



Commercialising
regional or minority
languages: associations
with Low German in
Instagram posts

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Abstract This paper focuses on how commercial Instagrammers display their associations with the Low German regional language in their posts. Previous studies on offline domains show that regional and minority languages are increasingly commodified. At the same time, e-commerce plays an important role in retail. However, until now, comparably little attention has been paid to the commercial use of regional and minority languages online. This paper analyses what commercial Instagrammers associate Low German with and how they employ these associations for marketing in their posts. A multimodal corpus of commercial Instagram posts was compiled using different Low German related hashtags, consisting of 1,157 posts by 86 Instagrammers. The data were analysed using a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis and employing methods of Qualitative Content Analysis and multimodal research grounded in Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. This paper shows that the commercial Instagrammers in the study deliberately combine a limited and rather conservative and stereotypical repertoire of associations they hold with Low German circulating and strengthening common ideas of the language to promote their products. The Instagrammers reinforce the association of Low German with the seaside, especially, in their posts, also presenting their products in idyllic sceneries.

Keywords regional or minority languages, Instagram, commodification, social media

1. Introduction

In today's accelerated and increasingly interconnected world, regional or minority languages (RML) fulfil various other functions than merely being a means of communication or markers of identity. RML are considered to be valuable tools for advertising (see e.g., Pietikäinen *et al.* 2016). Given the widespread diffusion of e-commerce, the internet is currently one of the most important arenas for marketing. This raises questions about the use of RML in online marketing, what kinds of associations users have with the languages, and how businesses reproduce these associations in commercial contexts. As a visually expressive social media platform, Instagram provides new insights into associations with Low German that might not

be overtly expressed in written texts. While there is a substantial body of research dedicated to either the commodification of RML or their online use (see section 2.1 for a literature review), this paper offers a rather novel combination of these two fields, contributing to our understanding of the current use and perception of RML. Using a multimodal corpus of Instagram posts and methods of Qualitative Content Analysis, this paper answers the research questions of the kind of associations Low German is linked with in the posts by commercial Instagrammers, what themes reoccur, whether the Instagrammers associate Low German with certain stereotypes (see section 2.2.2), and how they employ these associations for marketing.

After an introduction of the research background and its relevance to the study, as well as an overview of the common associations people make with Low German, I will present the research methods and the data, followed by the results of the analysis. In the final part of the article, I will discuss the findings and their implications for future research.

2. Background: Regional and minority languages in current usage

2.1. RML use in digital communication and commodification

Today, RML are used less frequently in daily communication and are often limited to specific contexts. However, new opportunities emerge to use and maintain RML. The internet and social media platforms are widely seen as valuable tools for the use, maintenance, and learning of RML. In times of spatial mobility, online spaces allow speakers within and outside traditional language areas to interact with RML communities, also enabling speakers to form new groups and communities (Cunliffe 2019: 453; Dołowy-Rybińska 2013: 124, 127; Reershemius 2017: 36). In addition to fostering the use of RML, Dołowy-Rybińska 2013 (124, 127) notes that the internet and social media platforms can strengthen speakers' sense of being part of a community and create a certain speaker identity. Furthermore, speakers can easily access and share different language learning materials, which is particularly valuable in contexts lacking formal language classes (see e.g., Mac Uidhlin 2013). Through this decentralised approach, RML can reach a broader and more diverse audience beyond traditional and institutionalised language-learning

settings (Cunliffe 2024: 3). According to Cunliffe (2024: 3) and Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes (2011: 61), the internet and social media platforms also democratise the discourse surrounding RML. Online platforms increase the visibility of the language communities and create opportunities for diverse voices of the communities to address different issues and perspectives. As speakers of RML are often of older generations, it is important to increase the number of younger speakers (who actively use the language). The possibly increased visibility of RML in online spaces can also be a way to attract younger generations, who previously might not have been interested in (using) the language (Dołowy-Rybińska 2013: 128; Reershemius 2017: 36). Cunliffe (2024: 2) further notes that the use of RML online shows that they are suitable for digital communication and makes the languages thus more appealing for younger generations.

In today's globalised world and the new economy, languages have gained new value and are commodified in different ways, for example, to highlight the authenticity or regionality of a given product (Cavanaugh & Shakar 2014; Heller 2010; 2014). RML, once viewed as mere (often stigmatised) means of communication, are now seen as profitable assets (Pietikäinen *et al.* 2016; Pietikäinen *et al.* 2019). Through a strategic use of RML in marketing, products stand out in comparison to other products that are promoted in dominant languages (see e.g., Brennan & O'Rourke 2019: 131). RML are particularly valuable tools in the tourism sector as discussed, for example, by Moriarty (2015) concerning Irish and by Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes (2011) for the Sámi context. In these contexts, RML promote regionally branded products and experiences to tourists, creating the feeling that the products or experiences are rooted in the regional tradition (Moriarty 2015: 206). Moreover, products with prints in RML or other non-dominant varieties, such as T-shirts, mugs, and postcards, serve as another way in which regional speech forms are commodified (Jürgens 2016: 339). Johnstone (2009; 2013) describes how products with a print in Pittsburghese, a local variety spoken in Pittsburgh, allow consumers to create regional identity by emphasising linguistic differences. The practical value of the products and the communicative function of the varieties can be seen as less important, while the symbolic value of the RML or regional variety and the resulting increased value of the product are crucial.

2.2. Previous studies on Low German

2.2.1. Use of Low German

Low German is spoken by approximately 2.6 million speakers in Northern Germany and acknowledged as an endangered regional language under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Reershemius, 2017: 36). During the Middle Ages, it was the prestigious language of the influential merchants of the Hanseatic League around the Baltic Sea (Wiggers 2017: 130; Wirrer 2000: 132). After the decline of the Hanseatic League, the language's societal status decreased, and speakers have had to face stigmatisation and discrimination for centuries (Wiggers 2017: 130). Especially after the Second World War, the stigma resulted in a language shift leading to a decrease in daily language use and in intergenerational transmission (Kremer 1997: 118–120; Reershemius 2011a: 35–36; Wiggers 2017: 130). Today, the majority of fluent speakers tend to be from older generations, while younger ones have limited command of the language (Adler *et al.* 2016: 14; Arendt *et al.* 2017: 9–10). In general, the ability to speak and understand Low German is highly varied, with many people understanding Low German fairly well without necessarily having any extensive active competence of the language (Adler *et al.* 2016: 9). In contrast to the use in daily public communication in the past or in official domains during the Middle Ages, Low German is nowadays mostly used within families and with friends, in association with cultural activities, such as (amateur) theatre, or in language classes (Adler *et al.* 2016: 20; Arendt *et al.* 2017: 10; Reershemius 2011b: 385).

Today, new domains for using Low German have emerged. Online spaces, such as social media platforms and websites, foster the use of written and spoken Low German. However, studies by Reershemius (2010; 2017) and Wiggers (2017) indicate that users face obstacles when wanting to write in Low German. As Low German is not standardised and primarily used in spoken communication, users are not used to writing in Low German, which leads to uncertainties (Reershemius 2010; Wiggers 2017). Apart from orthographic questions arising from the fact that only a small number of Northern Germans are confident and good writers of Low German (Reershemius 2010: 199) and people are used to writing High German (Reershemius 2017: 37), hierarchies

between online user groups can pose challenges to users as they may fear to be called out for what others perceive as incorrect language use (Reershemius 2010: 199). Furthermore, even for users with active oral skills, converting the spoken language into written form can be even more challenging due to regional variation. Linguistic purism poses yet another challenge to the use of Low German. For instance, some users promote monolingual stances and look down on codeswitching, translanguaging, or other forms of multilingual communication practices (Reershemius 2010: 199). Other users may not feel proficient enough to write in Low German (Reershemius 2010: 199). Although more recent studies have shown that users on other platforms are tolerant towards the use of Low German in multilingual communication (Reershemius 2017; 2024), linguistic norms and ideologies still influence Low German language usage also in online spaces.

Another rather recent phenomenon is the employment of Low German for marketing purposes. According to Reershemius (2009; 2011a), Low German serves as a unique selling point in the tourism sector; apart from proper names for restaurants or summer cottages in the Low German language area, tourist boards provide brochures and other information materials including Low German to some extent. Often, a comparably small variety of well-known Low German words and phrases is strategically employed as eye-catchers, locating companies (and their products) in a Low German or Northern German context (Jürgens 2016: 330; Reershemius 2009: 144; 2011a: 49). Going through a process of enregisterment, these Low German words and phrases are no longer perceived solely as Low German but often seen as indexical of Northern German identity and used to construct authentic regional selves (see Elmentaler and Niebuhr 2017; Jürgens 2016). Following Agha (2007: 81), enregisterment describes the “processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population”. These enregistered forms are displayed on a wide selection of products emphasising regional identity and adding a sense of uniqueness, such as mugs with Low German text (Jürgens 2016: 339). With Low German not being widely used in everyday communication but carrying a high symbolic value, Elmentaler and Niebuhr (2017: 118) highlight that the audience for these Low German texts and products is not primarily Low German-speaking. Instead, Low German’s

function as an index for regional identity and authenticity is foregrounded. This commercial use targets not only locals who want to express and take pride in a regional identity but also tourists and non-locals seeking a genuine regional connection to the language area (Reershemius 2009; 2011a). Thus, utilising Low German is a comparably easy strategy to create authenticity, a regional identity, and uniqueness of the promoted products and services.

2.2.2. Previous studies on associations with Low German in the 21st century

How people perceive Low German and which associations the language evokes has undergone profound changes throughout history, often relying on specific stereotypes that also changed with time. According to Reisigl (2008: 231), stereotypes are “uniform, rigid, reductionistically overgeneralising patterns or schematic processes” which “are acquired through socialization and are usually spread through the mass media”¹. In this paper, I use the term association to describe the aspects that people connect with Low German. Associations have not necessarily undergone the earlier introduced enregisterment, whereas enregistered forms involve associations. Associations can therefore be seen as more fluid and overarching than enregisterment as they are applicable to linguistic and non-linguistic signs that are to different degrees socially recognised as indexes of regional or social identities. They also include what Niehaus (2018: 170) describes as a point of shift from second-order to third-order indexicality² (see also Elementaler and Niebuhr 2017: 110–111).

1 Translated by the author.

2 Johnstone *et al.* (2006) use Silverstein’s (2003) concept of indexical order and define the first three levels of indexicality. In Johnstone *et al.*’s (2006: 81) adaption of the model, “[f]irst-order” indexicality is the kind of correlation between a form and a sociodemographic identity or pragmatic function that an outsider could observe”. Here, variables are more generally associated with a region while members of the respective in-group are unaware of this connection (Johnstone *et al.* 2006: 83). Then, “[s]econd-order indexicality occurs when people begin to use first-order correlations to do social work, either interpretive or performative” (Johnstone *et al.* 2006: 83). On this level, also in-group members are aware of the connection between language and social meaning, but not necessarily address it (Johnstone *et al.* 2006: 84). Third-order indexicality – enregisterment – describes how in-group and out-group members

Similar to other RML, Arendt (2010: 128–129) argues that many of the different images linked to Low German nowadays often draw from historical ideas and prejudices towards Low German. Such images have been established and reinforced throughout history, for example through the depiction of Low German in the literature of the given times (Arendt 2010: 129). Despite its prestigious past, Low German speakers faced discrimination after the Middle Ages until the late 20th century. High German became more valued, leading to a decrease in the usage and prestige of the languages that are and were part of Northern Germany's autochthonous multilingualism, such as Low German, Frisian, and Danish (Reershemius 2011b: 384). Being a speaker of Low German was seen as a stigma, as Low German speakers were perceived as people of lower societal status: farmers and poor or uneducated people (Bieberstedt *et al.* 2016: 7; Reershemius 2009: 133). Although, according to Jürgens and Schröder (2016: 376–378), Low German is still often seen negatively as a language that is closely connected to farming and the countryside, Low German has a better societal standing in today's society. People perceive it predominantly positively and take pride in using Low German as an insignia of their identity (Arendt *et al.* 2017: 11; Reershemius 2009: 144; 2017: 38). Low German's past is thus complex, including periods of both prestige and stigmatisation, yet today's perception is positive in most cases.

Nowadays, many associations with Low German by the public can be summarised under the concept of *Heimat*: a feeling of home and regional belonging, being part of a family, and known traditions. The study by Adler *et al.* (2016: 22) shows that Northern Germans often associate Low German with their family and especially older relatives, which is consistent with the fact that Low German is often still spoken in domestic domains and by older generations (see e.g., Reershemius 2011a: 36). In Adler's *et al.* (2016: 22) study on the use and perceptions of Low German, the language was most frequently associated with family or the private sphere, accounting

include a limited “highly codified repertoire” (Johnstone *et al.* 2006: 84) of words and pronunciations to construct localised identities (Johnstone *et al.* 2006: 83–84). At this stage, public discourse addresses these enregistered forms (Johnstone *et al.* 2006: 84).

for 25.5% of mentions. In the context of family, the authors also show that Low German is often associated with traditions. Furthermore, conversations among friends and family are perceived as the most appropriate context for using Low German (see e.g., Adler *et al.* 2016: 20). In general, people from the language area perceive Low German as a means to convey emotions (Jürgens 2015: 314). Low German is often seen as direct, honest, and authentic, but also as a means to softening statements and make them seem less harsh or harmful (Jürgens 2015: 389; Jürgens & Schröder 2016: 345). This apparent contradiction could be explained following Jürgens's (2015: 314) insight that people perceive contexts of Low German usage as appropriate based on their own experience with the language. The feeling of home can also be seen in the connection of Low German with specific places in the language area or the region as such (Adler *et al.* 2016: 22). In sum, Low German is associated with multifaceted perceptions, most of which relate to the concept of *Heimat*.

Moreover, due to its supposed directness, Low German is often associated with a certain, often ribald kind of humour (see e.g., Schröder 1995: 199–201). Arendt (2010: 129) notes that this association, like other associations with Low German, originated as early as the 17th century, when the language was linked to the image of the uneducated and the poor and was perceived as impolite and uncultured. Today, Low German and its associated form of humour suit the image of a language that is used primarily in informal contexts, such as conversations among peers, or in settings like amateur theatre (Jürgens 2015: 323). In this context, people often use this kind of humour as an auto-stereotype, as noted by Schröder (1995: 210).

Another association with Low German is the seaside. Low German is traditionally spoken in the Northern part of Germany, with its coastal areas and islands. It is thus not surprising that the connection between Low German and the seaside is relatively common, although only 9.9% of the participants in Adler *et al.*'s (2016: 22) study reported making this association *per se*. Both Adler *et al.* (2016) and Schröder (2019) state that, in addition to the seaside as such, people working in occupations linked to the seaside such as fishers or sea captains are frequently mentioned as associations with Low German and are commonly seen as people who still have a relatively good knowledge of the language. Furthermore, shipyards or harbours are also associated with the language (Adler *et al.* 2016: 22; Schröder 2019: 116). In general, this

connection is also used in commercial contexts, for example in the naming and promotion of pubs (Jürgens 2016: 332). Although the seaside per se is not the most common association with Low German, it is relevant in serving commercial purposes.

The notions and stereotypes that people connect to languages can be used and commodified in marketing, in the same way as languages themselves can. Janich (2019) emphasises that the use of stereotypes in commercial contexts reflects societal assumptions. Commercial content on social media platforms such as Instagram aims not only at selling products and services, but also has an impact on values. It serves as guidance in shaping societal and personal values and at the same time has the power to reproduce or reshape them. After a notable shift in the last decades, Low German has a predominantly positive status, even though its speakers are conscious about the fact that some negative stereotypes and associations with the language still exist (Jürgens 2015). Positive and generalising associations with Low German, such as the feeling of home and belonging as well as informal and less drastic communication, can thus be valuable tools for the promotion of different products and services.

3. Data and methods

The data for this study was derived from Instagram, currently one of the most popular social media platforms (We Are Social *et al.* 2023). Like other widely used platforms, its content centres around various visuals: Instagram posts consist of images, GIFs, or videos combined with a caption. In most cases, users add a number of hashtags to their content to make it searchable (cf. Zappavigna 2011). In addition to Instagram posts, there are other forms of content that users can share with each other, such as stories, that is, content available for a maximum of 24 hours (Instagram n.d.a), or reels, i.e., short videos of a maximum of 90 seconds in length (Instagram n.d.b). This study uses several kinds of data: a) written texts in the captions, images, videos, and hashtags, spoken text in the videos, and b) images and videos, which I refer to as visuals unless otherwise stated. My analysis of the written texts of the content form one layer which sheds light on the Instagrammers' associations with Low German. The visual aspect of Instagram provides

another level with new insights into the associations with Low German that the Instagrammers might not explicitly express in a written form (see section below for multimodal analysis).

Table 1. Corpus data.

Category	Σ
Instagrammers	86
Posts	1,157
Captions total	1,157
• Words in the captions	54,304
Captions with hashtags	1,140
• Hashtags in total	22,007
Visuals	1,753
• Images	1,673
• Videos	80

To approach the research questions of what commercial Instagrammers associate Low German with, what kind of themes occur repeatedly in their posts, and how the Instagrammers use them for marketing purposes, a multimodal corpus of Instagram posts was produced (see also Schram, 2023). Various hashtags (e.g., #plattdüütsch, #niederdeutsch, #plattdeutsch) referring to Low German either in Low German or High German were used to create the corpus of publicly available commercial Instagram posts in which the hashtags indicate the use of Low German or reference to it. Only posts that contain at least one Low German word in their caption were included in the corpus. The corpus comprises 1,157 posts, including 1,753 visuals³, by 86⁴ Instagrammers posted between 1 March and 31 October 2021 (see Table 1). The commercial Instagrammers found with the used search terms

3 As an Instagram post contains a caption in combination with one or more visuals, the number of visuals in the corpus is higher than the number of posts. In 2021, an Instagram post could contain up to 10 visuals.

4 Please contact the author (frederike.schram@utu.fi) for a list of the Instagrammers included in the study.

and fulfilling the prerequisite of using Low German in the captions of their posts are rather small domestic businesses. They range from single-person businesses selling handmade products or printed clothing, to restaurants, cafés and hotels. The comments in the posts were not taken in to account due to the scope of this article. The data were manually collected and processed.

For the coding of the captions, methods of Inductive Category Formation within the framework of Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring 2015; 2022) were used and combined with a deductive approach based on earlier studies on Low German (see previous section) to name the data and group them into superordinate categories (please see Figure 2 for a full list of superordinate and subordinate categories). This approach made it possible to use an open coding scheme for patterns emerging in the data and at the same time to take existing knowledge into account. As shown in Figure 1, the codes and categories of the captions were established when processing the data. New categories were created where necessary and the data coding was reassessed after no new codes or categories emerged. The coded and categorised data was then grouped into superordinate categories following known associations with Low German⁵.

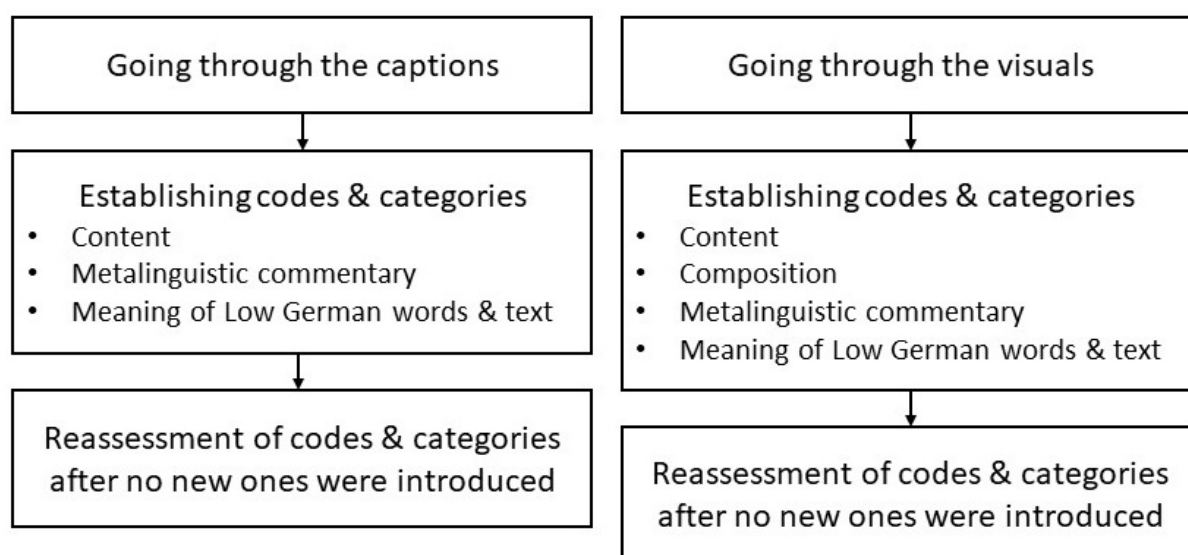


Figure 1. Overview of the inductive part of the data coding.

⁵ A detailed analysis of the (Low German) language use in the captions was presented in Schram (2023).

In addition to the written text in the captions, the distribution of hashtags and emojis was analysed. Hashtags are topic markers that users establish and consciously add to their posts (McMonagle *et al.* 2019: 32; Zappavigna and Martin 2018: 5), making them valuable for gaining insights into commonly used associations and topics. Thus, by using hashtags, the users embed their posts into certain contexts and create or connect them to communities. The corpus contains 1,140 posts with hashtags, which account 22,008 tokens. As hashtags were only used to find suitable Instagrammers for the data collection, it is not a requirement that the posts contain hashtags. The frequency of single hashtags was analysed using AntConc (Anthony 2020). For the purpose of this study, the 100 most common hashtags (9,448 tokens) were coded and categorised with the same categories that were used for the written texts in the captions, plus an additional category for product-related hashtags and for the language-related hashtags used for the data collection. The emojis in the captions of this study (244 types, 1,914 tokens) were replaced with their corresponding Unicode in order to analyse their frequency. Danesi (2016:15) describes emojis as “providing nuances in meaning in the tone of the message” and being used to “reinforce, expand, and annotate the meaning of written communication”. Accordingly, the analysis of the emojis follows a qualitative approach, examining them within their specific context.

The coding and categorising of the visuals took into account both their content and their composition. Similarly to the captions, the visuals were manually tagged using inductive codes developed in the coding process and utilising the open-source software *Tropy* (Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media 2017) (see Table 2 for the different categories). Furthermore, this study used concepts of multimodality research, as both Instagram and visual marketing are inherently image-centric and rely on multimodal content. Multimodality describes the combination and interplay of different modes, such as written and spoken language, sound, gestures, and visual elements to create a specific multimodal meaning (Jewitt *et al.* 2016). Jewitt (2016) stresses that, apart from compositional choices, it is relevant to take the cultural, social, and historical contexts into account to understand multimodal meaning.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), whose model of visual analysis is probably the most widely used in language studies, propose three key factors that significantly influence the composition of visuals. The first one, information value, concerns the placement of objects in visuals and their resulting importance. The authors distinguish between the positioning of objects according to the Western reading tradition from left to right (*Given* vs. *New*), based on top and bottom orientation (*Ideal* vs. *Real*), and dominant vs. subservient (*Centre* vs. *Margins*). The second factor in their model, salience, focuses on how different aspects, such as size, perspective, sharpness, and cultural context shape the hierarchy of the objects within visuals. In addition to compositional choices, non-compositional aspects thus have an impact on salience. Framing, their third factor, involves actual frames as well as those constructed through lines and vectors to establish relationships between the objects in visuals. As the focus of the analysis was to identify the Instagrammers' associations with Low German, the aspects of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework introduced above served as a basis to qualitatively analyse the visual data.

In the coding process, one or more categories were assigned to the visuals. Alongside the categories introduced in Figure 2, the coding of the visuals was also concerned with salient features of the visuals, such as the advertised products or written text containing information. In addition, the spoken data of the videos and written texts in the visuals were coded using the methodology employed in the analysis of the captions. After the inductive assignment of codes and categories, the coded visuals were grouped into superordinate categories, as with captions.

Table 2 below provides the superordinate and subordinate categories that emerged in the coding of the data and the criteria for allocation to the respective categories. The data can be coded with several categories depending on the context and content of the data.

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate categories.

Superordinate categories	Captions		Visuals	
	Criteria for being included	Subordinate categories	Criteria for being included	Subordinate categories
Seaside	Seaside implicitly or explicitly addressed, e.g., through texts or short stories about being at the beach or by descriptions of people linked to the seaside such as <i>Küstendeern</i> ‘girl of the coast’	Beach; description of person; seaside; weather	Display of the seaside, objects connected to the seaside, prints on products that are either illustrations of maritime objects or written texts (criteria as with captions)	Animal; outdoor; real seaside other; seaside; on product; weather
Character traits and humour	Implicit and explicit comments/claims about character traits, humorous content, such as jokes, wordplays, sayings, short texts	Character traits; humour; joke; weather	Display of character traits, humorous content, such as jokes, wordplays, sayings, integrated into visuals as written texts	Character traits; humour; joke; weather
Countryside, nature, farming	Countryside, nature, farming, or related topics are implicitly or explicitly addressed, e.g., in texts about life in the countryside or the origin of products	Animal; countryside; farming; nature; outdoor; weather	Visuals depicting e.g. rural areas, countryside sceneries, or farm animals	Animal; at work; countryside; farming; nature; outdoor; weather
Language area, region	Texts addressing the language area or region, also highlighting its uniqueness	Identity; language area; place (name); region; tradition	Known signs in specific places, written texts connected to the language area or region, e.g. public signage	Identity; language area; outdoor; place (name); region; tradition
Home, family, community	Implicitly or explicitly discussing home, family, or community, e.g., the Instagrammers talk about the people they speak Low German with or how they learnt the language	Community; emotions; family; <i>Heimat</i> ; identity; love for Low German; tradition	Pictures and videos showing families/family members, friend groups etc., written texts are coded as in the captions	Community; emotions; family; <i>Heimat</i> ; identity; love for Low German; tradition

Figure 2 illustrates the coding and categorising of the data. Based on its focus on (the feeling of) home, the caption was annotated as belonging to the subor-

dinate category “*Heimat*” and to the subordinate category “seaside” because of the use of *Heimathafen* ‘home port’, supported by the ‘anchor’ emoji 🚢. The superordinate categories of the caption are thus “home, family, community” and “seaside”. As they were not among the 100 most common ones, the hashtags in this post are not qualitatively analysed. The image in this post was tagged with the subordinate categories “outdoor” because of its setting and “*Heimat*”, “place (name)”, and “seaside on product” due to the texts embroidered on the cushions, which include place coordinates and Low German *Tohuus* ‘home/at home’, High German *Ankerplatz* ‘anchorage’ and the place name *Bergedorf*. In addition, Figure 2 was tagged with the category “product focus”, which is not included in Table 2 but was used to tag and thus find visuals that were centred around products. The superordinate categories of the image are “home, family, community”, “region”, and “seaside”. In Figure 2 and in the examples discussed below, the Low German parts were underlined by the author. The remaining parts are in High German.



And where are you at home? We would be happy to make you a coordinate cushion. Completely customised in your favourite colours and with the exact coordinates of your home port, your 2nd home or simply from [your] home! 🧑🏻‍🦱 🧑🏻‍🦱

Figure 2. Example post. Post by @spruchgut_by_wilma reproduced with permission.

The applied methodology provides a solid basis for the analysis of the representation of Low German in commercial Instagram posts.

4. Analysis and results: using associations with Low German in commercial Instagram posts

In this section, I will first introduce the general context of the posts' content and structure and then move on to describing the main categories of motifs used by the Instagrammers in connection to Low German.

The corpus is inherently highly product-centred; the presentation of products or services is the prevalent content and characteristic of many posts. This influences the content of the captions, hashtags, and visuals. In 587 of the 1,157 captions in the corpus, the Instagrammers describe the promoted product or provide information without showing or using any association with Low German. The following analysis relates to the remaining 570 captions (49%) of the corpus in which the Instagrammers use Low German and link different features to it. Regarding the 100 most common hashtags (9,448 tokens), product-related hashtags are relatively common with 23 types and 1,371 tokens (15%). Similarly, the visuals are highly product-centred and in the analysis, a subset of 895 of the 1,753 (51%) visuals was selected because they include associations with Low German. Visuals were excluded if only a product was displayed in a neutral setting, such as a monochrome background, without accompanying written or spoken Low German text in the image or printed on the product.

The Instagrammers use different connections with Low German in the captions and visuals in their posts. Although different in their nature, the captions and visuals in the posts can be compared with the help of the different categories revealed by the analysis. Table 3 provides an overview of the distribution of categories in the corpus. As mentioned in the methods section, the categories are not mutually exclusive and allow multiple tagging of the data.

Table 3. Associations with Low German in the corpus.

Category	Captions (n=570)	Visuals (n=895)	Hashtags (n=9,448)
Seaside	270 (47%)	719 (80%)	2,881 (30%)
Character traits and humour	153 (27%)	58 (6%)	390 (4%)
Countryside, nature, farming	121 (21%)	122 (14%)	0 (0%)
Language area, region	97 (17%)	100 (11%)	2,570 (27%)
Home, family, community	31 (5%)	28 (3%)	460 (5%)

As Table 3 indicates, the seaside is the most dominant motif in the captions, visuals, and hashtags. However, there are some differences considering the other categories. The visuals contain a higher number of seaside-related content with 80% of all visuals (719 occurrences) falling into this category, whereas the other categories are less visible with only 3%–14%. In contrast, the captions include a comparably high number of occurrences of character traits and humour (27%,) and of the countryside, nature, and farming (21%). Regarding the 100 most common hashtags, hashtags related to the language area and region are the second most common category (27%), while the other categories are considerably less frequent, and hashtags linked to the countryside, nature, or farming do not occur⁶. Nevertheless, there is an unbalanced distribution of the categories in the captions, visuals, and hashtags, with seaside motifs being dominant.

Unlike the hashtags, the emojis are not assigned to one of the categories established for the study due to their versatile usability in various contexts. While they are not quantitatively analysed for each category, the figures given in the discussion of examples reflect the total number of occurrences. For an overview, Table 4 below shows the 10 most frequently used emojis in the captions of this study. The Instagrammers' emoji use is rather varied, with

6 In addition to the categories in Table 3, the hashtags were divided into three further categories: 1) Hashtags used for the data collection (e.g., *#plattdütsch* ‘#LowGerman’): 950 tokens, 10%, 2) *Moin* or *Moin*-related hashtags (e.g., *#moinmoin* ‘#hello’): 605 tokens, 6%, and 3) hashtags that were not included in other categories (e.g., *#picoftheday*): 221 tokens, 2%.
















many emojis (55% of types) only being used once or twice. The Instagrammers most commonly post seaside-related emojis, such as the ‘anchor’⁷ emoji  and the ‘water wave’ emoji  and emojis that are linked to the expression of positive emotions or friendliness, for example the ‘smiling face with smiling eyes’ emoji  and different heart emojis. In addition, among the most common emojis are also emojis that the Instagrammers use to list facts about their products, such as the ‘check mark button’ emoji , and the ‘down arrow’ emoji  to point to their websites, shops, or contact information.




Table 4. Most frequent emojis in the captions.









	Emoji	Unicode	Used emojis (n= 1,914)
1		U+2693	339 (18%)
2		U+1F499	168 (9%)
3		U+2705	104 (5%)
4		U+1F60A	46 (2%)
5		U+2600	41 (2%)
6		U+1F970	39 (2%)
7		U+1F49B	35 (2%)
8		U+1F535	34 (2%)
9		U+2B07	33 (2%)
10		U+1F30A	32 (2%)

4.1. Seaside

In the following, I will discuss the different categories shown in Table 3, starting with the captions in each category, followed by the hashtags, and then focusing on the visuals in the given category. As stated above, the Instagrammers use the seaside in various ways in their captions and visuals. With 47% of the analysed captions (see caption in Figure 2), maritime motifs and the seaside are commonly employed both in connection with Low German content as well as mentioned in High German texts about

7 The naming of the emojis follows the one on <https://unicode.org/emoji/charts/full-emoji-list.html>

holidays or spending time at the beach. Often, the Instagrammers employ well-known Low German words in the names of their shops and products, such as *Fischkopp* ‘fish head’, a description of a person living in Northern Germany, to emphasise the regionality of their products and make them stand out (see Schram 2023). In Example (2), the Instagrammers use the Low German word *Stranddeern* ‘beach girl’ both for naming the advertised product and to describe the target audience in the greeting. They refer to the glitter design aspect of the product as something ‘true’ beach girls need. The Low German parts in the caption are highlighted by the Instagrammer using capital letters, making them stand out. As illustrated by Example (1), emojis are a means to establish or emphasise a certain context, in this case the seaside. The Instagrammer use the ‘anchor’ emoji  (339 occurrences, 18% of all used emojis) in content that addresses the seaside but also when the caption only contains descriptions of products to connect the post and product to a regional context. Similarly, the ‘water wave’ emoji  (32 emojis, 2%) is used. Alongside these emojis that are rather openly connected to the seaside, other emojis, such as the ‘blue heart’ emoji , (168 occurrences, 9%), can be seen as hinting to the seaside through their colour.

1. *Moin STRANDDEERNS! #Glitzer zum Wochenausklang ist alles [sic] was echte STRANDDEERNS brauchen*    *Schau Dir den Hoodie GRETA „Stranddeern“ im Onlineshop an* 
Hello BEACH GIRLS! #Glitzer at the end of the week is all true BEACH GIRLS need    Check out the GRETA “beach girl” hoodie in the online shop 

Another way to connect the posts with the seaside are hashtags. The Instagrammers commonly employ seaside-related hashtags (2,881 tokens, 30%). In this category, the 100 most common hashtags are either in High German or words that can be both Low German and High German. The hashtags include the North Sea (#nordsee, 372 occurrences, 13% in the seaside category) and Baltic Sea (#ostsee, 295 occurrences, 10%) and general words connected to the seaside, such as #meer ‘#sea’ (195 occurrences, 7%), #küste ‘#coast’ (164 occurrences, 6%), and #deich ‘#dyke’ (143 occurrences, 5%). Furthermore, in a smaller number of hashtags, for example, #meerliebe

‘#sealove’ (118 occurrences, 4%), #küstenliebe ‘#coastlove’ (98 occurrences, 3%), and #meerverliebt ‘#inlovewiththesea’ (84 occurrences, 3%), the Instagrammers express love and affection for the seaside, adding an emotional layer to the content. In the corpus, the Instagrammers employ and emphasise the association of Low German with the seaside and Northern Germany to place their products in a regional context and appeal to an audience looking for something unique.

In the visuals, the seaside and maritime motifs are a key category with occurrences in 80% of the analysed visuals. The Instagrammers often promote products with sea-themed prints and present their products in seaside settings. As in Figure 3, many visuals were shot at the beach and most of them in sunny weather. Only 28 out of 268 images depict the seaside with grey, rainy, or stormy weather (10%). Similarly, the captions in the seaside category rarely address bad weather (14 captions, 5%). In Figure 3, the image portrays

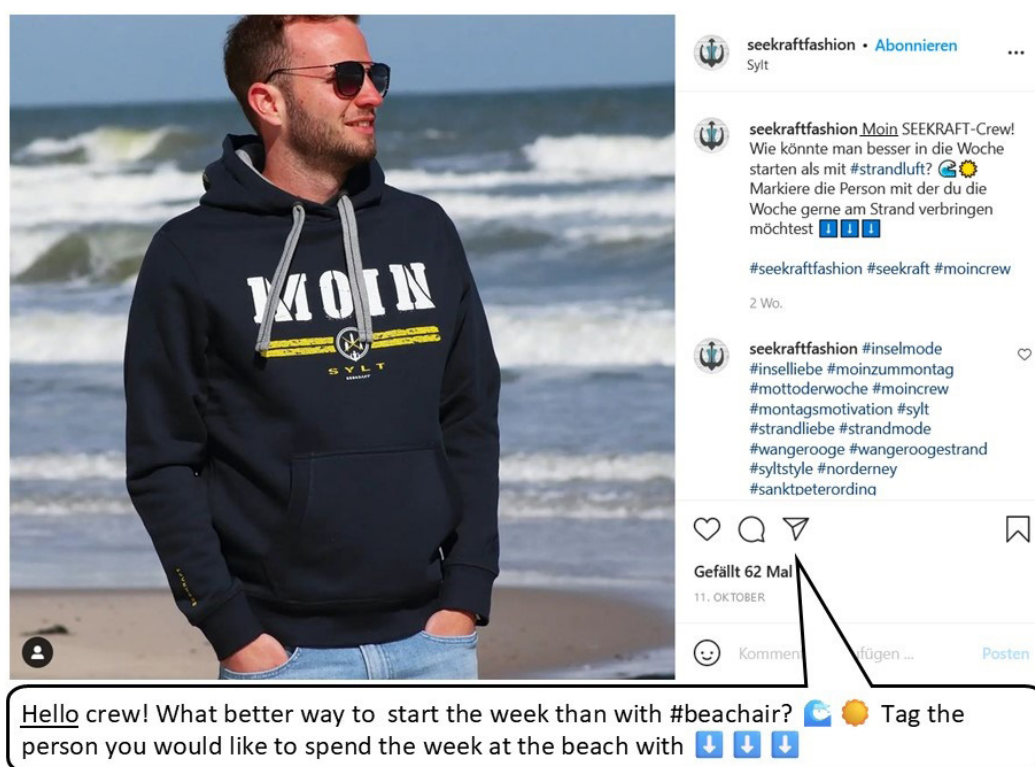


Figure 3. Seaside as setting. Post by @seekraftfashion reproduced with permission.

a model wearing a sweatshirt promoted by the shop. Following Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) framework, the shirt with its rough design is clearly the centre of the image, while the sea forms a slightly blurred background.

Its prominent print includes the greeting *Moin* ‘hello’ in bold capital letters, the place name *Sylt* (an island in the North Sea) is placed below it in a smaller font. The portrayal of the seaside in this post can be seen as adhering to the traditional idea of a perfect day at the beach on the North Sea or Baltic Sea: the sun is shining brightly, and there are some waves lapping onto the shore, but no hint of a storm. Furthermore, the person in the image is smiling, emanating a relaxed feeling without making eye-contact with the audience thus not directly engaging with them (c.f. Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). Both the design and the content of the print, as well as the idyllic setting, establish a strong connection between the product and a regional context. It constructs a regional background of the product using a Low German print and a place name in the image and Low German in the caption without challenging the common associations with Low German.

Using the public’s association of Low German with the seaside in their posts, the Instagrammers deliberately create a unique regional backdrop that serves as a competitive advantage. The combination of well-known Low German words, comprehensible to a High German speaking audience with receptive Low German skills, maritime prints, and the seaside as a setting serves as a tool to make the Instagrammers and their products stand out. At the same time, however, they are not innovative but rely on existing and rather stereotypical associations with the language, similar to what Niehaus (2024: 84) describes regarding German varieties.

4.2. Character traits and humour

The Instagrammers also employ a set of stereotypical Northern German character traits and humour. This category is more prominent in the captions (27%) than in the visuals (see Table 3) and in the hashtags (339 occurrences, 4% of the 100 most common hashtags). In the captions, character traits and humour are often expressed using Low German nouns and sayings. Through drastic wording and swear words as well as descriptive nouns in Low German, e.g. *Dösbaddel* ‘dunce, fool’, *Gnadderbüddel* ‘grumbler’ or *Klaukschieter* ‘smart-arse’, and short High German texts, the Instagrammers create and emphasise the common idea of straightforward, taciturn, and tough Northern Germans (see also caption in Figure 4). To emphasise humorous content or character

traits or to create a humorous context of the captions, the Instagrammers use emojis such as the ‘winking face’ emoji 😏 (27 occurrences, 1% of all used emojis) or ‘winking face with tongue’ emoji 😜 (22 occurrences, 1 % of all used emojis), which are both among the 20 most common emojis, even though their number is rather small. Northern German character traits and humour are also conveyed through Low German sayings. While the saying in Example (2) emphasises the stereotypical narrow-mindedness of Northern Germans, Example (3) highlights their ascribed relaxed attitude to life and hints at stereotypical Northern German understatement.

2. Wat de Buer nich kennt, dat frett he nich.
‘What the farmer doesn’t know he doesn’t eat.’
3. Ümmer suutje blieven, ja nix overdriven!
‘Always stay relaxed, don’t overdo anything!’

Low German content is often placed at the beginning of captions to serve as an eye-catcher (Schram 2023). By using Low German words and sayings related to character traits and humour as openers of captions, followed by High German text, the eye-catching function is further highlighted. Through the strategic use and placement of Low German and the display of stereotypical character traits and humour, the Instagrammers emphasise the uniqueness of their products and set them apart from comparable ones that lack these (marketing) features.

The hashtags in this category draw on the connection to bad and stormy weather as well as rough language and sayings. Among the most common hashtags are #wind ‘#wind’ (49 occurrences, 13% of the hashtags in this category), #sturm ‘#storm’ (47 occurrences, 12%), #moinihrspacken ‘#helloyou-jerks’ (45 occurrences, 12%), and #watmutdatmut ‘#whathastobedone,has-tobedone’ (47 occurrences, 12%), which is one of the few Low German hashtags in the 100 most common ones.

Character traits and humour are included in the visuals to a lower extent (6%). Often, humorous content and content related to character traits is displayed as prints on products or as written texts in visuals revolving around them. Although linked to Low German and Northern Germany, the

texts in the visuals are not necessarily written in that language. Instead, some Instagrammers use High German. The Instagrammer draws on the connection of Low German, the region, humour, and character traits in the image in Figure 4 that has written text in the centre. Listing different

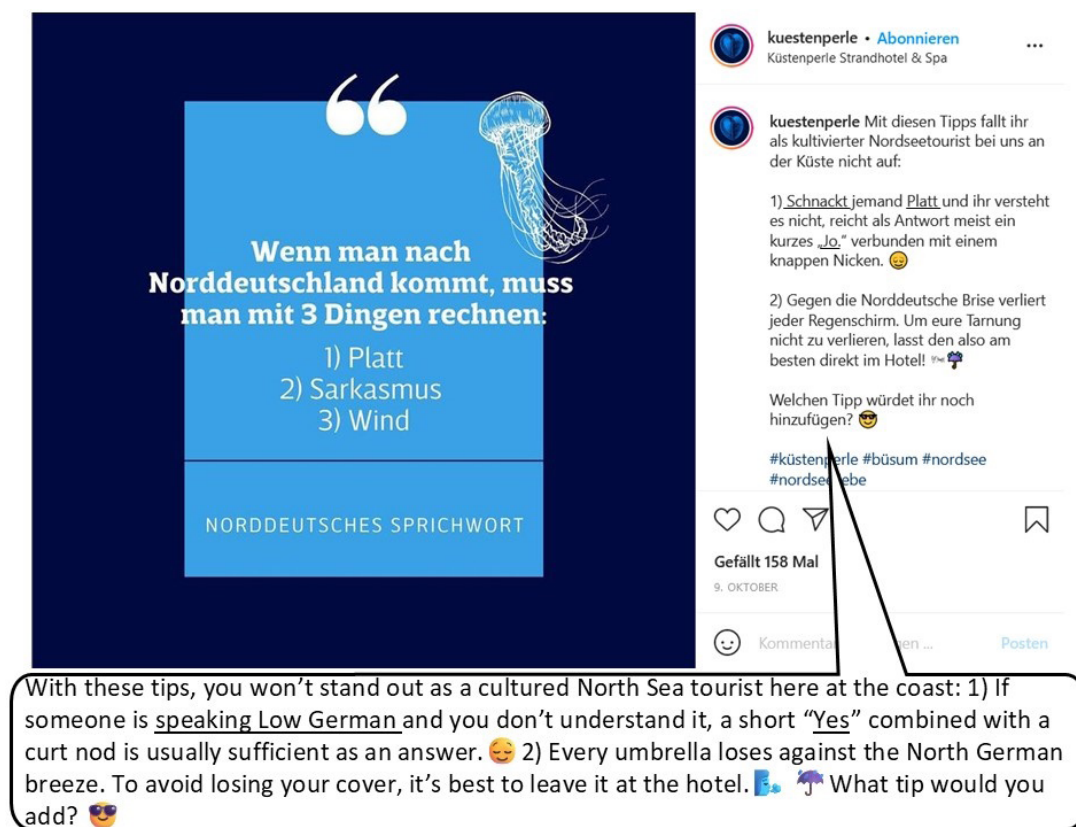


Figure 4. Character traits and humour. Post by @kuestenperle reproduced with permission.

aspects that people should expect when coming to Northern Germany, they emphasise Low German's prevalence and the perceived enduring and ribald nature of Northern German people. Furthermore, the Instagrammer uses the colloquial *Platt* as a term for Low German, which is commonly used by its speakers alongside *Plattdütsch*, possibly to highlight in-group knowledge, as opposed to *Niederdeutsch* that tends to be more used in scholarly or political discussions. As people in the language area often see Low German as less harmful and serious than High German and rather "cute", for example when using rough wordings or swear words (Adler *et al.* 2016: 22; Jürgens 2016: 336), the captions and visuals do not convey a very drastic impression. Still, they create and enforce a specific idea of what Northern Germans are like and what kind of humour they share for a commercial purpose.

4.3. Countryside, farming, and nature

A third pattern that is relatively common both in the captions (21%) and in the visuals (14%) is the association of Low German with the countryside, farming, and nature (see Table 3). There are no related hashtags in the 100 most common ones. Again, the Instagrammers use Low German in single words and in naming their products, as well as in High German texts. In the caption in Example (4), the Instagrammer promotes small, self-service stalls for dairy products, highlighting that farm animals are something typical for the region using the ‘cow’ emoji 🐮 (6 occurrences, 0.3% of all used emojis). As with the sea-related captions, the ‘green heart’ emoji ❤️ (10 occurrences, 0.5%) can be seen as supporting the connection with nature or the countryside. In addition to mentioning their origin and the countryside, the regional character of the product is also emphasised using a Low German proper name for the stalls. Low German and farming are thus positively linked and used for advertising. Moreover, a common theme is rainy and stormy weather in the language area. In contrast to the captions of seaside-related posts (14 captions, 5%), bad weather is relatively common (78 captions, 64%) and employed in conjunction with character traits that are often associated with Northern Germans. Posting captions such as Example (5), the Instagrammers enforce the image of tough Northern Germans who do not care about the weather. In this example, the use of the Low German word *deerns* ‘girls’, combined with the region’s name and describing them as ‘true’, further emphasises the aspect of bad weather and a regional identity.

4. *Nicht nur die Schafe auf den Deichen prägen Ostfrieslands Landschaft, auch an den schwarzbunten Kühen kommt man nicht vorbei 🐮❤️ In Ostfriesland kann an den sogenannten „Milchtankstellen“ frische Milch abgezapft und probiert werden. In den gemütlichen Melkhuske findet ihr weitere leckere Milchprodukte aus der Region. 😊*

‘It’s not just the sheep on the dykes that characterise East Frisia’s landscape, you can’t miss the black and white cows either 🐮❤️ In East Frisia, fresh milk can be tapped and tasted at the so-called “milk filling stations”. In the cosy milk booth, you will find other delicious dairy products from the region. 😊

5. *Echte Ostfriesendeerns kann so ein bisschen Wetter eben nicht abschrecken.*

‘True East Frisian girls can’t be put off by a bit of weather like this.’

In the captions, the Instagrammers stress unique characteristics of the stereotypical Northern German nature, countryside, farming, and Low German in a positive way.

In the visuals, the Instagrammers often present products in pristine and idyllic outdoor settings, also using natural materials such as wood as a backdrop. In the example in Figure 5, toddler trousers with the Low German

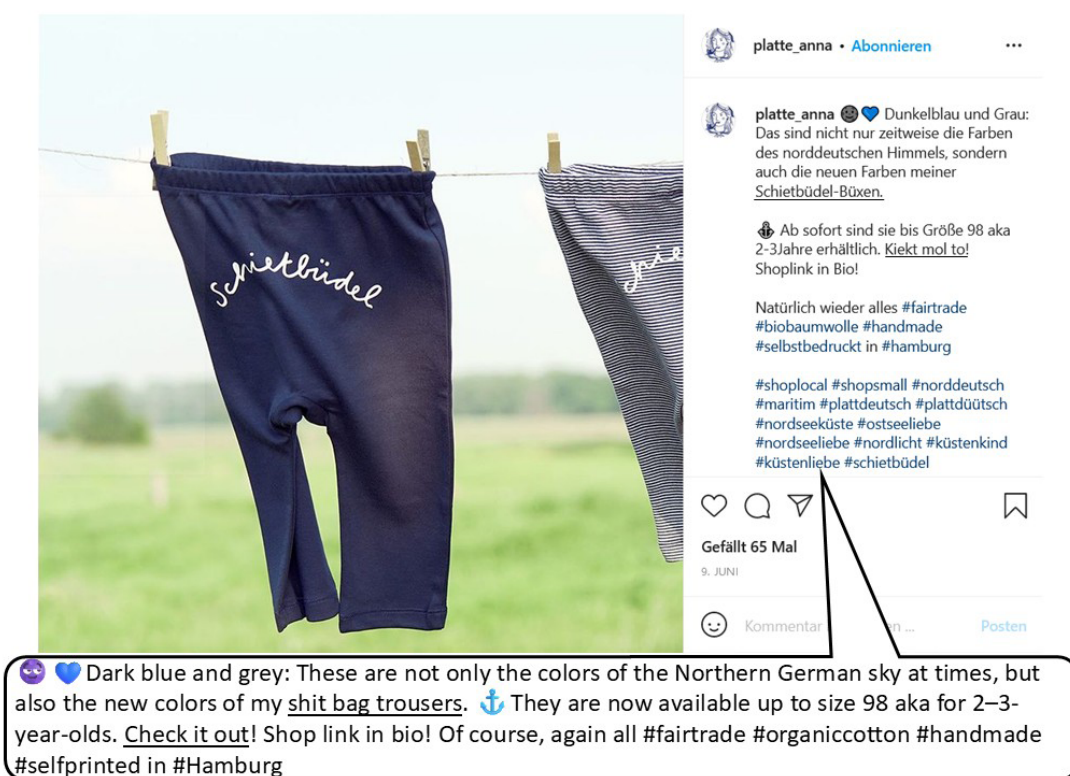


Figure 5. Countryside as setting. Post by @platte_anna reproduced with permission.

print *Schietbüdel* ‘shit bag’, an affectionate expression for a toddler or small child, are presented blowing in the wind. As the background is out of focus, the advertised product with its print serves as the salient eye-catcher, as was the case in Figure 3. Nevertheless, the countryside scenery in the background is visible and places the post in a rural context. Through the blurred background






and the caption text, a connection is made between wind or bad weather and Low German or Northern Germany. This association can be regarded as typical, emphasising the stereotypical enduring spirit of Low German speakers or Northern Germans. Although the posts align with common associations with Low German, the employment of rural imagery linked to farming with Low German in commercial settings is still rather novel. The earlier stereotype saw Low German speakers as uneducated farmers, so the connection between Low German and the countryside used to have a negative connotation. Now, however, Low German and the countryside are positively associated, indexing nostalgia and a slower-paced, genuine lifestyle—an image that can serve as a valuable marketing tool. In the context of tourism, for example, Reershemius (2009: 142) notes that tourists seek for authentic experiences which “[i]n the case of East Frisia [...] is surely the Low German speaking native, who is preferably a fisherman or a farmer”. While the countryside might be used as an idealised pristine setting in marketing in general, this notion is still new in connection with Low German considering its stigmatised past.

4.4. Language area and region

A less frequent category in the corpus is the association of Low German with the language area or the region in general (see Table 3). In 97 of the captions (17%), the Instagrammers refer to the language area or specific places in the region and often emphasise their own authenticity and that of people from the area. Similar to Example (5), the Instagrammer in Example (6) highlights that one of their employees is a ‘true’ person from the region, who knows and appreciates both the region and Low German. This strategy, combined with the use of Low German, adds to the perceived authenticity and expertise of the Instagrammer, their products as well as the employee, creating trustworthiness.

6. Heute möchten wir euch unseren [name] vorstellen. Einen echten Ostfreesenjung, der seine Region kennt und schätzt - und natürlich „ok platt snackt“ und gerne mal mit seinem Oldtimer unterwegs ist.

‘Today we would like to introduce you to our [name]. A true boy from East Frisia who knows and appreciates his region - and of course “also speaks Low German” and likes travelling in his vintage car.’

Emojis in this category are used with a rather high variety, showing no clear preference towards a specific kind of emoji. As in other categories, general smiley faces are used to convey a positive attitude. Similar to the captions in the seaside category, emojis such as the ‘anchor’ emoji  (339 occurrences, 18% of all used emojis) and the ‘water wave’ emoji  (32 occurrences, 2%) are used. The Instagrammers also use weather-related emojis, for example, the ‘cloud with rain’ emoji  (19 occurrences, 1%), the ‘sun’ emoji  (41 occurrences, 2%), and the ‘wind face’ emoji  (2 occurrences, 0.1%). The combination of these kind of emojis with the content of the written text in the captions strengthens the connection between Low German and the (bad) weather typical for the region.

In contrast to the captions, the second most frequent category of the 100 most common hashtags are connected to the region (2,570 tokens, 27%). The hashtags often refer to specific areas in Northern Germany (for example, #ostfriesland ‘#EastFrisia’, 366 occurrences, 14% of the hashtags in this category, #emsland, 94 occurrences, 4%), Northern Germany in general (for example, #norddeutsch ‘#NorthernGerman’, 327 occurrences, 13%, #norddeutschland ‘#NorthernGermany’, 248 occurrences, 10%), specific cities (for example, #hamburg, 174 occurrences, 7%, #kiel, 107 occurrences, 4%), or federal states (for example, #schleswig-holstein, 108 occurrences, 4%, #mecklenburg-vorpommern ‘#Mecklenburg-WesternPomerania’, 47 occurrences, 2%). Furthermore, the Instagrammers use hashtags that address affection, authenticity, or pride for coming from the region, such as #nordisch[sic]bynature ‘#nordicbynature’ (68 occurrences, 3%), which refers to a song by the band Fettes Brot and is the only hashtag that combines English and High German among the otherwise High German hashtags in this category, #echtemsländisch ‘#trulyemsländic’ (61 occurrences, 2%), or #wirliebennorddeutschland ‘#weloveNorthernGermany’ (45 occurrences, 2%). Apart from rather descriptive hashtags connected to the region, the hashtags in this category thus emphasise a sense of local pride and community.

Regarding the visuals, the category of language area or region is also less common, comprising 100 visuals (11%). In this category, the Instagrammers advertise products with place names or (humorous) texts and statements emphasising a regional identity printed on them. Furthermore, characteristic places or sights in the region are used to present products. In Figure 6, the Instagrammer promotes a hoodie with a maritime print in front of the *Elbphilharmonie*, a new and famous concert hall in Hamburg, which is also known outside the region, with the harbour of Hamburg in the background. Even though the product is promoted by placing it in the foreground in Figure 6, it



Figure 6. Regional setting. Post by @vittvatten_hamburg reproduced with permission.

is not the explicit focus in the image, but rather it is as salient as the setting. Due to the lack of any blurring effects and the fact that the person wearing the advertised hoodie looks in the same direction as the audience, the setting and the background are relatively prominent in contrast to Figure 3 and Figure 5. Combining the regional view and maritime motifs (in the product print and the harbour background), the Instagrammer creates a strong regional tie for their brand identity and their advertised product.

4.5. Home, family, and community

The least common category in the corpus is the association of Low German with home, family, and community. The Instagrammers use this category in 31 of their captions (5%), 460 hashtags (5%), and 28 visuals (3%). In a few captions, such as Example (7), the Instagrammers link Low German to older relatives, thus indicating that Low German is a language for conversations within a distinct demographic group. Additionally, the Instagrammer in Example (7) discusses the status of Low German as a language in Low German and states that, for them, it is not only a means of communication but a *Lebensgefühl*, a way of living. The example is one of the few captions in which information about Low German is provided and a positive attitude towards the language is evident. Like in Figure 4, the Instagrammer uses *Platt* and *Plattdüütsch* to speak about Low German, further underlining the closeness and affection expressed in the caption.

7. Plattdüütsch - du büst uns de leevste Spraak ünner de Sünn.

Plattdüütsch is nich blot en egen Spraak (dat is keen Dialekt of dat gifft bannig veel Dialekte in't Plattdüütsch!) - Plattdüütsch is allns vöran ok en Lebensgefühl.

Wie ihr seht: wir lieben Platt sehr - auch, weil es für uns ein wichtiger, kultureller Teil des Nordens ist. Und wir finden: Plattdeutsch muss wieder mehr gesprochen werden. Daher werden wir hier zukünftig auch ein wenig Plattdüütsch mit euch teilen. [Name 1] schnackt ab und an mit ihrer Omi Platt und liebt's geschrieben, gesprochen und gesungen. [Name 2] ist im Rahmen ihres Germanistikstudiums sogar an der Uni mal für ein Semester ins Plattdeutsche eingetaucht. Wie sieht es denn bei euch in Sachen Plattdüütsch aus? Snackst du ok n beten wat platt?

'Low German - you are our favourite language under the sun. Low German is not just a language in its own right (it is not a dialect, there are quite a few dialects in Low German!) - Low German is above all a way of life.

As you can see: we love Low German very much - also because it is an important cultural part of the north for us. And we think: Low

German needs to be spoken more again. That's why we'll be sharing a bit of Low German with you here in the future. [Name 1] chats with her grandmother in Low German from time to time and loves it written, spoken, and sung. [Name 2] even immersed herself in Low German for a semester at university as part of her German studies. What about you when it comes to Low German? Do you also speak a little Low German?

The Instagrammers use different kind of emojis that express positive emotions, such as the 'smiling face with smiling eyes' emoji 😊 (46 occurrences, 2% of all used emojis) and the 'slightly smiling face' emoji 😏 (25 occurrences, 1%). Apart from heart emojis in different colours, they add the 'smiling face with hearts' emoji 🥰 (39 occurrences, 2%), and the 'smiling face with heart-eyes' emoji 😍 (22 occurrences, 1%) to their captions, establishing a friendly feeling and a positive connection between the Instagrammers and their audience.

The hashtags in this category (460 occurrences, 5% of the 100 most common hashtags) include Low German and High German and are content-wise rather unvaried. They link the posts to the concept of *Heimat* or home in general, as with the High German hashtags #heimat '#home' (184 occurrences, 40% of hashtags in this category) and #zuhause '#home or #athome' (51 occurrences, 11%) and the Low German hashtag #tohuus '#home or #athome' (64 occurrences, 14%). Furthermore, the Instagrammers tag their posts with the High German hashtags #heimatliebe '#loveforthehome' (113 occurrences, 25%), expressing affection for home or the home region, and #heimathafen '#homeport' (48 occurrences, 10%), adding a connection to the seaside.

In the visuals, Instagrammers may address family in Low German when promoting products, e.g., for children, and in the context of Mother's and Father's Day. Linked to Father's Day, in Figure 7, the Instagrammer presents a greeting card. The centre of the image is the advertised greeting card which is printed with the Low German sentence *Vaddi is de best* 'Dad is the best'. As the Instagrammer uses not only the language, but also the combination of Low German, the seaside, and regionality with the lighthouse design of the card, a strong connection of the product with the region is created. In addition to the Father's Day event, the common association of Low German



Figure 7. Family, home, community. Post by @platte_anna reproduced with permission.

with the expression of emotions further emphasises its connection to family, home, and community.

Although Low German is often associated with concepts like family, home, and community, the Instagrammers do not strongly associate the language with these themes in their posts. However, their use of Low German and its associations relies on uniform and stereotypical associations that can also be found offline.

Although the distribution of the categories differs in the captions, the visuals, and the hashtags, they follow the same trends with the seaside being the most common motif. As the visuals are the dominant content of Instagram posts, the content of the captions often serves as a contextualising backdrop to the visuals by containing further information about the products and often linking the posts and thus the promoted products to an authentic regional context. Whereas the settings of the visuals provide a link to (the associations with) Low German in the captions at first sight, the Instagrammers use Low German words and sayings as well as High German texts to establish a connection between the caption, post, product, and a shared Northern German identity. As Reershemius (2011a: 48) notes, Low German serves as a

means of expressing regional identity by people from East Frisia, despite the fact that Low German and Frisian are distinct languages.

To sum up, the content of the captions and visuals, together with the Low German words and sentences give rise to a stereotypical idea commonly connected with the language and the region. The stereotypes serve as an exotic – for people not coming from the region – and general unique selling point that highlights the regional origin of the Instagrammers or their products. Low German provides the Instagrammers with a tool to emphasise the genuineness of the associated concepts and to highlight their expertise and authenticity of their products.

5. Discussion and conclusion: limited variety in associations

This article focussed on the way commercial Instagrammers make use of associations with Low German for the marketing of their products. The study answered the questions of what the Instagrammers associated with the Low German language, what kind of patterns are common, as well as whether the Instagrammers applied common stereotypical associations with Low German. The main finding is that the commercial Instagrammers in the study deliberately combined a limited and rather conservative set of associations with Low German in their posts. Instead of challenging prevailing stereotypes associated with Low German, the Instagrammers used common, albeit positive stereotypes in their marketing. No superordinate categories associated with Low German emerged in the data that had not been identified in previous studies. Noteworthy is the predominant association of Low German with the seaside and maritime motifs. The Instagrammers incorporated maritime motifs in their posts, for example, as prints on products or illustrations, or as settings of their visuals, highlighting the strong connection between Low German and idyllic maritime settings. In addition to the presentation of products in coastal landscapes, the Instagrammers often presented their products in picturesque and idyllic countryside sceneries, emphasising nostalgia for an idealised pristine lifestyle as opposed to hectic urban life.

Reinforcing existing ideas, the Instagrammers used associations with Low German in their posts' captions and visuals to create a unique selling point

in contrast to non-localised marketing. This kind of limiting the language and its speakers to a small set of associations is not only true for the present corpus of Low-German-related Instagram posts but can also be observed in commercial offline domains. Maritime motifs, such as ships and seagulls, traditions, and fonts that people link to traditions, for example Fraktur fonts, are used in combination with Low German (Jürgens 2016: 332; Reershemius 2011a: 39), similar to the way the Instagrammers used them. Furthermore, the Instagrammers' relatively unvaried associations with Low German mirror the limited use of Low German words, sentences, and sayings in commercial contexts offline, which also restrict the use of Low German to greetings, commonly known words or names (Jürgens 2016; Reershemius 2011a; 2011b). Motifs and strategies used in offline marketing are thus also valuable for the Instagrammers online.

Although the ideas associated with Low German by the Instagrammers in this study follow commonly acknowledged associations, the general distribution of what people associate with Low German differs from what this study revealed. The most dominant association in the corpus was the seaside, in contrast to previous studies on the use and perception of Low German, such as that by Adler *et al.* (2016: 22), in which Low German was often seen as the language of family and *Heimat* and the seaside was only named by 9.9% of their participants. One reason why the Instagrammers did not use the connection of the family and Low German in their posts could be that family, unlike seaside settings or maritime motifs, might not work as a localised backdrop that an out-group would perceive as exotic or 'other'. The combination of Low German with the seaside provides a unique way to create a positive image through regional branding, lending added authenticity to the marketed products. Furthermore, some similarities can be drawn between the use of RML in tourism and online advertisement. Also in marketing, Low German, alongside its public image, serves the creation of an "other" that can be consumed (see Moriarty 2015). Additionally, with regard to the seaside posts, the Instagrammers associated specific character traits to Low German speakers or Northern Germans, an association that was rather infrequent in earlier studies (Adler *et al.* 2016). The Instagrammers presented Low German speakers as direct, tough, stubborn, and enduring, highlighting their distinctiveness from other groups. Apart from people from

the region seeking authenticity in Low German related products, the target audience of the products and posts might especially be people who have moved to the region or tourists seeking a connection with the area (see Kelly-Holmes 2014; Reershemius 2009; 2011a). Despite still existing prejudices in some contexts, Low German has been recontextualised and is applied as a positive and valuable marketing tool. Even images with typically negative connotations, such as the countryside and farming, were repurposed in a positive light and assets. Low German now has symbolic and economic value. The emphasis on the seaside is thus a logical connection to the tourism sector in Northern Germany and its use of Low German for advertising.

To conclude, the Instagrammers in the corpus used common associations with Low German combined with the language as a positive feature in their marketing without challenging or questioning them in their posts. Just as normalising the use of RML would limit their economic value (Pietikäinen *et al.* 2016), diversifying the associations with Low German in marketing would diminish the capacity of this tool for creating uniqueness and authenticity of products and producers. The consistent use of established and stereotypical associations with Low German is thus crucial for maintaining Low German's value in commercial Instagram posts. Nonetheless, the positive image of Low German could also further improve the common perceptions of that language and make its use more appealing to a wider audience. Learning or speaking Low German could become more attractive when the display of the language is presented as something fashionable. At the same time, the use of rather one-sided perceptions of the language might also limit the perceived useability of Low German (see e.g. Reershemius 2011b).

Future research on the commercial use of Low German and its associations in Instagram posts could focus on a different time frame. The posts in this study originated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictions on public life were still in force in Germany. Given the potential impact of these restrictions on the content, a follow-up study would be intriguing to see how the pandemic influenced the Instagrammers' content and how they currently use Low German and its associations. Additionally, other RML could be studied in the same way to reveal commonalities and differences in how Instagrammers apply RML in their posts. Another intriguing future study could focus on the target audience and, for example, whether they comment on

presented concepts and how they interact with the Instagrammers. It would provide further valuable insights into Low German's use and its associations in current online domains. **N**

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