

Article – Theme section

Communicating health advice on social media A multimodal case study

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Abstract

Social media represent new arenas for health communication. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok provide unique opportunities for health workers to build understanding, engagement, and trust among a broad and young audience. At the same time, such platforms demand of health workers a careful balance between social closeness and professional distance. The article is based on a case study in which the award-winning Norwegian psychologist Maria Abrahamsen's practice of health communication on Instagram is studied through the lens of multimodal discourse analysis. Following a bottom-up method, the study starts with a close reading of a single Instagram post, where video and written verbal text interact closely. The entire account is then studied as a complex case of mediated health communication. Conclusively, after a discussion of genre implications, the article suggests possible solutions to key challenges concerning the followers' engagement and trust.

Keywords

health communication, social media, trust, multimodality, case study

Introduction

Today, many people turn to social media for health information and health advice (Chen & Wang, 2021). And many internet users experience that advice found online influences the health-related decisions they make in their daily lives (O’Dea & Campbell, 2011; Campbell et al., 2016). For qualified health workers, social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok thus represent potentially important arenas for health communication. They provide unique opportunities for health workers to develop a relationship of trust with a wide audience (Munson et al., 2013). On the other hand, on social media, health workers must compete with cat videos and lifestyle influencers for media users’ attention (Steffens et al., 2020). There is also a risk of sensitive information being exposed in the comment fields (Yonker et al., 2015). How can professional health workers utilise the new opportunities that social media represent, and how can they meet the challenges?

This study focuses on one “best practice” case. The Norwegian psychologist Maria Abrahamsen offers advice concerning mental health to a broad audience on Instagram and TikTok. As of April 2022, Abrahamsen’s Instagram account (Abrahamsen, n.d.) *psyktdeg* (a play on words, meaning both “mental you” and “extremely you”) had around 77,000 followers, and her media practice has brought her several awards and nominations. The objective of the study is to offer a detailed look at a best practice case. Results from the analysis will contribute to both the academic and the professional conversations regarding the role of social media in health communication. Applying a method of multimodal discourse analysis, the case is examined and discussed with regard to the following research questions: *How does the psychologist Maria Abrahamsen use Instagram to disseminate health advice to a public audience, and what new opportunities and challenges does such a media practice represent for health workers?* Findings from the study include suggestions on how engagement and trust can be stimulated by specific textual strategies.

Theoretical perspectives and earlier research

Health advice as a form of science communication

Health information and advice offered by professional, well-educated health workers in open public media channels can be seen as a form of popular science communication. Within the discipline of public understanding of science (PUS), three crucial factors have been identified for popular science communication to function effectively (Bauer, 2009). First, complex conditions and contexts must be simplified and concretised for non-professionals to gain a useful understanding of the topic. Second, these topics must be related to individuals’ everyday lives and to issues they are concerned with, so that their engagement and commitment is aroused. The third factor is about trust and credibility, which, in recent decades, has been central to the work of disseminating research-based

knowledge (ibid.). In a digitalised media society where it has become difficult to distinguish between fake and real news, and between authorised and unauthorised advisors, professional expertise is often met with scepticism (Rauch, 2021). Thus, today's knowledge communicators must formulate their message with three parallel objectives: They must support understanding, evoke engagement, and build trust. How can such complex objectives be achieved by professional health workers moving from well-known arenas for information and dialogue, like health centers and school visits, to social media like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok? This question will guide central parts of the analysis in the present study. According to Davies and Hara (2017, p. 564), digital and social media – ideally – promise to “open up science, enable dialogue, and create a digital public sphere of engagement and debate”. At the same time, they point out that there is often a big difference between the opportunities that media technology offers and the communication practices that actually take place.

Transformation of genre conventions

When communication traverses from physical arenas to digital platforms, there is always a change in the genres used in the communicative interaction (Lüders et al., 2010). By *genre*, we are referring here to a recognisable pattern of communication – a set of conventions and expectations related to the form and content of utterances (Vanini, 2007). Such genre conventions are constantly evolving and adapt over time to the forms of communication that work best in specific types of social situations (Miller, 1984). What is perceived as acceptable and expected behaviour by a psychologist in social media will be different from what is expected behaviour in a psychologist's office. At the same time, there will probably also be certain commonalities between the two types of behaviour, since the participants in the communication, as well as the objectives of the communication, overlap to a considerable extent. Therefore, relevant topics for discussion in the present study are how the forms of communication observed in the analysed case relate to other comparable genres of communication, and what implications such genre features have regarding the social and professional practice being exercised.

Health communication on social media

Professional health advice in social media aimed at a wide and often a young audience is a relatively new phenomenon. However, the commitment among health workers, as well as the interest in the international research community, have increased in the last decade (Yonker et al., 2015; Martini et al., 2018; Basch et al., 2021). In the following, I will focus on studies dealing with two of the key issues related to popular dissemination of expert knowledge mentioned above: How can health workers evoke interest and engagement in an audience of social media users, and how can they become trusted advisors? For a professional health worker, the balance between appearing as a relevant and engaging

dialogue partner to a wide media audience and at the same time maintaining a necessary professional distance can be difficult to find (Yonker et al., 2015; Munson, 2013).

Several studies of health communication on social media are aimed at the channels' potential for emotional appeals. Findings suggest that the use of video and the use of humour may stimulate user engagement. Kite et al. (2016) examined 20 Facebook accounts run by Australian public health organisations over 360 days of posting, focusing on what kind of content generated the most user engagement in the forms of likes, shares, and comments. They concluded that video usually generated a high level of engagement, compared with other media forms. Martini et al. (2018) concluded that YouTube videos can work well as a channel for information and advice on mental health. In their study, statistical methods were used to examine many aspects of 44 videos and the users' responses to them. They write (p. 335):

Information may be more effective in reaching the audience if delivered in video format, if shared in more than one media, if it includes personal experience and some humour in content and more detailed information about types and format of treatment.

Several studies emphasise the importance of humour (e.g., Basch et al., 2021; Steffens et al., 2020). Basch et al. (2021) investigated the popularity of TikTok videos used in health communication. They conclude that videos involving humour, music, and dance lead to increased engagement. The study compares a campaign about wearing a breathing mask that uses humour and dance with the World Health Organization's more serious videos with the same topic and message, distributed on the same channel. The study showed large differences in engagement and number of views. The authors write: "Given the short length of TikTok videos, further research is needed to determine the types of messages that can effectively be conveyed on this platform" (Basch et al. 2021, p. 4). A study based on interviews with 21 health workers involved in vaccine promotion on social media revealed both promising opportunities and key challenges (Steffens et al., 2020). The health workers involved found it challenging to compete with all other types of attractive content (such as cat videos and memes). On the other hand, they experienced positive effects of humour, personal stories, and two-way communication. Two-way communication is, however, an affordance of social media representing both opportunities and risks in the context of health communication. On the one hand, it allows users to participate and to share their ideas and opinions. On the other hand, it represents a risk of sensitive information being published and possibly misused in other contexts (Yonker et al., 2015; Munson, 2013).

The literature does not offer clear and unambiguous answers as to how professional health workers can gain the trust of social media users. Some commentators state that young people usually prefer to obtain information and advice from their own friends or other people they can identify with (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2020; Yonker et al., 2015). Others emphasise the importance of expertise. Fountain et al. (2019) write that scepticism can be

counteracted by being careful to cover claims with expertise and explicitly stressing that the information is credible. The dilemma is explained as a crash between different sets of norms and expectations by Ferrel and Campos-Castillo (2022, p. 2):

Best practices for how professionals can cue their credibility on social media are unclear [...]. This is because on social media platforms for health advice like Twitter, the norm is to present yourself as an approachable peer, while in professional settings, the norm is distinguishing yourself from the lay public to signify you are an authority.

In summary, we can state that the research literature identifies new sets of opportunities and challenges when social media are used to reach a broad, and in particular a young, audience with health-related advice. What is missing in the literature is a collection of detailed empirical studies of how these opportunities are utilised in practice, and how the challenges are handled through discursive choices made by relevant actors. The present study responds to this knowledge gap by providing an in-depth study of a selected case. The case represents a best practice in a Norwegian context, and the objective of the analysis is to provide a deep understanding of how expert knowledge is shared and how social relations are constructed through an orchestration of semiotic resources. Social semiotic theory of meaning-making and genre change adds new perspectives to the field of study.

Analytical and methodological framework: Multimodal discourse analysis

How is understanding, engagement, and trust built when health workers use social media as a channel for public health advice? The field of multimodal discourse studies, and the related theory of social semiotics, provide relevant analytical tools for elucidating this question. The three mentioned success criteria identified within research on science communication (Bauer, 2009) can be connected to the multifunctionality of language described in social semiotic theory. Social semiotics is a theory of meaning-making, that is, of how social actors (individuals or organisations) use semiotic modes (words, images, colours, music, etc.) to construct representations of reality and build social relationships (Halliday, 1978; van Leeuwen, 2005). Central to social semiotics is the theory that all utterances are multifunctional, in the sense that they always carry three forms of meaning simultaneously. *Ideational meaning* concerns what the utterance says about the world, i.e., how people, places, processes, etc., are represented semiotically. *Interpersonal meaning* concerns how the utterance establishes or changes the social relationship between the participants in the communication activity. *Compositional meaning*, on the other hand, concerns how wholeness and coherence are established in the interaction between the various components of the utterance. All these dimensions of meaning, called the metafunctions of language, are present in any utterance, whether it is a three-word text message, a car advertisement, or a multimodal post on Instagram.

Although social semiotics has its origins in linguistics (Halliday, 1978), the theory has been developed and adapted over recent decades for the analysis of complex, or *multimodal*, texts. In multimodal analysis, we examine how different semiotic resources, both individually and in interaction with each other, create complex meaning potentials when texts are created and applied in specific social situations and practices (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2009). Of specific interest are practices and genres that are changing due to cultural or technological transformations. Multimodal social semiotic analysis is thus a form of discourse studies particularly well-suited for investigating the media practice that is being examined in the present study. Discourse is, in this context, understood as a communication activity in which worldviews and social relations are shaped by linguistic (or multimodal) choices (Fairclough, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Methodological approach

In social semiotic analysis, we are concerned with studying all the choices made in the design and production of a text and discussing the synthesis and effects of these choices considering the context. By “context”, we mean the situational and socio-cultural surroundings that both shape and are shaped by the utterance. The purpose of the analysis is most often to describe the potentials for meaning-making that lie in a certain utterance, or to reveal underlying patterns in a certain communicative practice – patterns that have consequences for how text users perceive reality and how they interact with each other (van Leeuwen, 2005; Jewitt, 2009).

Furthermore, case studies are common in social semiotics since such studies require a detailed description and interpretation of concrete utterances and of their context. Vanini (2007, p.134) writes: “Sociosemiotic ethnography must be concerned not with the study of discourse in abstract and general terms but instead with the analysis of specific instances of discourse”. Although case studies primarily provide insight into the case being investigated, such investigations will often lead to knowledge that is also relevant for other cases with similar contextual circumstances (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

In the present study, a particular media practice is examined, namely the Instagram account *psyktdeg*, which is carried out by a particular social actor, the psychologist Maria Abrahamsen. The investigation follows a bottom-up methodology inspired by Norman Fairclough’s three-part model for critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2010).¹ It starts with a close reading of a *multimodal phenomenon*. At this stage, one selected Instagram post is analysed with a focus on the semiotic metafunctions mentioned above, and how they relate to understandability, engagement, and trust. Thereafter, the *multimodal event* is examined, i.e., the phenomenon’s textual and medial surroundings and situational circumstances. In the last step, the genre relations that contribute to giving the examined phenomenon meaning and social functions are discussed.

Social semiotic discourse studies often aim to uncover transformation and change, more specifically, showing how textual changes are connected to changed social practices

and structures (van Leeuwen, 2005; Vanini, 2007; Aiello, 2020). In the present case, we are concerned with how the new communicative potentials that digital network technology offers affect the genres that can be roughly labelled as “professional health advice”. The method is mainly of a deductive, theory-driven nature since it rests on concepts and perspectives taken from social semiotic theory and previous research. Such a study will nevertheless always contain inductive elements, since it is the interpretation of the data material itself that guides which theoretical perspectives are highlighted and discussed in the last part of the study.

The method has clear limitations. It is fully based on the researcher’s interpretation of text products (both of social media texts and of the research literature), and it does not provide direct access to either the text creator’s intentions and reflections or to the actual effects of the texts on readers. This type of text study should therefore be supplemented with studies that use other, complementary methods.²

Presentation of the case

In the present study, a specific social practice – the public dissemination of health advice on social media – is examined by means of a case analysis. The case has been strategically chosen. I looked for a best practice case, representing a “state of the art” – with assumably high social impact – and relatable for other Norwegian and Scandinavian actors in similar fields of practice. Psychologist Maria Abrahamsen stands out among Norwegian health workers who offer health advice on social media due to her style and popularity. As of April 2022, she had more than 77,000 followers on Instagram and about 27,000 on TikTok. In a Norwegian context, those are high numbers. Her activity on social media is also acknowledged by her peers. She received the Åse Gruda Skard Prize in 2020, awarded by the Norwegian Psychological Association, for her contribution to the popular dissemination of psychological knowledge. She has received public attention through a number of media reports, mainly focusing on her social media practice of combining solid professional knowledge with entertaining elements such as dance, singing, and comedy (e.g., Lunde, 2020; Vaa, 2021). Thus, the case represents a best practice and is not suitable for drawing a representative picture of the entire population, i.e., of all health workers who use social media for a similar purpose. A close analysis of her practice can still provide original and nuanced knowledge concerning how this media channel can be used within this field of practice. Such knowledge is useful for researchers and students within media studies and health communication and can contribute to a raised awareness among practitioners.

Maria Abrahamsen (b. 1992) started as a municipal psychologist in Farsund in southern Norway in March 2020 and found that her patients did not show up for their appointments when the country shut down the same month due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She then opened accounts on TikTok and Instagram and quickly gained thou-

sands of followers. After some time, she quit her job as a municipal psychologist to devote herself to the activities of her own company. In 2021, she published the popular science book *Psykt Deg. Hva er det egentlig som foregår på innsida?* [*Psykt Deg – What's going on on the inside?*] She also runs a podcast, writes books, gives lectures, and offers individual video-based psychological consultations through the company *Epsyk*. Abrahamsen largely uses the same video material on TikTok and on Instagram. However, on Instagram, the format allows for longer verbal texts to be included alongside the video clips. This is also where she has the most followers. Therefore, in this study, only her practice on Instagram is examined.

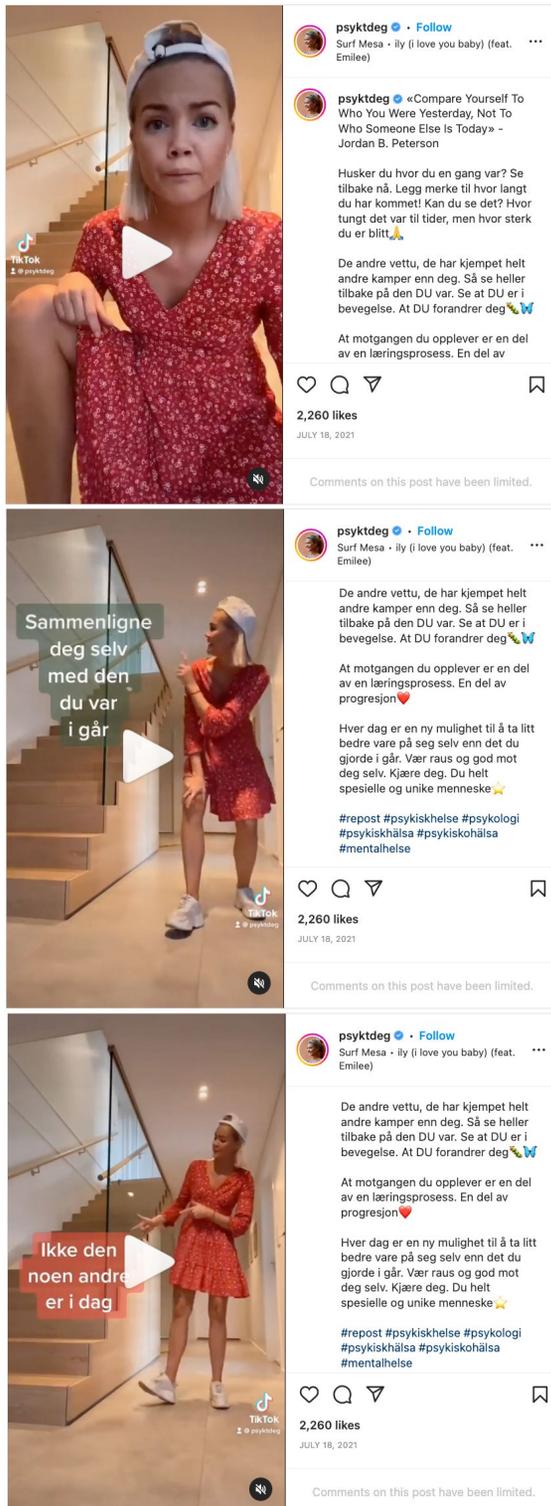
Analysis of selected Instagram post

Following the analytical model presented above, I start with a close reading of one selected post on the Instagram account in question. The close reading follows guidelines from social semiotic analysis (Gnach et al., 2022), starting with a detailed description of the selected text, before the text is analysed with regard to the textual functions in focus: the construction of understandability, engagement, and trust. The post is almost randomly selected, but not completely. I wanted to focus on a post characterised by what Abrahamsen is best known for: combining advisory texts on mental health with entertaining videos. The selected text was posted on July 18, 2021 (Abrahamsen, 2021).

Upon opening the post, we are met with a square-format window divided into two panes (see Figure 1). In the left pane, we see a video window; in the right pane, we see a verbal text field that is split into four parts. (If viewed on a mobile device, the text field appears below the video.) In the upper part of the text field, we find the sender's signature with a picture and the account name *psyktdeg*, as well as information about the music that accompanies the video. The account name is clickable, both in the top field and in the main field below. The main part of the verbal text field is devoted to a text consisting of five short paragraphs followed by six hashtags. This field can be scrolled through, and below the hashtags follows a series of readers' comments. In the bottom part of the text field, we learn that the post has received 2,171 likes (as of April 2022). The video clip is 15 seconds long. In Figure 1, we see three screenshots that show different parts of the video and of the scrollable text (all screenshots in the article are used with permission from Maria Abrahamsen).

In the video, we first meet the character played by Abrahamsen wearing a red summer dress, white trainers, and a cap turned backwards. She is kneeling and taking a sip from a water bottle while looking directly into the camera with an expression that gives the viewer associations firstly of a deeply concentrating, and then joyfully smiling, teenager who has just pressed the record button. The camera is placed close to floor level in a stairwell in a residential building. She then quickly stands up, walks backwards while smiling and then begins to dance backwards while pointing to two text elements that appear

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in large white fonts next to the dancing figure. The first text reads: “Compare yourself to who you were yesterday”, and the second immediately follows: “Not who anyone else is today” (my own translations). In the last seconds of the video, the red-clad figure dances backwards all the way to the end of the hallway, now with slightly more advanced dance steps. The song *I Love You Baby* by the group Surf Mesa is played throughout the video. The lyrics we hear during the 15 seconds go like this:

I love you baby and if it's quite all right,
I need you baby to warm this lonely night
I love you baby, Trust in me when I say...

In the scrollable text field in the right half of the display, we can read the following five paragraphs, starting with a citation from the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson. (The Norwegian sections are translated by me):

«Compare Yourself To Who You Were Yesterday, Not To Who Someone Else Is Today» - Jordan B. Peterson

Do you remember where you once were? Look back now. Notice how far you've come! Can you see it? How hard it was at times, but how strong you have become 🌟

The others, y'know, they have fought completely different battles than you. So, rather look back on who YOU used to be. See that YOU are moving. That YOU are changing 🌟

Figure 1. Three screenshots from Maria Abrahamsen's Instagram account *psyktdeg*, viewed on a laptop. Downloaded April 4, 2022.

That the adversity you are facing is part of a learning process. A part of progress♥

Every day is a new opportunity to take better care of yourself than you did yesterday. Be generous and kind to yourself. Dear you. You very special and unique person✨

The six hashtags indicate the post's relation to the field of psychology. They are written in both Norwegian and Swedish. Translated to English, they say: #repost; #mental health; #psychology; #mental un-health. Then follows 24 comments from readers. All are short; they express gratitude or excitement for the post, and many consist only of emojis. One hints at the comment author's own mental challenges. Abrahamsen has not responded verbally to the comments, but she has "liked" almost all of them. At the bottom of the column, there is a message saying that "comments on these posts have been limited", indicating that the comment field is moderated by either Abrahamsen herself or others with administrator rights.

What kind of meaning potentials does this composite utterance contain, which can explain Abrahamsen's popularity among followers as well as the recognition from the professional community? In the analysis below, I use the three meaning dimensions described in the theory section as a starting point. They work as tools for examining how the different semiotic modes function together to stimulate understanding, engagement, and trust among readers.

Function 1: Making psychological issues understandable

The professional message in the post is obviously carried by the verbal elements. These are presented on three levels. Firstly, the core content is formulated as two short sentences highlighted in Norwegian in the video and reproduced in the original English version at the top of the text field. These sentences, which together form an aphorism, summarise the post's topic and main message. Both the topic and the message are then further elaborated in the other paragraphs in the text field. Here, the psychologist Abrahamsen is touching on professional insights concerning projection, self-awareness, and identity building – all "translated" into a vernacular, youthful language and concretised into recognisable everyday experiences.

A third level in the post's representation of professional content lies in the hashtags. Through the six hashtags following the five short paragraphs of text, the reader is invited to explore similar content on the networked platform, but now on a very general level, for example, via the hashtag #psychology.

Function 2: Building engagement and trust

It is particularly the *interpersonal* dimension of Abrahamsen's communication that makes it stand out. Trust is built through a combination of professional authority and social identification. The professional authority is established through the account information that Abrahamsen is a trained psychologist, author, and award winner (more on that

below). The hashtags used in the post provide a link to this authority. On the other side, Abrahamsen uses a style in the verbal texts that young readers will recognise, such as here: “The others, y’know, they have fought completely different battles than you”. Social identification is also sought to be established by the playful character portrayed in the video by Abrahamsen’s outfit (especially the cap turned backwards), her facial expressions, and her dancing. The young viewer is thus invited to think: “She knows more than I do, but she is still quite similar to me”. In this way, Abrahamsen offers a solution to the contrasting situation identified in the literature review: Namely, that young people often trust their own friends’ advice and experiences more than they trust experts (Yonker et al., 2015), while at the same time they often have increased trust in a message that has a solid scientific foundation (Fountain et al., 2019). A prerequisite for this platform of trust is that the “teenage girl” is accepted as a credible character, or at least as “passable”, and not as a constructed or pathetic figure. The high number of followers indicates that Abrahamsen is succeeding with this strategy.

The popularity of Abrahamsen’s account is probably also related to another side of its emotional appeal, namely the video clips’ combination of entertainment value and recognisability. In the examined post, the video clip is carefully edited and well-produced, while at the same time imitating amateur footage in a manner that creates recognition in the viewer. This is a tried and tested form of content creation within the rapidly growing group of young media personalities known as *lifestyle influencers*. These are highly profiled media actors who build trust with their young followers through a personal, almost intimate style of communication, while at the same time sharpening a specific (often promotional) message through carefully planned production and editing (Torjesen, 2021). A major difference is that Abrahamsen clearly steps into a *role* when she portrays a teenage girl; this appears as acting, not as an authentic representation of herself as a person. This becomes evident because there are also many videos on her account where she is not portraying a character, but appears and speaks in a way that you would expect from a professional psychologist.

In the examined video, she also uses several tools suitable for appealing to the audience both emotionally and sensorially. The experience of close contact with another human being is constructed through close-ups of the face and a direct gaze into the camera (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 116). Sensory stimulation is achieved both through the colourful dancing figure and through the interaction between the active body language and the text elements exposed on the video; a lot is going on in a short span of time. Finally, one can assume that the direct and personal form of inquiry in the verbal text helps to build emotional engagement. The text is characterised by empathic advice, the use of personal pronouns, and the use of emojis. The language throughout has an oral and personal feel, with a clear sender’s voice: “Do you remember where you once were? Look back now. Notice how far you’ve come!”

The selected Instagram post touches upon a theme that has received a lot of attention in the critical conversation around social media: that the massive exposure of (apparent) success can have a depressing effect on other individuals. Based on the number of responses to the analysed post, we can assume that Abrahamsen's approach to this type of problem is perceived by many as relevant. If so, the playful, or even comic characters and entertaining elements are not only for amusement, but rather work as an entrance to self-reflection of a recognisable issue.

The context of mediation

The selected text is not read in a vacuum. It appears together with a large number of similar posts on Abrahamsen's Instagram account. It is also framed by the information in the account profile, which is easily visible to whoever views the *psyktdeg* account (see Figure 2). Moreover, it belongs to a media landscape shaped by similar practices. All healthcare workers who offer public health information and advice via social media contribute to the building of expectations and interpretive frameworks for each other's readers. An understanding of the genre is gradually being developed, both among the professional actors and among their readers.

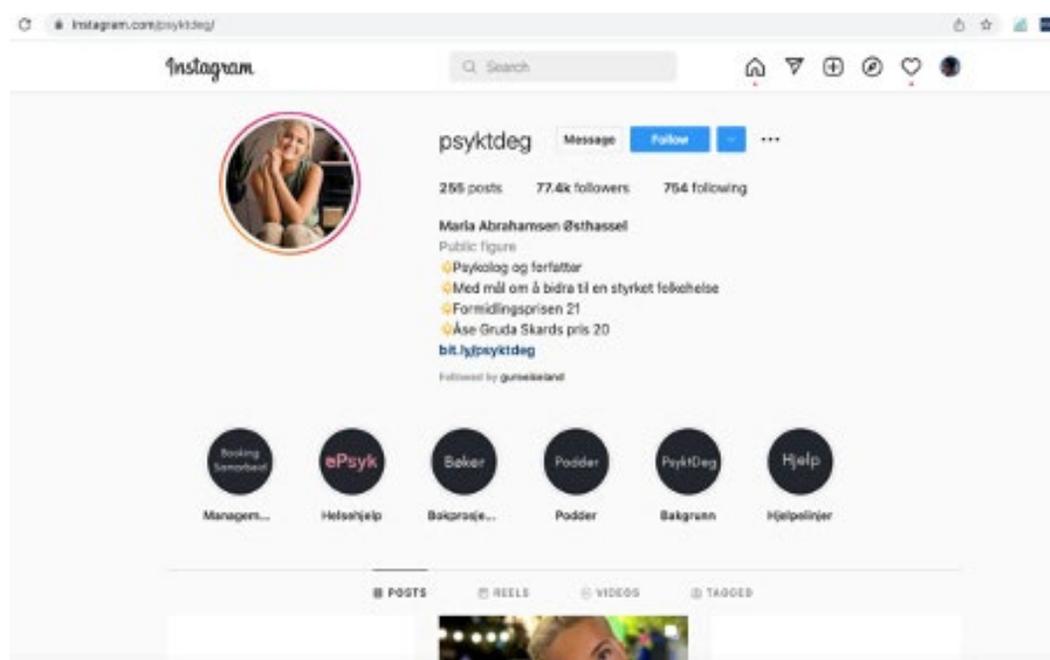


Figure 2: The account profile of Maria Abrahamsen's Instagram account *psyktdeg*. Downloaded April 4, 2022. Abrahamsen changed her name from Maria Abrahamsen Østhassel to Maria Abrahamsen during the research period.

The account information itself is semiotically complex. It consists of photo, written text, graphics, colours, and links. It constructs a sender identity that includes both expertise (it is stated that Abrahamsen is a psychologist, author, and award winner), popularity (she has many followers), and certain aspects of her personality (she appears in the profile picture as young, cheerful, and welcoming). At the same time, a certain distance and demarcation is established. The page does not display an email address, and in one of the round boxes at the bottom of the field (Stories Highlights), it is stated that she can be contacted through a management agency. It also becomes clear that she does not offer individual healthcare via the Instagram account, but via another service. The fact that the account also has a commercial side is evident both from the management box and from the box where you can buy her book with just a few clicks. A review of media coverage and prices can be obtained by clicking on the Stories Highlight box labelled “Bakgrunn” [Background].

Anyone who takes the time to look at several of the posts will quickly discover that Abrahamsen appears with a complex sender identity. In all the videos, we meet Abrahamsen herself, usually alone. In many of them she is portraying a character, such as the “teenage girl” we saw in the analysed sample text. She also uses other, often comic forms, e.g., miming to a soundtrack containing a strange, foreign voice, manipulating her own face using image filters from mobile apps, or portraying an emotional state by means of exaggerated mimicry (see Figure 3).

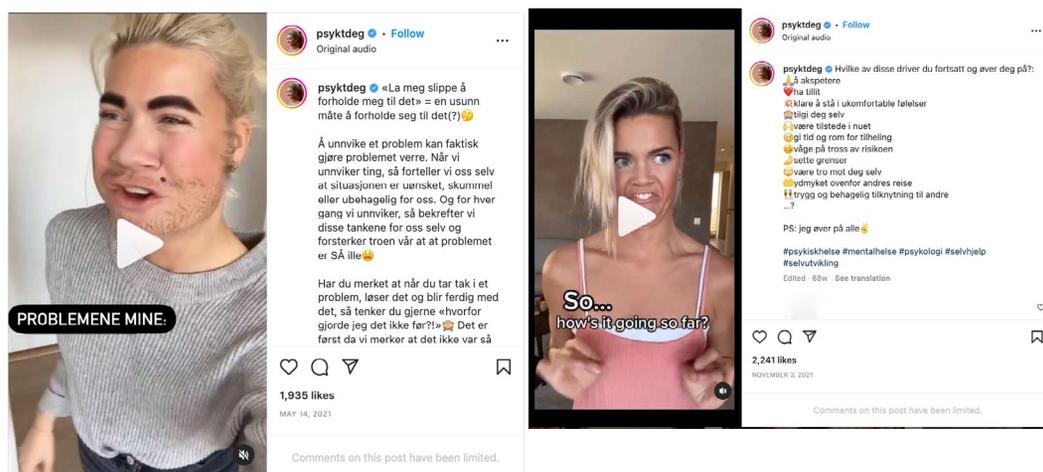


Figure 3. Two examples of playful characters, both posted in the same period as the post analysed above. To the left, she uses an image filter on her own face to picture metaphorically “the problems haunting us”. To the right, she uses quickly changing facial expressions and body movements to show the wide spectrum of personal and emotional aims that may cost a lot of energy for a person to pursue. Downloaded November 24, 2022.

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In many posts, and increasingly so in more recent posts, she is not portraying any playful character, but addresses the viewer as herself, a psychologist offering advice on mental health. In some posts, we see Abrahamsen in serious conversation with other people, such as the Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, as we see in two of the posts in Figure 4 below. The style in the verbal text elements also varies, depending on the topic. In some cases, the style is matter-of-fact, clear, and professional (as in a post about suicidal thoughts), in other cases it is youthful, colloquial, empathic, and often with elements of slang and lots of emojis.

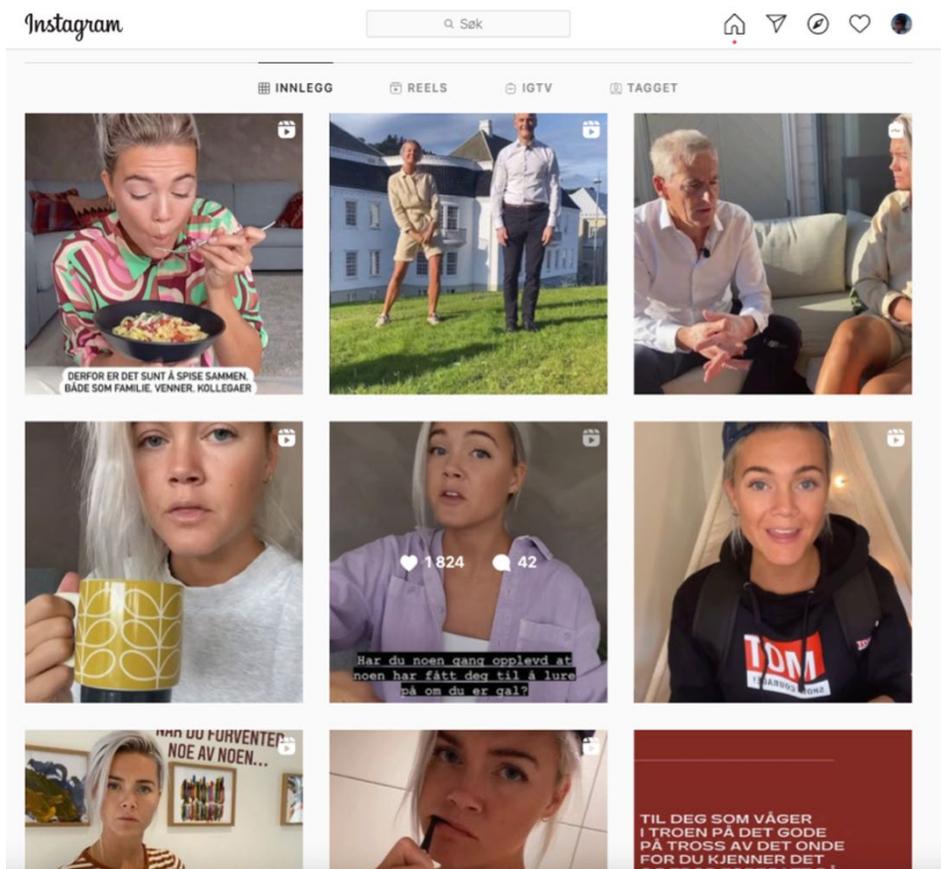


Figure 4: The psychologist Maria Abrahamsen appears with many different expressions on her Instagram account *psyktdeg*. Downloaded April 4, 2022.

All the posts are followed by likes and a series of comments. The comment field is seemingly moderated (it is stated at the bottom that “comments are limited”). Although most of the comments only consist of brief utterances of encouragement and positive emojis, there are also some respondents who relate more explicitly to the content of the post by mentioning their own challenges.

Summary of the analysis

The psychologist Maria Abrahamsen utilises the Instagram format in a distinctive way when she combines brief, often playful and humorous video clips with written verbal texts. The format facilitates a specific division of discursive tasks. The video clips aim to evoke engagement through identification and attraction, while the written elements are used for pedagogical formulations of the professional message. The two parts have a recognisable thematic connection, and the feeling of an overarching wholeness is often strengthened by the music played over the video. Yet, the demand for active interpretation and meaning-construction by the viewer is often sharpened by a certain degree of tension in the interaction between the modes. In the video frame, Abrahamsen is sometimes playing a character, and sometimes not. When she is portraying a character, the character is not the sender of the verbal message. For example, the “teenage girl” dancing in the selected example is obviously not the sender of the precise mental advice in the text field, or the professional-looking hashtags below. It is then up to the viewer to identify the video clip’s “real” sender (the psychologist Abrahamsen) and implicit message if a coherent whole is to be established. Thus, the presentation both requires and stimulates a process of active interpretation and meaning-making.

Genre relations: Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue...

As mentioned in the theory section of this article, the interpretation and effect of an utterance will depend on the expectations and conventions linked to the genre to which the utterance is perceived to belong (Miller, 1984; van Leeuwen 2005). The Instagram account *psyktdeg* represents a new media practice, where qualified health professionals use social media to communicate directly to broad groups of interested recipients. We can determine that the practice is “new”, since the arena itself is relatively new, and since it has characteristics of representation and interaction that distinguish it from previous arenas for professional health communication and advice. Yet, it is obvious that the practice is part of a network of related practices, both old and new. In terms of content, it is closely related to earlier forms of health advice as we know them, such as health centre work, class visits, leaflets distributed in schools and leisure clubs, magazine and news media columns, public media campaigns, websites with health information, and more. Abrahamsen writes on her Instagram account that her media practice springs directly from her practice as a municipal psychologist. In terms of form, however, it is more similar to the practice of the wide range of lifestyle influencers who appear on the same media channels. On the Instagram profile, it appears that Abrahamsen is associated with an agency that profiles and promotes a number of influencers who give advice on health, diet, recycling, and the like.

However, as mentioned in the analysis, Abrahamsen's media practices clearly differ from many of today's lifestyle influencers who appear on similar channels. While commercial beauty and lifestyle influencers often use an amateurish style of production to appear authentic and honest (Torjesen, 2021), Abrahamsen uses similar techniques to create a comic or artistic attraction and to illustrate her professional message. Her various characters are hardly intended to establish an impression of authenticity, since they stand in clear contrast to her identity as a trained psychologist, which is fully visible in many posts as well as in the profile information. On the other hand, followers can establish both a sender identity and a social relation to this identity through Abrahamsen's use of role-playing and humour. It should also be mentioned that before her breakthrough on Instagram, Abrahamsen was known as Norway's first TikTok psychologist (Lunde, 2020). Thus, the TikTok format of brief, entertaining, and creative video clips (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) represents another thread in the web of genre elements, adding meaning and recognition to followers familiar with this format.

Losses, gains, and new challenges

What, then, are the most important genre changes represented by Abrahamsen's media practice compared to previous forms of public health advice targeted towards young people? In what ways do the changes and potentials uncovered through this case study respond to digital media's invitations to "open up science" (Davies & Hara, 2017) and to the challenges that previous research has identified? Several commentators have pointed out that it is difficult for experts to evoke engagement and gain trust from young media users, who are constantly bombarded by entertaining media impressions and who prefer to seek advice from their own friends and acquaintances (Steffens et al., 2020; Yonker et al., 2015). We have seen that Abrahamsen utilises the Instagram format to build a distinctive form of multimodal aesthetics and cohesion, where the video and music track create attention and emotional engagement while the verbal text field unpacks the post's actual message with professional clarity. Identification and recognition are built through the videos' often comic characters, the youthful music track, and the personal style of the verbal text element. At the same time, there is enough contrast and tension between the video and the verbal text that the user is "forced" to invest some extra mental effort to construct a coherent whole. The effect of such tensions, or "gaps", between the different elements of a text, potentially stimulating engagement and active interpretation, is described both in literature theory (Iser, 1974) and in multimodality theory (Engebretsen, 2012).

Thus, the format invites the audience to build a relationship of trust on several foundations. It is built partly through the professional authority and popularity that becomes evident in the profile information, partly through the "illusion of similarity", which is constructed in the youthful, and often personal, style of the videos and texts. In this way,

Abrahamsen builds a multi-faceted sender identity, potentially gaining followers' trust due to both competence and identification. The fact that Abrahamsen represents a Norwegian voice in the vast international "marketplace" of influencers and advisors online strengthens the image of a close and accessible advisor. Thus, the Abrahamsen case suggests a possible solution to a key challenge facing professional health workers reaching out to a wide audience in social media: the balance between appearing as an engaging and relevant dialogue partner for the followers, on the one hand, and maintaining a necessary professional authority and distance on the other (Ferrel & Campos-Castillo, 2022; Yonker et al., 2015; Munson, 2013).

Concerning the challenge that Yonker et al. (2015) point out regarding sensitive information potentially being shared or stolen due to followers leaving comments on the posts, this case only provides a partial solution. It shows that the comment field can be moderated, and thereby problematic comments can be removed – whether it is incitement or self-disclosure that is considered problematic. However, the examined account does also contain a small number of comments where the comment authors mention their own challenges. These comments add an aura of relevance and dialogue to the posts, and the followers' right to have a voice in the discourse is acknowledged. On the other hand, it can also be perceived as an exposure of sensitive information. This potential dilemma points to the limitations inherent in the media practice studied here, compared to previous practices. When health professionals visit a school class or a youth club, a space for direct dialogue emerges, a space that enables both in-depth two-way communication with the group and invitations to follow up with one-to-one consultations. Online, this space is limited by the lack of synchronous, direct interaction.

Conclusion and final comments

In this article, I started off by asking what possibilities and challenges professional health workers are faced with when offering health advice to a wide and often a young audience through social media. These are of course questions that do not have simple – or definitive – answers. Both health challenges and media habits are developing rapidly in our culture. According to statistics from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, the proportion of Norwegians with significant mental health challenges was 9 % in 2005, 12 per cent in 2012, and a significant 18 % in March 2020 (Nes et al., 2020) (the last measurement was carried out during the first shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the same period that Maria Abrahamsen decided to go online with her practice as a psychologist). In order to build knowledge around the issues in question, extensive and sustained research is needed in the field, using methods that complement each other.

The present study contributes to the research on health communication on social media by applying social semiotic theory in a detailed examination of a best practice case. The analysis of the Instagram account *psyktdeg* implies some suggestions regarding

the ways social media can be used by professional health workers to gain young people's attention, stimulate understanding, and evoke engagement and trust. The suggestions mainly concern design and style: a carefully orchestrated collaboration between short, engaging video clips and precise verbal texts, well-adapted to the target group. When the visual and the verbal elements provide a certain tension in style or content, the user may be motivated to invest extra interpretive effort to establish unity and coherence. Such investment may lead to increased reflection and motivation on the part of the user. This assumption is not tested empirically in the study. However, it is based on established theories within text and literature research. The analysed case also suggests that a multifaceted sender identity, combining the competence of an expert with the closeness of a peer, may be a good strategy for gaining followers' trust in the field of mediated health communication.

The massive response to Abrahamsen's Instagram account indicates that this form of health communication has a potentially far-ranging reach (from April 2022 to February 2023, more than 20,000 new followers were added to the account). Healthcare workers who do not possess Abrahamsen's talent for dance and comedy can also benefit from that knowledge. Key factors are the establishment of a personal voice that can be used when addressing the target group and utilising the media platforms' format to construct multimodal texts suitable to stimulate understanding, engagement, and trust. The analysis has not provided a clear answer to challenges related to the exposure of possibly sensitive information in the comment fields. Such comment fields can of course be strictly moderated; however, too strict moderation may end up harming the social relationship with the readers and the feeling of being engaged in a dialogue, which is characteristic of this media platform. Unger et al. (2016, p. 281) state that "the social nature of communication is the core quality of textual practice in the participatory web".

Further work in this field of research should pay special attention to two perspectives. One is the user's perspective: To what extent, and in what ways, do the users of this type of media texts experience that the texts touch them, enlighten them, and motivate them, while protecting their integrity? The second is the sender's perspective: What experiences, reflections, and questions do healthcare workers who use social media to pursue professional goals have? When both of these perspectives are illuminated and combined with the textual perspective of which this study is an example, we will have a better basis for understanding how social media can be used effectively and safely as an arena for health communication and health advice in the future.

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Notes

- 1 Fairclough's model connects the textual micro level with the social macro level. The analysis starts with a close reading of textual utterances, which in the next step is commented on in light of the situational context of production and interpretation. The third step of analysis regards the connection between the textual forms and practices on the one hand and the socio-political issues of power structures, values, and institutionalised traditions on the other.
- 2 The study is the first step in a project supported by the Norwegian Media Authority. In later stages, the project will include an interview study with relevant health actors as well as a reception study with users of this type of health communication.