contextual information, including photos, videos, location tags, and timestamps. The fourth step is pattern description, in which the researcher calculates the frequency of each reference type and describes the dominant patterns of reference and referent usage. This analysis process follows the workflow of Miles and Huberman (1994), namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Data Validity

To ensure data validity and the credibility of the findings, this study employs theoretical triangulation. Theoretical triangulation is applied by using multiple theoretical frameworks from Kreidler (1998), Lyons (1995), and Yule (1996) to cross-check the classification of references and the identification of referents. Using more than one theory aims to reduce bias that might arise if only one theoretical perspective were relied upon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 112). In addition, researcher triangulation is also applied, where the primary researcher first analyzes the data independently, and then a peer reviewer in linguistics reviews a sample of the analysis to check for consistency and agreement. Any disagreements are resolved through discussion and consensus. The data are presented in a combination of tables and narrative descriptions to help readers understand the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that from six Instagram captions analyzed from six public figures, namely Jennie (@jennierubyjane), Rose (@roses_are_rosie), Katarina Blue (@katarinabluu), Maudy Ayunda (@maudyayunda), Cinta Laura (@claurakiehl), and Hailey Bieber (@haileybieber), a total of 22 referential expressions were found. Exophoric reference (54.55%) was slightly more dominant than endophoric reference (45.45%). Among exophoric references, person deixis was the most frequent type (31.82%), followed by time deixis (13.64%) and place deixis (9.09%). This finding indicates that public figures tend to use references that depend on context outside the text, especially those referring to themselves (I, me) and others (you, we, they). This is consistent with the nature of Instagram as a visual-based platform, where captions

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function as complements to the uploaded photos or videos.

The discussion of these findings indicates that the dominance of exophoric reference shows public figures' reliance on visual context when writing captions. This aligns with Herring's (2013, pp. 12-15) statement that digital communication requires new analytical frameworks due to its unique contextual characteristics. Furthermore, the high frequency of person deixis reflects public figures' efforts to build parasocial relationships with their followers, a finding that aligns with Lee's (2021, pp. 88-91) study on K-pop idols' Instagram captions, which found that first-person and second-person pronouns are frequently used to maintain intimacy with fans.

Table 1. Distribution of Reference Types in Public Figures' Instagram Captions

Type of Reference	Sub-type	Frequency	Percentage
Endophoric	Definite Noun Phrase	10	45.45%
Exophoric	Person Deixis	7	31.82%
	Place Deixis	2	9.09%
	Time Deixis	3	13.64%
Total		22	100%

Source: Researcher's data analysis (2026)

Analysis of Reference and Referent in Each Caption

The first caption came from Jennie (@jennierubyjane): "Dracula with kevin out today." Based on the visual context and explanation from the public figure, "Dracula" refers to the title of a song being released (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase), "kevin" refers to a vocalist who collaborated on the song (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase), "out" is a place deixis used metaphorically to mean "released" (Exophoric/Place Deixis), and "today" is a time deixis referring to the date of the post (Exophoric/Time Deixis).

The second caption came from Rose (@roses_are_rosie): "the night i taught bruno how to play a korean drinking game." In this caption, "the night" functions as a time deixis (Exophoric/Time Deixis), "i" is a person deixis referring to Rose herself (Exophoric/Person Deixis), "bruno" is a definite noun phrase referring to a man named Bruno seen in the video (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase), and "a korean drinking game" is a definite noun phrase referring to a specific Korean drinking game shown in the video (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase).

The third caption came from Katarina Blue (@katarinabluu): "I need some lemonade" with a visual showing her on the roadside at night. In this caption, "I" refers to Katarina Blue herself (Exophoric/Person Deixis), and "some lemonade" refers to the lemonade drink she wanted (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase).

The fourth caption came from Maudy Ayunda (@maudyayunda): "A bed of grass, and sun in your eyes" with a visual showing her and her partner lying on the grass looking into each other's eyes. The reference "a bed of grass" refers to the grass where they were lying (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase), "sun" refers to the sun shining on them (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase), "your" is a person deixis referring to Maudy's partner (Exophoric/Person Deixis), and "your eyes" refers to the partner's eyes (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase).

The fifth caption came from Cinta Laura (@claurakiehl): "Lucky to still be able to cosplay as a little girl. Visited my parents over the weekend and yes... all we did was

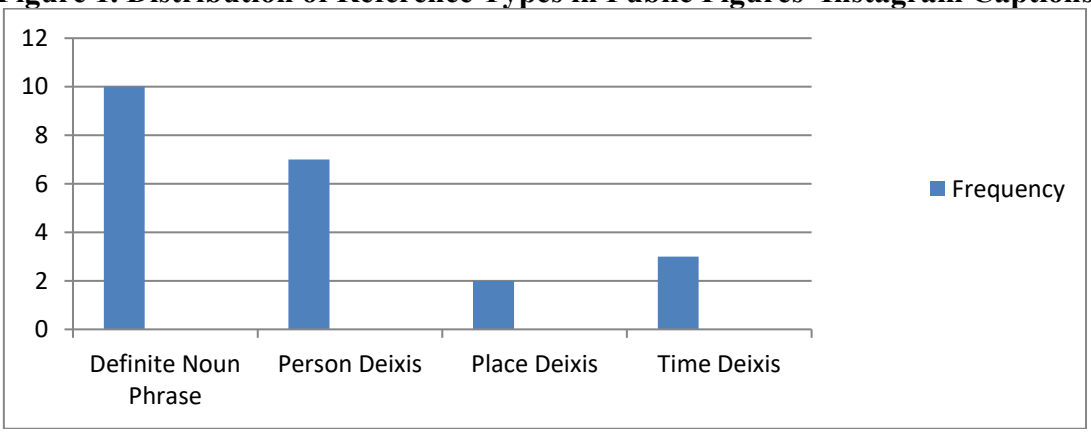
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eat and stare at the ocean!" with the location in Bali. The reference "my parents" refers to her parents (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase), "the weekend" is a time deixis referring to the weekend before the posting date (Exophoric/Time Deixis), "we" is a person deixis referring to Cinta Laura and her parents together (Exophoric/Person Deixis), and "the ocean" refers to the ocean visible in the photo (Endophoric/Definite Noun Phrase).

The sixth caption came from Hailey Bieber (@haileybieber): "I'll be here if ya need me" with a visual showing her at the beach. The references "I'll" and "me" refer to Hailey Bieber herself (Exophoric/Person Deixis), "here" is a place deixis referring to the beach where she was standing (Exophoric/Place Deixis), and "ya" is a person deixis referring to the audience (Exophoric/Person Deixis).

The discussion of these findings confirms that visual context is crucial in identifying referents, especially for place deixis such as "here" in Hailey Bieber's caption and "your" and "your eyes" in Maudy Ayunda's caption. Without visual context, these referents would be ambiguous or unidentifiable. This supports Rellstab and Schlüter's (2017, p. 205) argument that "Instagram has transformed place deixis from a primarily linguistic phenomenon into a multimodal one." In addition, some captions contained metaphorical references, such as the word "out" in Jennie's caption meaning "released" rather than literally "outside," which shows that referent identification sometimes requires interpreting figurative language and contextual knowledge (Fauzi & Rahmawati, 2023).

Figure 1. Distribution of Reference Types in Public Figures' Instagram Captions



Source: Researcher's data analysis (2026)

Based on the graph above, out of 22 referential expressions found in the six Instagram captions, the highest frequency is Definite Noun Phrase with 10 occurrences (45.45%). This indicates that public figures most frequently use definite noun phrases such as "my parents," "the ocean," "some lemonade," or "your eyes" which directly refer to concrete entities visible in the photo or video. The second highest is Person Deixis with 7 occurrences (31.82%), reflecting public figures' efforts to build interpersonal relationships with their audience through the use of first-person pronouns (I, we, me) and second-person pronouns (you, ya, your). Time Deixis appears 3 times (13.64%) and Place Deixis only 2 times (9.09%). Although Place Deixis has the lowest frequency, spatial deictic expressions such as "here" and "out" are highly significant because their referents can only be identified through visual context, not from the text

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alone. These data confirm that analyzing Instagram captions requires a multimodal approach that combines text and image.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed reference and referent in six Instagram captions from six public figures: Jennie (@jennierubyjane), Rose (@roses_are_rosie), Katarina Blue (@katarinabluu), Maudy Ayunda (@maudyayunda), Cinta Laura (@claurakiehl), and Hailey Bieber (@haileybieber). From the analysis, it was found that exophoric reference was more dominant than endophoric reference, with person deixis being the most frequent type. This indicates that public figures tend to use references that depend on visual context, especially those referring to themselves (I, me, we) and their audience (you, ya, your). The identification of referents required both textual and visual context. Without the accompanying photos or videos, referents such as "here" in Hailey Bieber's caption and "your" in Maudy Ayunda's caption would remain ambiguous or unidentifiable. This confirms that Instagram, as a visual-first platform, demands a multimodal approach to semantic analysis where text and image are analyzed together. Some captions also contained metaphorical references, such as the word "out" in Jennie's caption meaning "released" rather than literally "outside." Theoretically, this study enriches semantic studies on multimodal social media discourse by applying reference and referent theories from Kreidler (1998), Lyons (1995), and Yule (1996) to digital contexts with visual consideration. Practically, this study helps followers understand captions containing references and provides insights for public figures about how their captions may be interpreted by their audience. Future research is recommended to expand the sample size, compare across different social media platforms, and analyze audience responses in comments.

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