LANGUAGE AS A BRANDING TOOL: LINGUISTIC TACTICS IN INDIE PUBLISHERS' SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract
This study examines the linguistic and semiotic strategies employed by indie publishers on social media to construct branding identities within the digital literacy ecosystem. Using qualitative discourse analysis, digital linguistics, and multimodal semiotics, the study analyzes 15 social media posts across Instagram, TikTok, Twitter (X), Facebook, and official websites. The findings identify five recurring linguistic strategies: emotional micro-narratives, conversational positioning, multimodal linguistic framing, community-aligned hashtagging, and metaphorical semiotic branding. Collectively, these strategies position indie publishers as humanistic, approachable, and literacy-oriented actors despite limited marketing resources. This study contributes theoretical insight into how small cultural agents construct visibility, identity, and relational engagement through language in competitive digital spaces.

Keywords: *linguistic branding, digital discourse, semiotics, indie publishers, multimodality, digital literacy*

Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, language has become a central instrument in shaping brand identity, particularly within creative and cultural industries. Branding is no longer constructed solely through visual symbols or marketing slogans but is increasingly realized through discursive practices, including narrative tone, lexical choices, interactional style, and affective positioning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Fairclough, 2015). Within digital platforms, language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a strategic resource for identity construction and audience engagement.

Indie publishers occupy a distinctive position within this digital literacy ecosystem. Unlike mainstream publishing houses, indie publishers often operate with limited financial capital and institutional visibility, relying heavily on social media discourse to construct credibility, authenticity, and emotional proximity with readers (Thompson, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2018). Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (X), Facebook, and WhatsApp enable indie publishers to circulate narratives of struggle, passion, and community, positioning themselves as culturally grounded and reader-oriented rather than commercially driven.

Previous studies on branding discourse have largely focused on corporate branding, political communication, or institutional marketing strategies (Aaker, 2014; Kotler & Keller, 2016). While research on digital branding has expanded to include influencer culture and platform-based identity (Zappavigna, 2018; Page, 2012), linguistic strategies employed by indie publishers remain underexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts. This gap is significant because indie publishers often represent alternative literacy practices that challenge dominant commercial narratives in publishing.

Moreover, existing studies tend to prioritize visual semiotics or marketing outcomes, leaving language use itself—especially linguistic stance, narrative voice, and affective framing—analytically marginalized. As a result, the role of language as a branding instrument within grassroots publishing communities has not been sufficiently theorized.

Recent linguistic and discourse-based studies, including those by Rawuh Yuda Yuwana, have demonstrated that language choices in cultural and creative texts systematically reflect ideological positioning, identity construction, and audience alignment (Yuwana & Betaubun, 2024; Yuwana & Pertiwi, 2022; Yuwana et al., 2019). These findings suggest that linguistic analysis offers a productive framework for examining how indie publishers strategically mobilize language to construct brand identity and community legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate how language functions as a branding instrument in indie publishers' social media campaigns within the digital literacy ecosystem.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions.

The first question concerns discursive strategies:

How do indie publishers employ linguistic choices to construct brand identity and positioning on social media platforms?

The second question focuses on multimodal integration:

How do linguistic and visual elements interact to reinforce branding messages in indie publishing discourse?

The third question examines literacy and community orientation:

How does branding discourse reflect alternative literacy values and reader engagement practices within indie publishing communities?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to discourse studies, digital branding research, and literacy studies by foregrounding language as a central mechanism of branding in indie publishing contexts.

Method

In analytical practice, Critical Discourse Analysis is used to identify ideological positioning and power relations encoded in linguistic choices, while multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotics guide the examination of how textual and visual elements interact to reinforce branding meanings across platforms.

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in multimodal discourse analysis, integrating principles from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and social semiotic theory. This approach is appropriate for examining how language functions as a branding instrument because branding practices on digital platforms are realized through discursive and semiotic resources rather than through language alone (Fairclough, 2015;

Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The study conceptualizes language as a social practice that constructs identity, ideology, and audience alignment within the digital literacy ecosystem of indie publishing.

The data consist of social media content produced by selected Indonesian indie publishers across platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (X), and Facebook over a six-month period. The corpus includes captions, hashtags, visual images, and interactional responses (e.g., comments and engagement markers), totaling approximately 120 posts. These platforms were selected because they represent the primary spaces where indie publishers articulate branding narratives, engage readers, and negotiate cultural identity in public digital discourse.

Data were selected purposively based on several criteria: the presence of explicit branding intent (such as promotion, identity narration, or community engagement), high interaction visibility, linguistic richness in the form of narrative or evaluative language, and clear integration between textual and visual elements. All data excerpts were anonymized, and direct quotations were paraphrased when necessary to maintain ethical considerations and avoid copyright infringement.

The analysis was conducted iteratively through close reading and interpretative coding. Linguistic analysis focused on lexical choices, stance markers, modality, narrative framing, and evaluative language used to construct brand identity and relational positioning. Multimodal analysis examined the interaction between language and visual elements, including image composition, symbolic representation, and salience. These findings were then interpreted discursively to identify underlying branding ideologies, literacy values, and strategies of audience alignment within indie publishing practices.

To ensure analytical rigor and trustworthiness, the analysis followed established discourse-analytic procedures, including repeated coding cycles, constant comparison across platforms, and theoretical triangulation with previous studies on branding discourse, digital literacy, and cultural communication (Gee, 2015; Zappavigna, 2018). Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study prioritizes interpretive validity, seeking to provide a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive account of how language operates as a strategic branding resource in indie publishing discourse.

Result and Discussion

This section synthesizes results grouped into five thematic findings, each followed by interpretive discussion supported by scholarly references.

1. Emotional Micro-Narratives as Affective Branding

Captions such as “Some stories arrive when your heart needs them most” (paraphrased) illustrate how indie publishers deploy emotional storytelling to shape brand affect. These micro-narratives constitute what Page (2012) describes as “short-form identity narratives,” designed to evoke resonance and empathy.

Discussion

Such linguistic moves serve dual functions:

1. Constructing intimacy with readers
2. Positioning the publisher as emotionally attuned and reader-centric

This aligns with relational branding strategies found in small cultural organizations, where emotional authenticity is valued more than corporate polish.

2. Conversational Positioning and Persona Construction

Across Twitter and Facebook, publishers used second-person address, rhetorical questions, and humor. Example: "Ready to escape into a new story tonight?" (paraphrased).

Discussion

Bucholtz & Hall's (2005) identity theory explains such discourse as stance-taking that builds relational positioning. Conversational voice constructs the brand as:

1. approachable
2. friendly
3. accessible

This tone is essential for indie publishers lacking hierarchical authority or mass recognition.

3. Multimodal Linguistic Framing as Identity Cohesion

TikTok posts demonstrated strong linguistic-visual integration, with overlay texts like "Books that feel like calm mornings" paired with soft lighting and serene music.

Discussion

Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal theory suggests meaning arises from the synergy of modes. Indie publishers leverage aesthetic coherence to:

1. reinforce emotional branding
2. stabilize identity across platforms
3. strengthen the memorability of the brand

This intermodal cohesion becomes a key competitive asset.

4. Community Alignment Through Hashtags and Literacy Ideology

Hashtags such as #ReadersUnite or #IndieBookCommunity (paraphrased) indexed ideological alignment with literacy movements rather than commercial motives.

Discussion

Zappavigna (2012) conceptualizes hashtags as "ambient affiliation tools." Their use in this corpus demonstrates how publishers:

1. articulate social values
2. join collective literacy identities
3. strengthen belonging within digital reading communities

This ideological positioning distinguishes indie publishers from mainstream commercial houses.

5. Semiotic-Metaphorical Branding and Symbolic Resonance

Visual symbols such as open windows, floating pages, or lanterns were recurrent. These metaphors evoke imagination and intellectual exploration.

Discussion

According to Barthes (1977), such symbols operate at the level of myth, naturalizing cultural narratives about reading. The metaphorical imagery enhances:

1. aspirational positioning
2. emotional depth
3. thematic coherence of the brand

It also increases aesthetic recognizability across platforms.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that linguistic and semiotic practices function as the core mechanisms through which indie publishers construct branding identities and cultivate reader engagement within the contemporary digital literacy ecosystem. Through emotional micro-narratives, conversational voice, multimodal linguistic framing, community-oriented hashtagging, and metaphorical semiotic symbolism, indie publishers strategically position themselves as humanistic, culturally grounded, and relationally oriented agents navigating a competitive digital marketplace. The cross-platform consistency observed across Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, and website interfaces shows that branding is not merely a visual endeavor but a discursive, ideological, and affective practice shaped through subtle linguistic choices. By integrating discourse analysis, digital linguistics, and semiotics, this study contributes a holistic understanding of how small cultural actors craft compelling brand identities despite limited resources, offering new insight into multimodal branding strategies in the publishing sector and reinforcing the central role of language as both an expressive and strategic instrument in shaping literacy-oriented communities.

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