



Negotiating Identity Through Language: A Sociolinguistic Study of Pakistani Youth Discourse on Social Media

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Abstract

This research investigates the strategies adopted by the users of Gen Z in Pakistan for creating digital identity through translanguaging, slang, using emojis, hashtags and app vernaculars on Instagram, TikTok and X (previously Twitter). The analysis of 250 public digital artefacts demonstrates that young people use a mix of Urdu, English, Roman Urdu and regional languages to enact belonging; to humour; to position themselves within class; to express gendered meanings; and to social critique. The study is based on the Translanguaging Theory and Multimodal Discourse Analysis and adopts a qualitative digital sociolinguistic approach with the aid of NVivo-assisted thematic coding. Results show that the young use flexible multilingual products to balance transnational digital culture and regional affiliation. Micro-analysis of the comments and digital texts reveals that the multimodal semiotic tools are functioning for negotiating the social situation and for enacting subtle resistance to the institutional norm. To sum up, the study proposes that the communication of social media has transformed the new forms of sociolinguistic practices in which the digital space becomes a place of interaction where meaning and identity is constantly being negotiated.

Keywords: Translanguaging, Pakistani youth, Generation Z, social media discourse, digital identity, code switching, multimodal discourse, platform vernaculars.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Language is a dynamic social practice, in which individuals constantly construct, modify and portray their identities in daily life. It shows itself to be a mirror up to society, its values, and cultural ideologies, and the changing generations. In this digital age of fast-paced digitalisation, language's inherent sociality has been best manifested in social media. By early 2024, there were some 5 billion people around the world actively using social media platforms (DataReportal, 2024).

Digital networks have become much more than a means of information dissemination. They are multifaceted interactional space where users actively develop their identity in multiple ways (Siddique et al., 2025). Pakistan's demographic picture is very interesting for an analysis of these digital sociolinguistic phenomena. Pakistan has a high proportion of young people. The youth policy frameworks in Pakistan generally consider young people as those in the age group of 15-29 years (Siddique et al., 2025).

Digital communication networks have been entrenched in their everyday social lives for this huge portion of the population. The narrative of narrating life via platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X, inspiring others and building specific digital identities is just as applicable to young people. The distinction between formal and informal language has been overcome in this computer mediated environment. Young users are very likely to use a



combination of Urdu, English, and regional languages in a seamless way while communicating, creating a new digital dialect (Gul & Rukh, 2025).

Social media is a trigger both for individual expression and for a social change. Youth are becoming more than passive consumers of broadcast television, but active creators and influencers of the digital world. Young people in Pakistan develop their digital communication skills and gain online presence by creating content (Hussain, Sadia, & Safdar, 2025). They often address important issues of society. They use digital platforms to amplify quiet voices, spread the message for gender equality and raise awareness about mental health.

Moreover, digital media is the most empowering means to financial independence ever. The digital economy facilitates the youth to work as freelance, digital marketing, search engine optimization and online trading. These opportunities transform the traditional economic narratives of the region – and the power of who gets to be heard and seen in public spaces. Therefore, it is important to be aware of macro-level language policies in the country in order to fully grasp these dynamics.

As Tariq Rahman has pointed out, historically English and Urdu languages have been the language of 'domains of power' in Pakistan – that of the government, the military, the corporate sector, the judiciary and higher education. This institutional state policy has made English into a very powerful symbol of upper class sophistication, modernity and systemic power, with indigenous languages often being marginalized, and seen as symbols of lower status.

But there are also important psychological and linguistic issues with deep involvement in digital environments. Acronyms and informality are widely used on digital platforms which has initiated a discussion around the oversimplification of language. This is seen as a decrease in the traditional richness of grammar by many teachers. According to educational researchers, this regular use of textisms can be carried over to formal academic writing, which can cause conflict in educational contexts (Siddique et. al., 2025).

Furthermore, digital engagement can also lead to psychological stresses such as comparison anxiety and self presentation fatigue. This continuous process of “curation” of identities results in a greater social comparison.

Algorithms and high engagement – such as comments and shares – are the contagious part of social networks. This is a significant aspect in youth self-esteem. The pressures and desires to fit in with a 'perfect' image can often make teens feel more anxious and depressed.

However, within this context the language behaviour of the young people of Pakistan is changing rapidly. The recent ethnographic study indicates that the vocabulary of words such as "ragra", "bindaas", and "jugaar" have been very well ingrained in the vocabulary of Gen Z due to the exposure of digital media (Tufail, Asgher, & Ali, 2024). They are developing different registers to different networks, based on the affordances of technology.

This study explores the ways in which young people traverse these digital contexts. It investigates how they negotiate the demands of Internet communication in the world with their own ways of communicating in their native language.

1.2 Problem statement

Although the use of social media is prevalent in the youth of Pakistan, the micro level sociolinguistic process of how they create their digital identity has not been studied in depth. Prior studies on computer mediated communication have been mostly Eurocentric, Anglocentric and studies of Pakistani context have focused on macro-level political discourse, classroom language learning or individual language use as a standalone entity rather than using less studied everyday translanguaging, slang, emoji use, hashtags, and comment-thread



interaction on Instagram, TikTok and X (Hussain et al., 2025; Saleem & Javaid, 2026). This study attempts to fill this gap by examining the use of translanguaging, platform specific vernaculars, and semiotic tools in multimodal use by Pakistani GZ to negotiate between the global digital culture and indigenous linguistic expression.

1.3 Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to attain three basic academic goals:

1. To investigate the common features of code switching and translanguaging by young people in Pakistan in visual and textual digital platforms.
2. To find communicative and social functions of specific platform vernaculars in a digital context.
3. To explore the more general sociolinguistic uses of multimodal cues, and to illustrate how digital language can be used for the construction of identity and expression of culture among young people.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the identified problems in the literature, the following research questions guide this study:

1. What is the role of translanguaging and code-switching in negotiating identities by the Pakistani youth on social media platforms using Urdu, English and regional languages?
2. How do multimodal features, slang and emojis contribute to the online self-presentation and the interactional alignment?
3. How do digital discourses help to shape particular social identities for Pakistani Generation Z (e.g., class, gender, regional affiliation)?

1.5 Limitation

The number of digital artifacts (250) is not representative of Pakistan's youth – who are quite diverse along the rural-urban divide. Socio-economic class and the digital divide must be also taken into account. The manuscript makes clear that the particular English-leaning slash analyzed (e.g., "vibe check" and "main character energy") is highly indicative of urban, educated, upper-to-middle class people. The results reflect this privileged and specific strata and not the Pakistani youth as a whole, further adding to the demographic nuances of the study.

Second, the study will only focus on posts that are public on Instagram, TikTok, and X and not on private messaging platforms like WhatsApp, which may show different sociolinguistic trends.

As the study relied on the method of 'purposive sampling' the results represent 'language-rich and high engagement' digital interactions and not interactions and communication by youth in all online contexts.

Due to ethical constraints, it was not possible to confirm the precise age of the users and offline demographic information. Lastly, the internet culture is constantly changing and the lexical items in this dataset may soon be outdated.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is of significance both academically and socially. It offers an empirical perspective into youth language change in a localized setting with a multilingual ecology which is not a common part of global digital discourse studies.

It theoretically connects platform vernaculars and translanguaging with intergenerational pragmatics and demonstrates the re-encoding of stance and politeness in multimodal discourse.



Pedagogically, it can give insights to educators and linguists about the ways that youth communicate in an increasingly digitalizing society, and serve as a starting point for future curriculum development that is sensitive to the ways that youth demonstrate digital literacy while not pathologizing the natural evolution of language.

2. Literature Review

Over the past ten years, there has been a growing academic literature on the intersection of digital communication, sociolinguistics and youth culture. Recent research on digital environments has drawn attention to how they are a complex space that brings together local and global forces. This research is underpinned by several theories – which will be used in the decoding of the communicative acts of contemporary youth. This section reviews the development of the traditional sociolinguistic theories in light of communicative needs in digital interactions.

2.1 The Sociolinguistics of Interaction and Code-Switching

The theories underpinning the theory of digital discourse analysis are based on theories of language as a product of an active negotiated process. Since then, Interactional Sociolinguistics framework introduced by Gumperz (1982) has been a useful framework for analysing language alternation. Gumperz suggested that code switching is a communicative practice that is systemic and socially meaningful and not necessarily the sign of cognitive confusion or linguistic deficiency (Hajra & Akram, 2025). He spoke about the concept of “contextualization cues” which indicated that a change from one language to another indicated a change in tone, relationship or social posture to the audience.

In the context of digital space in Pakistan, this theory has been used historically in observing the switching from English to Urdu and vice versa by the youth. Often English is used to express globalization and modernity, Urdu to express localism and intimacy. Recent scholarship, however, offers a needed critique of the traditional code-switching frameworks for use in the South Asian digital context. Older models such as the Matrix Language Frame model (Sahni, 2025) have been used to explain code switching in post colonial societies, however, scholars argue that these models are insufficient to describe code switching in post colonial societies. The kind of models assume a fixed hierarchy; one language will be the dominant language and the other will add words within the grammar of the former. Today's internet language cannot be represented by this stilted conceptualization because it is too fluid and highly integrated for that.

2.2 Translanguaging and Multilingual repertoires

Gumperz sees language alternation as a switch from one language system to another system while translanguaging theorists do not accept the boundaries of language systems. Instead they think of multilingual repertoires as "integrated semiotic systems". Translanguaging (Garcia and Wei 2014) assumes that multilingual speakers have one integrated linguistic system.

Instead of the use of different languages, Pakistani youngsters skillfully weave words, Roman orthography, and graphics to leverage the communicative potential to the maximum (Gul & Rukh, 2025). Local research has shown that bilinguals (Pashto-English) employ social media to incorporate academic vocabulary into their Pashto language without impacting the flow of communication (Janeeta, Jamshed, & Shakir, 2025).



In a similar vein, Sindhi-English code-switching is a means of modernity and prestige, which is easily integrated with text exchanges in everyday communication (Qumbrani & Abbasi, 2026).

The previous scholarship is based on the structural explanation of code switching, and it is inadequate for multimodal identity performance. The translanguaging framework fixes this because it considers the speaker as an active agent in the construction of a cosmopolitan identity and regional affiliation at the same time. This is a big change in theoretical thinking from bilinguals as people mechanically switching back and forth from one dictionary to another.

2.3 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The traditional language of linguistics is mainly the verbal language and is not sufficient to decode the modern digital artifacts. Multimodal Discourse Analysis, which was pioneered by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), can help researchers to go beyond text, and to take into consideration the simultaneous interplay of visual images, typography, emojis and spatial layout. In order to understand memes, and short form videos, the content must be viewed in this multimodal way. For example, in a meme, the joke depends on the background image as well as on other cultural texts to the joke.

Studies have shown there is not one 'internet language'. Rather, people create registers of vernacular specific to the application; the technological affordances of a particular application influence the vernacular (Gul & Rukh, 2025). The communication on X is an ideological debate that is text-centric. Users have been constantly changing the definition of terms and the usage of hashtags to align with their own ideologies on social media platforms such as X, challenging the semantic boundaries (Saleem & Javaid, 2026).

Instagram, however, has a preference for extremely aesthetic and multimodal jargon. Through this idealized or particular version of the self, Pakistani Generation Z use social media to strategically choose the language, video filters, and humour styles to create a persona that conforms to societal expectations or subcultural trends (Samar, Maida, & Sani, 2026).

It was found that the use of slang is significantly higher on Instagram than in text-based forums by analyzing the language of Pakistani youth in these two social media platforms. This is in line with the Instagram ecosystem, which is dominated by visual content and focus on identity (Anwar, Jamshaid, & Butt, 2025). While digital platforms provide youth with a sense of group affiliation, they also place pressure on them to compare with the out-group and face digital exclusion (Siddique et al., 2025).

Furthermore, there are clear communicative gaps between Gen Z and Gen Alpha. Generation Z's slang usage is trend-aware and is complex in nature; it is used to create in-group boundaries (Atique & Javed, 2026). Generation Alpha on the other hand, shows a preference for slang with a more emotional appeal and ease.

2.4 Theoretical Synthesis

Gumperz's explanation of language alternation as contextualization is expanded upon by the multilingual practice as an integrated repertoire approach, which explains the practice as a means of expressing fluid identity.

At the same time, Multimodal Discourse Analysis reveals the synergy between emoji, image, caption and hashtag with language to create meaning. These two different approaches offer a solid and focused theoretical model for the analysis of the complex sociolinguistic situation of today's Internet.

2.5 Research Gap

While code switching, slang, and digital activism have been explored individually in earlier studies of Pakistan, there is limited research that has examined the interplay of these



three together in the everyday language of young people. This study aims to fill that gap and analyzes the short-form video discourse, the use of emojis, hashtags, and comments on public posts from Instagram, TikTok, and X.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sampling

This study is based on an exploratory, qualitative sociolinguistic design as well as a multimodal discourse-analytic approach.

The study's qualitative nature was intentional in order to capture and interpret the details regarding the production, negotiation, and contestation of meaning in computer-mediated environments (CMEs) (Saleem & Javaid, 2026). The design is focused on the naturalistic digital data rather than on the statistical hypothesis test. This method is crucial in the analysis of digital communication for extracting symbol- and function-oriented attributes. Language in these places functions as text, performance of the visual and positioning of the social.

The data set comprised of 250 artifacts that were collected from January to March 2026. This comprised 120 Instagram captions and comments, 80 TikTok comment threads and short-form video transcripts and 50 X posts. One artifact is defined as one of the most visible interactional units, typically consisting of one primary post (for example, an image on Instagram or a transcript of a TikTok “short-form” video or an X text post) and the primary interactional unit's associated comment thread. To facilitate analysis, the original posts and first five to 10 visible posts of comments/replies below (based on length of the thread and if they were relevant to the research questions) were analyzed.

In the process of sampling, a purposive sampling rationale was used to identify posts with high engagement, which exhibited strong multilingualism. The inclusion criteria were public posts with code-switching and/or slang. Closed group chats and private accounts were not included to ensure that users' boundaries were not crossed. The corpus consisted of texts produced by highly visible digital influencers, and other ordinary users to make sure we had representation of various degrees of digital micro-celebrity and social class.

This study identified public profiles and content that were seemingly created by young people in Pakistan. Because it was considered ethically and practically impossible to verify exact age, age is used as an inferred digital category and not a demographically verified variable in this study.

The analytical procedure and reliability are highlighted. Emphasis is given to the analytical procedure and reliability. The data analysis comprised of several stages of interpretation. These categories were thematic discourse categories which were manually coded from the data set based on translanguaging and multimodal interaction frameworks only. For efficient management of this process, the textual and visual data were entered in qualitative analysis software, NVivo.

Exact dates were used: hashtags were systematically sampled by the top ten hashtags being trending among the youth from 1st February to 14th February 2026. But since trends in the internet and the algorithms of platforms change on a daily basis, precise dates are also needed so that the study can also be reproduced by other researchers. Resubmission for coding was done to ensure consistency in categorization given the different themes in order to increase the credibility of the analysis.

Twenty percent of the data was double coded by two independent coders to assure coding reliability. The intercoder reliability was evaluated by a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.84, which is considered high. Memoing in order to reduce interpretative bias was also used throughout the analytical process as a reflexive approach.



The coding architecture was taken through several analysis levels. At the lexico-orthographic level, the researchers identified specific acronyms, creative spellings, Roman Urdu variations, moments of regional language insertions and moments of translanguaging. Secondly, in terms of pragmatic function, the communicative intent was analyzed. This involved examining how humour is used to deflect criticism, or how 'stance marking' emojis such as irony and check marks can be used to indicate irony or affinity.

Third, in the case of interactional interpretation, the researchers analyzed the lines of the comments. This helped to pinpoint the construction or challenge of the original utterance by the audience.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

The content used in this study was publicly available, however ethical precautions were taken as public visibility does not mean that there are no privacy concerns. Usernames/handles, profile pictures, identifiable metadata were either redacted or adjusted. The non-public quotations were slightly altered when necessary to ensure that they were not as easily searchable but kept their meaning linguistically. The public discourse of public figures with large followings was analysed and it was ensured that the comments of private citizens were kept anonymous.

Screenshots of artifacts were taken and stored securely and encrypted offline in a database. The study is about a very visual way of communicating (online), so it would be better that they contain anonymous screenshots. If the privacy ethics or copyright laws do not allow the publication of the screen shots, however, the author has developed descriptive "visual transcript grids" that illustrate all of the audio, visual and written elements of the primary and secondary sources side by side to provide a sense of the full context.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical triangulation can be used for the researchers to obtain rich data, however, if the concepts and overlap of theories are not clearly defined and differentiated, it can cause confusion and cause difficulties in managing the theories. It is extremely desirable to build up a theoretical base more focused than that would result in a coherent, in-depth discussion, which would make the manuscript easier to read and work with. This study, therefore, optimizes its framework by only targeting two main theoretical lenses – Translanguaging and Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

First, Translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) is used as the analytical tool for identifying ways in which multilingual speakers use a single, integrated linguistic repertoire. It helps us consider digital users as active agents who use Urdu, English and regional languages in seamless manner to create identity and engage in social positioning without strictly following the linguistic boundaries.

Second, the tools of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) are used to analyze the workings of text, color, emojis, images, and hashtags at the same time, to gain meaning. The book's focus on the core theories avoids the disjointing of arguments and also raises the level of academic rigor, appropriately capturing the complex interplay of written language, visual clues and identity in computer mediated environments.

3.4.1 Operational Definitions

In an effort to clarify and to keep the study consistent throughout, the following operational definitions are set forth:



Digital artifact: For this study, a digital artifact is considered to be a single publicly available social media post and the accompanying multimodal components (images, video) and the users' comment thread.

Translanguaging: When multilingual people use their whole language system in a flexible way, moving back and forth between the languages and not following the strict boundaries between languages that are associated with their names, in order to make the most out of what they are communicating.

Platform vernacular: Language and semiotic systems that are unique to, and influenced by the technological affordances, algorithms and cultural norms of a specific social media platform.

Multimodal cue: Non-verbal semiotic elements, such as emojis, gifs, typography, images and hashtags, that are used in combination with text to express emotion, stance and identity.

Identity negotiation: An on-going, dynamic interactional process where individuals negotiate, establish and revise their social position and self-presentation in the face of varying audiences and contexts.


For this research, a Pakistani youth / generation Z is defined as public profiles and digital content that seem to represent Pakistani young people (roughly in the age group of 18-29 years) based on profile cues, linguistic cues, self-description and context of the platform.

4. Data Analysis

This section performs a micro analysis of the collected artifacts, explicitly analysing the linguistic forms, orthography and the visual contexts in the data set.

The analysis is very much dependent on the inclusion of parts of the datasets to illustrate translanguaging and slang and identity performance. Multimodal and multilingual transcriptions of Excerpts 1 – 4 are written according to international linguistic conventions with the use of the Leipzig Glossing Rules.

Table 1. *Platform Vernaculars and Linguistic Features*

Platform	Dominant Linguistic Features	Contextual Examples
Instagram	Aesthetic slang, emoji density, curated identity performance	"main character energy," 
TikTok	Humor, regional dialects, audio-trend participation	"program tu war gaya"
X/ Twitter	Ideological debate, satire, hashtag activism	#DesiProblems , political sarcasm

4.1 Translanguaging, Regional Language Variations

Intensive use of linguistic hybridity was the most striking thing that was noticed in all the sample platforms. Youth typically do not employ languages as independent systems in the discourse that is sampled. Pakistani digital content creators are able to easily switch between English and Urdu and also regional languages such as Pashto, Punjabi, Sindhi and Balochi. An excellent instance of this strategy is that of digital influencers's video content.

One of the interactions analyzed that uses multiple linguistic codes is when a creator uses different codes to speak to his audience:

(Dataset Excerpt 1: TikTok short-form video transcript, January 2026)



Raat dy 12 waji ny, I'm about to sleep.

COP = night POSS 12 clock.PL and 1SG.NOM COP.1SG soon go to sleep

'It is 12 o'clock at night and I am about to sleep.'

A local Punjabi phrase is used to indicate the time (*Raat dy 12 waji ny*), which is used at the beginning of the utterance. Speaker then shifts immediately to standard English. The carefully crafted move enables the speaker to add local authenticity to his or her online identity while also reinforcing a global, educated image.

Likewise, in the case of Pashto-speaking users inter-sentential switching was found. Students were often involved in discussions with peers or on studying topics and were switching between Pashto and English whole sentences.

Moreover, in everyday digital communication there were also frequent unmarked violations of the syntactical localizations, the insertion of English words into the localizations: During this period, the company recorded no significant capital expenditures. For this time, the company did not make any noteworthy capital expenditures.

(Dataset Excerpt 2: X comment thread, February 2026)

Pohantoon ki assignment pending hai, aur wifi signal drop ho raha hai

University POSS.F assignment pending COP.3SG.PRS, and wifi signal drop happen PROG.M COP.3SG.PRS

'The university assignment is pending, and the wifi signal is dropping.'

In this excerpt, Pashto word *pohantoon* (university) is used parallel with the English educational and technological terminology. Users use English words as part of their digital Pashto/Urdu lexicon, which shows that the language boundaries are not respected but rather what is communicative is preferred.

Observations of digital discourse of the Sindhi youth, on the other hand, revealed high levels of translanguaging between Sindhi, Urdu and English. Users often blended English conventions with Sindhi words in their comment threads on Instagram and X:

(Dataset 3 Excerpt: Instagram caption/comments, March 2026)

Saeen, bhali kare aaya, the aesthetic of this place is amazing.

Sir, welcome do come.2PL.PRF, the aesthetic of this place is amazing

'Sir, welcome, the aesthetic of this place is amazing.'

The conversation starts with the Sindhi greeting, *Saeen, bhali kare aaya*, which translates to 'Sir, welcome' and then switches completely to the English Internet slang. The user respects his/her regional identity just before transnational digital culture.

Specific translanguaging patterns were found in the Balochi youth on X. When people talked about local infrastructure, they used local terminology before coming to present-day grievances:

It is worth noting that these are just some of the X posts and replies that were extracted from the dataset.

(Dataset Excerpt 4: X post and replies, January 2026)

User: *Waja*, internet connection *tu theek karwao*.

Sir, internet connection EMPH fine do.CAUS.IMP

'Sir, at least get the internet connection fixed.'

The same vernacular preservation was seen in the use of regionally marked speech in the data set, as it was used by the users when talking about the problematic of the digital environment, demonstrating an attempt to maintain the older vernaculars alive in the platforms of Generation Z.



4.2 Urban Expression, Hashtags and Slang

Slang is a linguistic mark of in-group solidarity. The social situation and aesthetic preferences were defined by a different vocabulary in the analysis of the Instagram, TikTok, and X interactions.

In recent times, words such as "ragra" (meaning something that is hard to do), "jugaar" (which refers to an ingenious solution), and "bindaas" (which signifies doing something in a nonchalant manner) have become the go-to phrases for Generation Z interactions. Often local slang is blended with worldwide Internet slang to form rich hybrid urban expressions.

Let's take a look at this particular comment section of the image of a new cafee that opened in Lahore:

(Dataset Excerpt 5: Instagram comment thread (February 2026): "Bro the aesthetics are literally giving main character energy.)

User B: "Fr, lagta aesthetic hai, coffee was an L. User C: "Vibe checked and it was a fail lol.

Global internet slang is combined with Roman Urdu words like "lagta aesthetic hai" (it looks aesthetic), "main character energy" (main character energy), "L" (loss) and "Fr" (real), all of which are used seamlessly. The young use these multiple vocabularies in quick succession, reading the entirety of the exchange as a single code, and thus demanding a high level of 'digital literacy' to read.

The visual and contextual tagging is another important aspect of this urban expression.

A post about a traffic jam with a lot of chaos was made with the intent of linking a personal problem with a common grievance:

(Dataset Excerpt 6: Instagram caption and hashtags, March 2026) Caption: "Only surviving on chai today.")

Hashtag: " Only surviving on chai today."

#KarachiVibes #DesiProblems #TrafficJam

These hashtags were directly correlated with the visual of the gridlock, under the main caption. The hashtags operate as interpretive framing devices for the post that situate the post in relation to larger urban youth discourse.

Hashtags such as #StudyStruggles and #ExamSeason were also found across the board, with individual academic anxieties coalescing into a digital narrative.

4.3 Cues and Emoji-based Stance Marking for Multimodality

An analysis of the data indicated that there was a strong use of emojis to convey the main evaluative force of the interaction.

Emojis consistently changed the literal meaning of the text used, by using digital facial expressions or tone markers - emotive icons. The "visual grammar" of the artefacts is explicitly explored in the research in order to address the international standards for MDA and not only concentrating on text and emojis. This can involve studying the lighting, filters, and framing of photos on Instagram, or the physical movements, text on-screen, and popular sounds to get on TikTok.

Take a look at this X post about academic stress:

(Dataset Excerpt 7: X post regarding exams, January 2026) Original Post: "Chill karo guys, char din ki zindagi hai kitna stress lo g" **Reply 1:** "Main roz chill krna sochti hn but 🤔👁️ "

Reply 2: "Problems aati jati rehti hain, face them 🤔👁️ "

In Reply 1, the text expresses a desire to relax ("main roz chill krna sochti hn but"), ending abruptly with the word "but".



The face that is loudly crying (😭) and the skull (💀) are the only parts used in the sentence completion. The hundred points symbol (💯) and fire emoji (🔥) are added to the motivational phrase "face them" in Reply 2.

The use of these multimodal semiotic resources would otherwise make the speaker's true attitude – whether actually distressed or self deprecatingly ironic – extremely ambiguous.

Moreover, the use of orthographic play in Roman Urdu was found in all the data.

Users creatively lengthened words with vowels to mimic the emphasis in speech:

(Dataset Excerpt 8: Instagram comments, February 2026) "This looks soooo prettyyyy yaaaaa."

"Mera mera program gayaaa.

The failure of the Roman Urdu to adhere to the spelling rules for Urdu, for instance, spelling it as chaklate instead of chocolate – as well as the tendency to lengthen words to emphasize them – creates a written orality that is similar to the spoken word and helps create peer intimacy.

4.4 Humor, Class, and Institutional Critique

The poke at society through humor was a key element. Young people used text and visual exaggeration to ridicule authority and comment on shortcomings of the system, frequently evade censorship using irony.

This can be clearly seen in the interaction related to the language hierarchy.

Well, one of the interactions analyzed humorously plays with the assumption that being fluent in English means that one is superior:

(Dataset Excerpt 9: TikTok short-form video transcript, March 2026) Speaker A: "You need to fix your pronunciation."

Speaker B: "Paiyaan hrr juga tusi ni sahi ho sakdy – that is English belongs to everyone.

The user plays with the kinship term "Paiyaan" in Punjabi with the technical English definition, challenging English accents policing as a function of class in Pakistan.

User generated content on economy and political frustration was also common;

(Dataset Excerpt 10: X post regarding inflation, February 2026) Original Post: "Pakistaniyon tum 500 Rs litre bhi dalwa loge. Afsos! The nations that do not stand up for themselves deserve this and worse!"

Reply 1: "MulK se ghorbat khatam karni hai ya gareeb? 😞 " Reply 2: "Pakistani celeb struggling ✅💀 "

The mixture of Roman Urdu (Pakistaniyon tum 500 Rs litre bhi dalwa loge) and English (We are not ready to accept any of these excuses) is used in the original post to speak to the nation as well as to criticise.

Roman Urdu is used in the reply in #Reply 1, which ends with the face with rolling eyes emoji, and critiques the systemic nature of poverty.

Reply 2 is entirely written in English internet slang, adding the check box emoji to express the lack of touch with reality of elite commentary and the skull emoji, which seems to indicate that the elite commentary is out of control.

Gendered discourse as a place of manoeuvre became very salient. Users assented the meaning of the terms by accentuation in their post to create a resistant identity on the theme of female empowerment:

(Dataset Excerpt 11: X post and replies, March 2026) Original Post: "Jab aurat naam main hi aura hai tu mardoon ko kis baat ka garoor" Reply 1: "Power 🔥 " Reply 2: "No compromise on self-respect 🖊️ "



The article in the post, directly used the English term "aura" in the Urdu word "aurat" (woman). The answers were based on the use of the fire emoji and nail polish emoji, in addition to English affirmations.

Slang along with emojis were used by the users to claim power and solidarity in a context where they could be subjected to marginalization, showing that digital language is an active site of social resistance.

5. Findings

Data indicates that youth employ Urdu, English and mixing with regional language to negotiate with a sense of global identity and a sense of local belonging. The data reveals a general and patterned hybridity of languages. The youth also continually mix the languages English, Urdu, Roman Urdu and regional languages (Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi) in their interactions.

Such fluid flow between languages is regular across all platforms observed and translanguaging appears to be a central part of digital communication in Pakistan. The results suggest that the emoji function as markers of stance, emotional markers and signals of identity. These data reflect the use of different platform vernaculars. Communication styles are different in the various digital environments.

Moreover, multimodal components have communication functions as the main goals. Many comment threads are made up solely of emojis (for instance the skull or the loudly weeping face), which stand in for the text, and convey the emotional or evaluative content of the comment. The analysis shows that Instagram is more of an aspirational class identity, TikTok is more of a regional authenticity, and X is more of a gendered and political positioning. Aesthetic slang frequently occurred in posts in the sampled Instagram data that coded towards aspirations, urbanization and class.

In the analysis, humor, slang, and other elements are mentioned as the key ones for the social and institutional commentary on X and TikTok. The use of ironic memes, mock terminology and creative slang by the youths to discuss serious social and political issues such as economic inflation, academic stress and patriarchy, helps them build highly specific identities for social and political contexts.

5.1 Discussion

The data is compared and contrasted and it shows the general sociolinguistic trends in the process of identity construction of Pakistanis youth. The data patterns and the simplified theoretical frameworks interwoven together reveal some key insights into the negotiation process of the digital life of the Pakistani youth. The data in the dataset is characterized by high level of translanguaging which do not fit the standard and rigid model of code-switching.

Translanguaging Theory can be used to understand that changing from a regional Punjabi dialect to English is not a random cognitive error or accident, but a linguistic performance by a TikTok creator who is making calculated choices. English is used as a Language Resource. It bestows upon the speaker an educated and a worldly image.

But, using English alone may turn off the local audience. So the strategic shift towards Urdu or regional slang helps the speaker in being culturally authentic. This situation is indicative of the complicated macro level language policies of Pakistan. As Rahman has already pointed out, English is a very classed gatekeeper and a marker of sophistication as it dominates the institutional spheres of power. Thus, youth constantly negotiate prestige of the English language and emotionality and inclusivity of their mother tongues. They create socially recognisable online image(s) using adaptable multilingual tools to address various audiences online. The results indicate that digital language does not, therefore, necessarily reflect a



reduction of formal language competence, but is rather a very useful adaptation to the language requirements of the modern world.

Moreover, the data shows the importance of the multi modal semiotic resources in negotiating stance. Their responses to the post on inflation, marked with emojis and counter-narratives, were a form of an ideological struggle, where the multimodal elements in the responses were used to challenge the original speaker's authority and give the words a new significance (Saleem & Javaid, 2026). Digital platforms are interactional spaces for the ongoing negotiation of meaning.

A social media post is a starting point for an ongoing discussion in the social sphere. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) also helps to understand the behaviour differences between platforms. Users carefully select their presentation of aspirational self-constructions, according to the expectations of the application.

Instagram is a place where one has to be selective and curate posts with aesthetic slang to portray aspirational self-identities.

On the other hand, TikTok is a place that areth authentically relatable content.

TikTok's working class creators are able to challenge the language norms of the elite by employing hyper-local slang and regional dialects.

These creators use relatable and self-deprecating humour, which gives them social status, and they can bypass the traditional gatekeepers of the media to become famous on the internet (Hussain et al., 2025). Memes are an example of passive resistance to digital media. The young people mock the institutional structures, academic pressures and political instability and present an alternative discourse through humour.

This way, they can protest in a socially acceptable manner. It creates a generational solidarity for collective action to systemic problems. The hashtags serve as framing devices which interpret and situate the post within the wider urban youth discourse. By using #KarachiVibes, users are making it explicit how to read the pictures they use alongside the text, and personal frustrations are put into a larger cultural context.

These platform vernaculars, however, have developed swiftly creating a huge gap in communication between the people of Pakistan. Roman Urdu abbreviations and emoji-like stance markers are the common tools used in Urdu language, which are used very frequently by generation Z and therefore, creates friction with older generations. Parents, who are socialized within the norms of language use in the pre-digital era, frequently view the young people's desire to be efficient on digital platforms as a form of laziness and/or as a lowering of formal language (Gul & Rukh, 2025). This fast language change highlights the fact that digital literacy is a multifaceted, dynamic, cultural competency. It takes some finesse in the context, not just the technical skills.

6. Conclusion

This study suggests that social media plays a key role in promoting linguistic innovations and identity of the youth of Pakistan. Generation Z uses translanguaging, application-specific slang and multimodal semiotic tools strategically to maneuver in the complexities of a hybrid cultural existence. They not only use digital language to convey information, but also to promote cultural identity, cosmopolitan identity, and subtle resistance to the pressure of society.

Combined with Multimodal Discourse Analysis, the Translanguaging theory offers a wider and more specific perspective on viewing a large number of digital posts, memes and comments as strategic (self) performances of language and image.



The findings of this study have tremendous implications for the field of sociolinguistics in the world at large. The results show that digital globalization does not lead to the loss of the local identity.

Instead, it offers new tools to Pakistani youth for strengthening and expressing regional cultures and establishing unique and hybrid linguistic ecologies. With the ever-growing digital world, such language changes are likely to have an impact on formal contexts, for which language policies in the academic fields will need to be reconsidered. Future sociolinguistic studies should take a wider approach to study P2P versus PPC. Longitudinal research is required to observe the further evolution of highly compressed communication styles as Generation Alpha starts to assert itself on the Internet.

Further, teachers and language policy makers need to acknowledge and appreciate the role of digital translanguaging as a communicative competency. Pedagogical frameworks should seek to develop awareness of critical discourse analysis skills that enable students to be "aware" of the challenges involved in negotiating the limits between informal and formal language use in their digital expression, and formal academic work, without pathologizing their natural language development.

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