

Abbreviations as Cultural Signs in the Communication of Indonesia's Digital Generation

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ABSTRACT

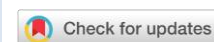
This study examines abbreviations as cultural signs in digital communication among Indonesia's digital generation. In contemporary online interaction, abbreviations are used not only to improve communication efficiency but also to express social identity and group affiliation. Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the linguistic sign and Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs, this study investigates how abbreviations function as semiotic resources in Indonesia's multilingual digital environment. Using a qualitative literature review approach following Creswell (2018), the study analyzes scholarly works on digital communication, internet language, and abbreviation practices. The findings indicate that abbreviations are socially constructed signs shaped by shared cultural knowledge, technological affordances, and online communication practices. Pragmatically, they facilitate efficient communication; cognitively, they reduce processing demands; and socially, they signal informality, solidarity, and membership within digital communities. Rather than reflecting language deterioration, abbreviations demonstrate linguistic innovation and adaptation to evolving digital communication. The study concludes that abbreviations play a significant role in shaping contemporary linguistic behavior in Indonesia while illustrating the dynamic interaction between language, culture, and technology in the digital era.

Keywords: Abbreviations, Digital Communication, Social Identity, Semiotics, Indonesian Digital Culture.

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1. Introduction

In today's interconnected Indonesia, abbreviations that function as cultural signs have become more than linguistic shortcuts. They acknowledge how the nation's digital generation thinks, interacts, and builds identity. In people's daily activities, especially some activities by social media, using abbreviations easily will be found (Abd et al., 2022). Abbreviations are short form of a word or a phrase. Some popular abbreviations that commonly used are the days of the week (Mon., Tue., Wed., etc), the months of the year (Jan., Feb., Aug., etc), and some other words such as NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), ASAP (As Soon As Possible), and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) that can be called acronyms as well. Thus, the abbreviations are not just as tools of efficiency, however, they provide symbolic markers and reflecting shared experiences and values. According to Abd et al. (2022), in the spoken language, abbreviations evolved into a form of insider communication and a marketing tool. Moreover, utilizing abbreviations in daily speech facilitates more efficient and expedited communication (Joanna, 2019 cited in Abd et al., 2022). In addition, abbreviated expressions have evolved into a major means of communication indicating both cognitive efficiency and cultural competence (Eti & Rosalinah, 2024). Furthermore, abbreviations can be defined as a continually changing collection of informal words and expressions that people use in communication to express personal and social identity or social bonding within a particular community or aligned with trends and popular culture within society as a whole that allowing for the recognition of distinct social subgroups (Eble in Hudson, 1996 cited in Trimastuti et al., 2017). Abbreviations in platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, etc., highlight generational identities and serve as social symbols that reinforce communication within social groups. Moreover, web-based platforms have transformed the process of language development for accelerated linguistic change serving as both a channel and a driving force (Fitri, 2025). According to Braimoh (2024), language expression and concept have been significantly changed by digital communication. Thus, new modes of communication that challenge conventional language structures, supporting linguistic innovation, and promoting the use of casual language varieties including slang and abbreviations have been introduced by digital communication and internet (Crystall, 2011 cited in Braimoh, 2024).

Individuals use abbreviations due to the fact that they lack a term to express a concept of some words, for example, it is more convenient to use the word ASEAN (Association of South East Asian) rather than the full form (Rozaliya Winarto, 2019). This communicative habit to compress multifaceted idea through abbreviated expressions highlights how function as signs that convey meaning beyond functioning as simple abbreviations. Therefore, based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory, the linguistic sign is a mechanism for meaning formation that combines a sound form that known as "signifier" and the concept as "signified" (Reda, 2016). Sometimes abbreviations express meanings that go beyond their literal meanings, reflecting humour or social expression that appeals to young users. Fitri (2025) argues that in digital communities,

abbreviations become a strong mechanism for expressing cultural knowledge, social identification, and participation that function as indicator of identity among youth and not only as a form of informal language use.

The frequent use of abbreviations illustrates the way language evolves to digital environments that emphasize innovation, efficiency, and expression of emotions. Thus, one of the most widespread outcomes of development of mobile technologies is the use of text-based language, defined by abbreviations, emoticons, and informal linguistic elements that fostering new ways of interaction and language practices (Brimoh, 2024; Mochammad et al., 2025; Jung et al., 2025; Yaumi et al., 2024). However, it has been argued that excessive use of text-message abbreviations may negatively affect linguistic competence which contribute to substandard writing habits (Humphrys, 2007cited in Brimoh, 2024). In contrast, Abd et al. (2022) argues that even if older generations are reluctant to accept digital messages and texting, the modern era requires adoption of new modes of textual communication since the text-based online communication has introduced a new writing style by reducing word forms, using alphanumeric forms, and visual symbols that represent complete meanings. Therefore, in the Charles Sanders Pierce's classification, symbols represent beliefs and behaviours, contribute to semiotic, and convey common interpretations (Rakhimova, 2018; Mochammad et al., 2026; Andini et al., 2022).

Digital linguistic features indicate growth rather than decline and reflect range of linguistic expression. Moreover, informal linguistic practices correspond to the transient and conversational character of digital communication where efficiency and instantaneity are prioritized. Additionally, the internet not only facilitates rapid diffusion of emerging linguistic forms but also allows for continuous adaptation and change of language in live interaction (Crystal 2011 cited in Fitri, 2025). As a result, use of abbreviations plays a role in shaping digital identity where language choices indicate contemporaneity, cultural currency, and social positioning. In addition, abbreviations challenge established conventions of lexical and syntactic patterns and introduce alternative structures by substitution of extended lexical items by abbreviated variants that may contain more pragmatic meaning than standard lexical expressions (Minyar-Beloroucheva et al., 2019). Overall, theoretical frameworks and previous studies suggest that abbreviations forms in digital contexts should not be considered only as informal linguistic variants, but as meaningful semiotic units that function within particular social, cultural, and cognitive settings.

Considering the discussion so far, it can be observed that abbreviations perform a multifaceted role in digital communication, especially within the digital generation. In Indonesia's online communication landscape, high levels of social media usage and interaction across multiple languages have contributed to the culturally situated abbreviations that express cultural norms, social relationships, and identity construction. While previous studies have explored abbreviations in the Indonesian digital context, most have primarily emphasized linguistic forms and perceptions of language use rather than examining abbreviations as cultural symbols. Therefore, further research is needed

to investigate the semiotic role of abbreviations in Indonesian digital communication. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How do abbreviations function as cultural signs in digital communication among Indonesia's digital generation? To answer this question, the study aims to explore how abbreviations function as cultural signs in digital communication among Indonesia's digital generation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Communication and Abbreviations

The rapid development of digital technologies has significantly transformed contemporary communication practices. Social media platforms, instant messaging applications, and other internet-based communication channels have encouraged the emergence of new linguistic forms characterized by brevity, informality, and creativity. According to Crystal (2011, cited in Braimoh, 2024), digital communication has introduced new writing conventions that challenge traditional language structures while facilitating linguistic innovation. In Indonesia, the widespread use of platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and X has accelerated the use of abbreviated language forms among young users.

Abbreviations are shortened forms of words or phrases used to increase communicative efficiency. Rozaliya Winarto (2019) argues that abbreviations are frequently employed because they enable speakers and writers to convey complex meanings in a concise manner. In digital contexts, abbreviations such as ASAP, FYI, LOL, and OTW have become common communicative resources. Previous studies (Abd et al., 2022; Eti & Rosalinah, 2024) indicate that abbreviations not only save time and effort but also function as markers of social identity and group membership within online communities.

2.2 Semiotic Perspectives on Language and Signs

Semiotics is the study of signs and meaning-making processes in communication. Since abbreviations frequently convey meanings beyond their literal forms, semiotic theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding their functions in digital interaction.

2.2.1. Ferdinand de Saussure's Theory of the Linguistic Sign

Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualized language as a system of signs composed of two inseparable components: the signifier and the signified (Reda, 2016). The signifier refers to the physical form of a sign, such as sounds or written symbols, whereas the signified represents the concept or meaning associated with that form. Meaning emerges from the relationship between these two components within a particular linguistic system (Yaumi et al., 2023; Faisal et al., 2025; Wicaksono et al., 2021).

In digital communication, abbreviations can be understood as linguistic signs whose meanings are socially constructed and interpreted by users. For example, abbreviations such as LOL or OTW function not merely as shortened expressions but as meaningful signs that carry specific communicative intentions within online interaction.

2.2.2. Charles Sanders Peirce's Classification of Signs

Charles Sanders Peirce expanded semiotic analysis by classifying signs into icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons resemble the objects they represent, indexes indicate causal or contextual relationships, and symbols derive meaning through social convention and shared interpretation (Rakhimova, 2018; Suheri et al., 2025; Latif et al., 2024; Junaid & Andini, 2025). Unlike icons and indexes, symbols depend on collective agreement among members of a community.

Many abbreviations used in digital communication operate symbolically because their meanings are understood through shared sociocultural knowledge. Expressions such as WKWK, LOL, or PHP acquire meaning only when users possess sufficient cultural and contextual understanding. Therefore, Peirce's framework is useful for explaining how abbreviations function as culturally meaningful symbols in digital communities.

2.2.3. Abbreviations as Cultural Signs in Digital Communities

Previous studies suggest that abbreviations in online communication extend beyond their role as linguistic shortcuts. Fitri (2025) argues that abbreviations serve as mechanisms for expressing social identity, cultural knowledge, and participation within digital communities. Similarly, Eble (cited in Trimastuti et al., 2017) states that informal linguistic forms enable speakers to establish social bonds and demonstrate membership in particular social groups.

Within Indonesian digital contexts, abbreviations frequently reflect local cultural values, multilingual practices, and interpersonal relationships. Their meanings are negotiated through repeated interaction and shared experience among users. Consequently, abbreviations can be viewed as cultural signs that simultaneously facilitate communication, express identity, and reinforce social solidarity in digital environments.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach based on a literature-based analysis to examine abbreviations as cultural signs in digital communication among Indonesia's digital generation. A qualitative approach is suitable as the study emphasizes meaning interpretation sociocultural meanings and communicative functions and since it is dealt with the topic or problem and usually gather data in the field where participants experience (Creswell, 2018) The data comprise scholarly journal articles, books, and conference proceedings addressing digital discourse, abbreviated forms, and online

slang, semiotics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics with specific emphasis on discussing the Indonesian digital context. Appropriate sources were chosen via academic databases through keyword searches focusing on abbreviated forms and digital linguistic practices and were reviewed based on contextual relevance source validity and theoretical significance. The reviewed studies were examined through the identification of recurring themes related to the forms, functions, and interpretations of abbreviations used in digital interaction. The identified themes were further analysed based on semiotic theory especially Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the linguistic sign and Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs in combination with sociolinguistic and pragmatic approaches to clarify how abbreviated forms function as semiotic resources within digital communities.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Qualitative analysis of the existing literature shows that abbreviations perform an important and deeply embedded cultural role within digital interaction among the digital generation in Indonesia. In Indonesian digital environments, the use of abbreviations is influenced not only by digital platform affordances alongside multilingual communication practices, local sociocultural conventions, and the construction of youth identity within digital environments.

4.1.1. Forms of Abbreviations in Indonesian Digital Communication

The literature indicates that digital communication in Indonesia utilizes a broad variety of abbreviated forms. Typical examples consist of abbreviated initial forms such as OTW (on the way), FYI (for your information), ASAP (as soon as possible), and BTW (by the way), which are frequently used in Indonesian conversations which are widely used without being translated. Furthermore, abbreviated Indonesian lexical items such as *tgl* (tanggal), *info* (informasi), *admin* (administrator), and *promo* (promosi) are commonly used across messaging apps and online promotional content. Mixed-language abbreviations that integrate Indonesian and English components are widely observed. For example, expressions such as *mabar* (main bareng), *gws* (get well soon), *dm aja* (send a direct message), and *nge-like* (give a like) demonstrate how Indonesian users modify global digital expressions within local linguistic frameworks. These patterns reflect the multilingual context of Indonesian digital communication and illustrate the localization of abbreviated forms to function in everyday interaction. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok accelerate the circulation and standardization of these abbreviations. After an abbreviation becomes commonly known, it is often used without reference to its original complete expression especially among younger users who adopt these abbreviations through repeated encounters in digital interaction.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1. Abbreviations as Cultural Signs in the Indonesian Context

From the perspective of semiotic analysis, abbreviations used in Indonesian digital discourse function as cultural signs whose meanings are shaped through shared interpretation. For example, abbreviations such as LOL, WKWK, or hehe do not simply indicate laughter but also serve as indicators of emotional orientation and interpersonal alignment. Similarly, abbreviations like baper (bawa perasaan) or PHP (pemberi harapan palsu) convey culturally specific meanings that represent Indonesian youth cultural norms and interpersonal norms. Interpreting these abbreviations requires familiarity with Indonesian digital culture suggesting their role as markers of group membership. Individuals who understand and correctly use such abbreviations signal belonging within digital communities whereas users unfamiliar with them may face exclusion or misinterpretation. This further suggests that abbreviations function as semiotic resources that convey sociocultural knowledge instead of basic linguistic shortcuts.

4.2.2. Pragmatic Functions of Abbreviations

In pragmatic terms, abbreviations facilitate efficient communication and conversational informality in Indonesian digital communication. For example, abbreviations such as thx, pls, brb (be right back), and afk (away from keyboard) help users communicate messages efficiently without disrupting conversational exchange. Indonesian abbreviations like yg (yang), dg (dengan), krn (karena), and udh (sudah) are frequently used in everyday messaging to minimize typing effort. Users show pragmatic competence by modifying abbreviation usage depending on communicative setting. While forms like OTW, LOL, or wkwk are common in informal interpersonal chats, formal written and academic settings are rarely used. This patterned use suggests that abbreviation practices are influenced by sociocultural norms and interactional expectations rather than unlimited linguistic variation.

4.2.3. Cognitive and Linguistic Implications

From a cognitive perspective, abbreviations minimize cognitive load for Indonesian digital communicators by reducing complexity in both message creation and understanding. Regular exposure to widely used abbreviations such as DM, VC (video call), PM (private message), and TC (take care) enables users to identify meanings immediately without mentally reconstructing the full expressions. Gradually, these abbreviations undergo lexicalization and are cognitively handled as single units instead of as abbreviations of full lexical items. This processing efficiency facilitates rapid digital interaction and shows how continual use reinforces new language forms. In Indonesian digital communication, these patterns show how digital communication supports language development without replacing standard Indonesian usage.

4.2.4. Implications for Language Change in Indonesia

Overall, the findings indicate that the use of abbreviations in Indonesian digital communication signifies language adaptation rather than a decline in language quality. Moreover, the use of abbreviations supports linguistic creativity, expressive potential, and communicative efficiency while also reflecting local sociocultural values as well as global digital culture. Although some concerns continue related to misuse in formal or institutional contexts or gaps between generations. Abbreviations should be interpreted as situationally appropriate language resources that demonstrate language development in reaction to social and technological transformation in Indonesian society.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored abbreviations as cultural signs in digital communication among Indonesia's digital generation using a qualitative, literature-based methodology. Based on semiotic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and cognitive frameworks the findings demonstrate that abbreviations in Indonesian digital contexts operate beyond simple linguistic shortcuts. Instead, they serve as culturally meaningful signs that express social identity, sociocultural values, emotional positioning, and community belonging within digital communities. The findings show that abbreviation use in Indonesia is influenced by Indonesia's multilingual context and intensive participation in digital media. Abbreviations drawn from both Bahasa Indonesia and English, as well as mixed-language forms, demonstrate the adaptation of global digital practices and creative linguistic adaptation by young users. These forms acquire cultural significance via shared interpretation and repetition allowing abbreviations to function as symbols that promote social bonding and digital affiliation.

From pragmatic and cognitive viewpoints, abbreviations enable communicative efficiency in fast-moving digital exchanges while showing pragmatic awareness. Their differentiated use in informal and formal communication shows that abbreviation practices are shaped by sociocultural conventions rather than random abbreviation. This implies that abbreviations exist alongside standard language forms and support linguistic adaptability rather than language decline.

In summary, the study emphasizes that abbreviations can be seen as a natural and evolving aspect of language change in Indonesia's contemporary digital context. Although concerns persist about frequent or excessive usage or inappropriate communicative contexts, abbreviations should be understood as flexible linguistic resources that illustrate the dynamic relationship among language, culture, and technology. Further research could benefit from primary data collection platform-based examination or cross-contextual studies to deepen understanding of how users interpret and negotiate meaning through abbreviated language across different communication environments.

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