OPEN ACCESS

Article

Discourse Criticism in Social Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Youth Identity Representation on Instagram

https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i6.1644

*Afni Rosalina, Jumino Suhadi, Devi Pratiwy[abc] ID

[123]Kajian Bahasa Inggris, Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Indonesia
Corresponding Author: afnirosalina94@gmail.com

A B S T R A C T

This study investigates how youth identities are represented in social media discourse, focusing specifically on Instagram. Using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research examines how language, visual elements, and ideologically loaded narratives shape the construction of youth identity in digital spaces. The dataset consists of approximately 40 Instagram posts and captions from Indonesian youth accounts, collected within a three-month period and selected based on engagement levels, relevance to youth culture, and visibility of identity-related themes. The findings indicate that youth identity on Instagram is constructed through consumptive symbols, curated visual aesthetics, and narrative patterns emphasizing freedom, authenticity, and self-branding. However, the analysis also uncovers underlying power relations, such as the hegemonic influence of global popular culture and social expectations that pressure young users to present idealized versions of themselves. These discursive tensions reveal Instagram as not merely a platform for self-expression but a site of ideological negotiation where identities are shaped, contested, and reproduced. The study's implications extend to broader understandings of youth culture, digital literacy, and media criticism, highlighting how young people learn to navigate identity construction amid commercialization, social comparison, and algorithmic visibility. This research contributes to scholarly discussions on digital discourse by demonstrating how social media platforms mediate cultural norms and reinforce power structures in contemporary youth identity formation.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Media, Instagram, Youth Identity, Representation.*

Check for updates

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, social media has shifted from a supplementary communication tool into a dominant cultural space that actively shapes how individuals understand themselves and others. Among various platforms, Instagram has emerged as one of the most influential sites where identity, lifestyle, and social meaning are visually and discursively produced. For young people, the platform functions not merely as a medium of entertainment but as an environment where identity is continuously constructed, displayed, negotiated, and evaluated. The combination of images, captions, hashtags, and interaction patterns forms a semiotic landscape that influences how youth imagine and perform their sense of self. Consequently, studying Instagram is crucial for understanding the discursive mechanisms through which contemporary identities are shaped, particularly in societies undergoing rapid digital transformation.

In Indonesia, Instagram holds a particularly powerful position. With one of the world's largest young online populations, Indonesian youths engage in highly dynamic processes of identity production that intersect with global digital trends and local cultural norms. Instagram encourages them to participate in aesthetic performance, lifestyle showcasing, emotional self-disclosure, and peer validation cultures. Despite its appearance as a creative and liberating space, youth expressions on Instagram often reflect deeper socio-cultural

pressures such as consumerist ideals, beauty standards, class aspirations, and algorithmic visibility rules. These practices create a "curated self," where identity is shaped not only by personal preference but also by dominant discourses circulating within digital spaces. Yet, despite the platform's cultural significance, scholarly studies specifically examining Indonesian youth identity on Instagram remain limited, particularly those using a critical, discourse-oriented lens.

The existing international literature has explored online identity from sociolinguistic, media studies, and cultural perspectives. Researchers such as Zappavigna, Kress & van Leeuwen, and boyd have demonstrated how digital discourse practices—including hashtags, multimodality, and networked publics—shape identity performance. However, most of these studies are grounded in Western contexts, where cultural values, socio-economic structures, and digital behaviors differ significantly from those in Indonesia. This gap indicates a lack of context-specific knowledge about how Indonesian youths construct identity within local socio-cultural frameworks while navigating globalized digital norms.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly the model developed by Norman Fairclough, provides an analytical foundation for uncovering how language, visuals, and social structures interact to produce identity meanings. CDA views discourse as a site of power relations, where ideologies are embedded in linguistic and semiotic choices. Its three-dimensional model—textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice—enables a comprehensive examination of Instagram posts not only as linguistic products but as social actions shaped by broader ideologies such as neoliberalism, consumer culture, and digital capitalism. Despite CDA's suitability for interrogating digital identity, few Indonesian studies have applied this approach to Instagram content, leaving an important methodological and empirical gap.

Furthermore, the Indonesian socio-cultural context creates unique dynamics that shape youth identity online. Young people must navigate expectations rooted in collectivism, religious norms, modesty culture, and family obligations while simultaneously engaging with global aesthetics associated with modernity, individuality, and self-branding. This creates a tension-filled identity landscape where youths balance authenticity with performance, freedom with conformity, and local values with transnational digital trends. Yet, the discursive strategies through which Indonesian youths negotiate these tensions remain underexplored in existing academic conversations, leaving limited understanding of how identity is culturally constructed at the intersection of global and local discourses.

Another gap lies in the limited attention to the ideological dimensions of Indonesian youth self-representation. While studies often describe visual trends or communication styles, fewer analyses critically examine how power operates within these practices—for instance, how algorithmic pressures shape visibility, how beauty standards produce symbolic inequality, or how consumerist discourse constructs an "ideal" youth identity tied to lifestyle and material achievement. Without such critical questioning, the deeper socio-cultural implications of Instagram use remain insufficiently understood.

Given these gaps, this study investigates how Indonesian youth identity is discursively constructed on Instagram using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. By analyzing a defined dataset of posts and captions from selected youth accounts, this research explores the linguistic patterns, multimodal elements, and ideological structures embedded within digital self-representation. The aim is not only to reveal the surface expression of youth identities but to uncover the power relations and cultural pressures that shape them. Through this approach, the study contributes to growing scholarship on digital discourse by offering a context-specific, critically informed analysis of youth identity formation in Indonesia—an area that remains underrepresented despite its cultural urgency.

Ultimately, this research addresses the need for a deeper, more analytically grounded understanding of how Indonesian youths navigate identity construction in an increasingly saturated digital environment. By highlighting the intersection of discourse, culture, and power on Instagram, the study provides important insights for scholars, educators,

policymakers, and digital literacy practitioners who seek to understand and support young people in the contemporary media landscape.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework. The method was structured to ensure systematic data collection, transparent analytical procedures, and rigorous interpretation of linguistic and visual discourse on Instagram.

Data Sources

The data for this study consisted of Instagram posts and captions created by Indonesian youths aged 16–24. A total of 60 posts and 60 accompanying captions were selected. The posts were collected over a three-month period (January–March 2025) to capture recent patterns of identity representation.

A purposive sampling technique was used with the following selection criteria: (1) Posts that explicitly showcased lifestyle, self-expression, fashion, social activities, or personal identity. (2) Accounts categorized as youth (based on bio, content themes, and visible interactions). (3) Posts containing relevant hashtags such as *#anakmuda, #youthlife, #dailyvibes, #OOTD,* and *#selfexpression.* (4) Posts with a minimum engagement threshold (at least 200 likes or 20 comments) to ensure discursive relevance. (5) Public accounts to maintain ethical transparency and avoid privacy violations. These criteria ensured that the dataset reflected authentic and culturally significant expressions of Indonesian youth identity

Respondents

The respondents of this study consist of Indonesian youth aged between 16 and 25 years old, representing the generation most active in using digital platforms—particularly Instagram—for self-expression, identity construction, and lifestyle representation. These respondents were not directly involved through interviews or questionnaires but rather served as indirect participants whose publicly accessible Instagram posts were analyzed as textual and visual data.

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, which means the data were intentionally selected based on relevance to the research objectives. The researcher focused on youth who: (1) Have public Instagram accounts; (2) Frequently upload personal or lifestyle-related posts; (3) Use captions, hashtags, or visuals reflecting identity performance (e.g., self-expression, aesthetic culture, freedom, or modern lifestyle); (4) Engage in digital discourse that resonates with contemporary youth issues in Indonesia.

Ethical principles were strictly applied. The anonymity of respondents was fully protected by omitting usernames, profile photos, or identifiable details. Instead, posts were coded numerically (e.g., *Post 1, Post 2, Post 3*) for analysis. Furthermore, to strengthen contextual understanding, the researcher conducted informal validation discussions with several young people (aged 18–22) to ensure that interpretations of digital meanings accurately reflected the lived experiences of Indonesian youth.

Analytical Framework

The data were analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which conceptualizes discourse as simultaneously a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice. The application of this framework involved three levels:

Textual Analysis (Description)

At this stage, the linguistic and semiotic features of captions and images were examined. This included: (1) Lexical choices (e.g., adjectives, slang, English mixing) (2) Representational strategies (e.g., self-branding, empowerment narratives) (3) Visual elements (e.g., posture, setting, color tone, objects displayed) (4) Hashtag functions and intertextual cues

The focus was to identify the linguistic and visual patterns used to construct youth identity.

Discursive Practice (Interpretation)

This level analyzed how posts were produced, distributed, and consumed, examining reposting and commenting behaviors, influencer-style discursive mimicry, audience

engagement practices, algorithmic visibility pressures, and intertextual references to global youth trends, pop culture, and lifestyle aesthetics.

This stage highlighted how youth draw from broader digital discourses in crafting self-representation.

Social Practice (Explanation)

The final dimension contextualized the findings within broader socio-cultural structures, including Indonesian norms related to youth behavior, modesty, and achievement; the influence of consumer culture and digital capitalism; power relations embedded in beauty standards, class aspirations, and forms of social validation; and cultural tensions arising from the interplay between traditional collectivism and modern individualism.

This level made explicit the ideological forces shaping youth identity performances.

Instruments

Because this study employs a qualitative approach with a Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the instruments used are primarily researcher-centered tools designed to collect and interpret textual and visual data. The main instruments include:

Observation Sheet

A structured observation sheet was developed to systematically record each post, including variables such as post date, caption content, type of image or video, number of likes, comments, and dominant hashtags, while also noting key linguistic characteristics—such as word choices, metaphors, and tone—and visual aspects including setting, composition, gestures, colors, and fashion.

Contextual Note Log

(a) Served to record contextual details surrounding each post, such as ongoing social trends, viral challenges, or cultural events relevant to the post's message. (b) Notes included reflections on how the post relates to broader cultural themes, such as consumerism, modernity, or digital identity performance.

Documentation File (Screenshots)

(a) All relevant Instagram posts were saved as screenshots and cataloged in digital folders, each labeled with codes for easy reference during analysis. (b) Each screenshot was accompanied by metadata (upload time, engagement level, caption text, and visual description).

Researcher's Reflexive Journal

(a) Used to record the researcher's own analytical reflections and evolving interpretations throughout the process. (b) This helped maintain **reflexivity**—acknowledging the researcher's influence in interpreting meaning—and ensured transparency in the analytical process.

Research Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three structured phases:

Data Collection

Data collection involved identifying potential youth accounts, applying the established selection criteria, capturing posts and captions through screenshots and transcription, and organizing all gathered material both chronologically and thematically.

Data Coding

Coding was conducted using thematic and discourse-sensitive categories derived from CDA principles, encompassing identity performance markers, consumerist symbols, linguistic features such as slang, English mixing, and evaluative language, visual strategies including pose, background, and objects, as well as ideological cues related to success, modernity, beauty, and freedom.

NVivo-style manual coding sheets were used to ensure systematic categorization.

Data Interpretation

Codes were then analyzed using Fairclough's three levels, with patterns compared across accounts to identify recurring discourses, and the interpretation centering on dominant identity narratives, tensions between authenticity and performativity, power relations

embedded in digital self-presentation, and ideological constructions of "ideal youth" on Instagram.

The integration of textual, discursive, and social practice analysis allowed for a multidimensional understanding of youth identity representation

Procedures

The research procedures were carried out in several systematic stages, following the principles of qualitative inquiry and CDA methodology.

Preparation Stage (January 2025)

Conducted a literature review on identity construction, youth culture, and digital discourse, particularly within Indonesian contexts.

Defined research objectives, analytical frameworks (Fairclough & van Dijk), and sampling criteria.

Designed observation sheets and note logs to guide systematic data collection.

Data Collection Stage (February–March 2025)

Performed online observation by visiting public Instagram profiles of Indonesian youth that met the criteria.

Collected posts containing captions and images reflecting identity-related themes such as *self-love, freedom, confidence, modern lifestyle, fashion, or digital aesthetics*.

Popular hashtags were used as entry points for data exploration, including #selflove, #aestheticlife, #youngandfree, #dailyvibes, #hustleculture, #indonesianyouth, and #lifestylegoals.

Each selected post was screenshotted and cataloged with contextual details (likes, comments, and hashtags).

Observed user interactions (comments and replies) to understand how meanings are negotiated collectively within youth communities.

Recorded relevant socio-digital phenomena occurring at the time (e.g., TikTok trends, viral influencers, national campaigns).

Validation and Triangulation Stage (April 2025)

Conducted theoretical triangulation by interpreting data through both Fairclough's and van Dijk's CDA models to compare and enrich perspectives.

Applied source triangulation by analyzing data from multiple accounts and types of posts to enhance representativeness.

Held brief discussions with several young informants (aged 18–22) to validate interpretations and ensure that analytical meanings resonated with authentic youth experiences.

Data Analysis and Reporting Stage (May–June 2025)

1. Carried out a comprehensive data analysis using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, 2. compiled the results into well-defined categories and themes such as self-expression through aesthetics, digital consumerism, and the illusion of freedom, 3. drafted and refined the analytical interpretations through multiple cycles of close reading and reflective evaluation, and 4. prepared the final research report while ensuring full adherence to ethical standards and guaranteeing participant anonymity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework, integrated with van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive model. The analytical process involved several interrelated stages:

Textual Analysis (Micro Level)

Focused on linguistic features (word choice, metaphors, evaluative language, modality, pronouns) and visual signs (color, gaze, pose, composition).

Identified patterns of *how youth describe themselves, express emotions, and frame their lifestyles*.

Analyzed figurative and symbolic representations that reflect underlying values such as freedom, confidence, or belonging.

Discursive Practice Analysis (Meso Level)

Examined how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed on Instagram.

Investigated how platform algorithms, follower expectations, and influencer culture shape the way youth create self-representations.

Considered how comments and hashtags form intertextual connections, reinforcing or contesting particular identity narratives.

Social Practice Analysis (Macro Level)

Connected the discursive findings to broader social, cultural, and ideological structures.

Interpreted how the representation of youth identity reflects digital capitalism, consumer culture, gender norms, and modern Indonesian values.

Explored how Instagram functions as both a space of empowerment and a site of subtle ideological control.

Integration with van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model

Used van Dijk's theory to understand how *social cognition* (shared mental models and beliefs) mediates between discourse and power.

Analyzed how youth internalize dominant ideologies through language and imagery, consciously or unconsciously reproducing them in their digital performances.

Triangulation and Reflexivity

Theoretical triangulation compared the interpretive depth of Fairclough's and van Dijk's frameworks.

Source triangulation ensured data validity across different accounts and post categories.

Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout analysis to critically monitor researcher bias and maintain interpretive transparency.

Through these analytical stages, the study aimed to uncover the **interplay of language, power, and ideology** that underlies how Indonesian youth construct, negotiate, and display their identities on Instagram.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The analysis of the Instagram dataset reveals that Indonesian youths construct their identities through recurring linguistic, visual, and symbolic patterns that reflect broader cultural and ideological forces. At the **micro-textual level**, specific linguistic choices demonstrate a clear tendency toward hybridization and identity signaling. Captions such as *"Start your day with good vibes only"*, *"Healing tipis-tipis biar mental tetap waras"*, and *"Still hustling, still growing"* illustrate the fusion of English motivational expressions with Indonesian colloquial terms. Keywords like *healing*, *vibes*, *mindset*, *grinding*, *waras*, and *self-growth* recurrently appear in the dataset, functioning as discursive markers that project competence, emotional resilience, and modern self-awareness. Hashtags such as #*selfgrowth*, #*anakmuda*, #*healingtime*, and #*dailyvibes* further index affiliation with specific online communities, reinforcing Zappavigna's (2015) concept of hashtags as searchable identity practices.

At the meso level of discursive practice, the production and circulation of these posts reflect algorithmic patterns and the influence of digital lifestyle templates. Youths frequently follow a visual script dominated by aesthetic cafés, mirror selfies, curated workspaces, and "softboy/softgirl aesthetics." For instance, a post featuring a minimalist coffee shop accompanied by the caption *"Productive mornings start here"* aligns with globalized wellness and productivity discourses circulating on social media. This mirrors what Baym (2023) describes as networked self-performance, where users adopt forms that maximize engagement and social approval. Through likes, comments, and algorithmic visibility, these textual and visual strategies are continuously reinforced, making identity not solely a matter of personal choice but a negotiation with platform-driven norms. The repetition of empowerment language (*"trust the process," "become your best version," "glow up journey"*) suggests that youths

draw from pre-existing discursive templates rather than creating entirely original representations.

At the macro-social level, these identity practices reflect broader ideological currents such as neoliberal individualism, digital capitalism, and the commodification of the self. Despite the frequent claim of "authenticity," the findings show that the curated self often aligns with dominant social expectations related to beauty, lifestyle, productivity, and emotional positivity. This echoes Ibrahim (2022), who argues that online emotional performances are shaped by cultural narratives that valorize visibility, desirability, and self-optimization. In the Indonesian context, these discourses intersect with cultural values of respectability (kesopanan), communal identity, and social class mobility. Some users negotiate these pressures by framing their posts as achievements for family pride or as reflections of moral discipline (e.g., *"Trying my best to be a better person each day"*), blending global self-branding with local cultural values. Thus, identity construction is not merely a personal act but a culturally embedded social practice.

Importantly, the findings reveal contradictions that highlight the tension between the *"authentic self"* and *social expectations*. Posts captioned *"Just being myself"*, *"No filter needed"*, or *"Real life over fake vibes"* are often paired with heavily edited photographs or highly staged poses. This illustrates that authenticity becomes a performative discourse rather than an objective state — a finding consistent with Marwick (2023), who notes that authenticity online is strategically curated to maintain relatability while still adhering to aesthetic norms. The claim of "being real" becomes a symbolic performance, reinforcing rather than challenging dominant norms about beauty, success, and emotional control. This tension indicates that youths are simultaneously resisting and reproducing platform-driven ideals, navigating complex pressures to appear unique yet socially acceptable.

This study reveals that the representation of youth identity on Instagram is the result of a complex discursive construction in which language, visuals, and social practices are deeply intertwined. Using Fairclough's (1995) model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research examines three key layers of discourse — text, discursive practice, and social practice — to understand how identity is constructed, negotiated, and reproduced in social media spaces.

Instagram, as a digital arena, has become a space where young people perform and project their desired self-image. The language used in captions, comments, and hashtags demonstrates a process of self-representation influenced by global values such as freedom of expression, the search for self-existence, and personal aesthetics. Yet, beneath these expressions lies an ideological dynamic reflecting a cultural shift from collectivism toward individualism.

At the textual level, the frequent use of code-mixing between Indonesian and English serves as a significant marker of digital youth identity. Expressions such as *healing*, *vibes*, *self-love*, or *grateful* are not merely linguistic trends but deliberate attempts to associate oneself with a modern and global lifestyle. Here, language functions not only as a tool of communication but also as a symbol of social and cultural capital. Moreover, the use of emojis, excessive punctuation, and informal writing styles reinforces an image of expressiveness, spontaneity, and freedom.

Visual language also plays a major role. The selection of filters, color tones, body poses, and design elements demonstrates strong non-verbal communication strategies. For instance, the use of pastel tones and minimalist styles conveys a *soft aesthetic* impression, while travel-themed posts signify freedom and symbolic affluence. All of these elements work together to form a visual discourse that strengthens the messages embedded within the text.

At the discursive practice level, the processes of content production and consumption on Instagram reflect an ongoing interaction among individuals, algorithms, and popular culture. Young users do not create content solely for themselves but also to meet the social expectations of their digital audiences. Validation through *likes*, *views*, and *comments* has become a new form of social recognition. Consequently, a culture of self-branding emerges,

where young people are driven to constantly display the best version of themselves—often diverging from their actual reality.

The social practice underlying this digital discourse indicates a broader ideological shift. The identities constructed on social media are shaped by the spirit of neoliberalism, which emphasizes individualism, consumption, and performativity. However, amidst this dominant current, counter-discourses also emerge from groups of young people who use social media as a platform for critique and symbolic resistance. Accounts promoting social activism, environmental awareness, and mental health advocacy exemplify how social media can also serve as a space for resistance against the idealized self-image propagated by digital capitalism.

These findings demonstrate that language and visuals on Instagram are far from neutral they are laden with ideological meanings. Youth identity is constructed through power relations among users, technologies, and global discourses. It is within this interplay that Critical Discourse Analysis becomes essential, as it uncovers the hidden layers of meaning behind seemingly simple texts and images, revealing how digital practices shape, reinforce, and sometimes challenge prevailing social ideologies.

Table 1. Main Findings of Critical Discourse Analysis on Instagram

Analytical Aspect	Main Findings	Critical Meaning	Data Example
Textual Language	Use of code-mixing and popular terms (*healing, vibes, grateful*)	Language functions as a symbol of social status and modernity; constructing a global image	Caption: "Need some healing vibes after a long week 😌 ✨"
Visual Language	Dominance of pastel colors, minimalist style, and composed poses	Visuals construct an aesthetic of "perfection" and self-control	Photo with soft filters and carefully arranged poses
Social Interaction	Search for validation through likes and comments	Identity depends on digital recognition	Comments such as "so goals!" or "super aesthetic!"
Underlying Ideology	Influence of capitalism and consumer culture	Self-image is associated with ownership of goods and experiences	Posts about "healing trips," brunch cafés, or OOTD (Outfit of the Day)

Table 2. Representation of Youth Identity on Instagram

Identity Category	Discursive Characteristics	Dominant Representation	Social Implications
Ideal Identity	Perfectionist, aesthetic, happy	A life without problems, always productive	Creates social pressure and fear of missing out (FOMO)
Authentic Identity	Honest, reflective, emotional	Acknowledges personal struggles and weaknesses	Inspires empathy and solidarity
Critical Identity	Educative, activist, counter-mainstream	Uses media to voice social issues	Promotes political awareness and digital culture consciousness
Hybrid Identity	Blend of local and global elements	Uses cross-cultural language and symbols	Reflects the adaptation of modern Indonesian identity

**Example 3**
Caption:

A group of young people are posing in front of a mural, wearing streetwear outfits and displaying confident expressions.

Caption:

"We don't fit in, we stand out. 💥 #youthculture #bebasaja #ownyourstyle"

Discourse Analysis (Example 3)

Element	Analysis
Text (Linguistic)	The declarative sentence *"We don't fit in, we stand out"* illustrates the construction of an identity that rejects conformity. The mixture of English and Indonesian (*"#bebasaja"*) reflects the typical code-switching style of urban youth.
Discourse Practice	The caption and fashion style serve as means of resistance against traditional social norms. Young people display the courage to be different, yet still within the acceptable boundaries of social media aesthetics.
Social Practice	This represents young people's effort to construct a discourse of *"freedom of expression"* as a modern value. However, at the same time, they are not free from the pressures of lifestyle capitalism—since a "unique" identity itself becomes a visual commodity on Instagram.

Example 4
Caption:
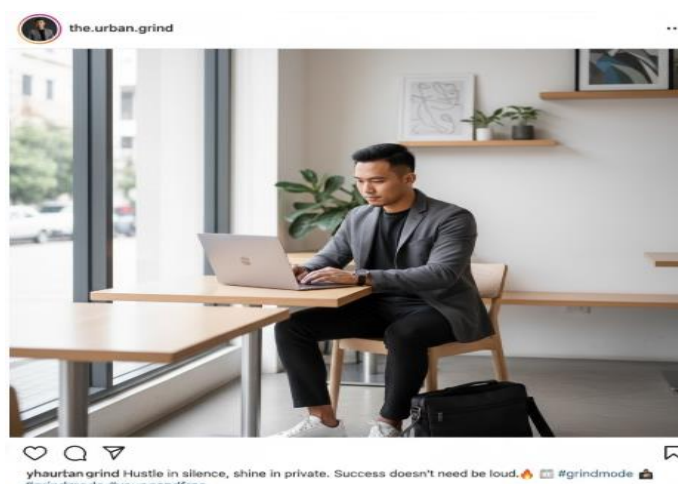
"*Hustle in silence, shine in private. Success doesn't need to be loud.* 💼 🔥 *#grindmode #youngandfree*"

Description

A young man is photographed in a modern café while using his laptop, dressed neatly in a stylish manner.

Meaning

This post reflects the values of modernity and hard work that have become symbols of contemporary youth success. The visuals and accompanying words emphasize the idea that productivity and personal achievement represent the ideal identity.

This analysis reveals that Instagram has evolved into a new social space where youth identities are continuously negotiated. Language and imagery not only convey messages but also produce norms about who is considered ideal, attractive, or worthy of appreciation. Such representations demonstrate that power in the digital world operates through aesthetics and algorithms rather than direct control.

These findings align with Foucault's (1972) theory that discourse serves as an instrument of power that shapes subjects through language. In the context of Instagram, power manifests through algorithms and digital social norms that determine what is visible and valued. Similarly, van Dijk's (2009) view on the role of discourse in reproducing ideology is evident, as social media reinforces individualistic, consumerist, and competitive values.

However, the emergence of counter-discourses from critical youth communities indicates that social media can also become a site of symbolic resistance. They use language and visuals to challenge dominant narratives — shifting from self-image construction to social awareness and solidarity. Thus, a critical discourse analysis of youth identity representation

on Instagram reveals that social media is not merely a platform for sharing but an ideological arena that shapes the collective consciousness of Indonesia's younger generation.

Subheading 1 (Research Question 1): How is Youth Identity Linguistically Constructed on Instagram?

At the textual level, language serves as both a communicative and symbolic resource in the construction of youth identity. Instagram captions, comments, and hashtags reveal a distinctive linguistic style characterized by code-mixing, informal syntax, and the use of popular English expressions such as *healing, vibes, self-love, grateful,* and *mood.* These linguistic choices function as markers of modernity, signaling the users' alignment with global youth culture.

The integration of English in otherwise Indonesian texts reflects a form of linguistic hybridization that conveys both cosmopolitanism and digital fluency. For instance, phrases like *"Need some healing vibes after a long week* 😌 ✨*"* or *"So blessed and grateful today* 💕*"* are not merely casual expressions—they symbolize cultural capital that distinguishes young people who are attuned to global digital trends.

Emojis, playful punctuation (!!!, "~"), and stylized spellings further construct a tone of expressiveness and authenticity, shaping an impression of spontaneity and emotional openness. This aligns with Fairclough's view that language in digital discourse operates as a semiotic system of identity performance, where linguistic creativity becomes a means of social differentiation.

From a critical discourse perspective, these linguistic patterns reflect a subtle shift in ideology—from collective modesty toward individual self-celebration. Through linguistic choices, youth portray themselves as empowered, independent, and emotionally self-aware, while simultaneously reproducing neoliberal ideals of self-optimization and positivity.

Subheading 2 (Research Question 2): How Do Visual and Discursive Practices Contribute to the Representation of Youth Identity?

At the visual level, Instagram posts employ strong aesthetic cues—such as color tones, camera angles, poses, and filters—to project identity visually. The preference for pastel hues, minimalist compositions, and curated poses communicates calmness, control, and aesthetic discipline. These visual strategies produce what can be termed a "digital aesthetic of perfection," where self-representation is carefully managed to align with social media norms of beauty and success.

For example, a post featuring a young individual in a café setting with the caption *"Hustle in silence, shine in private.* 💼 🔥 *#grindmode #youngandfree"* symbolizes the internalization of productivity culture—linking modern youth identity with notions of hard work, ambition, and personal success. The image of working from a stylish environment conveys the ideal of being both creative and career-driven—values central to digital neoliberalism.

At the discursive practice level, content production and consumption are mediated by algorithms and audience validation. Likes, views, and comments act as new forms of symbolic capital, determining the perceived value of identity performances. Young users thus engage in a cycle of self-branding, where they continuously curate their online image to meet audience expectations and algorithmic visibility.

This process reflects what van Dijk (2009) describes as ideological reproduction through discourse—where dominant cultural values are maintained by everyday communicative acts. On Instagram, the pursuit of aesthetic perfection and digital validation reproduces ideals of consumerism, competitiveness, and self-discipline.

Nevertheless, not all representations conform to mainstream ideals. The study also identifies counter-discourses—posts that emphasize authenticity, mental health awareness, or social critique. These serve as alternative narratives challenging the homogenized ideals of beauty and success, suggesting that visual discourse on Instagram remains a contested space.

Subheading 3 (Research Question 3): What Ideological and Social Practices Underlie the Construction of Youth Identity on Instagram?

At the social practice level, the findings indicate that Instagram operates as a cultural site where neoliberal, consumerist, and individualist ideologies are both enacted and naturalized. The repeated imagery of travel, lifestyle consumption, and productivity constructs an ideological narrative equating self-worth with visibility and material success. This reflects a larger cultural transition in Indonesian youth identity—from collective harmony toward self-promotion and performativity.

However, amid this ideological mainstream, resistance discourses are also evident. Youth-led accounts promoting environmental awareness, gender equality, and social activism represent a form of symbolic opposition to digital capitalism. Through language and visuals, they reframe Instagram from a platform of self-display into a tool for social critique and community engagement.

This dual dynamic—between conformity and resistance—illustrates Foucault's (1972) argument that discourse is both a medium of power and a potential site of resistance. Power in digital culture does not operate through coercion but through aesthetic and algorithmic regulation, shaping what is visible, desirable, and celebrated.

The analysis also aligns with van Dijk's notion of socio-cognitive reproduction, where users internalize ideological norms (such as success and independence) as part of their self-understanding. In this context, youth identities on Instagram are formed through the interaction of individual creativity, technological systems, and global cultural ideologies.

Ultimately, Instagram serves as an ideological arena where youth negotiate their place within the global modern world—sometimes complying with, and at other times contesting, the discursive forces that shape their identities.

Disscussion

These findings align with global research while also offering unique insights into the Indonesian context. Similar to Niemi & Björkqvist's (2022) study on adolescent digital expression, Indonesian youths negotiate emotional and existential concerns through curated self-representations. However, the Indonesian data shows stronger influences of localized cultural values, linguistic hybridity, and socio-economic aspirations, reflecting a distinct blend of global digital culture and local identity politics. This contributes to existing scholarship by showing that youth identity on Instagram is shaped by a dynamic interplay of linguistic creativity, platform norms, and socio-cultural ideologies, making identity less a fixed attribute and more a continuous discursive negotiation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that Instagram functions simultaneously as a space for youth self-expression and as a site of ideological regulation. Through linguistic choices, visual aesthetics, and digital symbols, Indonesian youth construct identities that appear authentic, modern, and self-directed. However, a closer critical discourse analysis reveals that these expressions are shaped by broader discursive forces including aesthetic norms, platform algorithms, and dominant global cultural values that subtly guide what is considered acceptable, attractive, or valuable online. Thus, youth identity on Instagram emerges not as a purely personal creation but as a negotiated outcome of individual agency and structural power. The findings highlight that the representation of youth identity is deeply influenced by globalized digital culture, consumerist pressures, and the logic of the attention economy. At the same time, young Indonesians maintain elements of cultural specificity through code-switching, local symbols, and contextual self-positioning. These hybrid identity practices illustrate how social media becomes a dynamic arena where global ideologies intersect with local meanings. Overall, this study contributes to understanding digital youth culture in Indonesia by showing how identity construction is shaped by the interplay of expression, power, and ideology. Social media affords young people the space to articulate who they are, yet it also embeds them within normative structures that shape how identity should look and be performed. This reinforces the need for critical digital literacy that helps youth navigate, question, and reinterpret the ideological forces embedded in everyday online interactions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Altheide, D. L., & Schneider, C. J. (2013). *Qualitative media analysis* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Barker, C. (2012). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Baym, N. K. (2015). *Personal connections in the digital age* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice*. Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. Pantheon Books.

Fuchs, C. (2014). *Social media: A critical introduction*. SAGE Publications.

Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Penguin Books.

Hearn, A. (2008). Meat, mask, burden: Probing the contours of the branded self. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 8*(2), 197–217.

Herring, S. C. (2004). Computer-mediated discourse analysis: An approach to researching online behavior. In S. A. Barab, R. Kling, & J. H. Gray (Eds.), *Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning* (pp. 338–376). Cambridge University Press.

Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. Bloomsbury.

Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Leavitt, A., & Clark, J. (2014). Upvoting Hurricane Sandy: Event-based news production processes on a social news site. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1495–1504.

Machin, D., & Mayr, A. (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis*. SAGE Publications.

Nugroho, R. (2021). Identitas digital anak muda di era Instagram: Studi kritis atas praktik representasi diri. *Jurnal Komunikasi dan Budaya, 9*(1), 22–35.

Papacharissi, Z. (2012). *A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites*. Routledge.

Rahardjo, M. (2018). Bahasa, kekuasaan, dan ideologi: Analisis wacana kritis dalam konteks media sosial. *Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra, 13*(2), 155–170.

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.

van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and power*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Zulli, D., & Zulli, D. J. (2020). Extending the "algorithmic presence": Social media marketing, Instagram's Explore page, and the digitally productive consumer. *New Media & Society, 22*(11), 2058–2076.