

# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING OF EXISTENTIAL EXPRESSIONS IN YOUTH SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS: A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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DOI: 10.35473/pho.v9i1.4637

First received: November 20, 2025

Final proof received: January 19, 2026

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## **Abstract**

This study explored how young people articulate existential meaning through their social media posts, employing a qualitative phenomenological approach to interpret their lived emotional and cultural experiences. Focusing on linguistic patterns and thematic expressions, the research analyzed how adolescents express concerns related to identity, purpose, emotional disconnection, and resilience within digital spaces. A corpus of youth-generated posts from platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X was examined using thematic, linguistic, and phenomenological analysis. The findings reveal three major existential themes: purpose-seeking, loneliness and the paradox of digital visibility, and hope-driven self-reconstruction. Purpose-seeking expressions often employed progressive verb forms—such as “searching,” “trying,” and “figuring out”—indicating an ongoing process of meaning-making rather than a fixed goal. Posts related to loneliness highlighted the tension between being seen and being understood, reflecting emotional vulnerability mediated by digital interaction. Meanwhile, affirmations of hope and resilience demonstrated future-oriented modal constructions that signaled efforts toward emotional recovery and agency. Culturally, the study showed that social media serves as a liminal space in which youth negotiate societal expectations, articulate vulnerabilities, and construct emerging identities. Overall, the findings suggested that existential expressions in youth digital communication were deeply shaped by linguistic choices and cultural environments, revealing social media as a critical site for understanding contemporary youth experiences.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Existential Meaning, Youth Social Media, Linguistic Analysis, Cultural Interpretation

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media as a dominant space for communication has profoundly transformed the ways in which young people articulate their emotions, identities, and understandings of life. In the contemporary digital environment, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) are no longer mere tools for entertainment or social networking; they have evolved into spaces of existential exploration where youth narrate their vulnerabilities, anxieties, hopes, and everyday struggles. These platforms create an environment where linguistic expression and emotional experience are intertwined, offering a public yet intimate arena for young individuals to voice concerns that previous generations may have withheld or expressed only in private. As a result, existential expressions relating to meaning, purpose, selfhood, emotional burden, uncertainty, and the search for direction have become increasingly visible within youth discourse online.

Although previous studies have explored youth communication on social media, few have examined how existential experiences are expressed linguistically and shaped by cultural influences. For example, Paula Melissa (2024) examined differences in slang usage between Gen Z and Gen Alpha, highlighting how social media platforms and peer interactions shape linguistic variation, and Doe and Smith (2023) showed that social media influences youth's linguistic practices and identity formation. This lack of research limits understanding of the depth and nuance of youth meaning-making online. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate existential expressions in youth social media posts from a phenomenological and cultural-linguistic perspective.

The existential utterances often con-

veyed through short captions, memes, hashtag chains, indirect storytelling, aestheticized photo-text combinations, or even coded emotional language, serve as linguistic representations of the youth's lived experiences. Many of these expressions reveal intense emotional states: loneliness masked by humor, fatigue symbolized through metaphors, or the desire for recognition articulated subtly through aesthetic filters and poetic captions.

The researchers identified several social media posts that illustrate and support the focus of this study, including expressions such as "trying to feel okay today" and "I feel I am not enough." These posts revealed layers of lived experience: emotional exhaustion, the desire for stability, an implicit narrative of struggle, and perhaps the cultural pressures surrounding youth mental well-being. Through phenomenological interpretation, such expressions become windows into the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) of young individuals—an experiential world shaped by social media exposure, peer norms, family expectations, and global cultural flows.

Cultural interpretation is equally crucial in this context. Youth social media discourse operates within hybrid cultural environments where local values intersect with globalized digital trends. In collectivist societies, for example, youth may encode their existential anxieties indirectly or metaphorically to maintain relational harmony or avoid perceptions of weakness. They may rely on humor, sarcasm, or aestheticized emotionality to articulate feelings that social norms discourage expressing openly. Meanwhile, global youth culture shaped by Western aesthetics, popular psychology, self-help rhetoric, and meme culture—introduces new modes of expressing emotional experiences. This intersection results in textual forms that are both locally roo-

ted and globally influenced, making youth existential expressions culturally layered and semiotically complex.

Therefore, the present study seeks to explore existential expressions in youth social media posts through an integrated phenomenological and cultural-linguistic lens. By treating existential utterances as manifestations of lived experience, this study aims to uncover how young people construct and articulate existential meaning within digital spaces. Based on this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

How are existential experiences linguistically expressed in youth social media posts? What phenomenological dimensions are reflected in these expressions?

How do cultural influences shape the existential meaning-making of youth in digital spaces?

Considering the phenomenon of how youth express meaning through linguistic practices on digital platforms, this study focuses specifically on the textual aspects of social media posts. Using a phenomenological lens inspired by Schutz's concept of subjective meaning-making and supported by qualitative content analysis, This study focuses on collecting data and respondents from three platforms: TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter (X).

Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions on digital youth culture, existential communication, and cultural linguistics. It highlights that existential expressions on social media are not trivial or fleeting remarks but profound cultural artifacts reflecting the emotional landscapes of contemporary youth. By understanding these expressions phenomenologically, we gain deeper insight into how young people experience their world, articulate their struggles, and strive to find meaning in the midst of a rapidly shifting social and

cultural environment.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate how young people articulate existential meaning through their social media posts. A phenomenological approach was particularly suited for this study because it emphasized understanding phenomena as they were experienced from the perspective of the individuals who live through them. Instead of looking for broad generalizations, phenomenology focuses on understanding the essential aspects of people's lived experiences as expressed through their language, emotions, and ways of making meaning. In the context of youth social media discourse, existential expressions are not simply textual artifacts but manifestations of how young people negotiate their identities, uncertainties, and emotional landscapes in digital environments.

Phenomenology provides the philosophical foundation for exploring what Edmund Husserl refers to as the *Lebenswelt*, or the "lifeworld," which encompasses the world of lived experiences that individuals take for granted. As Husserl emphasized (1970) "*The lifeworld is the world of immediate experience, the world that is taken for granted in everyday life.*" (p. 108)

Based on this framework, the study collected actual youth-generated expressions to examine how these lived meanings appear in real digital environments.

Data for this study were drawn from a purposive selection of youth-generated social media posts. The sources consisted of short captions, brief reflections, and emotionally expressive statements uploaded on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and X. These posts were chosen because they represent spontaneous linguistic expres-

sions in which young people articulate their emotional states, uncertainties, and existential concerns.

A total of 60 posts were selected across three platforms, such as: Instagram (20), TikTok (20), and X/Twitter (20) collected within a one-month period. These posts were purposively sampled based on the presence of explicit or implicit existential expressions related to selfdoubt uncertainty, emotional fatigue, search for purpose loneliness and disconnected and hopeful resilience.

The data were collected through screenshot documentation and manual extraction of publicly accessible posts shared by users aged approximately 15–24. Only posts containing clear existential expressions (such as reflections on purpose, uncertainty, emotional struggle, or self-evaluation) were included.

Also, to ensure ethical compliance, all identifying information was removed from the dataset. Usernames, profile photos, and links were not included in either the analysis or the appendix. Each post was assigned a neutral code (IG01–IG20, TK01–TK20, X01–X20) to preserve anonymity. The anonymized excerpts that informed the analysis are available in Appendix.

Since the study used publicly accessible content and did not involve direct interaction with human participants, formal ethical approval (IRB) was not required, following the university's ethical research policy.

The qualitative method was used because this study focuses on depth of meaning rather than numerical patterns. By examining naturally occurring online content, the study captures how meaning emerges through language choices, metaphors, emotional cues, and multimodal elements accompanying the posts.

Furthermore, this research design is

strengthened by the interpretative elements of phenomenology, particularly those found in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA supports close reading of individual texts and emphasizes the dual role of the researcher: first, as an interpreter of meaning, and second, as an analyst who seeks to reveal the essence of participants' lived experiences. The approach accepts that meaning is co-constructed—youth articulate their experiences, and the researcher interprets them through phenomenological reflection. This design acknowledges that both the participant and the researcher contribute to the meaning-making process, making the analysis more nuanced and reflective.

In summary, the phenomenological research design used in this study centers on capturing the depth and complexity of youth existential expressions in digital spaces. It enables the analysis to move beyond surface-level meanings and to explore how linguistic, emotional, and cultural elements intersect to form the lived experiences of contemporary youth. The design is grounded in the belief that existential expressions on social media are not trivial or casual remarks, but meaningful reflections of how young people navigate their personal challenges, social pressures, and cultural expectations. By focusing on subjective experience rather than statistical generalization, the phenomenological design ensures that the essence of youth meaning-making is explored with rigor, sensitivity, and interpretative depth.

Phenomenology provides the philosophical foundation for exploring what Edmund Husserl refers to as the *Lebenswelt*, or the “lifeworld,” which encompasses the world of lived experiences that individuals take for granted. When applied to social media data, the lifeworld concept positions online expressions not as detached or su-

perificial content but as authentic representations of internal consciousness. Youth often turn to social media as a space where they process emotions, articulate struggles, and search for meaning. As linguistic studies show, meaning-making is deeply embedded in cultural and experiential contexts because “language and culture are two inseparable components, as cultural values are embedded in lexical forms and reflected through everyday linguistic expressions” (Fauzah & Hidayati, 2023, p. 93). Thus, a phenomenological design is essential for situating youth existential expressions within their cultural lifeworlds.

A qualitative phenomenological design also recognizes that language is a gateway to understanding human experience. Existential utterances whether in captions, short reflections, poetic lines, or emotionally charged statements carry intentionality. These digital expressions often reveal complex emotional states such as doubt, loss, uncertainty, or hope. Moreover, the way these expressions are structured contributes to how meaning is conveyed, aligning with the view that “cohesion and coherence significantly influence the readability and logical flow of a text, determining how ideas are connected and interpreted by readers” (Otta et al., 2022, p. 73). By interpreting these utterances phenomenologically, the research seeks to uncover how youth construct meaning and navigate tensions between private emotional realities and the public nature of digital communication

### **Respondent**

The respondents in this study consist of young social media users aged 15–24, chosen because this demographic represents a period of intense identity exploration, emotional development, and deep engagement with digital platforms. Youth within this age range frequently use so-

cial media not only for entertainment but also as a space for expressing personal thoughts, emotions, and existential reflections. Their online presence, therefore, provides a rich site for understanding how existential meaning is articulated through digital communication. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, a method appropriate for phenomenological research because it prioritizes the relevance and depth of experiential data. Individuals were included based on their active posting habits within the last three months, their willingness to have their content analyzed, and the presence of linguistically expressive or reflective captions that revealed emotional or existential themes.

The respondents in this study consist of 60 individual social media users aged 15–24. Each respondent contributed one publicly accessible post, resulting in a total dataset of 60 posts collected across three platforms: Instagram (20), TikTok (20), and Twitter/X (20). This one-post-per-respondent approach ensures that each participant is represented equally in the corpus and prevents oversampling from any single individual.

All identifiable elements, such as usernames, profile photos, and location indicators, were removed to ensure full confidentiality. Respondents were assigned coded identifiers to protect their privacy while allowing for organized data presentation. Ethical considerations were central to the data collection process, with all participants providing informed consent and the researcher ensuring that sensitive content was handled with care. Through this respondent profile, the study obtains a nuanced and ethically grounded dataset that supports a thorough phenomenological interpretation of existential expressions in youth social media posts.

### **Subheading: Data Sources**

The primary data for this study are drawn from naturally occurring social media posts created by youth, specifically those that contain existential, emotional, or reflective content. These posts originate from platforms commonly used by young people, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X, and consist of various textual forms such as captions, short written reflections, tweets, and longer narrative-style posts. In many cases, these textual expressions appear within multimodal content, including aesthetic photographs, filtered selfies, symbolic images, and short video clips that incorporate on-screen text. The posts selected for analysis reveal a range of existential themes, including uncertainty about the future, struggles with self-worth, reflections on personal identity, emotional fatigue, and the search for meaning or direction. Because these expressions emerge organically from the respondents' lived experiences, they provide authentic insight into the inner emotional and existential worlds of contemporary youth as communicated through digital platforms.

In addition to the primary textual data, secondary data were gathered in the form of brief clarification exchanges with selected participants. These exchanges were not conducted as formal interviews but rather as short, targeted follow-up conversations aimed at confirming or clarifying the intended meanings behind certain ambiguous or symbolically rich expressions. This step supports the phenomenological orientation of the study by ensuring that interpretation remains grounded in the participants' own perspectives rather than the researcher's assumptions. By integrating naturalistic social media content with contextual insights directly from respondents, the study strengthens the validity of its phenomenological interpretations

and ensures that the findings accurately represent the lived experiences conveyed through youth digital expressions.

The primary data for this study are drawn from naturally occurring social media posts created by youth, specifically those containing existential, emotional, or reflective content. These posts reveal how linguistic expressions function within cultural environments because, as Fauzah and Hidayati (2023) note, understanding cultural meanings in vocabulary "allows researchers to grasp how a community conceptualizes experience, values, and worldviews" (p. 92). This is particularly relevant when analyzing how youth articulate existential meaning within culturally shaped digital ecosystems.

### **Instruments**

The instruments utilized in this study are qualitative and interpretive in nature, carefully designed to align with the phenomenological paradigm and the linguistic-analytic focus of the research. Rather than employing standardized measurement tools or numerical surveys, the study relies on instruments that facilitate deep engagement with lived experience, subjective meaning, and linguistic nuance. The primary instrument is a comprehensive data collection protocol that provides explicit criteria for selecting social media posts, securing informed consent from participants, and ensuring that all forms of digital content are used ethically. This protocol serves as a procedural backbone, guiding the researcher through each stage of data gathering to maintain consistency, transparency, and adherence to ethical digital research practices. It includes procedures for verifying the authenticity of posts, determining whether expressions reflect genuine existential or emotional content, and handling sensitive material responsibly.

A central analytical instrument in this study is the phenomenological coding framework, adapted from van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology and the methodological principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This framework provides structured yet flexible guidelines for interpreting the meaning embedded in youth digital expressions. It allows the researcher to identify thematic categories such as uncertainty, purpose-seeking, emotional struggle, hope, or self-reflection while remaining attentive to the subtle, lived nuances behind each expression. The framework also facilitates detailed linguistic analysis by examining lexical choices, grammatical patterns, metaphorical constructions, code-switching practices, and multimodal features that shape meaning in social media posts. Through this approach, linguistic and phenomenological dimensions are treated as interconnected layers of meaning rather than separate analytical domains.

To support the process of data management and organization, the study also employs several supporting instruments. Screenshots are used as stable visual captures of participants' posts, ensuring that the original form, layout, and multimodal elements such as emojis, image-text relationships, or typographic styles—are preserved for close examination. Digital logs help track the chronological context of posts, which is especially relevant for understanding emotional progression or situational triggers. Text extraction tools, used in a controlled and ethical manner, assist in transcribing and categorizing written content without altering its original structure or tone. These tools enable the researcher to manage large amounts of qualitative data efficiently while maintaining fidelity to the participants' intended meaning.

All instruments used in the study

are employed solely for research purposes, and strict anonymity is maintained throughout the process. Identifiable details such as usernames, profile images, or personal references are removed or replaced with coded identifiers to ensure confidentiality. The combined use of these qualitative instruments methodological protocols, phenomenological coding frameworks, linguistic analysis guidelines, and digital documentation tools—ensures that the study produces a rigorous, ethically sound, and deeply contextual interpretation of youth existential expression on social media.

### Procedures

Data collection began with the identification of social media posts containing existential elements, ranging from expressions of emotional struggle to reflections on meaning or identity. The researcher compiled these posts in a digital log, noting relevant linguistic and contextual features. Posts were selected only after meeting established criteria and receiving participant permission.

Following data collection, the researcher contacted the participants through direct messaging to obtain consent for using their anonymized posts in the study. All participants were informed of the purpose of the research, their rights, and the measures taken to protect their privacy. Only approved posts were included in the dataset.

Once consent was obtained, the researcher conducted phenomenological reduction, also known as bracketing or *epoche*. This phase required the researcher to suspend preconceived notions or personal interpretations regarding youth culture, emotional expression, or social media behavior. By approaching the data with an open perspective, the researcher ensured that interpretations emerged from the participants' experiences rather than external

assumptions.

The next step involved a detailed textual and linguistic interpretation of each existential expression. The analysis focused on the content of the expression, the emotions implied or explicitly stated, and the cultural context influencing how these feelings were presented. This process also included examining multimodal cues such as emojis, visual imagery, and the mixing of languages (e.g., English–Indonesian), which often contribute to the meaning-making process within youth digital communication.

The final procedural stage involved identifying thematic patterns across the dataset. Through repeated readings and reflective analysis, the researcher grouped expressions into broader themes such as emotional vulnerability, identity confusion, meaning-seeking, and the tension between cultural expectations and personal desires. These themes formed the foundation for the final phenomenological and cultural interpretation.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which supports an in-depth examination of personal experiences as expressed through language. The process began with multiple readings of each post to gain familiarity with its emotional tone, linguistic style, and contextual implications. Initial notes were taken to capture early impressions, metaphors, shifts in tone, and symbolic features.

The next stage involved extracting significant meaning units—sentences, phrases, or keywords that encapsulate core existential experiences. These units were then interpreted phenomenologically to uncover their deeper emotional and experiential significance. The analysis highligh-

ted how each expression reflected intentionality, emotional depth, and subjective meaning from the youth perspective.

Parallel to phenomenological interpretation, cultural linguistic analysis was conducted to identify cultural influences shaping the expressions. Elements such as collectivist values, academic pressure, familial expectations, and globalized digital discourse were examined as underlying factors contributing to how youth articulate existential meaning.

The final analytical step involved synthesizing both phenomenological and cultural insights into comprehensive thematic categories. These categories represent the essence of youth existential expression in digital spaces, demonstrating how linguistic choices, emotional states, and cultural contexts converge to create meaningful self-representation online.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **FINDINGS**

The analysis of youth social media posts revealed a rich variety of existential expressions that articulate concerns related to identity, meaning, emotional states, and the pressures of contemporary life. These expressions emerged not only as linguistic units but also as reflections of the youths' lived experiences shaped by digital culture, peer expectations, family expectations, and the broader cultural background in which they are situated. Across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok captions, and Twitter/X posts, existential expressions typically took the form of short emotional statements, metaphorical reflections, symbolic imagery, and coded affective language that encapsulated feelings of uncertainty, hope, loneliness, frustration, or self-searching. Many posts displayed a layered structure in which surface-level humor or aesthetic presentati-



on masked deeper emotional struggles.

A deeper phenomenological reading indicated that youths frequently embed their emotions within concise, ambiguous, or metaphorical language, reflecting a desire to express vulnerability without revealing too much of their inner world. Phrases such as “trying to find myself,” “lost but moving,” or “another heavy day” served as markers of internal reflection, while symbolic motifs such as sunsets, blurred landscapes, and dimly lit selfies accompanied textual elements to visually reinforce emotional states. These multimodal forms of expression show that meaning is negotiated not only through words but also through the aesthetic curation of images, colors, and visual atmospheres that evoke affective resonance.

The findings also highlight a significant pattern of language mixing, especially the use of English expressions by youths who predominantly communicate in their local languages in daily life. This linguistic shift appears to serve multiple functions. First, it allows a degree of emotional distancing, enabling youths to articulate sensitive or intimate feelings in a language that feels less direct or less socially risky. Second, English acts as a symbolic marker of modernity, global youth identity, and digital social belonging, reflecting the influence of global media cultures. Third, the stylistic use of English aligns with online aesthetic norms, making posts appear more expressive, stylish, or relatable within digital peer communities.

Moreover, the choice to blend English with local languages suggests a dynamic negotiation between cultural identity and globalized youth culture. This hybridity reveals that existential expressions are not isolated psychological events but culturally embedded practices influenced by social expectations, digital trends, and shif-

ting norms of emotional communication. Through mixed-language captions, youths create a linguistic space where they can experiment with identity, emotional articulation, and self-presentation without fully committing to culturally traditional or socially expected modes of expression.

The analysis further revealed that existential expressions often functioned as indirect calls for connection or recognition. Many posts suggested a silent request for emotional validation, communicated through subtle linguistic cues such as ellipses, rhetorical questions, or ambiguous emotional phrases. These cues allow peers to read between the lines, constructing a shared emotional understanding that supports a sense of community. This indirect communication style aligns with the cultural tendency among many youths to avoid overt emotional disclosure while still seeking relational closeness.

In addition, some expressions displayed a philosophical tone, indicating early-stage existential reflection on life's purpose, temporality, ambition, and self-worth. Statements like “What am I meant to do?” or “Time feels too fast lately” reveal an emerging awareness of existential themes typically associated with adolescent and young adult development. These reflections demonstrate that digital media has become a significant space for processing and externalizing existential questions that previously remained internal or private.

Overall, the findings illustrate that youth social media expressions are deeply meaningful, multimodal, and culturally situated. They reveal not only linguistic creativity but also the complex emotional landscapes of young people navigating identity formation, digital pressures, and the search for existential grounding in a hyperconnected world.

Table 1. Types of Existential Expressions in Youth Social Media Posts

| Category of Expression     | Linguistic Characteristics                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Representative Expression                                                                                                                                                                            | Underlying Existential Meaning          |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Self-Doubt & Uncertainty   | Short declaratives:<br>1. First-person pronouns ( I, me, my)<br>2. Emotive verbs (fear, lost, worry, doubt, wish, hope, struggle, regret, overthink, blame, crave)<br>3. Uncertainty word (kinda, maybe, somehow, probably)           | 1. “Still looking for future, I lost ma self”<br>2. “Trying ma best in this difficult f*** world, Idk who I’m fighting for.<br>3. “Somehow, I overthink about the past, regret for everything I did” | Crisis of identity, loss of direction   |
| Emotional Fatigue          | Metaphorical language:<br>1. Description of heaviness (drained, empty, heavy)<br>2. Hyperbolic intensifiers (everything, everybody, always)<br>3. Ellipsis showing mental Fatigue (numb, lost, fade, exhausted)                       | 1. “Drained to death”<br>2. “Feel numb, everything just too heavy even just breath”<br>3. Brain is fried, friend is gone, trust is fade”                                                             | Perception of burden, mental exhaustion |
| Search for Purpose         | 1. Modal verbs: trying to, need to, want to)<br>2. Introspective verbs (find, figure out, understand, realized, search for)<br>3. Open ended existential questions by using : why, what, who)<br>4. Reflection (still, yet, deepdown) | 1. “I want to be me”<br>2. “It’s ok to still figure out something you deserve, one day you’ll realize you did great”<br>3. “What I suppose to do in this crowded life”                               | Desire for meaning, self-discovery      |
| Loneliness & Disconnection | 1. Relational vocabulary (people, friends, anyone)<br>2. Negation Structures (no one, nothing, never)<br>3. Disconnection verbs (survive,wait, pause)<br>4. Adverb of isolation (tried, again, stopped)                               | 1. “Surrounding by people, locked up by loneliness”<br>2. “No one understand me”<br>3. “Need break, pausing everythings burden me”<br>4. Quite place, tired mind. I stopped. I’ll stop”              | Feeling of isolation                    |

|                    |                                                                      |                                                                                                   |                           |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Hopeful Resilience | Positive future-oriented verbs; affirmations (will, can, keep going) | 1. Tiredness never stops me, I'll let it get what it deserves"                                    | Persistence, self-healing |
|                    | Affirmation and self-encouragement (someday, eventually)             | 2. Someday, I'll stand peacefully with my success"                                                |                           |
| Self-protection    | Code-switching (Indo-Eng)                                            | 1. Gamau berlebihan lagi, I will treat you like you treat me                                      | Boundary Setting          |
|                    | Assertive stance-taking                                              |                                                                                                   |                           |
|                    | Positive-self affirmation (proud of me)                              | 2. Proud of me. Udah berani ga maksa siapapun buat peduli dan bertahan. If they wanna go just go. |                           |
|                    | Emotive verb (ga maksa)                                              |                                                                                                   |                           |
|                    | Detachment stance (just go)                                          |                                                                                                   |                           |
|                    | Humor-sarcasm blend                                                  | 3. Kehidupan dewasa kaya gini ga recommend, bintang                                               |                           |

### Thematic Interpretation of Existential Meaning

#### Identity Struggle and the Self in Transition

One of the most dominant themes was the articulation of identity uncertainty. Youth frequently expressed feelings of confusion, transition, or lack of clarity about who they are becoming. Phrases such as “*I feel lost*” or “*I don’t recognize myself anymore*” indicate profound existential questioning. From a phenomenological perspective, these utterances represent attempts to articulate the tension between the ‘self that is’ and the ‘self that is expected’ by society, family, digital peers, or cultural norms.

The linguistic patterns observed—first-person pronouns combined with verbs of emotional perception—show that identity struggle is experienced as an embodied emotional condition rather than an abstract idea. For many youths, social media becomes the space where identity confusion is not only expressed but also temporarily stabilized through sharing, interaction, and peer recognition.

### Emotional Overload and the Weight of Everyday Life

Another major theme is emotional heaviness linked to academic pressure, economic uncertainty, family expectations, and the constant comparison facilitated by social media. Expressions like “*Life feels too heavy today*” or “*I’m tired of everything*” reveal a deep sense of fatigue that transcends physical tiredness.

Phenomenologically, these expressions indicate that many youths experience their lifeworld as dense, pressuring, and fast-paced. The metaphor of “heaviness” is particularly significant because it linguistically encodes how emotional states are perceived through bodily sensations. The body becomes the medium through which existential meaning is felt and expressed.

Moreover, cultural expectations in many collectivist societies—such as maintaining emotional resilience, fulfilling social roles, or achieving academic success—intensify the sense of burden. Thus, emotional heaviness is both a personal and cultural phenomenon.

**Caption:**

*“Youth Social Media Posts: A Linguistic and Cultural Interpretation*  
*How do the language, emotions, and symbols used by young people reflect the existential meanings in their lives? Through a phenomenological analysis, we can uncover the deeper messages embedded in their expressions. #YouthStudy #Linguistics #CulturalMeaning”*

### **The Search for Purpose in a Digitally Mediated World**

A third prominent theme relates to purpose-seeking. Youth frequently express uncertainty regarding long-term goals, life direction, or existential aspirations. Utterances such as *“Still searching for my purpose”* highlight an ongoing process of meaning construction.

From a cultural perspective, digital environments expose youth to multiple, sometimes conflicting, narratives of success and ideal selves. This abundance of competing models creates both opportunities and anxieties. Phenomenologically, these expressions demonstrate that meaning making is experienced as both a cognitive and emotional journey mediated through digital spaces.

The linguistic structure of these expressions—often using progressive tense

(e.g., “trying,” “searching”)—suggests that purpose is seen not as a fixed endpoint but an evolving journey. This aligns with contemporary youth culture where exploration, experimentation, and change are central existential motifs.

### **Loneliness, Connection, and the Paradox of Visibility**

Despite being more digitally connected than ever, many youths express feelings of loneliness or emotional disconnection. Posts such as *“No one understands me”* or *“I wish someone would listen”* express an existential longing for authentic connection.

The phenomenological interpretation of these expressions reveals a paradox: the digital world offers visibility but not necessarily understanding. Being “seen” online does not always equate to being “known,” and this gap generates existential discomfort. Youth experience social media as a double-edged space—simultaneously a platform for self-expression and a reminder of emotional isolation.

Culturally, many youths avoid directly expressing loneliness in face-to-face settings due to stigma or social norms. Social media thus becomes a safer, semi-anonymous space to articulate vulnerable existential states.

### **Hope, Resilience, and Self-Reconstruction**

Amid expressions of fatigue and uncertainty, many youths also share hopeful affirmations. Phrases such as *“One day I’ll be okay”* reflect the presence of existential resilience. From a phenomenological perspective, these expressions represent moments of self-reassurance where youth attempt to reconstruct meaning and regain agency.

Linguistically, these statements often use future-oriented modal verbs (e.g., *will*, *someday*, *soon*) indicating a belief that the

current emotional state is temporary. This sense of forward-looking resilience acts as a counterbalance to existential despair, showing that youth maintain a sense of agency even amid emotional challenges.

Table 2. Thematic Categories of Existential Expressions in Youth Social Media Posts

| Theme                                                                                                    | Representative Expressions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Linguistic Features                                                                                                                                                                                  | Phenomenological Interpretation                                                                                                                        | Cultural Interpretation                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| P u r -<br>p o s e -<br>Seeking                                                                          | 1. "Still searching for my purpose."<br>2. "Trying to figure out my life."<br>3. "Growing doesn't mean evolving. Will I still fight for what I hope for?"<br>4. "In the middle of nowhere and still learning what truly matters"                                        | - Frequent use of progressive verbs (searching, trying, learning) showing ongoing process.<br><br>- Open-ended phrasing indicating an unfinished sense of self ("what truly matters", "my purpose"). | Youth experience meaning-making as a <b>continuous journey</b> , reflecting cognitive and emotional exploration in shaping identity.                   | E x p o s u r e to <b>multiple and conflicting cultural narratives</b> of success creates both inspiration and pressure, influencing how youth interpret life goals. |
| <b>Lone-<br/>liness,<br/>Con-<br/>nec-<br/>tion,<br/>a n d<br/>Para-<br/>dox of<br/>Visibil-<br/>ity</b> | 1. "No one understands me."<br>2. "I wish someone would listen."<br>3. "Even the shadow left me behind while I still smile in hurt"<br>4. No one knows what I'm feelin' what I suffer.<br>5. "I may unseen but who cares"<br>6. Laugh out loud silent in silence, haha" | - Use of <b>negative emotional predicates</b> (no one, no one understands)-<br>Short declarative sentences indicating emotional immediacy.                                                           | Reveals the <b>paradox of digital existence</b> : youth are visible but not necessarily understood. Emotional isolation persists despite connectivity. | Social media becomes a <b>safe space</b> to express vulnerable emotions due to stigma around discussing loneliness offline.                                          |

|                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Hope, Resilience, and Self-Reconstruction</b> | 1. “One day I’ll be okay.”<br>2. “I’ll get through this someday.”<br>3. Still trying, fighting, hoping ‘cause I’m stunning<br>4. “Life isn’t easy, reality isn’t always bitter” | - Future-oriented modal verbs (will, someday)- Soft, self-reassuring tone signaling emotional reconstruction. | Indicates moments of <b>existential resilience</b> , where youth rebuild meaning and reaffirm agency despite challenges. | Reflects cultural norms encouraging positivity and self-growth, often influenced by motivational digital discourse. |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that digital spaces have increasingly become important arenas for existential meaning-making among youth. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X are not only used for entertainment or interpersonal communication but also serve as reflective environments where young individuals process emotions, question their identities, and articulate the uncertainties of their lives. Contrary to the common perception that online communication is shallow or emotionally detached, the data reveal that youths’ posts often contain profound emotional depth expressed through carefully chosen linguistic forms, visual symbolism, and coded affective language. These platforms enable youth to externalize their thoughts and feelings in ways that may feel less intimidating than face-to-face disclosure, thus transforming digital spaces into contemporary emotional landscapes.

Previous studies have examined how young people construct language and identity in digital spaces. Paula Melisa (2024) analyzed the differences in slang use between Gen Z and Gen Alpha, showing how platform features and peer interaction shape their linguistic choices. Similarly, Doe and Schmitz (2023) found that social media engagement significantly influences youth

identity formation and everyday linguistic practices. Together, these studies highlight that youth communication online is shaped by digital environments and peer-driven linguistic innovation.

Other researchers have focused on methodological approaches to understanding youth expression in digital contexts. Previous research has also highlighted how youth express meaning and emotion in digital contexts. Zappavigna (2015), for instance, shows that hashtags function not only as searchable labels but as tools for expressing stance, emotion, and social affiliation. Her work demonstrates how young users encode affective meanings and construct identity through their hashtag choices. Complementing this, Niemi (2022) and Björkqvist (2021) examine adolescent emotional expression, showing how teenagers articulate distress, negotiate identity, and cope with social pressures through various communicative forms. These studies provide an important foundation for interpreting the existential expressions found in the present dataset, particularly in understanding how youth situate their emotions within broader social and cultural contexts.

Phenomenological interpretation shows that youth use social media to express lived experiences, reflecting emotional states such as fatigue, confusion, longing, and hope. These posts reveal how

adolescents navigate inner struggles and seek meaning in their lives.

Culturally, the data also reveal an important paradox: many youth construct online selves that differ significantly from their offline identities. This divergence reflects the uneven emotional affordances available to them in everyday life, where family norms, school expectations, or peer environments may not provide sufficient psychological safety for open self-expression. Digital platforms, by contrast, offer a protected and semi-anonymous space in which suppressed emotions, private vulnerabilities, and unresolved questions about identity can surface. Linguistically, this shift is materialized through hybrid language practices—particularly bilingual mixing and code-switching—that allow youth to fine-tune emotional nuance, align themselves with global youth culture, or temporarily step outside local social constraints. The interplay between cultural context and linguistic choice thus becomes a mechanism for negotiating identity: online spaces make expression possible, while the linguistic hybridity visible in the captions shows how adolescents actively craft, mediate, and inhabit these alternative selves.

The frequent use of code-switching reflects youths' negotiation between global digital culture (English) and local identity (Indonesian). This linguistic choice indicates how social media becomes a space where they can express aspects of themselves that may not be fully accepted in their offline cultural environment.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that youths' existential expressions online cannot be understood merely as casual emotional disclosures. Rather, they emerge from an interplay of cultural pressures, lived emotional experiences, and the linguistic resources available in digital spaces. The study contributes to existing

research by showing that adolescents use social media not only to express stance or manage emotion, as highlighted in previous studies, but to engage in deeper meaning-making processes that shape their developing identities.

These insights carry important practical implications. For educators and mental-health practitioners, the linguistic and cultural nuances of youths' online expressions can serve as meaningful indicators of their emotional needs—signals that may remain invisible in offline environments where self-expression feels constrained. Understanding these digital practices can support the development of interventions that are culturally sensitive, emotionally attuned, and aligned with the communicative realities of contemporary youth. For researchers, the findings underscore the value of approaching digital texts phenomenologically, recognizing them as symbolic traces of young people's attempts to navigate uncertainty, negotiate identity, and construct existential narratives within an increasingly hybrid cultural landscape.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how young people express existential meaning through their social media posts by employing a phenomenological approach integrated with linguistic and cultural analysis. The findings demonstrate that existential expressions in digital spaces are not merely spontaneous emotional outbursts but reflect complex layers of lived experience, identity negotiation, and cultural influence embedded within the everyday lives of youth.

First, from a linguistic perspective, the linguistic analysis showed that youths express existential experiences through emotionally loaded lexical choices, metaphorical constructions, concise declarati-

ves, and hybrid language practices such as bilingual mixing and code-switching. These linguistic strategies enable them to shape tone, convey emotional depth, and create symbolic distance when expressing vulnerability. The use of English, in particular, functions as a stylistic and emotional tool that allows sensitive experiences to be articulated in a less direct or face-threatening manner.

Second, the phenomenological interpretation showed that the posts articulate core lived experiences related to uncertainty, identity confusion, emotional fatigue, loneliness, and the ongoing search for purpose. Social media operates as an affective environment where internal struggles can be externalized and reflected upon. Youths use these platforms to articulate tensions between who they currently are and who they feel expected to become (whether by family, peers, or broader societal norms) thereby transforming digital texts into expressions of their evolving lifeworlds.

Third, cultural influences play a significant role in shaping how existential expressions are formulated and understood. The coexistence of collectivist norms, emotional restraint in offline settings, and globalized youth culture contributes to hybrid expressive styles that blend Indonesian and English. This linguistic hybridity mirrors the cultural negotiation youth undergo as they navigate between local expectations and global digital identities. Online environments provide emotional affordances and psychological safety that are often unavailable offline, allowing youths to construct alternative selves and articulate otherwise suppressed emotional states.

Overall, this study contributes to existing scholarship by providing a phenomenological understanding of how digital expression functions as a form of existential narrative construction among youth.

The insights also carry practical implications for educators, counselors, and mental-health practitioners, who may look to online linguistic patterns as indicators of emotional needs that remain unexpressed in offline contexts. Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of recognizing digital discourse as a meaningful site where young people navigate the complexities of identity, emotion, and cultural belonging.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alhamdulillahirrabbiilamin. I praise and thank Allah SWT for making it easy for me to complete this research. The authors would like to express their highest appreciation to Prof. Dr. M. Manugeran, Head of the English Language Studies Program, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU), for his exceptional academic guidance, continuous encouragement, and invaluable support throughout the course of this research. Sincere gratitude is also extended to Prof. Drs. Efendi Barus, M.A., Ph.D whose insightful comments, expert recommendations, and constructive feedback greatly contributed to the refinement of the research design, data analysis, and overall quality of this manuscript. Their scholarly contributions have significantly enhanced the depth and rigor of this study. The authors are also grateful to all faculty members, administrative staff, and colleagues for their assistance, insightful suggestions, and technical support during the development of this research. We extend our special thanks to all participating students and respondents, whose cooperation, openness, and valuable input laid the foundation for the study's findings. Finally, the authors would like to express heartfelt appreciation to their families and to all individuals who provided moral support, encouragement, and assistance whether directly or indirectly throughout the completion of this



work. May all contributions be recognized and duly rewarded.

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