#healing as a Form of Expression among Malaysian TikTokers: Fostering Connections

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ABSTRACT

The current increasing interactions on social media have created complex patterns of meaning-making among TikTok users, such as the usage of hashtags as extensions of social meanings. In the social media app, TikTok, users are currently using the app to express their emotions, mostly through views and likes as an extension of their feelings. The usage of these hashtags is also open to different interpretations and misunderstandings among those unfamiliar with the conventions. This study aims to investigate the semiotic meanings of "#healing" as used in TikTok videos. Using the semiotics in speech acts approach, this study investigates how TikTok videos interact and form meanings between the videos and their followers. The videos chosen are the Top Liked from March to October 2023. For each of the videos with the hashtag #healing, the resulting narration, views, and likes of the post are analysed. Based on these data, the most prominent themes are then identified. Our findings reveal that the hashtag #healing is associated with themes of sadness, laughter, motivation, and gratitude. The results contribute to our understanding of how TikTok users employ speech acts as a form of self-expression and belonging. This study found that the usage of these hashtags on TikTok fosters a connection among its users and unites them to show support for one another. These findings suggest that hashtags work well to aid a type of communication to show support among its users and also form invisible connections online.

Keywords: speech acts; healing; semiotic meanings; self-expressions; TikTok

INTRODUCTION

The TikTok app has become a global phenomenon among social media users, with more than one billion users jumping on the TikTok bandwagon to express themselves interactively by creating interesting and attractive content. The use of TikTok is so pervasive that it has become a new way of communication for the new generation. In this era of technology and digitalisation where people live in a dual or hybrid reality; online and offline worlds (Granic, Morita, & Scholten, 2020), finding meaning in their form of expression has become crucial for the older generation to understand the new way of expression. The way of expression on social media forms their own identity in both the online and offline world, where freedom of expression is more prevalent online. Their interests in topics are formed through fostering social interaction with their online friends on the social web. Online users nowadays frequently search for topics that contain information such as healthy lifestyles (fitness and diet), gender identity, sexual health, and mental health issues, from online websites (Basch et.al., 2022). Their search interests have formed their way of thinking about issues and constructed their way of self-expression and creativity for others to react. However, these expressions may have also shown symptoms of mental distress among TikTok users (Basch et.al., 2022), and this has become a worrying trend. In order to comprehend the concerns and despair the users may have towards their life challenges, it is imperative to investigate the current mental state of these TikTok users.

Understanding the communication patterns on TikTok can be daunting for those unfamiliar with the social conventions of online communication. Previous studies have noted that "language, meaning and society constitute a complex system" (Hodge, 2017) in studying social semiotics. This remains valid in the contemporary landscape of social media use. Social semiotics can be used to understand communication on TikTok by examining the images and videos within these posts.

Studies on social media have contributed to research on meaning-making, such as on Instagram images (Zappavigna, 2016) and on Facebook images and posts (Adami and Jewitt, 2016; Bezemer and Kress, 2014). Their research has revealed emerging themes or genres in the representation of images on social media. Moreover, the evolving modes of communication on social media platforms have created fresh avenues for daily online interaction in this digital age. With the emergence of new applications and evolving forms of social media interaction, this dynamic environment continuously generates opportunities for studying social media content. Furthermore, to understand how TikTok users express themselves through the app, this research will examine how the language used among TikTok users fosters social interaction and serves as a communication tool for the users and their followers.

Online communication has peaked since the COVID-19 lockdown (Kudchadkar and Caroll, 2020). Communication in social media has become a new way of interacting and keeping in touch with friends and families. With the rise of social media usage, unravelling the meanings of images and texts from social media is significant. Online social media platforms provide valuable opportunities for people to connect, to share experiences and strategies for health and wellness, such as meditation, mindfulness, stress relief, and those specific to mental health conditions (Moreno et al. 2016). The users on social media have also formed a certain way of 'membershipping', fostering connections and bonding, that allows them to fulfil their belonging needs (Seidman, 2013).

In the TikTok app, users find connections and bonding through the use of #. Users can find a particular trending post by using the hashtag (#). A hashtag is a label used on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok that enables others to find posts or information

with a theme or contains specific content. It is created by including the symbol "#" in front of a word or words without spaces.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to investigate how the #healing is expressed and communicated byTikTok users. Through adopting the social semiotics framework, the representation of these visuals shows the values and beliefs (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) shared by the users. Texts such as videos, hashtags, and their narrative form delineate the content on TikTok, and the videos depict self-expressions as reflections of individual's challenges, coping mechanisms, and encounters, offering insights into the framework, their emotions and connections with friends, family, or love interests. Occasionally, these reflections manifest through the mediums of laughter and humour. This study is timely, in particular in the context of ongoing investigations into the utilisation of visual language use on social media which is fitting in this contemporary online communication mode.

With the high number of posts using #healing, billions of posts have been found to use the word "healing" to indicate their way of expressing feelings and thoughts and identifying their posts. Based on the initial investigation on the use of hashtags related to #healing from March to October 2023, the number of # related to #healing was about 36.0B in October 2023. The hashtag is also known to become a word choice among TikTok users or, in social media terminology, 'viral'; which draws attention to other users to connect with other like-minded users. In the words of Halliday (1985: 101), these representations of experiences among "human beings build a mental picture of reality", which can also "make sense of the experience of what goes on around them and inside them". This is aptly said with regards to the language used in social media which currently still needs to be explored, researched, and understood to discover the imbued meaning of these TikTok posts.

The research questions guiding this study are;

1. What are the categories of expressions used in the #healing on TikTok?
2. How does the narrative content of the TikTok posts reflect the semiotics of #healing**?**
3. How do the comments on the TikTok posts foster connections among the users?

These research questions address the intersection of semiotics, narrative, and social interaction in the context of #healing on TikTok. By examining the narrative content and the dynamics of user engagement, valuable insights can be gained on how TikTok users engage with the concept of healing and form meaningful connections through shared experiences and expressions of support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TIKTOK AS A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC

This study explores the posts and responses on TikTok as social expressions from the users as a speech act, that is conceived within the semiotic frame (Lyne, 1981). This is achieved through understanding the values and meaning-making through TikTok videos. The posts from these videos combined with images, and texts, are taken as 'motivated signs' (Kress, 1997), and are used to understand the themes that carry these meanings. Studies in social semiotics have been attempted since van Leeuwen and Kress' *Reading Images* (1996) and van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2001) study in *Handbook of Visual Analysis*. Since the early 2000's research on visual communication has developed from reading iconic images from hardcopies such as newspapers (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001), magazines (Bell, 2001), advertisements (van Leeuwen, 2001), interpreting communication on the internet (Oyama & Jewitt; Zappavigna, 2016), the use of videos to understand multimodal financial texts (Rajandran, 2023) and studying self-expressions on Twitter (Orehek and Human, 2017). In this ever-changing world, research in social semiotics needs to evolve and discover new ways TikTok users interact and communicate.

This study posits that meaning-making, or self-expression in the form of TikTok posts is socially motivated and 'regulated' of what is perceived as acceptable in the TikTok community. Speech acts in the semiotics frame as suggested by Lyne (1981) are very useful in exploring and understanding what is happening when people interact online. It allows social understanding of how people use the online space to communicate their feelings and thoughts to the community that shares the same "cultural artefacts"; in this study, the TikTok community. The postings, or the videos, are written to an arbitrary audience. The viewers who liked and commented on the postings are "others" who share the same likes and thinking.

Social media has become a pervasive force in this globalised world, where if one is not on social media, one will be left behind. Internet users have understood how hashtags function on social media platforms and have used hashtags as a way of connecting with other social media users. Social media hashtags have been a powerful tool since the COVID-19 era (Lacsa, 2021) and have enabled society to stay connected and disseminate information since the lockdown during the COVID-19 spike (Kudchadkar and Caroll, 2020). Studies in social media communication particularly in the popular application, TikTok, need to be studied to discover ways on how communication has evolved and connected users online, as well as how communication has become a platform for people to express themselves.

The hashtag #healing has been frequently used on TikTok, with different varieties and forms, other hashtags include #healingprayers, #self-healing, #healingprocess and so on. TikTok has become a new way of storytelling among Gen Z, where the stories resonate among its users. "Storytelling is at the heart of TikTok " as mentioned on the TikTok application, telling its users to tell stories through the app. TikTok videos provide illustrations of different modes for meaning-making, where users provide stories that are unique to their current situations. TikTok videos uploaded can differ in content from entertainment (Meng and Leung, 2021) to political communication (Cervi et.al., 2021), due to their addiction to new things on TikTok, they couldn't stop using the app (Gu, Gao and Li, 2022).

The dearth of study in semiotics involving TikTok analysis makes this study timely. Understanding the ways TikTok users communicate and share their expressions is a valued way of speaking, and symbolically is a meaningful way (Fitch, 2012) to interpret how communication shapes the current forms of talk on social media. The current social media app has formed a new

language among TikTok users to communicate with other like-minded individuals. To understand this new way of communication, this study investigates the ways of expressions explicating the representational meaning of visuals using social semiotics as theory on TikTok as a social media platform.

The way of communication introduced by these social media platforms has changed the way our youth interact and communicate with each other and this has become a novel way for research in discourse studies. Research on the interpersonal meaning of Instagram photographs has been analysed to study the representation of motherhood (Zappavigna, 2016), while Facebook has been studied to fulfil belonging and self-presentational needs (Seidman, 2013) and text compositional practices (Bezemer and Kress, 2014). Communication in social media has caught interest in contemporary visual communication studies (Adami and Jewitt, 2016), however, there is still a dearth of research for TikTok as it is still a new social media application software. Even though research on TikTok has included research on the educational and social impacts of TikTok on teenagers (Guo, 2021) and the motives of using TikTok (Gu, Gao and Li, 2022), effects on mental health (Basch et.al, 2022) and also on analysis of metaphors on TikTok (Yuying, 2022), more studies on visual communication still needs to be uncovered. This study argues that TikTok platforms have developed a new system of communication that has pervasively made people communicate with each other in a subtle way that needs a nuanced understanding of social media usage in visual communication. Social semiotics supports the investigation of the hashtag #healing on TikTok by uncovering the ways that TikTok posts function as a form of communication among its users, with the images and texts that function as modes. Non-users of TikTok wouldn't be able to understand the usage of TikTok and its algorithm, as most of the users of TikTok come from Generation Z, which could create a generation gap in the real world.

Upon investigating how meanings are constructed in TikTok videos, a social semiotic multimodal approach is used to analyse different modes of representation from the video contents such as verbal, image, and video. This research framework involves the multimodal interaction between text and image. Previous studies on ways in which images and text construct meanings have addressed semantic relationships between images and language. The synergy between the nature of image and language interaction in meaning construction has involved image interactions (Unsworth and Cleirigh, 2011). However, previous research in social media analysis has not sought to explicate how images and language interact to construct meanings and self-expressions on social media. In this study, the emphasis is on the context within the analysis of hashtags such as #healing, #healingtiktok, #healingprocess and #selfhealing, as these are the hashtags that are most often used on Tiktok based on the dates of the study (Table 1). The aim of the analysis is to emphasise the TikTok posts as modes, the gesture of the video contents as images as realised in the context of TikTok. The focus of the images and texts on TikTok as a mode provides ways to get to the material qualities of texts and how the users construct ideologies that are materialised in these texts (Jewitt, 2015: 134).

Kress' (2010) framework on social semiotic multimodal theory of communication was employed as a lens to interrogate the ways in which the three #healing posts are expressed, how those expressions translate the semiotic of #healing into the thematic of 'healing' on TikTok, as well as its relation in fostering connections among the TikTok users. Kress' (2010) theory of recognizing the rhetorical, design and production approach to the composition of social semiotics was applied in the analysis of this research. As framed by Kress (2010), the rhetorical approach signifies the concept of the social semiotic itself, and that notion places the implementer of the concept as the 'rhetor' (Kress, 2010: 26). In the context of this study, by using the rhetorical

approach, the multifaceted concept of #healing as a social semiotic is explored through the analysis of the three chosen TikTok posts. The design approach on the other hand constitutes the 'aims and purposes of a rhetor' in materialising the concept of the social semiotic (Kress, 2010: 28). This approach is adapted into the analysis of this study in how the designs of the #healing posts are examined to signify the concept of #healing and how it is implemented by the TikTok creators. The third approach, that is the production, connotes the materialisation of the design, 'in which the communication takes place' and draws engagement from its audience (Kress, 2010: 27). This approach will be studied in the research's analysis by investigating the reactions and responses to the #healing posts.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative research methodology. Data are in the form of TikTok video posts, the captions written on the posts and the narrations that accompany the posts. Qualitative research methodology is suitable for the current research as it aims to gain new insights into the use of #healing. Another aim is to unpack the use and meanings associated with #healing. The theoretical framework from Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) is used to transcribe interactions which also serves as an analysis method for transcribing the contents of the TikTok posts.

Utilising Kress' social semiotic framework (2010) as a lens, four different aspects of the #healing posts were identified and analysed. The first aspect of the analysis is the visual theme, which refers to the general theme that is visually depicted in the videos. The second aspect of the analysis is the narrative text. The narrative text refers to the text written in the video itself. The caption, being the third aspect, refers to the text written in the caption section of the post. The last aspect involves the comments and constitutes the top three most-liked comments written by the other TikTok users engaging with the original post.

The search function on the TikTok app was used to identify the #healing videos created by Malaysians. The rationale for focusing on Malaysian TikTokers was intentional to present a focused and comprehensive discussion on the discourse of social semiotics of #healing among Malaysian TikTok users. The collection of the main data for the analysis of this study began by choosing the #healing posts with the most engagements, which constitutes the likes and comments from the TikTok users. Consent and written permission to utilise these posts as the research data have been granted by the creators of the posts.

To identify a broad use of #healing among TikTok users, TikTok terms co-listed with #healing such as #healingtiktok, #healingprocess, and #selfhealing were also included during the data collection stage. These hashtags were then assessed using thematic analysis. A number of 23 top-liked TikTok posts were finally used as the data. In addition, to fulfil the time frame of this study, the study adopted a cross-sectional design. The videos chosen are based on the Top liked videos, between March to October 2023. As a method of analysis, a cross-sectional design is chosen based on the prevalence of the hashtag frequency to assess the occurrences of the posts that are trending during the time of the study.

The process of data analysis involves:
i. organisation of the data and details related to the TikTok posts,
ii. categorization of data,
iii. identification of themes,
iv. synthesis and generalisations (Hodge, 2017).

For each TikTok post, the video, its resulting narration, and the genre of the post were analysed and coded into themes. Firstly, the content categories which include general posts on physical health, mental health, sadness, as well as failed relationships and coping content (related to sadness) were identified. To delve into the meanings associated with TikTok videos on #healing, videos and images that were used in these posts were identified. Then, the comments from each video were coded into categories.

In order to observe research ethics in social media studies, the research maintains the privacy of the users' data so that the research participants remain anonymous. The posts generated at the time are set to public. In addition, where possible, narrations are paraphrased from the original posts to ensure an ethical approach in research involving social media posts. Videos containing texts as narratives are included since the focus of this study is to investigate the representations of the images and the relationship with the text in the TikTok posts.
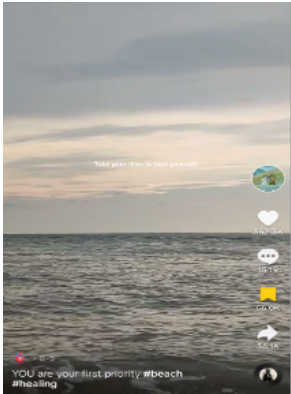
One notable observation that was captured during the data collection stage was that the majority of the videos posted on TikTok were written in multiple languages. The occurrence of translanguaging and multilingual practices was evident, depicting a pluralingustics scenery of the Malaysian community (Canagarah, 2013; Ng & Lee, 2019).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the TikTok posts that used #healing in their caption. It is important to highlight that the images from these posts are taken as a form of meaning-making mode. Table 1 illustrates the four aspects of analysis.

1. Visual Theme
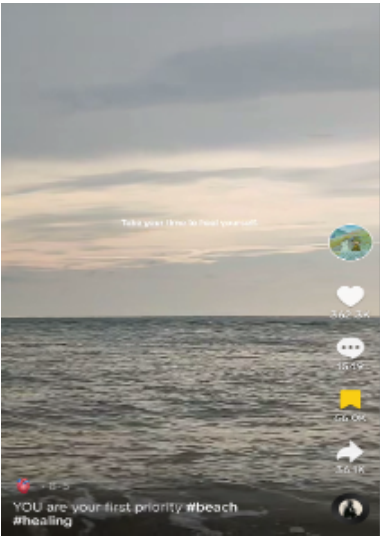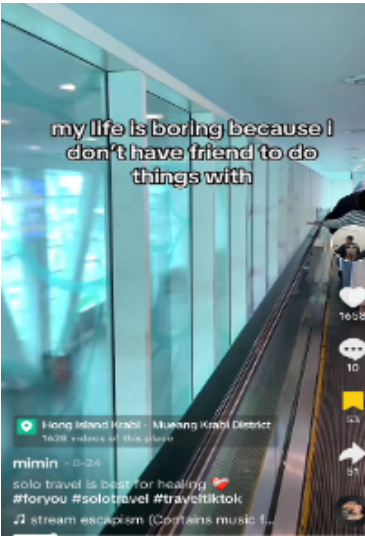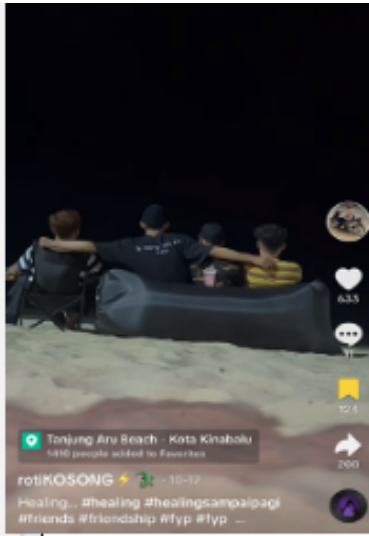2. Narrative text
3. Caption
4. Comments

TABLE 1. Four Aspects of Analysis

POST	VISUAL THEME	NARRATIVE TEXT	CAPTION	COMMENTS
	Nature	'*Take your time to heal yourself*'	'*YOU are your first priority*' *#beach #healing*'	i) '*time doesn't heal. it just teach us how to live with the pain. take note*' ii) '*Do i need to heal? This world isn't for resting for me anymore*' iii) '*How do you heal? It feels I've never healed just swept under the rug. Is there even such a thing as healed*'

WHAT ARE THE CATEGORIES OF EXPRESSIONS USED IN THE #HEALING?

To answer the first research question, the findings from the analysis found three categories of expressions. The analysis of the TikTok posts found the top three categories of expressions used with #healing, which are nature, travel and human characters. These categories provide examples of new linguistic modes that are used and understood by the TikTok community to represent meanings associated with #healing. Table 2 illustrates pictures that are associated with the three aforementioned themes.

TABLE 2. Visual posts based on the themes

THEMES		
Nature	Travel	Human characters
Picture 1: Open sea	Picture 2: On a conveyor escalator commonly seen at the airport	Picture 3: Sitting with friends in an open area

Beautiful scenes like beaches, river streams, sunset and trees are common visuals that the Tiktokers use when they post videos using #healing. Pictures of the wide, blue ocean, green trees, and scenic pictures of nature depict the feeling of calmness, tranquillity, and serenity. This suggests that #healing is associated with the idea of healing and mending oneself.

Similarly, images of travelling, such as at the airport or driving alone on a highway during night-time, indicate the ways the TikTokers "heal". Healing is associated with travelling, going away, and running away from the hustle of the city to see the ocean and clear blue skies. For example, in Picture 2 in the above table, the visual used was a picture one might see in an airport, and the caption written on the posting is "*solo travel is best for healing*"; suggesting travelling is one form of healing for this TikTok community.

It is also interesting to note that the creators attempt to 'mark' their presence in the video postings by taking pictures of their feet, hands or sometimes their back. This action suggests the

idea of 'being present' in the posting, 'to heal' in a nice, tranquil place. This can be seen in Picture 3 in Table 2. The visual used in the posting is a picture of a group of boys sitting somewhere at a beach, with the hashtag "*#healingsampaipagi*" [meaning: healing until morning].

These three categories suggest that #healing to the Malaysian TikTok community means taking time out, running away from the stressful city life, to 'heal' oneself. This somehow suggests that the daily life is stressful and the users want to be away to heal, to cure themselves. The visual image and caption in Table 2 illustrate the case in point.

To summarise, the findings suggest some significant characteristics of the TikTok community. Firstly, in this social media era, meaning-making is multi-modal and visuals and captions are used as modes to express meanings. The picture of the wide, open sea in Picture 1 is an example of semiotic modes of meaning-making that are socially and culturally shaped (Kress, 2010). The #healing community among Malaysian TikTok users is actively designing the meaning of 'healing' using a range of semiotic modes, such as visuals, captions and narratives. This design is central within the current online communication environment. In addition, in this TikTok community, connected through the #healing, the creators and those who write comments or respond to the narrations and captions in the video are accepted as one 'community'. Socialisation into a community of #healing suggests that these users have developed a shared understanding of what denotes "healing", and in their interaction through comments and likes, the members design what is an accepted practice of 'healing'.

HOW DOES THE NARRATIVE CONTENT OF THE TIKTOK POSTS REFLECT THE SEMIOTICS OF #HEALING?

This section discusses how the narrative texts reflect the semiotics of healing in #healing posts. The analysis reveals three themes; sadness, fear, and motivation.

1. Narratives of sadness

> *People think my life is easy. F** they don't know how hard it is to keep all my problems to myself and hide my sadness from everyone.*

In this posting, the creator expresses his frustration with what is happening in his life, how other people around him think that his life is easy when he is struggling to cope with the challenges. The captions he has on the videos demonstrate his sad feelings.

> #sadvibes #healing #sadbroken #brokenheart

The narrative "*...don't know how hard it is to keep all problems to myself*…" reveals bottling up emotions, and keeping feelings hidden through "*...hiding my sadness from everyone.*"
In another posting, the creator expresses his sadness with the words "not good enough", "pain", and "forget everything". The narrative implies he is heartbroken and just wants to delete everything. The short phrase 'I'm really tired' further accentuates his broken heart.

> *I did my best but not good enough. How did I wish, I want to delete all my pain and forget everything. I'm really tired* 🙁

2. Narratives of fear

In comparison with sadness, narratives of fear are similar in a way that they also invoke sadness and fear.

> *"I don't care if that girl likes you but I'm afraid that you will like her"*

The phrase "I'm afraid that you will like her" denotes worry, uncertainty and fear of losing. 'What if the girl like you and you like her?' implies the fear 'What would happen to me?', "Would i be alone?'
Similarly, "*Please don't be in love with someone else*" suggests a narrative of loss, of being alone. The word "Please" reflects a subtle appeal, 'don't leave me'.

3. Narratives of motivation

Some of the narratives that are used with #healing suggest narratives of motivation. For example, "*When you get tired, learn to rest not quit".* The narrative insinuates motivation and connects the voice of the author and the viewer; 'Heal yourself, don't quit'.
In another posting, "*Never put your heart into someone…*", the author promotes positive vibes to the readers; to love themselves and be strong. To heal, you should not depend on other people.
To conclude, the narratives used with #healing suggest feelings of sadness and fear. There are also representations of not giving up, of fighting back through narratives of motivation. Through the narratives, the creators in the TikTok community act as social agents in constructing meaning associated with the word 'healing'.

HOW DO THE COMMENTS ON THE TIKTOK POSTS FOSTER CONNECTIONS AMONG THE USERS?

The following presents the findings of the third research question, which is to investigate how the comments section on TikTok facilitates as speech acts, develops connections and brings a sense of community to its users. From the analysis of the texts used, it is found that there are four representations from the TikTok contents, which are; sadness, fear, laughter, and motivation. The responses from followers on these TikTok content pages are included as replies to the original TikTok post. Comments from these posts are discussed below.

1. Representations of Sadness

The following describes TikTok content that expresses sadness. The sadness that is shown in the visuals illustrates a range of sad emotions. The representations of sadness vary from expressing sadness, tiredness and fear. The tables below represent images of sadness and frustration, which in this context denotes the author showing tendencies to give up, thinking of escaping reality and at the same time thinking about what others may think.
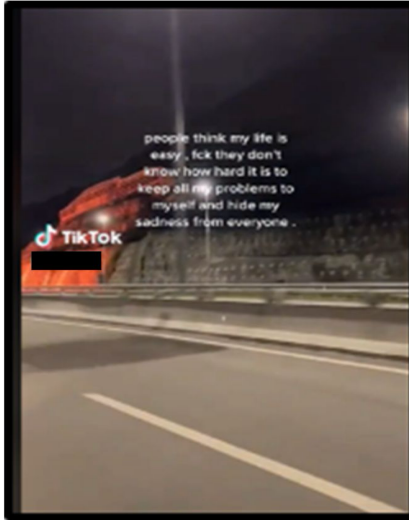
FIGURE 1. Representation and Visualization of Sadness

Figure 1 above shows the representation of sadness, with the caption:

"*People think my life is easy. Fck they don't know how hard it is to keep all my problems to myself and hide my sadness from everyone*"

The representation above garnered the following responses from the followers:

"*It's better to keep all of this than unwanted things happen.*"
"*I don't hide my sadness I cry everyday and people judge and make fun of me for it they really don't know they just don't know what I've had to go thru*"

Figure 2 shows TikTok content that expresses sadness and frustration. The images are represented with a bright landscape at night-time, with city lights, and empty roads. The vision in these images is clear, while the expressions relate to a strong emotional feeling of sadness and a forlorn attempt to escape from the current reality in life.
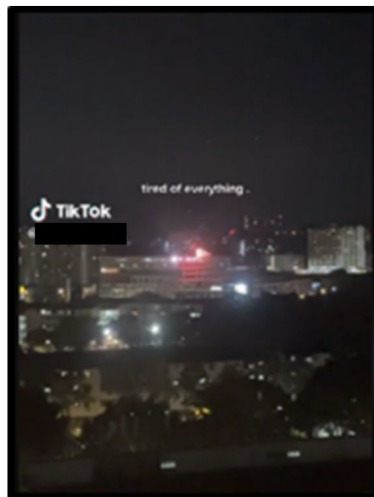

FIGURE 2. Representation and Visualization of Tiredness

Figure 2 shows another representation of sadness, with the caption: *Tired of everything.* The representation above garnered the following response from a follower:

> *"The real tired of everything*
> *iam tired*
> *I'm exhausted ya Allah :((*
> *pain and tired*
> *Tired of friendship*
> *I want to rest but the pain always come*
> *Time to rest forever"*

The above response from the follower echoes the post from Figure 2, and agrees on being "tired", by writing that he/she is "*The real tired of everything*". Then repeat "*I'm exhausted ya Allah*", indicating that the follower is expressing the emotion of being "tired" to God or "*Allah*", using his/her religion as a form of expression; prostrating to God. In addition, the sad emoticon (colon and brackets as a frown), :((multiplies the feeling through emoji expression, i.e the feeling of being tired. The expression of being tired is also repeated with "*pain and tired*", adding "pain" as another way of expressing their feelings. The follower then explains the pain is due to "*Tired of friendship*", and "*I want to rest but the pain always come*", as an act of being tired of a problem in a friendship. The worrying phrase "*Time to rest forever*" ends the comments from the original post, leaving the expression open with many unanswered questions as to the meaning of "*rest forever*".

The semiotic codes of the images and the semiotic code of language from the text and replies have their particular means of realising how the semantic relations seem to interact and connect. The replies seem to echo the posts created, and from almost 1 million views, these posts are commented on based on the phrase "tired of everything". This is in support of Kress and van Leeuwen's statement that these images represent an aspect of the experiential world. They bring the elements "together into a coherent and meaningful whole" (ibid, 44). The texts as content on TikTok through the hashtag #healing has created a meaningful category under sadness on social media, which has also created a group of supporters full of like-minded people, telling them not to let go.

> *"Your sadness is a gift. Don't reject it. Don't rush on it. Live it fully and use it as a fuel to change and grow"*

This pattern of communication is common on social media, among TikTok users going through tough times, and the support from like-minded people is represented in these posts as replies.
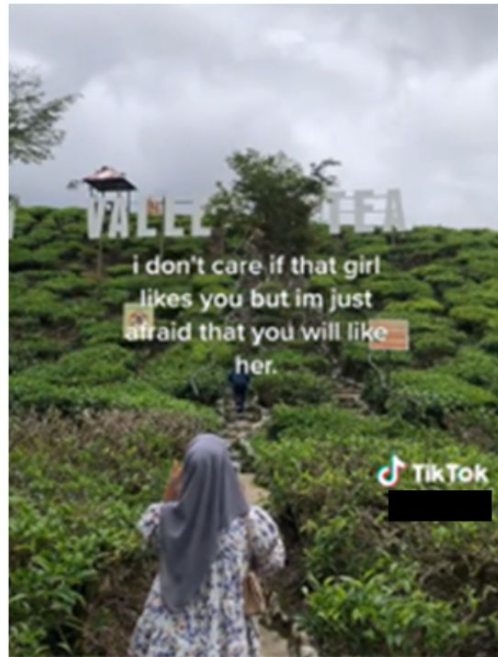
FIGURE 3. Representation and Visualization of Fear

Another representation of sadness is also evident in Figure 3, which expresses the representation of fear, with the caption:

"I don't care if that girl likes you but im just afraid that you will like her"
"Please don't be in love with someone else."

The representation above garnered the following response from a follower:

"Is he still likr her?"
● *Yes*
"I don't care if I'm bad but I'm there have Allah for me"
"Why the world is so cruel to weak people"

Both Figure 3 and Figure 4 show fear of their worth, of losing someone and of being weak. In Figure 3, this representation indicates the author fears losing someone to another girl. The image of a (Malay) girl in hijab is represented, walking and facing backwards in the image. The follower of this content asks "*Why the world is so cruel to weak people*", indicating that the girl is weak and has been victimised in this situation.

As for Figure 4, the image of a girl walking forward is shown, with the narrator worrying that she is not good enough. The image expresses sadness towards "*never be good enough for anyone*". It also should be noted that the image shows that these images are in contrast with the language used. The author mentions fear, whereas the image is connected to walking forward, which would indicate moving on, instead of giving up. These two figures visually represent each identity from the creator of the TikTok post, feeling sadness towards an unfortunate situation. The support from the followers indicates understanding and compassion towards the original post created and enables users to engage with one another through the same emotions and feelings expressed from the comments uploaded.
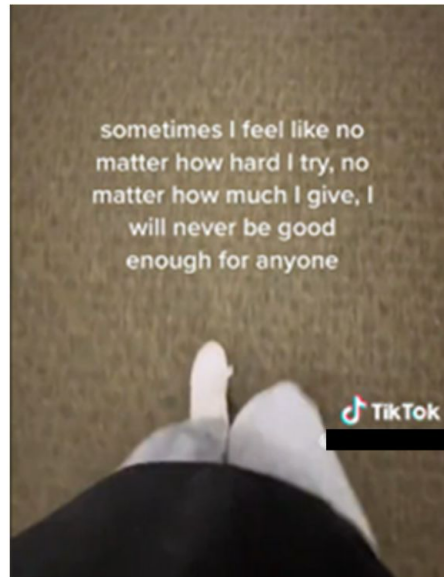
FIGURE 4. Representation and Visualization of Fear

2. Support from Representations of Laughter

Figure 5 shows a male worker showing the objects as actors; the clock, the tape, tools, the keyboard and the hanger are associated with objects from the content. The post invokes fun at the whole concept and is created for entertainment purposes. The phrase "All this clock but still doesn't have time for me" says that all of these belong to the same overarching category which implies that the notion of the clock and 'time', conflates that someone doesn't 'have time' for him. This makes the content creator seem sad or pathetic for being left behind by someone. The response from a follower, "*Sponsored by Mr DIY*" is to add laughter and invoke fun by implying that it looks like an advertisement from the D.I.Y. tool store, Mr. DIY.

FIGURE 5. Representation and Visualisation of Laughter

Figure 5 shows the representation of laughter, with the caption:

"All this clock but still doesn't have time for me,
All this tape but you didn't stick with me
All this colour but still can't be your rainbow
All this tools but still couldn't fix you
All this keyboard but still wasn't your type
All this hanger but you still don't hang with me"

The representation above garnered the following response from a follower: "*Sponsored by Mr DIY",* which is stated in jest, as a joke towards the creator's post. These images evoke laughter from the text content and replies of followers. The act of gratification in posts that are created for entertainment agrees with Hossain's (2019) statement that social media use is motivated by gratifications such as entertainment, escape, exposure, information seeking and social influence. It also can be explained that tension-released gratification in TikTok posts containing laughter (Gan et.al., 2017) would be a good reason for users to post such content that would keep their followers entertained. This post confirms that providing laughter on TikTok also forms ways of "membershipping", fostering connections and bonding, and providing an area for users to have a sense of belonging (Seidman, 2013).

3. Support from Representations of Motivation

The following section describes TikTok contents that express language used for motivation. The motivational content adds, "When you get tired learn to rest not quit", and tells their followers to not quit. This satisfies the followers who are reading the post and reassures them of their feelings.
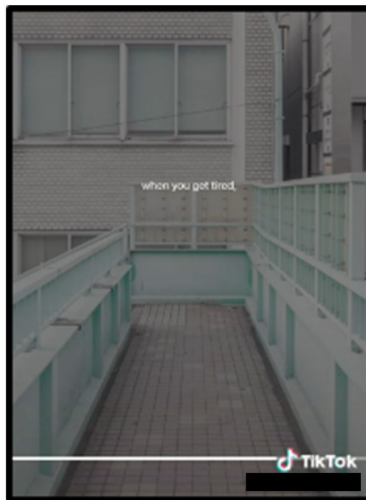

FIGURE 6. Representation and Visualisation of Motivation

Figure 6 above shows the caption: "*When you get tired learn to rest not quit*".

The representation above also garnered the following response from a follower: *"Love your quotes"* as a way to show support for the quote. These representations of motivation through providing advice allow the followers to relate to the TikTok content, to create a special bond between the followers. These positive engagements help the followers and creators to keep in touch with each other and foster positive connections through this support and spirit of camaraderie.

Such strong support for mental health issues among followers forms friendships online and continuously allows both creator and followers to connect through an invisible bond, fostering similar values and beliefs (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Even though these posts do not contain people as images of participants, and in some posts, only the images of roads and city landscapes are presented, a few words can still be impactful to those who have common interests. Other categories from the healing hashtag such as laughter, and motivation each contain the same pattern of communication and may symbolise the same meanings for these users and their followers.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study posit that online communities act not much different than physical communities, where shared values and practices are mutually understood and the members co-construct the meanings used in their community, even when they have never met each other. Thematic analysis for this study aimed to explore and understand how #healing is employed on TikTok. This present study conducted a visual analysis of hashtags related to healing through providing patterns of communication-related to the top liked hashtags for healing, which are: #healing, #healingprocess, #selfhealing, and #healingtiktok.   Findings have shown that explanations of self-expression in the #healing on the TikTok content, involve patterns in language identification and the construction of meaning. The function of the hashtag #healing used on the TikTok application is to connect people who share the same values and understanding of what the word means.

Through the three research questions for this study; What are the categories of expressions used in the healing hashtag; How does the narrative content of the TikTok posts reflect the semiotics of # healing; How do the comments on the TikTok posts foster connections among the users. This section summarises how the expressions on TikTok are related to the research questions.

The first question answers the argument that expressions used on TikTok do break into categories. Even just by typing the hashtag, varied categories or themes can appear, and the content is separated by the images that follow the content. Categories such as nature, travelling, and human characteristics form the linguistic modes of these expressions. Scenes of beaches, river streams and trees mirror nuances of healing and mending, which form image interactions (Unsworth and Cleirigh, 2011) among the creators and users.

Another noticeable expression is in the representation of sadness, which shows images of roads in their TikTok posts, showing tendencies for escapism and walking away from situations. The phrase "Tired of everything" indicates that it belongs to a category which implies sorrow and the feeling of giving up. These posts which are in the form of images, can be realised in linguistic form. The image is dynamic, that it is realised by a video format, in that the image moves, not static. It also relates the landscape of the highway to the writer, or content creator from the TikTok post that she's "tired", and the replies from the followers say that they are equally tired as a response, indicating support for the post.

Secondly, from the above findings, the narrative texts of TikTok posts reflect the semiotics of #healing through the nuances of meanings that give them possible relations. The image of feet from Figure 4 may seem unrelatable to some who may not have the same relation or semiotic code. The content in this post may seem an odd design pattern, however, the common social media trend nowadays is to not show the faces of the creators in their own posts. Showing the face, or the frontal mode is not a favourite among TikTok users. The more common post is to show a

representation of the topic, where the participants do not look at the viewer and tend to face backward instead. This is also mentioned in Kress and van Leeuwen where participants are represented in the background (2009).

Lastly, to explain and expand on the third research question, it can be seen from the replies that the followers' replies are supportive of the posts on TikTok. The replies are mostly positive in response to the original post, which brings up the question of agency. Jewitt and Oyama (2016) postulate about agency in constructing and projecting identities online. Even when an individual may not have the power to control the circulation of the posts on TikTok once they have been posted, these responses on the pages still show support for the posts (Figure 3). It can be seen that one user asks:

> User: Is he still likr her? (Does he still like her?)
> Reply: Yes

In summary, communicating online in this current internet surge has become a common practice for TikTok users; Gen Z. The discussions in this study attempt to explore how the users and the new generation are communicating in TikTok using the #healing hashtag. The internet gateway through technology is moving fast, new algorithms are created daily. New hashtags are currently trending among users online. The new generation has caught up with the current internet trends of communication, and the options for them are endless. TikTok users have also found that their followers (who could also be strangers) online are in full support of their feelings through their posts, and they find a commonality among each other through these hashtags. While interactions online can be honest and true, at the same time, they can also be fake and full of deception. Those who are not trained in this new means of communication (or those who oppose this means of communication) may feel that communication is mundane, whereas, for this generation, it has become more effective and more personalised.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown that the application of social semiotics in speech acts approach can be used to study the usage of hashtags in the TikTok application. The methodology used has been proven effective in showing how image analysis can be interpreted from speech act theory when analysing TikTok users' interactions on social media while using these hashtags. The use of these hashtags on TikTok fosters connection among its users and unites them to show support for one another. These findings suggest that the hashtags work well to aid a form of communication among its users, revealing meanings which are associated with #healing. The top three categories of linguistic modes used are nature, travel and human characters. While the narrative contents of the #healing posts revealed expressions such as sadness, fear, motivation, and laughter.

Upon analysing the TikTok contents, this theory can also be used to study other social media applications that contain images to encourage further understanding of social media language used by the younger generation. Comments from followers on the TikTok contents have also revealed that it develops connections and brings a sense of community, or bonding between its loyal users. Such narrative representations produce images that are ideologically related to other users of TikTok, and resonate within them. This enables the posts to get views and likes and this is easy to obtain, as in the words of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), "when they have a deeply important semantic dimension" as it works inside the semiotic systems of the same culture.

More studies can also be utilised in investigating other hashtags that are related to self-expressions and those that involve sub-themes on mental health as well as categories of narrative representations, (as proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; 2001) in order to identify images that will allow both users and non-users to understand the possible covert language and communication styles that are imbued on the TikTok platform. The subtle incorporation of these TikTok contents as modes needs further investigation to uncover novel communication methods that are made available online. Through a growing understanding of these posts on the social media platform, more studies related to social semiotics can be made to bridge the gap between images and language. This also lends weight to the growing amount of TikTok posts that use the hashtag #healing and the ambivalence of its meanings on social media.

However, it also should be mentioned that two issues may compromise the procedure and reproducibility of this research. Firstly, the current sample size requires a reassessment of the measures used to collect and analyse the data and secondly, the short amount of time allotted for this study indicates that the results of the study are unique to the current sample size. Nevertheless, detailed analysis of the data indicates that there is a particular pattern of communication among TikTok users that needs further research, in order to understand the new way of language system that the internet has created for this younger generation. Visual representation and construction in an online format reproduce the 'structures of reality' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) to both content creators and followers of TikTok as social media users.

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