



Language Games on Social Media: A Wittgenstein Analysis of Youth Identity Formation and Social Relations

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Abstract: *The rapid development of digital technology has transformed patterns of communication and social interaction, particularly through the widespread use of social media platforms. This study examines how language practices on social media shape youth identity formation and social relations through the philosophical perspective of Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language games. Using a qualitative method with a literature review approach, the study analyzes various academic sources to interpret digital linguistic practices among young people. The findings indicate that language on social media functions not merely as a medium for transmitting information but as a social practice governed by specific rules, conventions, and contexts of use. Expressions such as emojis, memes, slang, hashtags, and other symbolic forms operate as elements of language games that enable young users to construct and display their identities, build group solidarity, and negotiate social meanings within digital communities. At the same time, these linguistic practices also reveal tensions between honesty and manipulation, as reflected in phenomena such as false self-presentation, hoaxes, and persuasive language strategies. Therefore, social media language both reflects and actively shapes contemporary social realities, influencing how individuals understand themselves, others, and the dynamics of meaning and power in digital communication.*

Keywords: *Digital Communication; Language Games; Social Media Language; Wittgenstein; Youth Identity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology over the past two decades has fundamentally transformed patterns of human communication and social relations (Nabila dkk., 2023). The emergence of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X is no longer merely a means of sharing information; rather, these platforms have evolved into new social spaces where individuals construct their identities (Ayun, 2015), establish friendships (Aulady & Harianto, 2022; Marchellia & Siahaan, 2022), form communities (Gumilar dkk., 2018), and negotiate social meanings. In this context, the social relations of the digital generation occur not primarily through physical encounters, but through symbolic interactions mediated by digital language.

Language used on social media demonstrates characteristics that differ from conventional forms of communication. It tends to be shorter, more visual, symbolic, and performative through the use of emojis, memes, stickers, hashtags, abbreviations, as well as styles of irony and satire (Baktiar dkk., 2022; Cahyono, 2021; Damayanti, 2018; Ibrahim & Yusof, 2020; Zein & Wagiaty, 2018). These practices indicate that digital communication can no longer be understood merely as the transmission of messages; rather, it functions as a social practice that possesses its own rules, conventions, and meanings within each community of users (Alfazri & Syahputra, 2024). In other words, language on social media operates as a

system of social action that shapes how individuals understand others and are themselves understood.

The phenomenon can be critically interpreted through the concept of language games proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein, the meaning of language does not lie in abstract definitions but in its use within concrete practices of life, often referred to as forms of life (Malcolm, 1989; Wittgenstein, 2014). Language always operates within particular “games” that possess socially agreed-upon rules among their participants. In this sense, speaking is essentially a form of participation in a social practice (Wittgenstein, 2014). Within this framework, the use of certain emojis, slang expressions, or popular hashtags on social media can be understood as forms of language games that shape how meaning, group membership, and power relations are constructed.

In practice, the digital generation constructs its identity through active participation in these language games. Choices of linguistic style, the content of posts, shared memes, as well as self-narratives expressed through captions and hashtags become performative means of articulating “who I am” and “to which group I belong.” If René Descartes famously stated *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) (Descartes, 1996), within the context of contemporary advances in information and communication technology we might analogously say, “I upload (language on social media), therefore I exist.” Language, therefore, does not merely represent identity but actively manifests human existence. At the same time, digital language practices shape social relations by fostering solidarity and a sense of belonging through collective humor and shared community symbols. However, they may also generate exclusion, polarization, hate speech, and even symbolic violence (Sa’idah dkk., 2021; Syarif, 2019), indicating that social media continues to produce both positive and negative impacts (Abraham, 2026a).

Setiawan conducted a study on language games titled *An Analysis of Language Games in the Expression “Discourse on the Postponement of the 2024 Election”: A Perspective of Ludwig Wittgenstein*. The results of the study show that the expressions used possess meaning because they are employed in accordance with their specific context. These expressions also generated diverse responses from Indonesian society. The research indicates that Wittgenstein’s concept of language games occurs within the context of Indonesian politics in 2023 leading up to the 2024 general election (Setiawan & Hambali, 2023). Another study by Gregorius Loudowick Lengga Wangge and Robert Wijanarko, titled *Identity Politics in the Post-Truth Era in Indonesia from the Perspective of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Language Games*, demonstrates that diversity in Indonesia is unavoidable and cannot be eliminated. Each form

of diversity possesses its own language games. The findings of the study indicate that the language games of religion cannot be applied within the language games of politics, nor can the two be conflated (Wangge & Wijanarko, 2023).

Most existing studies continue to focus primarily on aspects of mass communication or on the impact of technology. Research that specifically interprets social media as a linguistic practice and analyzes it through the philosophical perspective of *language games* remains relatively limited, particularly within the context of qualitative, library-based studies. In fact, this approach is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the dimensions of meaning, social rules, and power dynamics embedded within digital communication practices.

Based on this gap, the present study becomes both relevant and timely. Employing a qualitative library research approach and the framework of *language games*, this study seeks to examine how linguistic practices on social media shape the construction of identity and social relations among the digital generation. This research is expected not only to enrich the theoretical discourse on the relationship between language and society, but also to provide a critical understanding of how contemporary social reality is constructed through everyday digital communication practices. Thus, social media language can be understood not merely as a tool of communication, but as a social arena in which identity, solidarity, and power are continuously negotiated.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a literature review approach. According to John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, qualitative research is an investigative process in which researchers engage directly with real-life contexts in order to observe and understand social realities in depth. Through this approach, the world is represented in various forms of documentation, including field notes, interviews, conversations, visual materials, recordings, and reflective memos (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, qualitative researchers examine phenomena within their natural settings and seek to interpret the meanings embedded in them. A literature review constitutes an essential component of this methodological approach because it provides an examination of relevant prior studies and scholarly sources that help strengthen the theoretical foundation and support the analysis of the research being conducted (Agustini dkk., 2024; Putra dkk., 2024). In the present study, data were gathered from various academic sources, including printed and digital books (PDFs), scholarly journals, and credible news media. This study also uses thinking of Ludwig Wittgenstein to analyze existing data and phenomena.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A Brief Overview of Ludwig Wittgenstein

Ludwig Wittgenstein was a twentieth-century Austrian-British philosopher who exerted a profound influence on the philosophy of language and analytic philosophy. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was born and raised in Vienna. It is therefore unsurprising that one of the most influential philosophers of the modern era emerged from this renowned city. In the years leading up to the First World War, Vienna stood at the height of its imperial grandeur as the capital of a vast and heterogeneous empire. The city became one of the world's foremost cultural centers, serving as a meeting point for groundbreaking artistic movements and innovative intellectual currents. Within this environment, rigid conservatism confronted radical modernism in a dynamic and often tense encounter. Vienna thus constituted a historical space in which the collapse of the old order and the anticipation of a new world were intensely felt a city marked by contradictions, obsessions, as well as remarkable creativity and intellectual brilliance (Kanterian, 2007; Wittgenstein, 2006).

His thought is commonly divided into two phases: an early phase reflected in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein, 2023), where language is conceived as a logical picture of the world, and a later phase presented in *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 2019), in which he critically reassessed his earlier position and developed a new approach that understands language as a social practice.

In this later phase, Wittgenstein introduced the concept of *language games*. He argued that the meaning of words is not primarily determined by abstract definitions or logical structures, but rather by how words are used in everyday life. Accordingly, he formulated his well-known principle: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.” Language is thus understood as analogous to a game: each linguistic activity such as commanding, praying, joking, promising, or reporting facts, operates according to particular rules, contexts, and purposes. These rules constitute what he called *forms of life*, namely the socio-cultural backgrounds within which language acquires its meaning.

For Wittgenstein, many philosophical problems arise because language is taken “out of context” or misused. Consequently, the task of philosophy is not to construct new theories, but to clarify conceptual confusions by returning to the ways language is actually employed. In this sense, the notion of language games emphasizes that language is a living human activity rather than a system of symbols detached from practical life (Wittgenstein, 2014).

Wittgenstein's Main Ideas about Language Games

Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas about language games are among the most influential concepts in 20th-century philosophy of language (Grayling, 2001). This concept was primarily developed in Wittgenstein's second phase of philosophical work, namely *Philosophical Investigations*. In this work, Wittgenstein criticized the traditional view that language is a system that directly represents reality through a fixed logical structure. Instead, he asserted that the meaning of language is not determined solely by the relationship between words and objects, but rather by the way words are used in everyday human life (Wittgenstein, 2019).

According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word lies in its use in a particular social context (meaning is use) (Wittgenstein, 2019). Language does not function as a stand-alone system, but rather as part of diverse human activities. To explain this, Wittgenstein introduced the concept of language games, which are various forms of language use that are bound by certain rules, contexts, and purposes in human life. Each language game has internal rules that give meaning to the words used in it, just as the rules of a game determine how the game is played. Thus, understanding language means understanding how it is practiced in a particular activity of life (Lycan, 2018).

Furthermore, Wittgenstein linked language games to the concept of forms of life (*Lebensformen*), namely the entire cultural and social context and human practices that form the backdrop for language use. Language cannot be understood separately from concrete human life, because meaning arises from social interaction, habits, and shared practices. Therefore, there is no single essence underlying all uses of language; there are only various forms of usage that are related to each other through what Wittgenstein calls family resemblance (Glock, 1996).

Social Media Language: Truth and Lies

The language used by young people on social media is highly diverse. The truthfulness of the language expressed through words is not always guaranteed, in the sense that it does not always reflect honesty. Language on social media functions not merely as a tool for communication, but also as a space in which identity is constructed, questioned, and even contested. In this context, the use of language often serves broader social purposes beyond the literal expression of thoughts. The linguistic patterns employed by adolescents on social media can reflect group solidarity, forms of self-expression, and strategies of informal communication that differ from established formal linguistic norms (Desrina & Yelliza, 2025).

The Phenomenon of Honesty and Dishonesty in Online Language

In the realm of social media, the concepts of honesty and deception are not always clearly dichotomous. Several key aspects deserve attention, particularly self-presentation and authenticity. Social media users frequently engage in forms of self-presentation that are partially inaccurate or exaggerated in order to meet social expectations or to project an idealized image of themselves. For instance, adolescents may deliberately highlight the positive aspects of their lives in comments, stories, or posts in order to gain social recognition and approval. Such behavior can be understood as a form of *false self-presentation* that emerges from social and psychological needs, rather than from a deliberate intention to deceive in an explicit sense (Nor dkk., 2025).

Hoaxes and the Spread of Misinformation. Social media has also become a space where inaccurate or misleading information (hoaxes) spreads rapidly. Linguistic studies of social media demonstrate how hoax content and hate speech circulate through strategic language choices and narrative structures deliberately designed to influence the opinions of other users (Ramadhani, 2025). Such falsehoods may take the form of inaccurate presentation of facts, manipulation of context, or the obscuring of information that makes the truth difficult to identify. From a linguistic perspective, this phenomenon also illustrates how humor, strong emotional appeals, and particular stylistic expressions are employed to capture attention and make misleading narratives appear convincing

Similarities and Differences between Honesty and Deception on Social Media

Several important aspects related to the issue of “honesty versus deception” merit closer analysis. One of these is the tension between the presentation of an “ideal self” and the authenticity of facts. Social media users often do not explicitly lie in a factual sense; rather, they selectively highlight certain aspects of their lives while concealing others in order to construct the most socially desirable image of themselves. This practice blurs the boundary between expressive honesty and strategic deception (Nor dkk., 2025). Another relevant aspect concerns manipulative language and disinformation. Content that appears to resemble the truth but is intentionally designed to mislead—whether in the form of misinformation or disinformation—is frequently driven by strong political, social, or emotional motivations. Such strategies function as instruments of linguistic power, enabling individuals or groups to shape public opinion and influence social relationships (Ramadhani, 2025). A further dimension is the polysemy of language use in digital communication. Young users frequently modify language by employing slang, emojis, abbreviations, or coded expressions. As a result,

distinguishing between what constitutes a genuine expression of honesty and what represents a form of linguistic manipulation becomes increasingly complex (Desrina & Yelliza, 2025).

Relevance to Wittgenstein's Language Games

Within the framework of language games developed by W. V. O. Quine and contextualized in numerous studies within the social sciences (including the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein) (Quine, 2008), the meaning of language is determined by social rules and practices of use rather than solely by reference to objective reality. In this perspective, expressions that appear “honest” are understood as part of a social language game that gains acceptance among its users within particular contexts. Likewise, expressions that appear “false” are often interpreted as elements of specific social strategies rather than merely as factual inaccuracies.

Social Media Language: Youth Self-Actualization

Social media language today can no longer be understood merely as a medium for transmitting information; rather, it functions as a space of social praxis in which young people construct and present their identities. In the digital context, language becomes a dynamic, creative, and performative medium of self-expression. Every post, comment, emoji, meme, or hashtag is not simply a linguistic sign but also a meaningful social action.

From the perspective of the *language games* concept proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, the meaning of language is not determined by fixed definitions but by the way language is used in everyday life (*meaning is use*). Accordingly, the language of social media acquires its meaning through the social practices of the youth who employ it. Social media platforms generate a new set of rules, conventions, and symbols that shape distinctive language games, including the use of abbreviations, slang, GIFs, stickers, and meme culture. These forms can only be fully understood when interpreted within the broader context of social relationships and digital culture.

For young people, the digital sphere becomes an arena for self-actualization. Through particular linguistic constructions, they express their interests, perspectives, values, and lifestyles. The choice of words in captions, the style of humor, the use of trending terms, or the way individuals respond to comments reflect how they wish to be perceived by others. In this sense, language functions as a representation of the self. Identity is no longer static but is continuously constructed and negotiated through online interaction.

Furthermore, social media language also plays a crucial role in shaping social relationships. Young people cultivate closeness through shared linguistic codes, internal humor, or community-specific expressions. The use of certain forms of language signals group

membership while simultaneously creating boundaries with outsiders. In other words, language not only forms personal identity but also collective identity. Solidarity, friendship, and even social conflict often emerge from these linguistic practices.

Self-actualization through social media language also reveals a performative dimension. Young people do not merely “be themselves” but actively “present themselves” before a digital audience. Identity is consciously displayed through narratives, images, and symbols that are carefully arranged to gain social recognition. This phenomenon indicates that language functions as a means of constructing social existence: individuals are recognized because they are seen, heard, and understood within the sphere of digital communication.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that language used in social media can no longer be understood solely as a means of conveying information, but rather as a social practice that shapes the identity and social relations of the younger generation. Through Ludwig Wittgenstein's perspective of language games, the meaning of language is understood not based on fixed definitions, but based on how language is used in specific social contexts. In the digital space, various forms of expression such as emojis, memes, slang, hashtags, and symbolic language styles reflect the existence of rules and communication conventions that shape the language games typical of social media user communities. The participation of young people in these language practices allows them to build and display their identities, create group solidarity, and form new patterns of social relations in the digital world. However, these language practices also open up space for ambiguity between honesty and manipulation, as seen in the phenomena of false self-presentation, the spread of hoaxes, and the use of persuasive or manipulative language. Therefore, social media language not only reflects social reality, but also actively shapes the way individuals understand themselves, others, and the dynamics of power and meaning in contemporary digital communication.

SUGGESTION

Advances in technology, information, and communication must be recognized as the result of human thinking that continuously strives for innovation. People today greatly feel the positive impact of technological advances. However, it cannot be denied that social media technology in particular has had many negative impacts on people, especially children (Abraham, 2026b). One of the positive and negative impacts of social media is language. Social media language is quite diverse. The positive impact should be appreciated, but the negative

impact of this language is important to note so that the language used on social media at least meets the ethical or moral standards of society. Therefore, it is important to regulate the use of social media so that language can develop more directly. When young people only focus on language and communication through social media, this has a significant impact on interpersonal relationships and individual development (Agustina, 2023). All elements of society also play a very important role in monitoring the use of language on social media. The government, in particular, needs to develop a curriculum that focuses on the ethics of social media use.

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