



Research Article

Interpersonal Meanings in Nike's "Winning Isn't for Everyone" Instagram Campaign

Ilma Alfi Rahmi, Zulprianto*, Eva Najma, & Zulfakhri Dt. Majo Datuk

Universitas Andalas, Indonesia

Abstract

This study examines how mood structure in Nike's *Winning Isn't for Everyone* campaign constructs interpersonal meaning between the brand and its audience. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. The data consist of 72 clauses derived from 53 Instagram captions posted on Nike's official account under the hashtag #WinningIsntForEveryone. The captions were selected through clause segmentation, focusing on the primary caption content while excluding tagging elements. The findings reveal that declarative clauses are dominant (70.9%), followed by imperative clauses (27.7%), with interrogative clauses occurring minimally (1.4%). In terms of polarity, positive clauses account for 90.3% of the data, whereas negative clauses represent 9.7%. These patterns indicate that the campaign primarily relies on declarative mood and positive polarity to construct an encouraging and engaging interpersonal relationship with its audience.

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*Corresponding Author

zulprianto@hum.unand.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a central platform for brand communication, where language plays a crucial role in shaping relationships between brands and audiences. As noted by Kim (2020) and Quesenberry (2019), brands have shifted their communication strategies toward more interactive and engagement-oriented approaches on social media rather than focusing solely on product promotion. In this context, language functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a means of constructing relationships and influencing audience perceptions.

In marketing, engagement refers to the process through which brands create memorable and meaningful experiences that connect audiences to the brand. Goodman (2012) emphasizes that engagement is achieved when audiences develop positive emotional connections through experiences that encourage them to share these interactions with others. Based on this perspective, brands must establish an appealing identity to attract and retain audience attention.

Advertising plays an important role in building brand identity. According to Goddard (1998), advertising is a form of discourse that functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a means of constructing a unique brand identity. This identity is developed through meaningful experiences and content aligned with audience interests (Motion et al., 2016). Similarly, Cook (2001) argues that advertising serves multiple functions beyond persuasion, including informing, entertaining, and raising awareness. These functions demonstrate that advertising language is flexible and capable of creating meaningful engagement with audiences.

Within social media contexts, the communicative role of advertising becomes increasingly interactive. Rosário and Dias (2023) state that brands use social media to deliver information that stimulates interaction, discussion, and audience perception formation. Consequently, social media campaigns have become an important strategy for strengthening relationships between brands and audiences (Mishnick & Wise, 2024). Therefore, understanding how language functions to establish these relationships becomes essential, particularly in terms of how interpersonal meaning is constructed in digital communication.

Social media also serves as an effective strategy for building brand image and increasing audience trust, functioning as a kind of rapport builder (Nargundkar & Mulky, 2018). In achieving this objective, language choice becomes a critical factor. Devos et al. (2024) argue that linguistic choices influence audience perceptions of a brand; therefore, brands must carefully select language to ensure the effectiveness of their social media campaigns.

One relevant example is Nike's *Winning Isn't for Everyone* campaign, launched in July 2024 in conjunction with the 2024 Summer Olympics. Through this campaign, Nike promotes the idea that winning extends beyond outcomes, emphasizing values such as commitment, perseverance, and courage. The campaign was disseminated across multiple platforms, particularly Instagram, where captions accompany visual posts as concise written messages. These captions provide a valuable dataset for linguistic analysis because they represent carefully crafted brand discourse intended for broad audiences. As a global sports brand with a strong digital presence, Nike offers an appropriate case for investigating how interpersonal meaning is constructed in social media campaigns. Examining this campaign allows researchers to explore how language positions the brand in its interaction with audiences within digital marketing contexts.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a valuable framework for examining how language functions in social interaction. In particular, the interpersonal metafunction focuses on how language establishes relationships between speakers and audiences (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 2014). Butt et al. (2012) further explain that this metafunction concerns the nature of interaction being exchanged and how speakers position themselves toward their audiences within communication processes. This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing Instagram captions, where brands communicate directly with audiences through concise written texts. By examining mood structure and clause polarity, this study investigates how Nike's campaign captions construct interpersonal relationships with audiences.

SFL has been widely applied to analyze interpersonal meaning across various text types. Previous studies have examined commercial texts (Ajepe, 2021; Herman et al., 2024; Shaumiwaty et al., 2024), political discourse (Koutchade et al., 2020), educational contexts (Hoang, 2019), literary works (Zulprianto, 2025) and even translation of religious texts (Otay et al., 2025). These studies demonstrate the flexibility of the SFL framework across diverse communicative settings. However, SFL-based analyses of social media communication, particularly Instagram campaign captions, remain relatively underexplored. Given the growing role of social media in shaping brand-audience interaction, investigating interpersonal meaning within this context is increasingly important.

To address this gap, the present study analyzes interpersonal meaning in Nike's *Winning Isn't for Everyone* Instagram campaign by examining the mood structures employed in campaign captions and interpreting the interpersonal meanings that emerge from these linguistic choices. Specifically, this study aims to identify how Nike constructs Instagram captions to build engagement with its audience.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as introduced by Halliday (1985, 1994) and further developed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, 2014). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting language use and meaning within its contextual setting (Kothari, 2004).

The research data consisted of Instagram captions collected directly from Nike's official Instagram account. Posts were selected based on the hashtag *#WinningIsntForEveryone* (Nike, n.d.), which served as the primary identifier of the campaign. Data collection covered posts published between July 18 and September 9, 2024. In addition, one post published on December 21, 2024, was included because it employed the same campaign hashtag and thematic focus, suggesting its role as a concluding post within the campaign. During this period, 53 posts were identified and used as data sources for the study.

All captions from the selected posts were compiled into a document organized chronologically by publication date and subsequently segmented into clauses for analysis. Posts were identified through

manual selection based on the presence of the campaign hashtag. To ensure consistency and transparency in the data collection process, all selected posts were documented within a dataset, and screenshots of each original post were archived for reference purposes.

From the fifty-three posts, seventy-two clauses were selected for mood structure analysis. The analysis was limited to caption segments appearing before tagging elements or mentions. This limitation was established to maintain consistency across the dataset and to focus on the primary communicative message of each caption. In Instagram discourse, the opening portion of a caption naturally functions as the main textual component that captures audience attention and frames the overall message of the post. Clauses appearing after tagging elements or mentions were excluded because they primarily referred to collaborators, athletes, or promotional partners rather than directly addressing the audience. Nevertheless, these excluded elements may also contain interpersonal meaning, and their omission represents a limitation of the study. For analytical clarity, each data item was assigned an identification code. The letter *P* refers to the post number (53 Instagram posts), while *C* refers to the clause number (72 clauses). For example, the code *P1C2* indicates the second clause extracted from the first post in the data.

The analysis was conducted by examining the mood structure of each clause to identify mood elements, specifically Subject and Finite (mood block), and to determine mood types, including declarative, imperative, and interrogative forms. The Residue element of the clause was also analysed although it does not affect the mood types. To enhance consistency, the coding process was performed repeatedly, with the data reviewed and refined multiple times to ensure reliable classification throughout the data. The identified mood choices were then interpreted to explore the interpersonal meanings constructed within the campaign captions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the findings of the mood structure analysis conducted on seventy-two clauses extracted from Instagram captions in Nike's *Winning Isn't for Everyone* campaign. The analysis identified three primary mood types used throughout the campaign: declarative, imperative, and interrogative. The frequency distribution and percentage of each mood type are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The distribution of Mood Types in Nike's *Winning Isn't for Everyone* Instagram Caption

Types of Mood	Frequency	Percentage
Declarative	51	70.9%
Imperative	20	27.7%
Interrogative	1	1.4%
Total	72	100%

As shown in Table 1, declarative clauses dominate the dataset, accounting for 70.9% of the total data. Imperative clauses represent 27.7%, while interrogative clauses appear only minimally at 1.4%. The predominance of declarative mood suggests that the campaign primarily relies on statements rather than commands, indicating a communication style focused on presenting perspectives, values, and identity rather than directly instructing audiences.

The following examples illustrate each mood type found in the data:

1. Declarative mood

P2C3: It's for those who do whatever it takes.

It	's	for those who do whatever it takes.
Subject	Finite	Predicator
MOOD	RESIDUE	

The clause above is categorized as declarative because it contains the essential mood elements of Subject and Finite. In this example, *it* functions as the Subject, while *'s* (is) functions as the Finite. In relational clauses, the verb *be* may simultaneously realize both the Finite and Predicator, meaning that tense and verbal process are expressed through a single lexical item. The remainder of the clause functions as the Complement within the Residue element. The use of declarative mood presents the campaign message as a statement of belief or identity. This structure positions audiences as participants who are invited to align with shared values rather than as direct recipients of instruction. Consequently, the campaign constructs interpersonal meaning through assertion and value positioning.

2. Imperative mood

P22C33: Look on the bright side.

Look	on the bright side.
Predicator	Adjunct
RESIDUE	

This clause is categorized as imperative because it lacks an explicit Subject and Finite. The clause consists solely of Residue elements, beginning with the Predicator *look* followed by the Adjunct *on the bright side*. The use of imperative mood creates a direct and motivational tone, positioning the brand as encouraging audiences to adopt a particular perspective. In brand communication, imperative structures are interactionally significant because they invite audience participation and create a more conversational relationship between the brand and its followers.

3. Interrogative mood

P28C39: Never thought Hip Hop would take it this far?

<i>Never</i>	<i>thought</i>	<i>Hip Hop would take it this far?</i>	<i>[Didn't you?]</i>
Mood Adjunct	Predicator	Complement	Mood Tag
MOOD	RESIDUE		MOOD

This clause represents the only interrogative mood identified in the data. Unlike typical interrogative forms, it does not begin with a WH-question or polar interrogative structure such as *Did you...?* Instead, it begins with *Never*, functioning as a Mood Adjunct. To clarify the mood structure, the clause was analytically expanded through the reconstructed tag *[Didn't you?]*. This addition is not part of the original caption but serves as an analytical device to make the implicit Subject *you* and Finite *did* explicit. The Residue element includes *thought* as the Predicator and *Hip Hop would take it this far* as the Complement. The interrogative form creates a conversational tone by encouraging audience reflection and implicitly prompting agreement with the campaign's message.

In addition to mood type, the analysis identified polarity as another interpersonal feature contributing to meaning construction within the campaign. The frequency distribution of polarity is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The distribution of Polarity in Nike's *Winning Isn't for Everyone* Instagram Caption

Polarity	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	65	90.3%
Negative	7	9.7%
Total	72	100%

Table 2 demonstrates that positive polarity dominates the dataset, appearing in 65 out of 72 clauses (90.3%). Negative polarity occurs less frequently, accounting for only 7 clauses (9.7%). This distribution suggests that the campaign primarily constructs an affirmative and motivational tone by presenting achievement, confidence, and perseverance as established realities rather than uncertain possibilities. The following examples illustrate polarity realization within the dataset.

1. Positive Polarity

P31C43: Day in and day out, this team believed.

Day in and day out,	this team	believed.	
Adjunct: Circ	Subject	Finite	Predicator
RESIDUE	MOOD	RESIDUE	

This clause is categorized as positive polarity because it contains no negation marker. According to Eggins (2004), polarity is realized through the Finite element, even when positivity is unmarked. The clause begins with a Circumstantial Adjunct *Day in and day out*, followed by the Subject *this team* and the verbal element *believed*, which functions as both Finite and Predicator. Beyond its grammatical realization, positive polarity contributes to the campaign's motivational tone. By presenting belief as a factual condition, the clause frames perseverance as a natural and desirable stance, reinforcing an encouraging message.

2. Negative Polarity

P34C47: You can't stop the reign.

You	can't	stop	the reign.
Subject	Finite	Predicator	Complement
MOOD	RESIDUE		

This clause is categorized as negative polarity due to the presence of negation within the Finite element, specifically *can't*. The clause includes *you* as the Subject and Residue elements consisting of *stop* as the Predicator and *the reign* as the Complement. Although negative polarity appears less frequently in the dataset, its rhetorical role is significant. Rather than expressing limitation, negation is used to convey certainty and dominance. In this context, negative polarity strengthens the campaign's tone by framing success and influence as unstoppable, thereby reinforcing themes of confidence and resilience.

Overall, the predominance of positive polarity, combined with strategically employed negative polarity, indicates that the campaign constructs interpersonal meaning that is both motivational and assertive. These linguistic patterns support Nike's broader communicative goal of inspiring audiences while strengthening engagement with the brand's values.

Discussion

The findings reveal that declarative mood is the dominant clause type in the campaign, accounting for fifty-one out of seventy-clause clauses (70.9%). Declarative clauses are characterized by the presence of Subject and Finite elements, which establish the clause as a statement offering information (Butt et al., 2012; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 2014). Within Nike's campaign discourse, declarative structures appear to function not merely as informational statements but as mechanisms for constructing certainty and reinforcing ideological positioning. Clauses such as *It's not how you start* (P17C28), *It's how you finish* (P17C29), and *Even worthy opponents can't take their crown* (P36C50) extend beyond description by presenting values associated with resilience, perseverance, and competitive identity.

The dominance of declarative mood suggests that Nike positions itself as a voice of authority capable of articulating motivational truths. Rather than directly negotiating information with audiences, the campaign communicates through assertive statements that frame success, effort, and determination as established realities. Such use of declarative mood aligns with the communicative demands of sports branding, where confidence and conviction are central to identity construction.

Imperative mood constitutes the second most frequent mood type, appearing in twenty clauses (27.7%). According to Butt et al. (2012), imperative clauses typically omit explicit Mood elements while foregrounding Residue components, especially the Predicator. Thompson (2014) further notes that imperative structures are associated with directive meanings that position audiences as expected participants in action rather than negotiators of information.

Within the campaign, imperative clauses function as invitations to action rather than commands in a strict authoritative sense. Expressions such as *Give everything* (P3C10) and *Regret nothing* (P3C11) foreground effort, discipline, and risk-taking, all of which resonate strongly with the values embedded in sports culture. Through imperative structures, Nike adopts an interactional role that extends beyond information delivery. The brand positions itself as a motivator and guide, encouraging audiences to embody the campaign's ideals.

This use of imperative mood contributes to audience engagement by creating a more direct interpersonal relationship. Instead of simply presenting messages for passive consumption, the campaign linguistically invites audiences to participate in a shared mindset. Such interactional positioning aligns with contemporary branding practices in social media contexts, where audiences are expected to engage emotionally and ideologically with brand narratives.

Furthermore, interrogative mood appears only once within the data, representing 1.4% of all clauses. Due to its limited frequency, interpretation must remain cautious. Nevertheless, the presence of this interrogative clause provides insight into an alternative interpersonal strategy employed within the campaign. Interrogative structures generally function to request information (Matthiessen et al., 2010); however, rhetorical interrogatives often serve broader discourse purposes beyond information seeking.

The clause *Never thought Hip Hop would take it this far?* (P28C39) does not expect a literal response but instead encourages reflection and emotional alignment. Through rhetorical questioning, the clause momentarily shifts the interactional dynamic by inviting audiences to reconsider assumptions or acknowledge shared cultural experience. Although rare within the dataset, this interrogative form demonstrates how mood variation can diversify communicative tone and enhance audience involvement.

Beyond mood type, polarity emerges as another significant interpersonal resource. Polarity, as part of the mood system, distinguishes between affirmation and negation, thereby influencing how certainty and contrast are linguistically expressed (Butt et al., 2012). The analysis shows a strong dominance of positive polarity, which appears in 65 clauses (90.3%), while negative polarity occurs in only 7 clauses (9.7%).

The predominance of positive polarity reflects that the campaign consistently frames its messages as affirmations rather than uncertainties. Clauses such as *Winning is winning* (P38C53) and *There's only one way to put things right* (P30C41) present values and perspectives as unquestionable statements. Such constructions contribute to a discourse of certainty that strengthens the campaign's motivational character. Positive polarity therefore functions not only grammatically but rhetorically, reinforcing confidence and presenting determination as an achievable and desirable condition.

Although less frequent, negative polarity plays a strategically important role. In examples, such as *You can't stop the reign* (P34C47) and *Even worthy opponents can't take their crown* (P36C50), negation does not imply limitation or weakness. Instead, it intensifies certainty by framing success as resistant to opposition. This use of negation contributes to a discourse of resilience, reinforcing athletic ideals of endurance and persistence.

Negative polarity also serves to establish contrastive meaning. Clauses such as *You can't win them all* (P2C4) followed by *but you should sure as hell try* (P2C5) create tension between limitation and determination. Similarly, the contrast between *Winning isn't for everyone* (P2C2) and *It's for those who do whatever it takes* (P2C3) positions achievement as selective yet attainable through effort. These contrasts deepen the emotional resonance of the campaign by framing struggle as an integral component of success.

The dominance of declarative mood identified in this study aligns with previous SFL-based research across multiple domains. Studies of advertising discourse have similarly reported a preference for declarative structures (Ajepe, 2021; Herman et al., 2024; Shaumiwy et al., 2024), suggesting that assertive statements are a common linguistic strategy in persuasive communication. Comparable findings have also emerged in educational discourse (Hoang, 2019), political communication

(Koutchade et al., 2020), and religious translation studies (Otay et al., 2025), where declarative mood frequently functions as a means of presenting authority and constructing knowledge.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to the literature in two important ways. First, it focuses specifically on Instagram campaign captions, an increasingly significant yet underexplored form of digital discourse. Second, unlike many previous interpersonal analyses that include modality and personal pronouns, this study concentrates specifically on mood structure and polarity as central resources for constructing interpersonal meaning in brand communication. This narrower analytical focus provides a detailed understanding of how grammatical choices shape interactional positioning in social media marketing contexts.

In general, the findings demonstrate that Nike constructs interpersonal meaning through a patterned interaction between mood structure and polarity. Declarative clauses establish authority and motivational certainty, imperative clauses encourage participation, and interrogative clauses introduce reflective engagement. Meanwhile, the predominance of positive polarity, supported by strategic negative constructions, reinforces the campaign's persuasive and inspirational tone. Together, these linguistic choices contribute to a coherent interpersonal strategy that supports Nike's broader branding objective of fostering emotional engagement and reinforcing shared values with its audience.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Nike's *Winning Isn't for Everyone* campaign employs a deliberate linguistic strategy to construct interpersonal meaning through mood structure and polarity in Instagram captions. The findings reveal that declarative mood dominates the dataset (70.9%), followed by imperative mood (27.7%) and a minimal use of interrogative mood (1.4%). In addition, positive polarity appears overwhelmingly (90.3%), while negative polarity is used selectively (9.7%). These patterns indicate that Nike primarily communicates through assertive and motivational statements, supported by directive expressions that encourage audience participation and occasional interrogative forms that invite reflection. Together, these linguistic choices create a confident and engaging communicative tone that aligns with the campaign's emphasis on perseverance, commitment, and determination as essential aspects of winning.

Beyond grammatical patterns, the study suggests that interpersonal meaning in social media campaigns extends beyond measurable interaction such as likes or comments, encompassing emotional and intellectual engagement between brands and audiences. Through the strategic use of mood and polarity, Nike constructs a discourse that encourages audiences to connect with the campaign's values and fosters a sense of shared identity. Although this study contributes to understanding how interpersonal meaning is realized in digital advertising discourse, several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis focuses on a single campaign and examines only mood structure and polarity, preventing it from making broader generalization. Future research may expand this scope by comparing campaigns across brands, incorporating additional interpersonal resources such as modality and personal pronouns, or integrating multiple metafunctions within the SFL framework to provide a more comprehensive understanding of meaning construction in social media communication.

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Competing interests

The author declares that this article was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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