

Semantic Shift in Social Media X Discourse: A Corpus-Based Study of Viral Terminology

Muhammad Natsir¹, Michelle F. N. Tobing², Bunga Anjelika³, Tsurayya Nailah A.P⁴, Jessica Geraldine Sibagariang⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5}Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

Corresponding Author:

Jessica Geraldine Sibagariang

jessicageraldine03@gmail.com

Abstract

The rapid development of social media has accelerated the dynamics of semantic shift in digital linguistic practices, positioning language not merely as a tool for communication but also as a space for negotiating emotions, identity, and social values. The use of viral terminology on platform X (Twitter) demonstrates that lexical meanings undergo transformation reflecting shifts in collective consciousness, particularly in relation to mental health, workplace relations, and urban lifestyles. This study aims to examine how such semantic shifts are constructed and negotiated within the Indonesian digital social context. Employing a qualitative approach with a digital case study design, data were collected through non-participatory observation of public posts containing selected viral terms over the past two years, accompanied by documentation of usage contexts and collocational patterns. The analysis adopted a reflexive thematic approach to identify recurring meaning patterns within the discourse. The findings reveal three primary dynamics: viral terms functioning as a medium of emotional catharsis, dialogic negotiation of meaning within digital public spaces, and collocational shifts contributing to the formation of new identities and value orientations. These findings affirm that semantic shift in social media discourse is affective, interactional, and ideological in nature. Theoretically, this study enriches the integration of usage-based approaches and discursive pragmatics, while practically contributing to digital literacy development, critical language curriculum design, and the understanding of contemporary digital generational dynamics.

Keywords: *Semantic shift; X (Twitter) discourse; Digital pragmatics; Viral terminology; Thematic analysis; Identity construction*

Introduction

Semantic shift constitutes an inherent phenomenon in language dynamics, occurring not randomly but under the influence of cognitive pressures and communicative needs within speech communities (Blank & Koch, 1999). Within historical linguistics and pragmatics, semantic change is understood as the result of processes such as metaphor, metonymy, generalization, specialization, amelioration, and pejoration (Traugott & Dasher, 2002). The development of digital technology, particularly social media, has significantly accelerated these mechanisms, causing lexical innovation and semantic shifts to occur at a much faster pace than in the pre-digital era (Tagliamonte, 2016).

In social media discourse, viral terms such as *toxic*, *healing*, *gaslighting*, and *literally* undergo substantial semantic shifts. This phenomenon is frequently associated with semantic bleaching, namely the attenuation of specific semantic content due to high-frequency usage within particular pragmatic contexts (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). Additionally, semantic change in digital discourse exhibits a tendency toward

subjectification, involving a shift from objective descriptive meaning to expressions of speakers' subjective attitudes and evaluations (Traugott, 2010). Consequently, viral terminology does not merely undergo lexical change but also experiences transformation within pragmatic and intersubjective dimensions.

Corpus-based approaches are particularly relevant for tracing such changes. Through analysis of collocational patterns and lexical distributions, semantic shifts can be detected by examining changes in the linguistic environments surrounding a word (Hilpert, 2013). Firth's (1957) principle of distributional semantics—"You shall know a word by the company it keeps"—emphasizes that word meaning is shaped by associations and co-occurrences within usage contexts. In social media settings, shifts in collocation often reflect changes in semantic prosody, namely the positive or negative evaluative tendencies attached to a lexeme through repeated association (Louw, 1993).

Furthermore, meaning in online discourse is inherently negotiative and emerges through collective interaction among users (Barton & Lee, 2013). This process aligns with the concept of *enregisterment*, whereby linguistic forms gain social recognition as part of a particular register through repeated circulation within a community (Agha, 2007). Hence, viral terminology does not merely reflect linguistic innovation but also contributes to the construction of social identity and ideological positioning within digital spaces.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze semantic shifts in viral terminology within social media discourse using a corpus-informed perspective. Specifically, the study focuses on: (1) collocational shift patterns as indicators of semantic change, (2) dominant mechanisms of semantic shift (e.g., generalization, pejoration, or subjectification), and (3) the pragmatic implications of such shifts for attitude formation and digital identity construction. By integrating perspectives from historical semantics, pragmatics, and corpus linguistics, this study seeks to contribute theoretically to the understanding of meaning dynamics in the fast-paced digital communication era.

Method

Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach employing a digital case study design. This approach is selected due to the study's focus on gaining an in-depth understanding of semantic shift phenomena in viral terminology within a specific social context, namely user interactions on platform X (Twitter). The case study design allows for contextual exploration of linguistic phenomena embedded within particular digital social spaces, capturing meaning dynamics as practiced in users' everyday social media interactions.

Given that the research topic centers on living, fluid, and interactive language practices, a qualitative approach is deemed more appropriate than a quantitative one oriented toward statistical generalization. The objective of this study is to understand how meanings are constructed through real discursive practices rather than merely measuring word frequency.

Research Setting and Social Context

The study was conducted within the digital space of platform X (Twitter), which serves as the primary social context. X was selected due to its text-based nature, open public timeline, and its capacity for rapid dissemination of viral terminology through retweets, replies, and hashtags. The platform represents a public discursive arena where users actively produce, distribute, and collectively negotiate meaning.

Accordingly, X is positioned not merely as a medium but as a social arena in which linguistic practices dynamically unfold and are continuously documented.

Data Collection Techniques

The primary data collection technique employed was non-participatory digital observation. The researcher did not engage in conversations but observed and collected data from public posts containing selected viral terms.

The observation focused on:

- Most relevant words frequently appearing alongside viral terms
- Collocational patterns
- Accompanying hashtags
- Sentential contexts and interactive responses

Data collection procedures included:

- Keyword searches using X's search feature
- Collection of public posts within a specified timeframe (approximately the last two years)
- Text documentation without recording user identities
- Data categorization based on usage context

Platform X's advanced search feature was utilized to filter data by time period, hashtags, and conversational relevance.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis combined with a basic distributional reading of frequently co-occurring lexical items.

The analytical stages included:

1. **Data Familiarization** – Repeated reading of collected posts to grasp overall usage contexts
2. **Identification of Most Relevant Words** – Detecting dominant collocates associated with viral terms
3. **Open Coding** – Assigning initial codes based on meaning patterns, emotional expressions, or social contexts
4. **Theme Development** – Grouping codes into conceptual themes representing meaning dynamics
5. **Reflective Interpretation** – Interpreting themes within the theoretical framework of semantic shift and discursive pragmatics

Analytical tools included Microsoft Excel for preliminary data organization and qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo or Atlas.ti) for coding and thematic categorization.

Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of semantic shift in social media discourse is not merely a lexical symptom but a reflection of social dynamics, ideological positioning, and the emotional experiences of participants within digital spaces. Over the past five years, studies on semantic change have increasingly adopted socio-cognitive and discursive-pragmatic approaches that conceptualize meaning as the outcome of collective negotiation within online communities (Geeraerts, 2020; Gries & Divjak, 2021; Zappavigna, 2022). Accordingly, this theoretical framework integrates three principal lenses: (1) usage-based semantic change, (2) discursive pragmatics and stance-taking in digital spaces, and (3) corpus-based and distributional approaches to meaning dynamics.

1. Semantic Shift as a Usage-Based Social Process

The usage-based approach conceptualizes semantic change as the cumulative outcome of repeated linguistic practices within speech communities. Geeraerts (2020) emphasizes that meaning is not static but emerges through socially and cognitively sedimented usage patterns. In the context of social media, the intensity, speed, and virality of usage significantly accelerate this process.

Recent research by Winter et al. (2020) demonstrates that changes in collocational distribution within digital corpora correlate with shifts in users' semantic perceptions. This finding suggests that semantic change is not an abstract linguistic phenomenon but a transformation of collective social experience.

Furthermore, Hilpert and Gries (2022) argue that semantic shift can be detected through changes in lexical associations and evaluative contexts. In viral terms such as *toxic*, an original meaning referring to chemical properties shifts into an evaluative label for interpersonal behavior. This transformation illustrates how digital communities reconstruct meaning based on relational and emotional experiences.

Thus, social media participants do not merely "use" words; they collectively reshape semantic horizons through repetitive, affective, and identity-oriented practices.

2. Discursive Pragmatics and Stance-Taking in Digital Spaces

While usage-based theories explain lexical mechanisms, discursive pragmatics provides insight into how meaning is negotiated interactionally. Du Bois (2021) conceptualizes stance-taking as an evaluative process linking language, emotion, and social positioning. In social media studies, Zappavigna (2022) shows that hashtag practices and captions foster *ambient affiliation*, namely emotional solidarity formed through shared lexical choices. Viral terminology often functions as a marker of identity and communal affiliation.

Androutsopoulos (2021) further demonstrates that semantic shifts in digital discourse frequently emerge through irony, hyperbole, and recontextualization. In other words, meaning change occurs because participants employ specific terms to express collective emotions such as frustration, empathy, or social critique.

In this sense, semantic change is not neutral. It reflects power relations, resistance, and solidarity. For instance, the term *healing* in Indonesian discourse shifts from a therapeutic meaning to a symbol of lifestyle and emotional consumption. Such shifts can only be adequately interpreted through a pragmatic lens that centers participants' lived experiences.

3. Distributional Semantics and Corpus Analysis as Empirical Windows

The third approach is grounded in the principle that meaning can be traced through lexical distribution patterns within corpora (Gries & Divjak, 2021). In recent years, the integration of corpus linguistics and semantic modeling has advanced significantly.

Hamilton et al. (2020) demonstrate that diachronic word embeddings can track semantic change over time through shifts in semantic vectors. Similarly, Kutuzov et al. (2020) confirm that changes in collocational contexts reflect evolving social perceptions of lexical items.

Within the Southeast Asian context, Sari and Wahyuni (2022) reveal that viral terminology in Indonesian Twitter discourse exhibits significant shifts in semantic prosody within a two-year span. Pratama (2023) further finds that evaluative terms undergo rapid pejoration due to political discursive framing.

While corpus-based approaches provide robust empirical evidence, they require theoretical interpretation to capture participants' social experiences.

Theoretical Positioning of the Study

Each approach offers a distinct focus:

- Usage-based semantic change emphasizes cumulative usage patterns.
- Discursive pragmatics foregrounds interactional negotiation and social positioning.
- Distributional corpus approaches provide large-scale empirical evidence.

This study adopts a usage-based discursive pragmatic perspective as its primary lens. Semantic shifts in viral terminology are understood not merely through collocational change but through how participants interpret and articulate social experiences via language. Corpus analysis serves as an analytical tool rather than the primary epistemological framework.

Accordingly, corpus data are interpreted not as mere statistical outputs but as traces of social interaction reflecting emotions, solidarity, resistance, and irony.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes meaning as a social practice embedded in digital interaction. Semantic shift is understood as:

- a usage-based social process,
- an evaluative negotiation through stance-taking,
- and a phenomenon reflected in changing lexical distribution patterns.

Viral terms are not treated as variables but as expressions of participants' lived experiences. For example, when *toxic* is used to describe interpersonal relationships, it is interpreted as a representation of collective emotional experience rather than a simple metaphorical extension.

Results

Based on non-participatory digital observation on platform X (Twitter) and reflexive thematic analysis of public posts containing viral terminology, three interrelated themes emerged, illustrating the dynamics of semantic shift in everyday discursive practices.

Theme 1: Words as Emotional Catharsis

In numerous threads and standalone posts, terms such as *toxic*, *healing*, and *burnout* appear in contexts related to personal relationships, workplace pressure, and mental exhaustion. These posts are often written late at night and carry reflective or complaint-oriented tones.

"plis mau resign aja jadi tkw kemana kali ya. punya kantor toxic bgt yawla"

"18! punya hubungan toxic capek bgt ternyata, tpi mau ngelepas susah udh terlanjur syg bgt, yg bisa ngertiin gw jg cuma dia. Tapi gw jg sadar diri kalo gw juga toxic people dpt pasangan jg sama2 toxic."

"wow the most toxic player complain about people being toxic haha but he right about all the thing he just listed tho"

Sumber: Pengguna Aplikasi X

In this context, viral terms function not merely as labels but as emotional outlets. *Toxic* no longer refers exclusively to extreme behavior but to accumulated fatigue, while *healing*

signifies a symbolic pause rather than clinical recovery. Meaning shifts occur alongside the need to intensify self-expression.

Theme 2: Meaning Negotiation in Digital Public Space

Replies to popular posts frequently challenge the use of specific terms, indicating collective awareness of semantic change. These interactions demonstrate that semantic shift is dialogically negotiated rather than passively adopted.

“Udah ada pergeseran makna tentang kata toxic, dulumah aku makenya pas ngedota, eh ada orang pinoy (philipine) yang bacotnya parah. Yaa itu orang ku kaitin toxic. Sekarang makna kata toxic udah berubah, tapi yaudahlah gapapa.”

“Makna “toxic”nya bergeser dan meluas kayaknya mba. Sama kayak “redflag”

“Ada yang bisa jelasin makna toxic itu apaa? Dan contohnya

Beracun? Bikin sakit fisik maupun hati muluk, kalau dalam hubungan udah ga bisa dipertahain lagi terbilang kasar lah, kalau dalam pertemanan juga sih.”

Sumber: Pengguna Aplikasi X

Viral terms become sites of meaning negotiation rather than fixed dictionary entries. Agreement, resistance, and redefinition all contribute to semantic evolution, often strengthening rather than fragmenting digital solidarity.

Theme 3: Collocational Shift and Lifestyle Identity Formation

Collocational analysis shows that *healing* frequently co-occurs with *staycation*, *self-reward*, and *me time*, while *toxic* collocates with *workplace*, *circle*, and *relationship*. These patterns indicate that viral terminology participates in constructing lifestyle narratives and social critique.

“ngga sabar gw mau ke pantai mau healing mau yoga di pantai”

“Never hurt someone else in a process of healing your own self”

“Bener kok.... emang rata rata yg keluarganya brokenhome atau disfungsi pasti jadi problematik. Krn asalnya aja dari lingkungan yg bermasalah. Tapi kalo orang nya waras, dia pasti bakal healing sih. Sayangnya ga semua bisa healing soalnya sadar problematik aja blm tentu”

Sumber: Pengguna Aplikasi X

However, a tension emerges between resistance and commodification, as *healing* becomes both a form of self-care and a consumer trend.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how semantic shift in viral terminology is enacted and negotiated within social media discourse on platform X (Twitter). Drawing directly on non-participatory digital observations and reflexive thematic analysis, the discussion

focuses on how meaning change emerges from actual discursive practices rather than abstract semantic postulations. The findings demonstrate that semantic shift operates through three interrelated dynamics: emotional catharsis, dialogic negotiation of meaning, and collocational reconfiguration linked to identity construction.

Semantic Shift as Emotional Articulation

The first major finding shows that viral terms such as *toxic*, *healing*, and *burnout* are recurrently employed as linguistic resources for articulating emotional strain related to work pressure, interpersonal relationships, and mental fatigue. The data indicate that these terms are frequently embedded in reflective or complaint-oriented posts, often lacking explicit targets and instead framing emotions as diffuse and situational.

This usage pattern suggests that semantic shift is closely tied to affective needs. The meanings of these terms expand not through deliberate redefinition, but through repeated use as emotionally efficient expressions. For instance, *toxic* no longer exclusively denotes extreme or abusive behavior but is frequently used to index accumulated exhaustion or dissatisfaction. Similarly, *healing* functions less as a reference to clinical recovery and more as a symbolic pause from daily pressures.

These findings align with usage-based theories of semantic change, which emphasize that meaning evolves through recurrent practice. However, the data further indicate that frequency alone is insufficient to explain the shift; emotional intensity and experiential resonance play a crucial role in accelerating semantic expansion. In this sense, semantic shift in social media discourse emerges as an affective practice grounded in lived experience.

Meaning Negotiation as a Dialogic Process

The second theme reveals that semantic shift does not occur without contestation. The data show frequent replies and comment chains in which users question, challenge, or defend the application of viral terms. These interactions demonstrate an ongoing awareness among users that meanings are changing and potentially becoming diluted or overextended.

Rather than stabilizing meaning, such interactions illustrate that semantic shift is dialogically produced. Users engage in implicit metalinguistic negotiation, debating whether a situation warrants labels such as *toxic* or whether the term has become overly generalized. Importantly, these negotiations rarely escalate into overt conflict; instead, they tend to take the form of clarification, irony, or personal testimony.

This pattern indicates that meaning change in digital discourse is not imposed unilaterally but emerges through collective sense-making. The data thus support a pragmatic-discursive view of meaning, in which semantic shift is shaped through stance-taking and interactional alignment. Meaning remains fluid, contingent, and socially embedded rather than fixed or institutionally regulated.

Collocational Shift and Identity-Oriented Meaning

The third theme demonstrates that semantic shift is empirically observable through changes in collocational patterns. The data show that *healing* increasingly co-occurs with lifestyle-related terms such as *staycation*, *me time*, and *self-reward*, while *toxic* is frequently associated with *workplace*, *circle*, and *relationship*. These collocational environments signal a recontextualization of meaning toward domains of lifestyle, self-care, and social critique.

Crucially, these shifts do not merely reflect semantic change but also participate in identity construction. The repeated pairing of viral terms with lifestyle vocabulary positions users within particular value orientations, such as prioritizing mental well-being or resisting oppressive work cultures. At the same time, the data reveal a tension between expressive resistance and commodification, especially in the case of *healing*, which sometimes appears as a consumptive trend rather than a reflective practice.

This finding underscores that semantic shift in social media is ideologically loaded. Meanings evolve alongside changing social values and are embedded within broader narratives of selfhood, productivity, and emotional legitimacy.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the three themes illustrate that semantic shift in X (Twitter) discourse unfolds as a sequential and interconnected process. Viral terms initially function as personal emotional expressions, subsequently become objects of public negotiation, and eventually stabilize into recognizable collocational patterns that support identity and value formation. Meaning change, therefore, is not a linear lexical process but a socially mediated trajectory shaped by emotion, interaction, and repetition.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that semantic shift in social media discourse on platform X (Twitter) is a complex, socially grounded process that cannot be reduced to lexical change alone. Based on empirical data derived from non-participatory digital observation and reflexive thematic analysis, three core patterns were identified: the use of viral terminology as emotional catharsis, the dialogic negotiation of meaning in public digital spaces, and collocational shifts that contribute to identity construction and value orientation.

The findings show that meanings change because users repeatedly mobilize certain terms to articulate shared emotional experiences, particularly those related to mental health, workplace pressure, and interpersonal relations. Viral terminology functions as a symbolic resource that legitimizes psychosocial experiences and renders them communicable within the constraints of digital discourse. Semantic shift thus emerges as an affective and interactional phenomenon rooted in everyday practice.

At the same time, the study highlights that meaning change is neither uniform nor uncontested. Users actively negotiate semantic boundaries, reflecting collective awareness of ongoing shifts and demonstrating that meaning remains fluid and context-dependent. Collocational patterns further reveal how semantic change becomes sedimented over time, linking viral terms to lifestyle narratives and social critique.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the relevance of integrating usage-based semantic change with discursive pragmatics. It shows that semantic shift in digital environments is simultaneously affective, dialogic, and ideological. Practically, the findings offer insights for digital literacy initiatives, critical language education, and socially sensitive communication strategies by emphasizing that viral language should be read as an indicator of broader social concerns rather than dismissed as transient trends.

Nevertheless, the study is limited by its focus on a single platform and a predominantly urban, digitally literate user base. Future research could extend this analysis across platforms, demographic groups, or longer temporal spans to capture more diverse trajectories of semantic change. Longitudinal or ethnographic digital approaches may further illuminate how meanings stabilize, fragment, or fade over time.

In conclusion, semantic shift in social media discourse reflects ongoing transformations in how digital communities interpret emotion, identity, and social relations. Language in digital spaces does not merely mirror social change—it actively participates in shaping how that change is understood and experienced.

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