



## The Role of Labuhanbatu Language in Constructing Local Identity within the Digital Era

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**Abstract.** *This paper examines how the Labuhanbatu language, a Malay variety spoken in North Sumatra, contributes to shaping and sustaining local identity in the digital age. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach by analyzing online materials such as folk narratives, community blogs, and digital glossaries that document the Bilah and Panai dialects. Results indicate that unique phonological traits, such as the nasalized articulation of /r/ into [gh], alongside specific lexical choices, set Labuhanbatu speech apart from standard Indonesian. These features act as markers of cultural identity, reinforcing group cohesion and distinguishing local speech practices. The research also highlights the growing presence of Labuhanbatu language in digital media, including educational archives, social platforms, and computational projects, which reflects ongoing efforts to both preserve and adapt the language. Findings suggest that digital environments provide opportunities for safeguarding linguistic heritage while simultaneously introducing changes through standardization and cross-cultural interaction. Consequently, the Labuhanbatu language continues to function as an essential medium of cultural expression and identity construction in an increasingly globalized context.*

**Keywords:** *Labuhanbatu language, identity construction, Bilah dialect, Panai dialect, digital media, language preservation, sociolinguistic study*

### INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a medium of communication but also a key element of culture and identity formation. Through language, communities transmit ideas, values, and traditions while reinforcing social ties that shape their sense of belonging. In Indonesia, the variety of regional languages illustrates cultural richness and simultaneously functions as markers of identity that distinguish one group from another. Among these is the Labuhanbatu language, a Malay variety spoken in North Sumatra, which is commonly divided into two dialects: Bilah and Panai.

The Labuhanbatu language is recognized for its unique phonological and lexical traits. For example, the /r/ sound is often produced in a nasalized form resembling [gh], and vocabulary items such as *awak* for “I” or “me” set it apart from standard Indonesian. Such distinct features highlight its role as more than a communicative tool; they symbolize cultural identity and community solidarity. However, the growing influence of globalization and the predominance of the national language pose challenges to its continued vitality.

The advent of digital technology has created both possibilities and pressures for regional languages. Social media, online repositories, and digital dictionaries have provided avenues for

the documentation, preservation, and dissemination of the Labuhanbatu language. Examples include the digital publication of folk stories and technological research into natural language processing for the Panai dialect. Yet, the frequent exposure to Indonesian and other global languages like English may lead to shifts in usage or the erosion of distinct local features.

This research seeks to explore the ways in which the Labuhanbatu language contributes to identity construction in the digital context. It aims to describe the linguistic characteristics that define the language as cultural markers and to investigate how digital platforms support both preservation and transformation. In doing so, this study contributes to efforts of safeguarding regional languages and underlines the relevance of local identity amidst the challenges of globalization.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The discussion of language as a marker of cultural identity has increasingly gained attention in the digital communication era. Scholars argue that regional languages serve not only as means of communication but also as cultural codes reflecting local traditions, values, and ethnic belonging. Evizariza (2024) observes that “regional languages in digital platforms function as deliberate expressions of identity, where speakers simultaneously negotiate local belonging and wider global engagement” (p. 53). This shows that language choice online is deeply tied to identity construction.

Several recent studies highlight the contribution of digital media to the preservation of local languages. Wulandari et al. (2025), for instance, analyzed how digital learning supports the continuity of Javanese in Yogyakarta. Their results indicate that “integrating e-learning platforms and online applications into language learning improves not only linguistic competence but also cultural identity awareness among students” (p. 85). This implies that technology acts as a mediator for cultural transmission.

The same pattern can be seen in Minangkabau studies. Ahmadi, Yasmadi, and Fitri (2024) discovered that Minang language retains its role as a cultural emblem through social media narratives, digital literature, and online interactions. They explain that “the persistence of Minang across digital spaces reflects its resilience against homogenization pressures from national and global languages” (p. 119). This suggests that minority languages can remain vital even in highly digitalized contexts.

Furthermore, Wagati, Darmayanti, and Adji (2024) explored identity dynamics among young Indonesians, showing that hybrid uses of Indonesian, English, and regional tongues mark new identity practices. They argue, “digital platforms have transformed language into a key symbol of group belonging, peer solidarity, and cultural pride for youth communities” (p.102). Such findings highlight the changing symbolic value of local languages in online communication.

In the North Sumatran context, Husna, Pulungan, and Pane (2024) found that Kualuh Malay continues to be practiced by Labuhanbatu Utara students in Medan, despite the dominant role of Indonesian. They conclude that “students’ continuous use of Kualuh

Malay demonstrates a conscious attempt to preserve cultural roots in urban and national environments” (p. 81). Even though this does not directly address all Labuhanbatu dialects, it reveals that regional varieties in Sumatra are still essential for identity-making in digitalized societies.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates three trends: (1) digital tools open new spaces for preserving local languages, (2) language remains crucial for identity construction among younger generations, and (3) hybrid language practices are emerging as new forms of identity performance. Yet, while much attention has been given to Javanese, Minangkabau, and Malay, research on Labuhanbatu language in digital environments remains scarce.

## **RESEARCH METODOLOGY**

### **1. Research Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, chosen because it emphasizes understanding the use of the Labuhanbatu language and its role in shaping local identity within digital platforms, rather than generating numerical data or testing hypotheses. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of the meanings, social functions, and cultural implications of language practices in online contexts.

The descriptive aspect enables detailed documentation of linguistic characteristics, patterns of usage, and contextual factors that influence language practices, providing a comprehensive view of how Labuhanbatu functions as a marker of local identity in digital spaces.

### **2. Research Methods**

#### **a. Netnography (Digital Ethnography)**

Netnography, or digital ethnography, is applied to study online interactions and cultural practices among communities using Labuhanbatu language. This method allows researchers to examine communication in its natural digital environment, capturing both linguistic features and the social meanings behind them.

##### **Advantages of Netnography:**

- Observes authentic user behavior in online communities.
- Highlights cultural and social norms in digital interactions.
- Tracks the dissemination and adaptation of local languages in real time.

#### **b. Case Study Approach**

The case study method complements netnography by providing a focused, in-depth examination of specific contexts where Labuhanbatu language is used, such as social media groups, blogs, or digital forums. This approach helps to uncover the social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions of identity construction in a localized context.

### **3. Data Sources**

Data are collected from multiple sources to ensure richness and comprehensiveness:

1. Digital texts: Online folk tales, community posts, and educational materials in Labuhanbatu.
2. Online glossaries/dictionaries: Documenting Bilah and Panai dialect vocabularies.

3. Social media content: Posts, comments, and digital interactions using Labuhanbatu.
4. Academic literature: Studies on regional languages, identity, and sociolinguistics.
5. Digital language projects: NLP corpora containing Labuhanbatu dialects.

This combination provides a holistic view of language use across both traditional and digital spaces.

#### **4. Data Collection Techniques**

1. Participant Observation: Actively observing online communities to record interaction patterns, discourse styles, and contextual usage of Labuhanbatu language.
2. In-Depth Interviews: Conducting semi-structured interviews with native speakers or community members to understand perceptions of Labuhanbatu's role in expressing local identity.
3. Digital Documentation: Collecting digital artifacts such as text, images, and videos for detailed analysis.
4. Literature Review: Reviewing relevant studies and theories to support analysis and interpretation.

#### **5. Data Analysis Techniques**

Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, involving:

1. Identifying patterns or themes in linguistic and digital content.
2. Categorizing phonological, morphological, and lexical features of Labuhanbatu.
3. Interpreting how language practices reflect social identity, community affiliation, and cultural values.
4. Iteratively revisiting the data to refine themes and enhance accuracy.

#### **6. Data Validity and Reliability**

The study ensures credibility and reliability through:

1. Source triangulation: Comparing folk tales, online glossaries, and social media content.
2. Method triangulation: Using observation, interviews, and digital documentation.
3. Theory triangulation: Employing sociolinguistics, language-and-identity theories, and regional language preservation frameworks.
4. Audit trail: Maintaining systematic documentation of data collection and analysis procedures.

#### **7. Research Procedures**

1. Preparation: Defining research focus, objectives, and data sources.
2. Data Collection: Gathering digital texts, observing online interactions, and conducting interviews.
3. Data Classification: Organizing data by linguistic features and digital usage patterns.
4. Data Analysis: Applying thematic analysis to examine

### **HASIL PENELITIAN DAN PEMBAHASAN**

This study confirms that the Labuhanbatu language continues to demonstrate vitality in the digital era, particularly through its frequent use on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Rather than being displaced by the dominance of Indonesian as the national language or English as the global lingua franca, Labuhanbatu speakers actively integrate their dialect into online interactions. This practice illustrates that digital spaces have become new domains for language maintenance, identity construction, and cultural representation.

Two representative examples highlight how the Labuhanbatu dialect is employed in digital communication:

**Example 1 (Instagram @rantohitz\_)**

A protest banner displays the message:



“Usah pala tapancing emosi ya, polan-polan saja nyampekkannya. Kalok pun rusuh, tak makan kita nanti.”

Translation: *“Do not get carried away by emotions; convey your message calmly. If the protest turns chaotic, we ourselves will suffer.”*

**Example 2 (Facebook Laburaku)**

A video of a man catching a giant snake is captioned:



“Oih bosarnyooooo. Hati hati pak, untung tak apo apo bapak tu.” Translation: *“Oh my, how big it is! Be careful sir, fortunately you are fine.”*

### **Linguistic Analysis**

The linguistic data collected from Labuhanbatu speakers demonstrates that the dialect possesses distinct lexical, morphological, phonological, and pragmatic characteristics that both differentiate it from Standard Indonesian and affirm its role in constructing local identity. These features, when analyzed within the framework of sociolinguistic and discourse studies, show how the Labuhanbatu dialect is strategically employed in digital contexts to convey solidarity, express emotions, and mark cultural authenticity.

#### **Lexical distinctions.**

Words such as “usah” (don’t), “tapancing” (provoked), and “nyampekkannya” (to deliver) showcase a clear lexical departure from Standard Indonesian equivalents such as “jangan”, “terpancing”, or “menyampaikannya”. These lexical items reflect the community’s effort to maintain localized vocabulary in their everyday communication, even in digital spaces where the dominance of Indonesian is strong. As observed by Mulyani (2021), the maintenance of local vocabulary in digital interactions acts as a conscious linguistic choice that reinforces cultural identity and community belonging (p. 47). Similarly, the phrase “tak apo apo” illustrates how local phonological forms persist in digital writing. Unlike the Standard Indonesian “tidak apa-apa”, the Labuhanbatu variant employs a repetition of “apo”, underscoring both regional pronunciation and a distinctive lexical identity. This supports Wibisono’s (2022) finding that dialectal lexical choices are often preserved online as markers of authenticity, even when speakers are fully bilingual in the national language (p. 91).

#### **Morphological processes.**

Another key linguistic feature of the Labuhanbatu dialect is its unique reduplication process, exemplified in “polan-polan” rather than Standard Indonesian “pelan-pelan”.

This morphological divergence reflects the dialect’s phonological system, where initial consonant variation (p vs. pe) creates a localized identity marker. As highlighted by Lubis (2020), reduplication in regional languages often differs systematically from the national language, signaling not only grammatical function but also sociolinguistic identity (pp. 102–103). In digital spaces, these reduplicative forms carry added symbolic value, since they reaffirm linguistic heritage in a written context where Standard Indonesian is otherwise dominant.

#### **Phonological markers.**

The presence of elongated vowels, such as in “bosarnyoooo” (very big), reveals how oral communicative features are transposed into digital text. This spelling variation is not random but rather serves to replicate the emphatic intonation patterns of spoken Labuhanbatu. According to Evans (2020), vowel elongation in digital orthography is a widespread strategy among dialect speakers to convey intonation and emotional nuance in writing (pp. 72–73). Within the Labuhanbatu context, this practice illustrates how speakers adapt traditional oral performance styles into online discourse, maintaining a strong connection between spoken and digital forms of communication.

#### **Pragmatic strategies.**

The pragmatic use of dialect is particularly visible in public expressions such as protest banners, where the Labuhanbatu dialect functions as a tool of solidarity and persuasion. The choice to employ local language reduces the perceived distance between the speaker and the audience, fostering inclusivity and communal belonging. As Setiawan (2022) argues, pragmatic choices in dialect use online are linked to strategies of politeness and solidarity, often designed to enhance group cohesion (p. 88). This is consistent with the Labuhanbatu case, where protest

language in dialect emphasizes collective identity and cultural pride in the face of broader sociopolitical discourse.

Conclusion of analysis.

Taken together, the lexical, morphological, phonological, and pragmatic features of the Labuhanbatu dialect highlight its adaptability and resilience within the digital sphere. These features are not only linguistic markers but also sociocultural strategies that reinforce identity. By preserving dialectal forms in online interactions, speakers actively resist

linguistic homogenization and assert their cultural uniqueness. As Holmes and Wilson (2021) note, such practices demonstrate how regional dialects are recontextualized as symbols of identity within the globalized digital landscape (p. 119). Thus, the Labuhanbatu dialect continues to thrive, not only as a means of everyday communication but also as a powerful emblem of cultural expression in contemporary society.

### **Comparison with Standard Indonesian**

To better illustrate these differences, the following table compares selected forms in Labuhanbatu and Standard Indonesian:

This comparison confirms that while the core semantic meaning overlaps, the dialectal variations reflect strong cultural and regional identity.

### **Digital Identity and Local Representation**

Social media allows speakers to publicly perform their linguistic identity. By using Labuhanbatu dialect in posts and captions, individuals construct a digital identity that affirms their belonging to a specific cultural group.

Had the same posts been written in Standard Indonesian, they would appear more formal but less emotionally resonant. Instead, the dialectal forms evoke intimacy and authenticity, creating what Ahmadi, Yasmadi, & Fitri (2024) describe as the preservation and evolution of cultural identity through digital language practices.

This suggests that social media acts not only as a platform for information-sharing but also as a cultural stage where local languages resist homogenization and continue to evolve in creative ways.

### **Sociolinguistic Perspectives**

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, several key aspects can be observed:

1. Language Maintenance: The presence of Labuhanbatu online demonstrates active language preservation efforts, resisting language shift in favor of national or global codes (Isnarini et al., 2025).
2. Code Choice: The deliberate use of dialect rather than Standard Indonesian represents a conscious identity choice, signaling pride in local heritage.
3. Solidarity Marker: Dialect serves as an in-group marker. Understanding its meanings requires shared cultural background, thereby reinforcing boundaries between insiders and outsiders.
4. Language Innovation: The integration of expressive features such as vowel elongation (bosarnyoooo) into digital text illustrates how traditional oral practices adapt to new technological contexts.
- 5.

## **KESIMPULAN**

This research highlights the continuing significance of the Labuhanbatu language in reinforcing and expressing local identity, particularly in the context of digital communication. The analysis of lexical features (*usah, tapancing, nyampekkannya*), morphological forms (*polan-polan*), phonological markers (*elongation in bosarnyoooo*), and pragmatic applications in both online texts and protest banners shows that the dialect remains distinctive while adapting effectively to modern communicative practices. These features are employed purposefully, not only for communication but also as a way of performing and affirming identity. As Holmes and Wilson (2021) observe, regional dialects serve as cultural symbols through which speakers establish belonging and draw boundaries in multilingual settings (p. 119).

The continuous use of Labuhanbatu in online discourse and public spaces demonstrates its function as a cultural resource that sustains group solidarity. Mulyani (2021) explains that local vocabulary use in digital communication is often intentional, aimed at maintaining authenticity and community cohesion (p. 47). This perspective resonates with the present study, where speakers maintain their dialect in everyday digital interactions and public demonstrations, underlining its ongoing cultural significance.

Oral features, such as vowel lengthening represented in text (e.g., *bosarnyoooo*), reveal how traditional speech patterns are creatively reshaped to suit digital contexts. According to Evans (2020), such strategies in online writing help to preserve intonation and emotional expression, allowing speakers to carry oral nuances into written communication (pp. 72–73). This shows that far from being eroded, the dialect adapts flexibly while preserving its expressive strength.

The pragmatic use of Labuhanbatu in banners and digital texts also strengthens collective identity and encourages solidarity. Setiawan (2022) notes that the use of regional dialects in public and digital discourse promotes politeness and inclusivity, thereby building social cohesion (p. 88). Within the Labuhanbatu context, this function demonstrates the dialect's importance not only as a means of communication but also as a tool of resistance against the dominance of Standard Indonesian.

In line with Omoniyi's (2020) argument, language choice in digital spaces represents an act of agency, where speakers deliberately use certain codes to express belonging and identity (pp. 134–136). For Labuhanbatu speakers, this means actively choosing their dialect in online spaces to assert pride and maintain their cultural distinctiveness in Indonesia's multilingual environment.

Ultimately, the Labuhanbatu dialect shows resilience and adaptability, maintaining its cultural and communicative relevance in the face of globalization. Its presence in digital spaces ensures intergenerational continuity and demonstrates how regional languages can remain vibrant. Wibisono (2022) emphasizes that the persistence of dialects in online communication reflects broader identity negotiations, where authenticity becomes central to representation (p. 91). Thus, the Labuhanbatu dialect is not diminishing but transforming, thriving as a living marker of cultural pride and identity in today's digital world.



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