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A STRUCTURAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SUNDANESE *ASIHAN* MANTRAS: CONSTRUCTING CIRCULAR EMPATHY ECOLOGY FOR DIGITAL WELL-BEING AND SDG 3

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Abstract: The vast development of digital technology has brought new form of psychological challenge; algorithmic anxiety, which is as a complex syndrome marked by emotional fatigue and identity erosion originating from relentless data-driven metric validation. This phenomenon challenges the United Nation Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG3) in achieving digital well-being for digital citizens. While current digital literacy interventions mostly rely on individualistic Western clinical paradigms, this study adopts a "two-eyed seeing" model, which harmonize Barthesian structural semiotics with Sundanese Ethnopsychology. Analyzing a purposively selected corpus of 15 Sundanese Asihan mantras (N=15, drawn from a master archive of 30 documented texts, this study investigates how "ontological security" is linguistically engineered. The findings reveal that *Asihan* texts systematically employ nominal clause structures to create "nominal stability", functioning as static semic anchor that protects individual from the volatile changes of external digital metrics. This linguistic architecture is rooted in the Sundanese Ideology of Three (*Tritangtu*), a cosmic harmony unifiying Earth, Humanity, and Heaven, which redefines individual as a relational entity rather than an isolated subject. Based on these results, this study proposes "Circular Empathy Ecology" framework, a social innovation designed to humanize digital spaces through three pillars: (1) Anticipatory Empathy to filter digital action preemptively; (2) Internalized Validation to decouple self-worth from quantitative metrics; and (3) Community Resilience to shift the burden of well-being from isolated user to the collective digital system. This study provides a culturally grounded ethical framework that operationalizes indigenous oral traditions to advance global digital well-being and sustainability targets.
Keywords: *Asihan mantras; structural semiotics; Sundanese ethnopsychology; digital well-being; SDG 3; circular empathy ecology*

INTRODUCTION

Today, it is inevitable that we are living in a digital paradox. At one side, modern technology has connected not only people more deeply than ever before, but also fueled a global mental health crisis (World Health Organization, 2022). Scientifically, this crisis is called as "algorithmic anxiety" (Cramarenco et al., 2023; Shekhar & Saurombe, 2026)—an inescapable emotional exhaustion born from our relentless pursuit of data-driven validation (Couldry & Mejias, 2020; Choi & Kim, 2024; Balaskas et.al., 2025). This psychological toll poses a direct challenge to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3), which calls for healthy lives and systemic well-being for everyone in the digital age (United Nations, 2023).

The evidence of this case keeps improving. Empirically, many studies constantly reveal that social media overload is a major driver of depressive symptoms and emotional distress, trapping users in digital spaces that erode their sense of self (Appel et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020; Meier & Reinecke, 2021; Sheng et al., 2023; Twenge & Campbell, 2019; Xie et al., 2025).

Unlike natural human conversations, which have organic boundaries, algorithmic validation is infinite and unpredictable. It locks users into "filter bubbles" where the rules of engagement are constantly shifting, leaving them vulnerable to chronic fatigue and dynamic stress (Murari et al., 2026; Ross, 2022; Santiago et al., 2025; Vanden Abeele, 2021; Dhir et.al., 2018)

To address this growing crisis, most digital literacy and mental health programs rely heavily on Western clinical models. These frameworks tend to view the individual as an isolated actor responsible for managing their own stress in a vacuum (Kirmayer & Ryder, 2016; Kleinman, 2020; Rose, 1990). Operating on the assumption of the "Independent Self" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), this approach places the entire burden of resilience on the user, while largely ignoring the systemic and relational forces driving digital burnout (Weber et al., 2025).

Fortunately, the academic conversation is shifting. Scholars are increasingly turning to a "Two-Eyed Seeing" model—an approach that bridges Western clinical science with Indigenous ways of knowing to build culturally grounded mental health strategies (Gone, 2021; Kirmayer, 2012; Cohen et.al., 2021). Across the globe, institutions are aligning their long-term health frameworks with these ecological models, recognizing that human well-being is inseparable from our broader cultural and environmental ecosystems (Hall et al., 2025; Akahome, 2026; Redvers et al., 2022).

In Southeast Asia, particularly within the Sundanese tradition of Western Java, indigenous ethnopsychology offers a persuasive alternative to modern digital volatility. Central to Sundanese thought is the "Ideology of Three" (*Tritangtu*), a philosophical framework that balances Earth (*Bumi*), Humanity (*Manusia*), and Heaven (*Langit*) in dynamic harmony (Effendi, 2025; Suryalaga, 2009). Recent semiotic research shows that traditional Sundanese oral performances—from everyday proverbs (*paribasa*) to ceremonial wedding texts (*sawer penganten*)—function as mythic speech that actively encodes ecological ethics and social stability (Trisnawati, et.al., 2025; Rohmana, 2023). Within this cultural landscape, *Asihan* mantras have historically been misunderstood as archaic artifacts of folk magic (Danandjaja, 2002). Yet, when viewed through a modern pragmastylistic lens, they reveal themselves as sophisticated performative designs (Austin, 1975) engineered for psychological auto-suggestion. Through a Barthesian structural semiotic framework, these mantras operate as a "second-order semiological system" or myth (Barthes, 1973, 1974; Leone, 2024), transforming the practitioner's inner reality by grounding their consciousness in a narrative of absolute safety.

Despite the growing appreciation for Indigenous knowledge systems in global health policy, a critical gap remains. Current literature on digital well-being is largely confined to technological digital detoxes or individual cognitive-behavioral techniques. It rarely explores how Indigenous performative linguistics might serve as a stabilizing force against the volatility of algorithmic systems. While scholars have documented the cultural and folkloric roles of Sundanese oral traditions (Danandjaja, 2002; Tawami, 2024), few have deconstructed the specific linguistic mechanisms—most notably nominal clause structures (*Klausa Nominal*)—that buffer the human psyche against the pressure of external metrics.

To bridge this epistemological gap, this study addresses two central research questions. First, how do the linguistic architecture and nominal clause structures of Sundanese *Asihan* mantras performatively construct "Nominal Stability" and mythic security through a Barthesian semiotic lens? Second, how can the ethnopsychological values of the Sundanese "Ideology of Three" (*Tritangtu*) embedded within these mantras be synthesized into a practical social innovation framework (*Circular Empathy Ecology*) to mitigate algorithmic anxiety and advance SDG 3 targets?

This study maps new ground by bridging Barthesian structural semiotics, Sundanese ethnopsychology, and contemporary digital well-being into a single analytical framework. Rather than treating *Asihan* mantras as passive folklore, we reframe them as active, performative psychological technologies. By establishing "Nominal Stability" as a direct counterweight to "Algorithmic Volatility," we introduce the *Circular Empathy Ecology.* It is a term that is culturally grounded model that shifts the responsibility for digital mental health away from the isolated individual and toward a reciprocal, interconnected system.

The implications of this research span theory, pedagogy, and public policy. Theoretically, it expands the boundaries of Barthesian semiotics into the realm of Indigenous mental health. It demonstrates how ancient linguistic architecture can decode and alleviate modern digital anxieties. For educators and clinicians, the study offers the

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Circular Empathy Ecology as a culturally responsive alternative to standard digital literacy programs. This concept moves beyond mere technical usage to foster genuine relational resilience. Finally, on a policy level, this work directly connects local cultural heritage to the United Nations SDG 3 agenda. This has shown how Indigenous epistemologies can be practically operationalized to build healthier and more humane digital environments.

METHOD

Measuring how ancient spells directly alter the neural or cognitive states of modern practitioners presents obvious empirical hurdles. To navigate this issue, the study intentionally shifts the analytical locus to "textual design." Asihan mantra texts are approached as performative linguistic architectures designed to facilitate auto-suggestion (Austin, 1975; Trisnawati et al., 2025; Sumarlina et al., 2024). Grounded in qualitative interpretive inquiry and structural semiotics (Chandler, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2016), this approach aligns with modern cultural studies, where psychological realities and coping strategies can be accurately decoded through the structural construction of textual meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Sulianta, 2024).

The primary empirical material for this research is taken from a comprehensive textual corpus of ancient Sundanese Asihan mantras documented in a recent structural-semiotic doctoral dissertation at Universitas Padjadjaran (Tawami, 2024). The master archive comprises 30 distinct oral mantras that were systematically recorded and culturally verified against classical Sundanese folklore standards (Danandjaja, 2002). From this primary archive, purposive sampling was conducted to select 15 representative mantras for in-depth semiotic deconstruction. To ensure analytical rigor, the selection was guided by three explicit criteria: the text must feature a prominent reliance on nominal clause structures (klausa nominal) rather than dynamic verbal action; the mantra must explicitly embed metaphors or lexical choices representing the three axes of the Sundanese Tritangtu cosmology—Earth (Bumi), Humanity (Manusia), and Heaven (Langit); and the text must contain clear relational directives linking the practitioner's ego to their broader environmental or social ecosystem (Ansloos et al., 2022; Tanta-Quidgeon et al., 2024).

To guarantee the trustworthiness and reliability of the qualitative analysis, investigator triangulation was employed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The lexia segmentation and coding processes were independently executed by the primary researcher and subsequently peer-reviewed by senior co-authors specializing in Sundanese ethnolinguistics and semiotics. Any coding discrepancies regarding sign classifications were debated and reconciled until 100% inter-analyzer agreement was reached.

Table 1 outlines the distribution and frequency of key structural and semiotic features identified across the 15 analyzed mantras.

Table 1. *Frequency and Structural Distribution of Semiotic Features Across the Analyzed Asihan Corpus ($N = 15$)*

Structural & Semiotic Feature	Description/ Linguistic Mechanism	Primary Barthesian Code	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Nominal Clause Structures	Static identity state (*Klausa Nominal*)	Semic Code (SMC)	14	93.3%
Cosmic/Earth Metaphors	Environmental grounding via nature signs	Symbolic Code (SYM)	12	80.0%
Reciprocal Imperatives	Ethical commands (*mangka welas mangka asih*)	Gnomic Code (GNO)	13	86.7%
Transcendent Identification	Divine or ancestral ego-elevation	Semic /Symbolic Code	9	60.0%

The textual analysis followed a systematic, three-stage integrative approach bridging Barthesian structural semiotics and Sundanese ethnopsychology. Following the protocol established in S/Z (Barthes, 1974), each selected mantra text was segmented into lexias—short, contiguous fragments of text consisting of one or a few words that form a distinct signify unit. At this initial level, literal signifiers and signifieds were cataloged to establish denotative meaning.

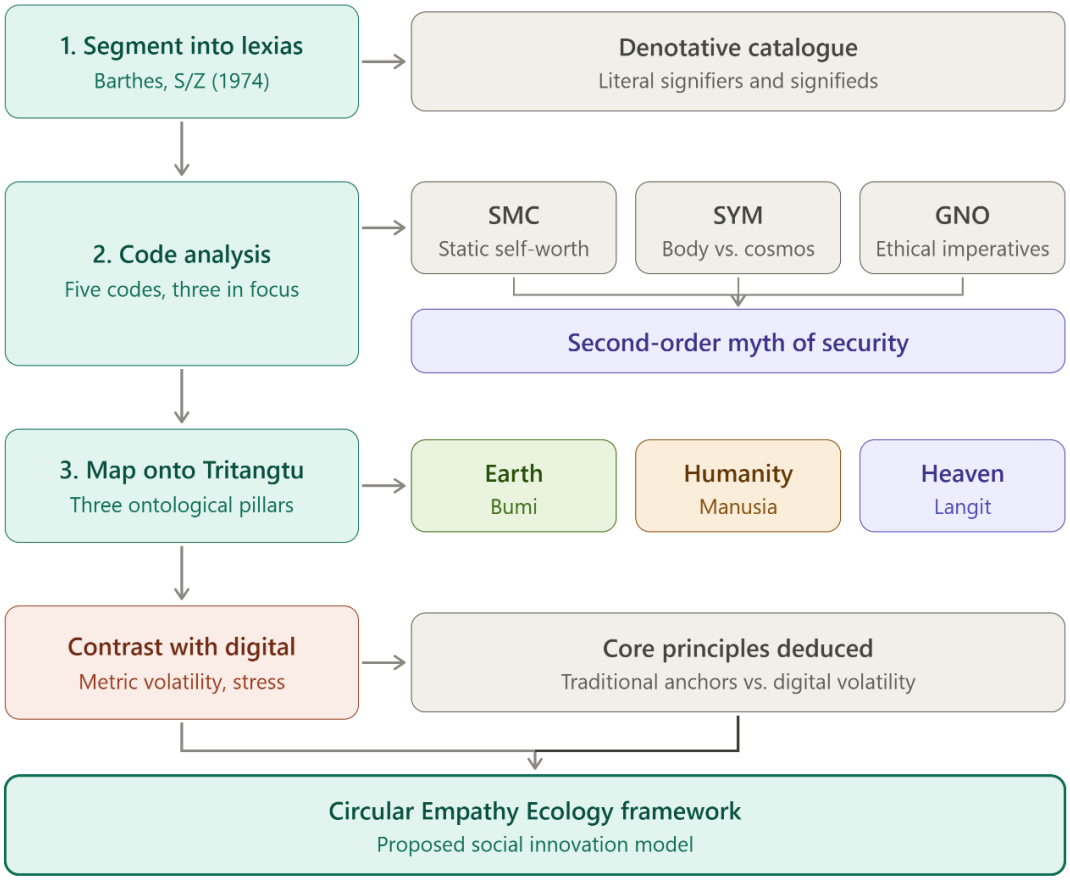


Figure 1. *Three-stage integrative analytical procedure, from lexia segmentation to the Circular Empathy Ecology framework*

Each lexia was then systematically analyzed across Barthes' five semiotic codes (Barthes, 1970, 1974), with specific attention to three codes. The Semic Code was used to isolate static attributes of self-worth, identified as "Nominal Stability." The Symbolic Code (SYM) was used to trace binary oppositions between the fragile human body and the immutable macrocosm. The Gnomic/Cultural Code (GNO) was used to extract cultural proverbs and ethical imperatives. Through this process, the analysis decoded how connotative signifiers performatively build a "second-order semiological system"—what Barthes (1973) defines as a myth of absolute psychological security.

In the final phase, the extracted semiotic mechanisms were mapped onto the three ontological pillars of the Sundanese Tritangtu ideology: Earth, Humanity, and Heaven (Effendi, 2025; Suryalaga, 2009; Aljunied, 2025). Finally, by contrasting these traditional anchoring mechanisms against modern metrics of digital stress and social media volatility (Laure et al., 2025; Shekhar & Saurombe, 2026; Vanden Abeele, 2021), the analysis deduced the core principles of the proposed social innovation model: the Circular Empathy Ecology framework (Murari et al., 2026; Ross, 2022; Sam, 2026).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In alignment with our analytical design, the findings are organized through a tripartite progression. We first unpack the linguistic architecture of the *Asihan* corpus, showing how nominal structures generate psychological stability. Next, we map these semiotic signs onto the Sundanese *Tritangtu* cosmology to reveal how ontological security is constructed across three relational axes. Finally, we translate these ancient mechanisms into a modern ethical model—the *Circular Empathy Ecology*—offering a practical counterweight to contemporary algorithmic anxiety.

Linguistic anchoring: Nominal stability vs. algorithmic volatility

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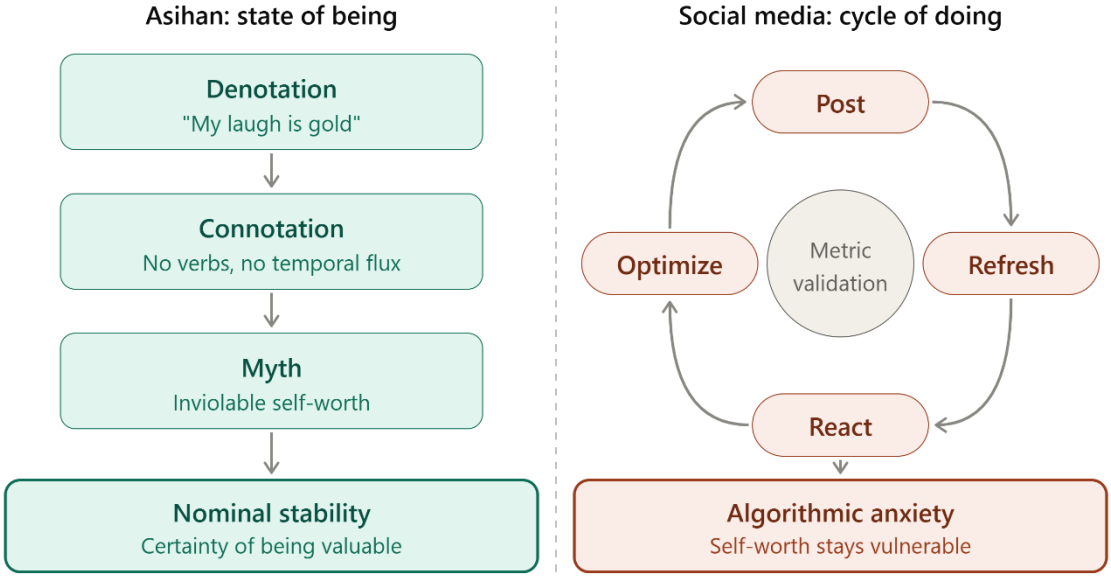


Figure 2. *Nominal stability in Asihan mantras versus algorithmic volatility on social media*

A pragma stylistic deconstruction of the *Asihan* corpus (Tawami, 2024) reveals a striking reliance on nominal clause structures (*Klausa Nominal*). In structural linguistics, verbs denote action, change, and temporal progression—states of "doing" that are inherently subject to flux. Nominal clauses, by contrast, declare an absolute, immutable state of "being." They do not describe an action to be achieved; they establish an ontological fact.

This mechanism functions as a "Semic anchor" through Roland Barthes's (1974) Semic Code (SMC). Consider three prominent examples from our analyzed corpus: Data 19: *"Seuri aing si kencring kuning"* (My laugh is as beautiful as gold). Data 1: *"Asihan aing asihan semar mesem"* (My charm is the supreme charm of Semar). Data 7: *"Rupa aing cahaya purnama"* (My face is the radiance of the full moon).

At the denotative level, these clauses simply equate the speaker's physical attributes (laugh, charm, face) with highly prized natural or mythical entities (gold, Semar, full moon). At the connotative level, however, the absence of active verbs removes time and effort from the equation. The practitioner does not recite "I am trying to be attractive" or "I hope others find me beautiful." Instead, the nominal structure locks the speaker's identity into a static, predetermined script of absolute desirability. Through Barthesian terms, this structural repetition transforms a linguistic sign into a second-order semiological system—a *myth* of inviolable self-worth (Barthes, 1973; Leone, 2024). The practitioner internalizes an unshakeable belief in their own value, effectively shielded from external doubt.

Table 2. *Denotative sign, connotative level and Barthesian myth*

Denotative sign	Connotative Level	Barthesian Myth
Nominal Clause Structure →	Semic Anchor (Static State) →	Involiable Self-Worth
My laugh is gold	Removal of Temporal Flux	Nominal Stability

This traditional mechanism stands in stark contrast to the modern digital experience, which is structurally engineered around dynamic, verbal volatility. Social media validation is an endless loop of "doing"—posting, refreshing, reacting, and optimizing content to appease opaque algorithms (Weber et al., 2025; Santiago et al., 2025). This relentless pursuit of metric validation exposes users to what scholars identify as "algorithmic anxiety" and severe digital fatigue (Cramarenco et al., 2023; Sheng et al., 2023; Choi & Kim, 2024; Xie et al., 2025).

While the *Asihan* text provides "Nominal Stability" (an internal certainty of *being* valuable), social media interfaces impose a regime of metric dependency (Vanden Abeele, 2021). When self-worth relies on fluctuating likes, shares, and views, the individual ego is left in a state of perpetual vulnerability (Kowalczuk & Musial, 2024; Shekhar & Saurombe, 2026).

The "ideology of three" as a framework for ontological security

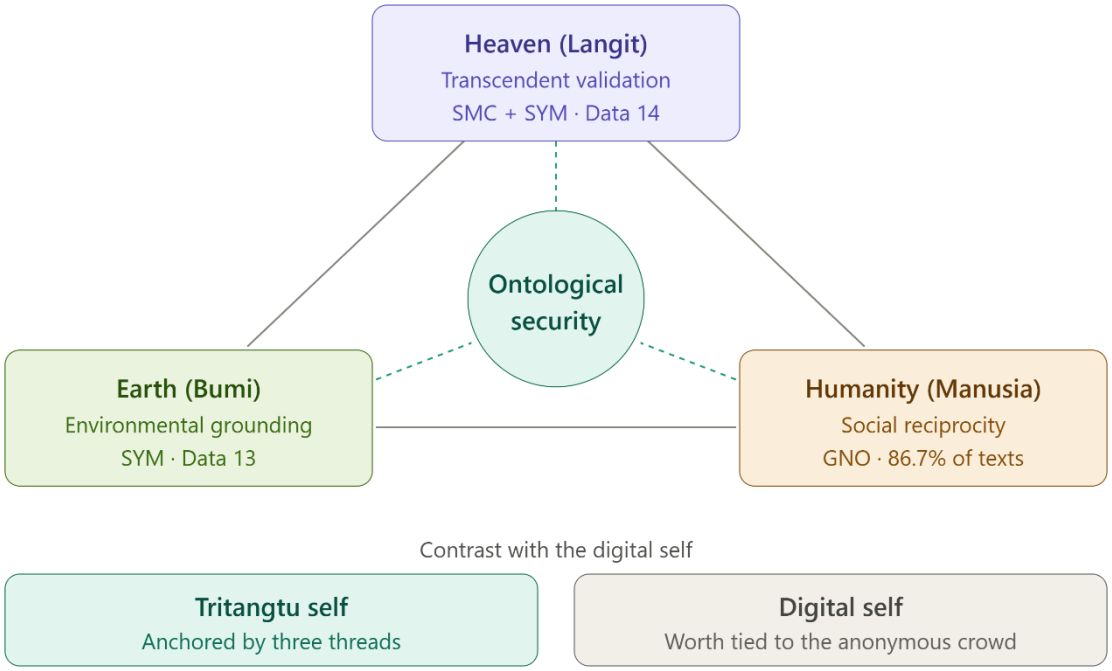


Figure 3. *The "Ideology of Three" (Tritangtu) as a framework for ontological security in Asihan mantras.*

The psychological resilience generated by *Asihan* mantras does not operate in a vacuum. It is deeply anchored in the Sundanese cosmological framework known as the "Ideology of Three" (*Tritangtu*) (Effendi, 2025; Suryalaga, 2009). By deconstructing the corpus across Barthes's five codes, we found that the mantras systematically build a protective shield across three relational axes:

Earth (Bumi): Environmental grounding

The mantras frequently deploy rich natural metaphors to establish physical invulnerability. In Data 13, the text recites: *"Nya tarang lancah mentrangan"* (My forehead is like the blazing sunlight) and *"Nya irung kuwung-kuwungan"* (My nose is a twilight rainbow). Here, the Symbolic Code (SYM) is intensely active. The fragile, perishable human body is discursively merged with majestic, enduring cosmic phenomena. Similar to other Sundanese oral genres—such as traditional proverbs (*paribasa*) and ceremonial wedding chants (*sawer penganten*) that encode ecological ethics (Trisnawati, et.al., 2025; Rohmana, 2023)—the *Asihan* text grounds human identity within the physical environment. By recognizing oneself as an extension of nature, the practitioner gains a sense of environmental grounding that counters the disembodied alienation typical of digital spaces (Sulianta, 2024).

Humanity (manusia): Social reciprocity

Communal empathy in the *Asihan* corpus is not presented as an optional virtue; it is encoded as an unwritten social law. Across 86.7% of the analyzed texts (e.g., Data 3, Data 5, Data 13), the mantras culminate in a direct imperative: *"Mangka welas mangka asih"* (Have mercy and have love). This activates the Gnomic or Cultural Code (GNO), invoking shared ancestral wisdom. The text constructs a circular, reciprocal social agreement (*sira welas sira asih*—if you project love, love will return to you). By commanding mutual affection, the mantra creates a discursive safety net. This will protect the individual ego from communal rejection through interdependent social ties.

Heaven (langit): Transcendent validation

The final axis connects the practitioner to divine and ancestral realms, providing a "Grand Validation" that renders human judgment secondary. Data 14 boldly asserts: *"Nya isun dewatané"* (And I am the divinity itself). Through a synthesis of the Semic (SMC) and Symbolic (SYM) codes, the practitioner elevates their identity to a sacred plane. By aligning the self with the transcendent macrocosm, the fleeting, fickle opinions of the crowd lose their power to inflict emotional distress.

Together, the *Tritangtu* ideology constructs a state of "Ontological Security"—a psychological anchor woven from environmental, social, and spiritual threads. Modern digital users, by contrast, are often treated as isolated individuals trapped in

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a linear ego-validation loop (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Deprived of these broader holistic anchors, their self-worth remains precariously tied to the anonymous, unpredictable digital crowd (Ansloos et al., 2022; Tanta-Quidgeon et al., 2024).

Deriving the "circular empathy ecology" for digital well-being

To bridge ancient linguistic mechanisms with contemporary digital needs, we synthesize our semiotic findings into a new social innovation model: the Circular Empathy Ecology. Rather than treating digital burnout as an individual failure to be managed by personal willpower, this framework reconceptualizes digital interaction through three interconnected pillars, directly derived from our textual analysis:

Table 3. *Circular empathy ecology*

CIRCULAR EMPATHY ECOLOGY		
Anticipatory Empathy	Internalized Validation	Community Resilience
Derived from Gnomic	Derived from Semic	Derived from Tritangtu
Imperative (*mangka welas mangka asih*)	Nominal Anchors (*klausa nominal*)	Macrocosmic Ecology
Preemptive filter before posting content	Decouples self-worth from likes/metrics	Shifts burden from isolated user to systemic interface design

Anticipatory empathy (derived from the Gnomic Code)

In current social media ecosystems, user behavior is largely reactive—driven by algorithmic prompts that reward immediate emotional outbursts (what Barthes classifies under the Proairetic Code of endless action). Our framework disrupts this reactive loop by introducing "Anticipatory Empathy," derived directly from the Gnomic imperative *"mangka welas mangka asih."* Before generating digital content (posting, commenting, or sharing), users are conditioned to reflect on the circular impact of their actions (Weber et al., 2025; McStay & Bakir, 2023). Empathy becomes a preemptive ethical filter, grounded in the cultural understanding that projecting hostility ultimately destabilizes one's own psychological peace.

Internalized validation (derived from semic nominal anchors)

To combat algorithmic anxiety, this pillar operationalizes the function of *Klausa Nominal*. Educational interventions and digital well-being programs should help users construct internal "Semic anchors"—static, foundational beliefs about their personal worth that remain completely independent of online metrics (Kowalczuk & Musial, 2024; Choi & Kim, 2024). Instead of chasing fleeting visibility, users learn to derive existential validation from their tangible connections to their physical environment (Earth) and immediate real-world relationships (Humanity).

Community resilience (derived from tritangtu macrocosmic ecology)

Finally, Circular Empathy Ecology directly challenges Western clinical models that treat the digital user as an "isolated entity" solely responsible for their burnout (Laure et al., 2025; Murari et al., 2026; Ross, 2022). Just as the *Asihan* practitioner drew strength from a broader cosmic web, digital mental health must be recognized as a collective, systemic responsibility (Sam, 2026). This pillar calls on platform designers and policymakers to build digital environments that prioritize meaningful relational connections over competitive, outrage-driven algorithms. The burden of mental health is thus reframed from an individual struggle to a shared community commitment.

By translating traditional ethnopsychological wisdom into modern digital literacy, this framework offers a culturally grounded roadmap for achieving SDG 3 targets. This demonstrates that true psychological resilience rests on relational harmony rather than algorithmic visibility.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Sundanese *Asihan* mantra transcends its conventional classification as an archaic folkloric artifact. It functions as a sophisticated semiotic device engineered to cultivate ontological security and psychological resilience. Through a Barthesian deconstruction of its nominal clause structures (*Klausa Nominal*) and the underlying *Tritangtu* cosmology, our analysis exposes a performative linguistic design (Trisnawati, et.al., 2025) that prioritizes internal "Nominal Stability" over fragmented, external validation. The sharp contrast between this Indigenous stability and the "Algorithmic Volatility" of the digital attention economy

highlights the structural roots of modern algorithmic anxiety. When digital citizens are stripped of internal "Semic anchors" and left to rely on the arbitrary, dynamic metrics of cyberspace, their psychological well-being becomes profoundly precarious (Choi & Kim, 2024).

To address this challenge, our proposed *Circular Empathy Ecology* framework translates ancient ethnopsychological mechanics into a modern ethical filter (Weber et al., 2025). It reaffirms that true digital resilience rests on reciprocal, harmonious relationships among the self, the community, and the broader environment. Bridging the gap between Indigenous wisdom and contemporary digital stress requires a culturally responsive approach to mental health policy. We strongly recommend that curriculum developers and public health authorities integrate the principles of *Circular Empathy Ecology* into digital literacy programs and community mental health interventions (Laure et al., 2025). By shifting the paradigm from individualized, metric-driven validation to collective, relational resilience, educational and policy frameworks can offer a more culturally resonant support system, directly advancing the global targets of UN SDG 3 (United Nations, 2023).

While this study offers valuable theoretical and social innovations, two primary limitations must be acknowledged. First, methodologically, this study analyzed the mantra corpus as a performative linguistic design and semiotic structure. Due to the historical and qualitative nature of the research, we did not empirically measure the direct neurological or cognitive impact of reciting these mantras on modern digital users. Second, the empirical data were drawn from a specific corpus of 15 purposively selected Sundanese *Asihan* mantras from Western Java (Tawami, 2024). While the semiotic principles of nominal stability and relational ecology have broad theoretical relevance, the findings remain contextually tied to Sundanese ethnopsychology and may require translation when applied to different cultural contexts.

To build upon the "Two-Eyed Seeing" model established in this paper, future scholarship should expand in two key directions. First, researchers are encouraged to examine other Indigenous oral traditions—such as Javanese *Jampi* (healing incantations), Sundanese *Rajah* (sacred prologues), or Native American oral chants—to identify parallel semiotic mechanisms of psychological preservation (Sulianta, 2024; Hidayat & Budimansyah, 2017). Second, interdisciplinary teams comprising linguists, digital media scholars, and clinical psychologists should design empirical, mixed-methods studies. Specifically, future work should test the practical efficacy of *Circular Empathy Ecology* training modules in actively reducing algorithmic burnout, social media fatigue, and metric anxiety among young digital natives (Sam, 2026).

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