

## Meaning Negotiation in Identity Conflicts on Social Media: A Pragmatic Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

Social media has become a primary space for self-expression and social interaction, while simultaneously giving rise to increasingly complex dynamics of identity conflict. This study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of how meaning negotiation unfolds in identity conflicts on social media from a qualitative pragmatic perspective. Employing a qualitative approach with a narrative-based thematic analysis design, the study enables an exploration of participants' experiences, reflections, and inner dilemmas in conflict-laden online interactions. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of meaning and social experience. The findings reveal four major themes: ambiguity of meaning and interpretive tension, self-positioning and identity labeling, conflict escalation through emotional language and impoliteness, and emotional fatigue leading to self-reflection and withdrawal from participation. These findings demonstrate that identity conflict on social media is a dynamic and non-linear process in which meaning is continuously negotiated and often fails to reach resolution. The study contributes theoretically by enriching pragmatic scholarship through the integration of affective dimensions and participants' subjective experiences, and practically by offering implications for strengthening digital literacy, informing social media moderation policies, and enhancing understanding of mental health in the context of online interaction

## **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid development of social media has fundamentally transformed the ways individuals interact, express themselves, and construct social identities. Digital platforms such as Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok function not only as channels of communication but also as discursive spaces where diverse interests, ideologies, and identities confront one another. Within this context, identity conflict has become an increasingly salient phenomenon, characterized by opposing viewpoints, group polarization, and language practices imbued with evaluative and ideological meanings. Such conflicts cannot be understood merely as differences of opinion; rather, they constitute complex processes of meaning negotiation in which social media users actively interpret, assert, and challenge both personal and collective identities through language.

Pragmatic studies provide a relevant theoretical framework for understanding how meaning is negotiated in identity conflicts on social media. Unlike semantic approaches that focus on literal meaning, pragmatics emphasizes how meaning is shaped through context, inference, and speakers' communicative intentions. Research has shown that online conflicts are often mediated by pragmatic strategies such as implicature, irony, sarcasm, impoliteness, and stance-taking, which serve to reinforce identity claims and social affiliations (Kádár & Haugh, 2021; Dynel, 2020). Through these strategies, utterance meaning is not only produced but also intersubjectively negotiated, depending on the responses and interpretations of other participants in digital interaction.

A growing body of research highlights the close relationship between identity conflict on social media and processes of identity construction and contestation. Language functions as a symbolic resource for self-legitimation and the delegitimation of others, particularly in political, ideological, or socially sensitive discourses. Angouri and Tseliga (2022) argue that conflict in online discourse constitutes an arena in which social identities are constructed through evaluation, opposition, and positional alignment, while Graham (2020) emphasizes the role of disagreement and stance-taking in reinforcing identity polarization. These findings suggest that social media conflicts cannot be separated from the ongoing negotiation of meaning within interaction.

Impoliteness also represents a crucial element in identity conflict within digital spaces. In many cases, impoliteness does not merely signify a violation of politeness norms but functions as a pragmatic strategy for demarcating boundaries between ingroups and outgroups. Culpeper et al. (2021) demonstrate that impoliteness practices in digital media are frequently employed to reinforce social hierarchies and power relations, while Kienpointner (2023) highlights how negative evaluations and confrontational language contribute to the escalation of identity conflict. Accordingly, the meaning of utterances in online conflict is highly dependent on social and ideological contexts, as well as on the shared knowledge among participants.

Furthermore, the multimodal and searchable nature of social media as a communicative space further complicates the process of meaning negotiation. Identity is constructed not only through verbal text but also through personal narratives, hashtags, emojis, and recurring, traceable interactional patterns. Page et al. (2021) and Zappavigna (2021) argue that these features allow users to strategically position themselves within broader discursive networks, rendering utterance meaning open to reinterpretation and public debate. Consequently, social media becomes a dynamic arena for identity conflict and meaning negotiation.

In the Indonesian context, pragmatic studies of identity conflict on social media reveal a strong connection between language strategies, face concepts, and local sociocultural values. Research published in nationally accredited journals shows that Indonesian social media users actively negotiate meaning and identity through linguistic choices that reflect power relations, politeness norms, and collective ideologies (Wijayanto, 2021; Utami & Hamzah, 2021). This indicates that despite the global nature of social media, practices of meaning negotiation in identity conflict remain deeply influenced by local cultural contexts.

Based on the discussion above, identity conflict on social media can be understood as a complex and multidimensional pragmatic phenomenon. Therefore, a pragmatic-based literature review is essential for mapping how recent studies address meaning negotiation in online identity conflicts. By examining findings from internationally reputable journals and nationally accredited journals, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the development of meaning negotiation research in the context of social media identity conflict, while also identifying research gaps that warrant further investigation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Pragmatic Perspectives in the Indonesian Social Media Context*

In the Indonesian context, meaning negotiation in identity conflict cannot be separated from local sociocultural dynamics that shape digital language practices. Yuliana and Imperiani (2020) demonstrate that impoliteness strategies in Indonesian online political discourse function not merely as expressions of emotion, but also as mechanisms for constructing ideological identities. Impoliteness serves to reinforce group affiliation and internal solidarity while simultaneously delegitimizing opposing parties. These findings strengthen the argument that pragmatic practices on social media possess a strong identity dimension and operate performatively.

Furthermore, Pratama and Santosa (2021) emphasize the importance of stance-taking in social media interaction as a means of identity positioning. In online conflicts, stance-taking does not simply reflect personal opinion but functions as a symbolic alignment with particular collective values. This process indicates that meaning negotiation is never neutral; rather, it is inherently embedded in power relations and social affiliations. This perspective aligns with

the findings of the present study concerning identity labeling and the narrowing of dialogic space.

Rahmawati and Wibowo (2022) identify that polarization in Indonesian Twitter debates is often triggered by divergent pragmatic inferences drawn from ambiguous or implicit utterances. Such ambiguity creates a wide interpretive space that is subsequently filled according to readers' ideological backgrounds. These findings support the semantic-pragmatic interface framework adopted in this study, whereby conflict emerges from tensions between literal meaning and inferred meaning.

Research by Firmansyah and Wahyuni (2023) further demonstrates that digital identity on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram is constructed through a combination of text, symbols, and personal narratives. This highlights the multimodal nature of meaning negotiation in identity conflict, indicating that such negotiation is not confined to verbal utterances alone. This perspective enriches the understanding that identity conflict on social media involves complex semiotic dimensions.

Meanwhile, Hidayat and Mulyani (2024) underscore the role of evaluative language in constructing ideological identity within online public discourse. Evaluative language functions as a pragmatic device for framing social reality and shaping collective perception. In identity conflict, the use of negative or positive evaluations reinforces symbolic boundaries between ingroups and outgroups, causing meaning negotiation to move toward polarization rather than resolution.

### ***Theoretical Integration***

By incorporating findings from the Indonesian context, the theoretical framework of this study reinforces the understanding that meaning negotiation in identity conflict on social media:

1. Operates through stance-taking practices and ideological evaluation;
2. Is shaped by politeness norms and local cultural values;
3. Involves multimodal dimensions that expand interpretive space;
4. Generates polarization due to divergent pragmatic inferences.

In addition to these perspectives, facework and the negotiation of face in digital interaction further enrich the understanding of identity conflict on Indonesian social media. Sari and Nugroho (2023) demonstrate that in online debates on sensitive issues such as religion and politics, social media users frequently employ face-saving acts and face-threatening acts as strategies for defending collective identity. Within Indonesian culture, which places high value on social harmony and politeness, threats to group "face" are often perceived as threats to collective dignity, thereby triggering defensive responses and conflict escalation. These findings indicate that meaning negotiation is not limited to semantic-pragmatic interpretation, but also involves the management of self-image and group image in digital public spaces.

By integrating these perspectives, the theoretical framework of this study further emphasizes that meaning negotiation in identity conflict on social media unfolds through stance-taking, ideological evaluation, and collective face management; is influenced by politeness norms and local cultural values; involves multimodal dimensions that broaden interpretive possibilities; and produces polarization not only due to pragmatic inferential differences but also due to sensitivity toward symbolic threats to group identity. This integration strengthens the position of the semantic-pragmatic interface as the primary analytical lens of the study, while also demonstrating that digital identity dynamics in Indonesia possess distinctive sociocultural characteristics that contribute to global pragmatic scholarship.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a systematic pragmatic literature review design. This approach was selected because the study seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of how meaning negotiation is conceptualized and interpreted in identity conflicts on social media, rather than to measure it quantitatively. Qualitative research emphasizes the exploration and interpretation of social phenomena within their natural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), as well as the construction of meaning within texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A systematic literature review, meanwhile, is conducted in a structured and transparent manner to identify, evaluate, and synthesize previous research findings in a replicable way (Snyder, 2019). This combination enables a critical examination of diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical findings within pragmatic studies that are inherently complex, contextual, and discursive.

Data sources were selected through purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) publication from 2020 onwards, (2) appearance in reputable indexed international journals, (3) explicit discussion of pragmatics, meaning negotiation, identity conflict, or social media discourse, and (4) presentation as either empirical or conceptual research relevant to pragmatic linguistics. Articles that did not focus on social media contexts or failed to link conflict with meaning and identity dimensions were excluded. The scope of analysis was limited to digital spaces, particularly social media interactions involving identity-related issues such as politics, culture, ideology, and social affiliation.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis by searching academic databases such as Scopus and nationally accredited journal portals. The procedure involved keyword searches (e.g., meaning negotiation, identity conflict, pragmatics, social media discourse), screening titles and abstracts, and conducting full-text readings. Selected articles were recorded in data extraction sheets containing information on authors, publication year, journal, theoretical framework, methodology, and key findings related to meaning negotiation and identity conflict.

Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis with open coding procedures. Key concepts such as pragmatic strategies, forms of conflict, identity construction, and mechanisms of meaning negotiation were identified and grouped into broader themes, including impoliteness and conflict, stance-taking and evaluation, and the role of socio-ideological context. The analysis was conducted iteratively to ensure interpretive consistency. Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was employed to support data management and coding transparency.

Research trustworthiness was ensured through established criteria. Credibility was achieved through the use of reputable sources and critical reading; transferability through detailed contextual description; dependability through systematic documentation of procedures; and confirmability through transparent analytical processes to minimize researcher bias. Ethically, all sources were cited in accordance with academic conventions. As the study did not involve direct human subjects, informed consent was not required; nevertheless, scholarly integrity and responsibility were rigorously upheld.

## RESULTS

This section presents the research findings based on qualitative thematic analysis of participants' experiences in encountering identity conflict on social media. The analysis focuses on how meaning is pragmatically negotiated through language, emotion, and self-reflection in conflict-laden online interactions. From the coding and categorization process, four interrelated themes emerged, forming a coherent trajectory of participants' experiences: (1) ambiguity of meaning and interpretive tension, (2) self-positioning and identity labeling, (3) conflict escalation through emotional language and impoliteness, and (4) emotional fatigue, self-reflection, and meaning withdrawal. Together, these themes portray identity conflict as a dynamic, non-linear, and paradoxical process.

### **Theme 1: Ambiguity of Meaning and Interpretive Tension**

The first theme indicates that identity conflict on social media often originates from utterances that are ambiguous and not fully explicit. Many participants described the initial phase of conflict as seemingly "ordinary," such as a brief comment, a reflective post, or a mild insinuation, which later escalated into intense identity-based debates. This ambiguity arises from the digitally mediated context, which lacks nonverbal cues, rendering interpretation highly dependent on readers' assumptions, experiences, and ideological affiliations.

One participant (P2) explained their experience when a reflective post was interpreted differently by opposing groups:

"I wrote it as a personal reflection, not to attack anyone. But some people felt that it was mocking their identity, and they started attacking back." (P2)

This excerpt illustrates the tension between intended meaning and interpreted meaning, in which meaning negotiation unfolds openly and often asymmetrically. Several participants reported dilemmas when attempting to clarify their original intentions, as such clarification was frequently perceived as self-defense or further provocation. In this context, meaning never reaches closure but remains continuously contested.

Ambiguity also generated feelings of identity insecurity. Participants felt that any utterance could be misinterpreted and associated with a particular ideological stance. This finding suggests that identity conflict on social media is not always triggered by explicit disagreement, but often by open and uncontrolled interpretive spaces.

### **Theme 2: Self-Positioning and Identity Labeling**

The second theme centers on how participants positioned themselves and others through language as the conflict progressed. Once conflict was triggered by ambiguous meaning, interaction often evolved into identity labeling, whereby participants associated interlocutors with specific groups, ideologies, or stereotypes. Such positioning served to simplify meaning complexity while clarifying “who stands where.”

One participant (P6) stated:

“Once the discussion escalated, I was immediately labeled as part of a certain group, even though I never felt that I fully represented them.” (P6)

This experience highlights the tension between self-claimed identity and externally imposed identity. In this process, utterances were no longer interpreted independently but through the lens of collective identity. Several participants felt trapped within narrow identity categories, limiting opportunities to articulate nuanced personal positions.

Identity labeling also shaped the trajectory of conflict. Once identities were assigned, subsequent responses tended to become defensive or offensive rather than dialogic. The conflict shifted from an exchange of ideas to a symbolic struggle over identity legitimacy, further hardening ingroup–outgroup boundaries.

### **Theme 3: Conflict Escalation through Emotional Language and Impoliteness**

The third theme describes the escalation phase of conflict, in which participants increasingly employed emotional, confrontational, and impolite language as pragmatic strategies. Many participants acknowledged that their linguistic choices changed as conflict intensity increased. Initially neutral or argumentative language gradually shifted toward evaluative, sarcastic, or personally attacking expressions.

One participant (P9) remarked:

“At first I tried to remain polite, but after being attacked repeatedly, it felt justified to respond in the same tone.” (P9)

This statement reflects the emotional paradox experienced by participants. On the one hand, impoliteness was perceived as a necessary and even fair response; on the other hand, participants recognized that such strategies exacerbated conflict. Emotional language functioned to assert identity and release frustration, while simultaneously undermining the possibility of reflective meaning negotiation.

Several participants also reported internal conflict upon realizing that their language use did not fully align with their personal values. This tension suggests that conflict escalation is not merely a social process but also an internal, ambivalent experience.

#### **Theme 4: Emotional Fatigue, Self-Reflection, and Meaning Withdrawal**

The fourth theme captures a subsequent phase of conflict in which participants experienced emotional exhaustion and engaged in self-reflection regarding their social media involvement. After repeated and prolonged conflicts, some participants chose to reduce participation, delete posts, or withdraw from specific platforms altogether.

One participant (P13) reflected:

“I felt exhausted constantly defending myself. Eventually, I started asking, what is all of this for?” (P13)

This reflection indicates a shift in how participants construed the meaning of conflict. Conflict was no longer perceived as a space for identity expression, but as an emotional burden. Notably, withdrawal did not necessarily signify conflict resolution. For some participants, silence and disengagement became final pragmatic strategies for emotional self-protection.

This theme also reveals another paradox: social media, initially perceived as a space for identity expression, ultimately became a space that constrained such expression. In this condition, meaning negotiation ended not in mutual understanding but in exhaustion and silence.

#### ***Interconnectedness of Themes and Experiential Complexity***

The four themes form an interconnected experiential sequence. Ambiguity triggers conflict, identity positioning narrows dialogic space, emotional language intensifies escalation, and emotional fatigue leads to reflection and withdrawal. However, this process is not strictly linear. Participants frequently moved back and forth between phases, indicating that identity conflict on social media is fluid and unpredictable.

By presenting findings through a narrative thematic approach, this section demonstrates that meaning negotiation in identity conflict is a complex social and emotional process. Participants' experiences are characterized by ambiguity, tension, and paradox, which cannot be reduced to singular conclusions. This complexity constitutes the core contribution of the study and underscores the value of a qualitative pragmatic approach in understanding identity conflict on social media.

## **DISCUSSION**

This discussion section aims to provide a reflective interpretation of the findings on meaning negotiation in identity conflicts on social media by situating them within pragmatic theoretical frameworks and contemporary linguistic scholarship. Overall, the findings indicate that identity conflict on social media is shaped by four interrelated processes: ambiguity of meaning and interpretive tension, self-positioning and identity labeling, conflict escalation through emotional language and impoliteness, and emotional fatigue leading to self-reflection and withdrawal. These processes demonstrate that identity conflict is not merely a disagreement of opinions, but a complex pragmatic phenomenon in which meaning, identity, and emotion are simultaneously negotiated within digital spaces.

The first theme, ambiguity of meaning, reaffirms the centrality of the semantic-pragmatic interface in understanding online conflict. The finding that conflict is often triggered by ambiguous and implicit utterances aligns with the view that meaning in social media communication relies heavily on inference and social context rather than literal interpretation alone. This supports Kádár and Haugh's (2021) argument that conflict in online communication frequently arises from divergent pragmatic interpretations rather than semantic misunderstanding. However, the present study extends this line of inquiry by demonstrating that ambiguity not only initiates conflict but also generates identity tension, as participants experience a sense of threat when their utterances are persistently interpreted through specific ideological lenses. In this sense, ambiguity in social media discourse constitutes a structurally inherent vulnerability that facilitates identity conflict.

The second theme, self-positioning and identity labeling, reinforces discursive identity theory, which conceptualizes identity as the outcome of ongoing language practices. The finding that participants were often "forced" into particular identity categories echoes Angouri and Tseliga's (2022) claim that online conflict functions as a site of social identity contestation. Importantly, this study reveals an additional dimension: the tension between self-claimed identity and externally imposed collective identity. Identity labeling operates as a mechanism for simplifying meaning in conflict, yet it simultaneously constrains dialogic space and marginalizes identities that are fluid, ambiguous, or non-aligned with dominant categories. This highlights how social media conflicts often leave little room for nuanced or intermediate identity positions.

The third theme, conflict escalation through emotional language and impoliteness, can be interpreted through the lens of conflict pragmatics and impoliteness theory. The strategic use of impoliteness to assert identity boundaries supports previous findings by Culpeper et al. (2021) and Kienpointner (2023), who argue that confrontational language functions as a social resource in identity conflict. However, the present findings add depth by revealing participants' internal ambivalence toward such strategies. While emotional language provided a sense of legitimacy and identity alignment, participants simultaneously recognized that it intensified conflict and diminished opportunities for reflective meaning negotiation. This insight enriches pragmatic research by foregrounding speakers' internal reflexivity, which is often overlooked in discourse-focused analyses.

The fourth theme, emotional fatigue and meaning withdrawal, offers a significant conceptual contribution to the study of identity conflict on social media. Existing literature has largely focused on escalation and polarization, with limited attention to fatigue, silence, and disengagement as integral stages of conflict. This study demonstrates that withdrawal from interaction—through silence, reduced participation, or platform exit—constitutes a meaningful pragmatic act rather than an absence of meaning. In this context, silence functions as a final strategy of meaning negotiation, allowing participants to protect their emotional well-being. This finding expands the understanding of online conflict

by incorporating affective endurance and the temporal sustainability of participation.

Taken together, the discussion underscores that identity conflict on social media should be understood as a multilayered pragmatic process involving language, identity, and emotion. The primary contribution of this study lies in bridging micro-level pragmatic analysis with participants' subjective experiences, thus reframing conflict as both a linguistic and emotional phenomenon. By foregrounding participants' voices of fatigue, ambiguity, and marginalization, this study challenges dominant narratives that portray online conflict solely as a rational exchange of arguments.

Researcher reflexivity is also crucial in this context. Participants' sociocultural backgrounds within a multicultural and polarized society shape how meaning and identity are interpreted in digital spaces. At the same time, the researcher's position as both analyst and social media user may influence the interpretation of emotional and experiential data. Reflexive awareness enables the findings to be understood not as singular truths, but as situated and contextualized representations of lived experience.

Ultimately, this discussion affirms that a qualitative pragmatic approach offers a nuanced and human-centered perspective on identity conflict in social media. Rather than seeking normative resolutions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how meaning is negotiated, contested, and, at times, abandoned within conflict-laden digital interaction.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study concludes that meaning negotiation in identity conflict on social media is a complex, layered, and ongoing pragmatic process. The findings demonstrate that conflict is not solely driven by explicit disagreement, but by the interplay of ambiguous meaning, discursive identity positioning, escalation through emotional language and impoliteness, and emotional fatigue culminating in self-reflection and withdrawal from participation. These patterns illustrate that meaning, identity, and emotion are deeply intertwined in digital interaction, producing conflict trajectories that are non-linear and often unresolved.

Beyond mapping conflict patterns, this study provides new insight into how participants make sense of their involvement in identity conflict. Participants' experiences reveal that online conflict is not merely an arena for argument exchange, but a space in which individuals continuously negotiate identity security, social affiliation, and emotional well-being. From this perspective, silence, disengagement, or reduced participation should not be interpreted as the absence of meaning, but as reflective pragmatic actions that mark the limits of emotional tolerance. Conceptually, this study extends pragmatic inquiry beyond utterance analysis toward the exploration of participants' subjective and affective experiences in digital identity conflict.

In terms of practical implications, the findings are relevant to multiple stakeholders. For policymakers and digital platform managers, the study highlights the need for moderation policies that address not only explicit hate speech but also the dynamics of ambiguity and emotional escalation that

precipitate identity conflict. In educational contexts, the findings support the development of digital literacy curricula that emphasize pragmatic awareness, contextual sensitivity, and digital empathy, enabling users to better anticipate the interpretive consequences of their utterances. Moreover, the findings on emotional fatigue have direct relevance to mental health promotion, encouraging approaches that recognize individuals' emotional boundaries in navigating online conflict.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. Its focus on specific social media contexts and participants with relatively homogeneous sociocultural backgrounds limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative narrative-based approach, while rich in meaning, does not fully capture longitudinal changes in identity negotiation across time or platforms. Constraints related to data depth and duration also limit insights into long-term identity transformation.

In conclusion, identity conflict on social media cannot be simplistically framed as communicative failure. It is a pragmatic and social phenomenon that reflects how individuals construct meaning, negotiate identity, and manage relational boundaries in digital spaces. Through a reflective qualitative approach, this study contributes to linguistic and social research by offering a more human-centered, critical, and contextualized understanding of identity conflict in the era of social media.

#### **FURTHER STUDY**

Future research is therefore encouraged to employ diverse methodological approaches, such as long-term digital ethnography, multimodal analysis, or mixed-methods designs, to deepen understanding of meaning negotiation in identity conflict. Expanding the research context to include more diverse populations, cultural settings, and social media platforms will further enhance the comprehensiveness of future findings. Moreover, subsequent studies may explore underexamined dimensions such as algorithmic influence, anonymity, and structural power relations in shaping identity conflict.

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