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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Digital mindfulness in motion: A thematic analysis of user comments on Calm's Instagram Reels

Atenção plena digital em movimento: Uma análise temática dos comentários dos utilizadores aos Reels do Instagram da Calm

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Abstract

Objective: This study examined user comments on Calm's Instagram Reels to explore how mindfulness-oriented short-form content is publicly received under platform-specific conditions. **Methods:** This qualitative, inductive study analyzed 2,054 user comments on 87 Reels posted on Calm's official Instagram account between September 4, 2024, and January 30, 2025. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with comments treated as publicly expressed responses to mindfulness-oriented content. **Results:** The analysis identified six main themes in user responses: Appreciation, Emotional Resonance, Restoration, Detachment, Social Engagement, and Rituals. Appreciation and Emotional Resonance were the most prominent themes, followed by Restoration, while Detachment, Social Engagement, and Rituals appeared less frequently. Overall, comments showed that mindfulness-oriented Reels were not uniformly or automatically received as positive; alongside expressions of gratitude, calm, and emotional connection, some comments expressed humor, criticism, confusion, or discomfort. **Conclusions:** The findings indicate that mindfulness-oriented short-form content on Instagram is publicly received in varied, sometimes ambivalent ways rather than with a fixed positive response. While many comments reflected appreciation, calm, and emotional resonance, others expressed distance, criticism, or discomfort. Because the study draws on publicly shared comments from a single brand and platform, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The study contributes to understanding how mindfulness-oriented content is articulated and negotiated through platform-specific forms of engagement on Instagram.

Keywords: Digital mindfulness; Instagram Reels; Mindfulness content; Public comments; Social media; Qualitative study.

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Resumo

Objetivo: Este estudo examinou os comentários dos utilizadores nos *Reels* do *Instagram* da *Calm* para explorar como o conteúdo breve orientado para o *mindfulness* é recebido publicamente nas condições específicas da plataforma. **Métodos:** Este estudo qualitativo e indutivo analisou 2054 comentários de utilizadores em 87 *Reels* publicados na conta oficial de *Instagram* da *Calm* entre 4 de setembro de 2024 e 30 de janeiro de 2025. Os dados foram analisados através de análise temática, sendo os comentários tratados como respostas publicamente expressas ao conteúdo orientado para *mindfulness*. **Resultados:** A análise identificou seis temas principais nas respostas dos utilizadores: Apreciação, Ressonância Emocional, Restauração, Distanciamento, Envolvimento Social e Rituais. A Apreciação e a Ressonância Emocional foram os temas mais proeminentes, seguidos pela Restauração, enquanto o Distanciamento, o Envolvimento Social e os Rituais apareceram com menor frequência. De modo geral, os comentários mostraram que os *Reels* orientados para *mindfulness* não foram recebidos de forma uniforme nem automaticamente como positivos; para além de expressões de gratidão, calma e ligação emocional, alguns comentários expressaram humor, crítica, confusão ou desconforto. **Conclusões:** Os resultados indicam que o conteúdo breve orientado para *mindfulness* no *Instagram* é recebido publicamente de formas variadas e, por vezes, ambivalentes, em vez de suscitar uma resposta positiva fixa. Embora muitos comentários reflitam apreciação, calma e ressonância emocional, outros expressam distanciamento, crítica ou desconforto. Como o estudo se baseia em comentários partilhados publicamente de uma única marca e plataforma, os resultados devem ser interpretados com cautela. O estudo contribui para a compreensão de como o conteúdo orientado para o *mindfulness* é articulado e negociado através de formas de envolvimento específicas da plataforma *Instagram*.

Palavras-chave: Atenção plena digital; Comentários públicos; Conteúdo de *mindfulness*; *Instagram Reels*; Redes sociais; Estudo qualitativo.

Introduction

Today, digital technologies are integrated into almost every aspect of life, making it common for individuals to be constantly online. The growing prevalence of smartphones, social media apps, and digital notifications has been linked to distraction, mental fatigue, and stress (Mheidly et al., 2020; Szczepańska & Pietrzyka, 2023). At the same time, social media can provide users with enjoyment and social connection through entertainment and interaction, which may contribute to happiness, psychological relief, and well-being (Alimuddin & Latepo, 2021). In recent years, attention to the need to manage one's relationship with digital tools more consciously and in balance has grown. This tension reflects the ambivalent nature of digital environments, where distraction and connection often coexist.

Abhari et al. (2021) discuss digital mindfulness as the mindful use of digital technologies such as smartphones and position self-monitoring as a key mechanism for cultivating awareness of digital use. According to Harley (2022), digital mindfulness involves consciously refocusing attention when individuals realize they have gone on autopilot during online interactions. Some studies have also linked app-based mindfulness training to reduced stress and improved affect (Economides et al., 2018). However, rather than examining digital mindfulness as a broad practice of self-regulating technology use, this study focused on a narrower, platform-mediated dimension: users' public responses to mindfulness-oriented content on Instagram Reels. More specifically, it explored how users articulate meanings, emotions, and forms of connection through comments.

Instagram is built around visual content (Lin, 2022), enabling users to engage with images, videos, and Reels. Mindfulness-oriented content on Instagram, therefore, appears in an environment shaped by scrolling, visibility, and interaction. This creates a tension between content associated with calm and a platform organized around ongoing viewing, engagement, and attention capture. In this context, Reels

and their comments provide a useful setting for examining how users respond to mindfulness content on the platform.

User comments are a common form of online public participation (Ksiazek, 2015; Ziegele et al., 2014), enabling users to express their views and engage in discussions around content. As such, they offer valuable material for examining public discourse and forms of participation in public debate (Dževerdanović-Pejović, 2018). Comments, unlike likes or views, contain users' own words. They do not necessarily reflect users' inner experiences, but they do provide insight into how users receive and discuss mindfulness content on the platform.

Recent research on mindfulness and social media use has often examined social media use in relation to psychological outcomes such as anxiety and compulsive or addictive use (Lin, 2022; Sun, 2022). Despite the growing literature on digital mindfulness and social media use, researchers have paid limited attention to how users publicly receive and discuss mindfulness-oriented short-form content in Instagram comments. By focusing on these comments, this study contributes to discussions at the intersection of digital mindfulness, platformed communication, and public engagement. Rather than treating digital mindfulness as a broad matter of individual self-regulation, it examined how platform-mediated forms of engagement and expression take shape around mindfulness-oriented content on Instagram. The study was guided by the following research question: How do users respond publicly to mindfulness-oriented Instagram Reels in the comments, and what meanings, emotions, and connections do they articulate in these responses?

Conceptual Framework: Mindfulness Content, Platform Context, and Public Response

Digital mindfulness refers to mindfulness practiced through digital platforms and technologies (McCarren & Kuoppamäki, 2025). In this study, the term is used more narrowly. It refers to how users encounter and respond to mindfulness-oriented content on Instagram Reels in public comments. The focus is on these public responses, not on users' broader efforts to regulate their technology use. The study does not read comments as direct evidence of users' private experiences. It examines how feelings such as calm, reflection, and connection are articulated in comments.

Calm's Reels offer a useful case because they bring mindfulness-oriented content into the short, fast-moving flow of Instagram Reels. That makes them difficult to read in simple terms. Research on social media distraction usually emphasizes how platforms pull attention away from other tasks (Koessmeier & Büttner, 2021; Siebers et al., 2023). Turuba et al. (2024) indicate that short-form well-being content may help some users, but it can also pose risks such as misinformation and distressing content. For that reason, Calm's Reels need to be read in relation to the platform in which they appear.

Research on meditation and well-being technologies helps clarify this tension. In Jablonsky (2022), apps like Calm and Headspace are presented as responses to digital distraction, but still follow the same commercial and design logic as the platforms around them. Beattie (2022) describes Space as an app that tries to change users' habits, while still treating problematic technology use as something users must manage for themselves. In this sense, mindfulness content on digital platforms remains tied to the same attention-driven and commercial conditions in which it circulates. These studies suggest that mindfulness content does not stand apart from the digital platforms in which it appears. It may generate experiences of relaxation and emotional regulation, but it also circulates within structures designed to capture and sustain user attention.

Rather than treating digital mindfulness as a broad form of digital self-regulation, this study focused on one platform-mediated dimension associated with it: the public articulation of calm, reflection, and connection in response to mindfulness-oriented Reels content. The term is therefore used cautiously, not to infer users' private experiences, but to examine how such responses become visible in comments within platform-specific conditions.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, inductive design to examine publicly expressed user responses to Calm's mindfulness-oriented Instagram Reels. The comments were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author conducted the primary coding, and the second author independently coded a subset of the comments. As communication researchers, the authors approached the comments as public expressions on Instagram, without assuming that they fully reflected users' private experiences. They also considered the content of the Reel when a comment was difficult to interpret.

Data Source and Sample

The study covered Reels posted on Calm's official Instagram account between September 4, 2024, and January 30, 2025. Calm was selected as a purposive case because it is a well-known commercial brand in digital well-being, and its Reels combine short-form video with a simple visual style and a clear emotional tone. This made Calm a suitable case for examining how mindfulness content is presented on Instagram and how users respond to it in the comments. The final sample comprised 2,054 comments on 87 Reels, including comments written in languages other than English. Comments were included if they could be meaningfully interpreted and related to the Reel or to users' experiences with Calm, including its app. Spam, promotional comments, and comments with no identifiable connection to the Reel or Calm were excluded. Overall, 135 comments were excluded. The included comments were analyzed as publicly expressed responses to content rather than as direct evidence of users' private experiences.

Procedures

Comments were collected in March 2025 using the Real-Time Instagram Scraper API (All API), accessed through RapidAPI. To protect user anonymity, tagged usernames in the comments (e.g., @someone) were anonymized and replaced with "@xxx" during the analysis. Example comments reported in the findings were also shortened where necessary to reduce traceability while preserving their original meaning, in order to protect user privacy (Harrington, 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). The study involved no participant recruitment or direct user interaction. No formal ethics committee review was sought for this study.

Data Analysis and Process

The coding process was carried out in NVivo 14. All comments were read closely, and initial data-driven codes were developed from the dataset. In coding the comments, attention was paid not only to the

explicit wording of each comment but also to its tone and context. Comments containing irony, humor, gratitude, or emotionally expressive language were read carefully in relation to the post and the surrounding discussion, where necessary. Given the interpretive nature of social media comments, coding decisions were made reflexively through repeated reading, attention to context, and ongoing comparison across the dataset. Similar codes were then grouped into broader themes and subcategories based on recurring forms of meaning across the comments. To keep the categories analytically distinct, each comment was assigned to a single main theme. A codebook was developed to document the themes and subcategories and to clearly define each category. When comments were open to multiple interpretations, they were revisited and reread in relation to the wider dataset before making a coding decision. This process resulted in six main themes, each with four subcategories: Appreciation, Emotional Resonance, Restoration, Rituals, Social Engagement, and Detachment. Example comments were then selected to illustrate each theme.

To assess how consistently the authors applied the coding categories, the second author independently coded approximately 25% of the comments. O'Connor and Joffe (2020) identify 10–25% as a typical proportion for double coding, depending on the size of the dataset. Cohen's kappa for the authors' independent coding decisions in this subset was .85. The authors then discussed the comments they had coded differently. The second author also reviewed the remaining comments and the first author's coding decisions.

Results

This section presents the findings of the thematic analysis of user comments as publicly expressed responses to Calm's Instagram Reels. A total of 2,054 comments across 87 Reels posts were analyzed. The inductive coding process identified six main themes, as shown in Table 1: Appreciation (43.9%), Emotional Resonance (25.5%), Restoration (12.9%), Detachment (9.1%), Social Engagement (7.1%), and Rituals (1.6%). The themes are presented with attention to the contextual variation of the responses expressed in the comments. Each theme was organized into four subcategories and illustrated with sample comments to show the different emotional, social, and interpretive meanings users articulated (Table 1).

Appreciation

The Appreciation theme included comments in which users expressed gratitude, praise, or other forms of positive acknowledgment for Calm's content. Some of these comments were brief and direct, while others more explicitly referenced the content's emotional effect. Differences in tone, focus, and intensity within the theme led to the identification of four subcategories: Direct Appreciation, Emotional Appreciation, Shared Gratitude, and Content/Creator Praise (Table 1).

In Direct Appreciation, users responded with short and explicit expressions of thanks, such as "Thank you." These comments were usually brief and straightforward. Emotional Appreciation, by contrast, included comments that linked gratitude to the content's emotional effect, such as "Thank you for the gentle reminder…" Shared Gratitude introduced a more collective tone. Comments such as "We needed this tonight…" showed that appreciation was sometimes expressed in collective terms, using "we" rather than "I." The Content/Creator Praise subcategory included comments that praised particular narrators,

creators, or features linked to Calm's Reels. In comments such as "My favorite narrator …," users praised the content's presentation, especially its voice and delivery.

Emotional Resonance

The Emotional Resonance theme included comments in which users responded to Calm's Reels by referring to personal emotions, memories, or shared feelings. The comments grouped under this theme suggested different forms of emotional engagement, including recognizing one's own feelings in the content, recalling past experiences, relating emotionally to others, and expressing emotional release. Variations across these responses led to the identification of four subcategories: Emotional Recognition, Emotional Release, Memory Activation, and Shared Resonance (Table 1).

The Emotional Recognition subcategory included comments in which users linked the content to their own emotional situation. For example, one comment read, "I lost myself taking care of others…" The Emotional Release subcategory included comments that expressed a strong emotional reaction to the content, as in "This made me cry…" Memory Activation referred to comments that linked the content to recollections of past moments. For instance, one user wrote, "Reminds me of sitting on the back porch with my dad…" Shared Resonance included comments that framed the content in relation to a broader sense of shared feeling or connection with others. In one example, a user described the content as "more than an app" and referred to it as "a community" and "a small light during such a dark time." These subcategories show that users expressed emotional responses to Calm's Reels in different ways across comments.

Restoration

The Restoration theme brought together comments that linked Calm's Reels to relaxation, calmness, or relief. Within this theme, comments often referred to slowing down, feeling soothed, or finding relief during moments of stress or mental fatigue. Variation across these responses led to four subcategories: Present Moment Awareness, Sensory Calmness, Emotional Relief, and Calm Practices (Table 1).

In Present Moment Awareness, users described Calm's Reels as helping them stay present or slow down mentally. One comment, for example, noted that these posts "always bring me to the present moment." Sensory Calmness grouped comments that referenced soothing sounds or atmospheric elements, such as "the sound of the sea waves." Emotional Relief included responses that framed the content in terms of relief, as in "What a relief…" Calm Practices included comments that linked the content to breathing, centering, or other calming practices.

Detachment

The Detachment theme brought together comments that approached Calm's Reels with humor, criticism, confusion, or a more distant tone. These comments reflected skeptical, uncomfortable, or platform-focused responses from some users. This variation was organized into four subcategories: Humorous Distance, Critique and Discomfort, Confusion or Disconnection, and Platform or Feature Complaints (Table 1).

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes Identified in User Comments on Calm's Instagram Reels, With Sample Comments

Theme / Subtheme	*n* (%)	Sample user comment
Appreciation	901 (43.9%)	
Direct Appreciation		"Thank you"
Emotional Appreciation		"Thank you for the gentle reminder…"
Shared Gratitude		"We needed this tonight…"
Content/Creator Praise		"My favorite narrator…"
Emotional Resonance	523 (25.5%)	
Emotional Recognition		"I lost myself taking care of others…"
Emotional Release		"This made me cry…"
Memory Activation		"Reminds me of sitting on the back porch with my dad…"
Shared Resonance		"Idc what anyone says. It was more than an app… It was a community… It was a small light during such a dark time…"
Restoration	265 (12.9%)	
Present Moment Awareness		"These breath in and out posts always bring me to the present moment…"
Sensory Calmness		"… The sound of the sea waves is just so relaxing."
Emotional Relief		"What a relief…"
Calm Practices		"Mindful breathing… Helps me center my thoughts…"
Detachment	187 (9.1%)	
Humorous Distance		"How is that going to help people sleep? … It kept me up… LOL"
Critique and Discomfort		"Too high pitched for me… NOT calming."
Confusion or Disconnection		"I'm confused… Why a train sound?"
Platform or Feature Complaints		"Why doesn't Calm work on … anymore?"
Social Engagement	145 (7.1%)	
Content Recommendation Requests		"What I really want is… voicing a sleep story, please and thank you"
Mentioning and Tagging Others		"@xxx… I know you'll love this"
Public Endorsement		"I first heard about JOMO… Highly recommend!"
Cultural or Social Context Linking		"Fellow Colombian… here…"
Rituals	33 (1.6%)	
Sleep Rituals		"…listen to Calm every nite"
Mindfulness Routines		"Do this every day…"
Nature-Linked Practices		"Take… nature walks…"
Digital Habits and Milestones		"…opening up my Calm app… 682 straight days of Calm!"

Note. N = 2,054 comments. Sample comments are presented in shortened form to reduce identifiability.

In the Humorous Distance subcategory, users responded to Calm's Reels with humorous, ironic, or sarcastic remarks, such as "How is that going to help people sleep? … It kept me up… LOL." Critique and Discomfort included comments that expressed dissatisfaction with elements such as voice, pitch, tone, or overall atmosphere. One example stated, "Too high pitched for me… NOT calming." Confusion or Disconnection included comments that suggested uncertainty or difficulty making sense of the content,

as in “I’m confused… Why a train sound?” Platform or Feature Complaints, by contrast, referred to technical problems or app-related issues rather than to the content itself. For example, one user asked, “Why doesn’t Calm work on … anymore?”

Social Engagement

The Social Engagement theme brought together comments in which users shared Calm’s content with others, made recommendations, or engaged with other users through the content. These comments showed how mindfulness-oriented Reels circulated socially on Instagram. Four subcategories were identified within this theme: Content Recommendation Requests, Mentioning and Tagging Others, Public Endorsement, and Cultural or Social Context Linking (Table 1).

Content Recommendation Requests brought together comments in which users asked for particular narrators, voices, or types of content, such as “What I really want is… voicing a sleep story, please and thank you.” In Mentioning and Tagging Others, users shared the content by tagging someone else, as in “@xxx… I know you’ll love this.” Public Endorsement included comments that recommended the content or related ideas more broadly, for example, “I first heard about JOMO… Highly recommend!” Cultural or Social Context Linking included comments that located the content within a cultural or social identity, such as “Fellow Colombian… here…” These comments indicated that some users engaged with Calm’s Reels in explicitly social ways.

Rituals

The Rituals theme included comments referring to Calm’s Reels as part of recurring routines or practices in everyday life. Within this theme, users described the content in relation to repeated habits, daily use, or regular moments of engagement. These responses were organized into four subcategories: Sleep Rituals, Mindfulness Routines, Nature-Linked Practices, and Digital Habits and Milestones (Table 1).

The Sleep Rituals subcategory included comments that connected Calm’s Reels to nighttime or pre-sleep habits, as in “…listen to Calm every nite.” The Mindfulness Routines subcategory included comments referring to repeated practices such as “Do this every day…” The Nature-Linked Practices subcategory included comments linking the content to walking or outdoor activity, including “Take… nature walks…” The Digital Habits and Milestones subcategory included comments referring to repeated use over time, for example, “…opening up my Calm app… 682 straight days of Calm!”

Discussion

This study shows that user responses to mindfulness-oriented Reels content do not constitute a uniform and automatically positive reception. The comments reveal that some users find this content relaxing, emotionally resonant, and worth sharing, whereas others respond to it in more distant and critical ways. This suggests that the meaning of mindfulness-oriented content is shaped in user comments through different experiences and expectations. In this respect, digital media experience is better understood through ambivalent and contextually variable affective formations (Paasonen, 2021).

Positive comments do not constitute a single, homogeneous form of engagement. The brief expressions of thanks, appreciation, and praise grouped under Appreciation may be associated with the quick and low-threshold forms of affirmation commonly found on social media. In digital environments, liking, brief expressions of support, or symbolic forms of affirmation have been discussed as low-cost and low-risk forms of participation (Schumann & Klein, 2015). By contrast, Emotional Resonance points to a

mode of interpretation in which the content establishes stronger connections with users' emotions, memories, and personal life experiences.

The Restoration and Rituals themes show that, for some users, mindfulness-oriented Reels content establishes a connection between short-term relaxation and repeated everyday use. Expressions of calming down, pausing, and relaxation that stand out in the comments indicate that this content elicits an immediate emotional or sensory response. Expressions referring to routine, listening before sleep, and regular use suggest that, for some users, their engagement with the content becomes integrated into the rhythm of everyday life. User routines may develop through repetition and continuity built into the platform. Jablonsky (2022) places meditation and mindfulness apps within the same platform logics they appear to answer. Beattie and Daubs (2020) similarly argue that digital well-being discourse takes up criticisms directed at platforms while still locating the solution in the tools those same platforms provide and in users' self-regulation. Within this framework, the relaxation and repetition highlighted in user comments suggest that mindfulness-oriented content is shaped within the logic of the platform.

Comments involving recommendations, tagging, and public support show that mindfulness-oriented Reels content circulates among users, but these alone do not demonstrate a strong sense of community. Liking, brief expressions of support, and other forms of publicly expressed affirmation are among the interactions commonly encountered on social media and often function as low-threshold forms of participation (Schumann & Klein, 2015). These forms of interaction also indicate that the platform's affordances shape user participation in particular ways. According to Treem and Leonardi (2013), social media transform users' access to information, ways of forming connections, and interaction especially through affordances such as visibility, persistence, editability, and association. From this perspective, tagging, recommendation, and endorsement comments show how mindfulness-oriented content becomes socially visible and shared through platform-specific forms of engagement.

Humor, criticism, discomfort, confusion, and complaints about platform or app features show that mindfulness-oriented content does not produce a shared emotional response among users. For this reason, Detachment should not be treated as a category that simply falls outside positive comments. This theme is one of the main ways to understand the variable and ambivalent character of the digital user experience. While the same content may be associated with a relaxing experience for some users, it may be perceived by others as inadequate, strange, or unsettling. This difference indicates that users' responses to the content can vary according to their expectations, aesthetic preferences, and relationship with the platform. From this perspective, digital media experience should be understood as a space in which attention, distraction, pleasure, frustration, and boredom can emerge together (Paasonen, 2021).

Instagram is the platform where mindfulness-oriented Reels are shared, circulated, and commented on. How users respond to this content is shaped by the content itself and by the platform conditions in which it is encountered and discussed. In this sense, mindfulness-oriented content and the social media environment can be understood as mutually shaping processes within the digital order.

Limitations

The study was limited to publicly shared comments on Calm's Instagram Reels published over a five-month period. These comments reflect what users chose to express publicly and do not provide direct access to their private experiences. Although the second author reviewed the remaining comments and the first author's coding decisions, the intercoder agreement estimate applies only to the subset independently coded by both authors.

Conclusions

This study found that Calm's mindfulness-oriented Reels posts did not produce a fixed or automatically positive meaning on Instagram. User comments show that this content was associated in some cases with relaxation, emotional closeness, and sharing, while in other cases it was met with distance, criticism, and unease. This result indicates that mindfulness-oriented content was interpreted within the platform through different expectations and experiences among users.

One of the main contributions of the study is its examination of mindfulness-oriented short-form content through public and platform-mediated responses. In this sense, the findings indicate how such content is publicly received and articulated under platform-specific conditions.

The analysis is based on comments publicly shared on Instagram. For this reason, the comments reflect how users expressed themselves on the platform, but they do not provide full access to their experiences. The study's focus on branded mindfulness content and on a single platform-specific context also limits the scope of the findings. For this reason, rather than being generalized directly to digital mindfulness more broadly, the findings are better understood in relation to user responses to branded mindfulness content circulating on Instagram Reels.

Future research may examine comparatively how similar content is interpreted across platforms such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts. Studies that combine comment analysis with interviews or user narratives may also explore in greater detail the relationship between public expression and more personal experience.

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