ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

DIGITAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: A STUDY OF LANGUAGE USE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract
This study examines the ways in which digital language practices shape identity construction among Pakistani university students on social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. Using a qualitative design complemented by selective quantitative observations, the analysis draws on 200 social media posts and 20 semi-structured interviews. The results indicate that students' online communication tends to be informal, hybrid, and multimodal, as reflected in frequent abbreviations, emojis, and non-standard spellings. Code-switching between Urdu and English, together with the prevalent use of Roman Urdu, appears as a central pattern, which participants associate with convenience, platform-specific affordances, and the social meanings attached to particular choices. Grounded in Acts of Identity Theory, Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, and scholarship on language ideology, the study argues that these linguistic choices operate as strategic resources through which speakers manage how they are perceived. Students alternate between languages to index different, sometimes overlapping identities such as being modern, professionally oriented, or culturally anchored depending on audience and situational demands. Overall, the findings suggest that digital environments constitute active sites of identity negotiation, shaped by the interplay of global currents and local sociocultural norms, and they contribute to ongoing discussions of language use in multilingual digital settings. The research also indicates that the social media is an active place of language innovation and identity negotiation in modern Pakistan.

Keywords:
Digital sociolinguistics, identity construction, code-switching, Roman Urdu, multilingualism, Pakistan

1.1 Introduction

The blistering development of digital communication technologies has radically changed how language is being employed and identities are being formed. Social networking sites like WhatsApp, Facebook and X (previously known as Twitter) have become focal points of communication especially among students in universities. Through these platforms people are able to communicate directly in real time regardless of geographical and social boundaries creating new modes of linguistic creativity and flexibility.

In multilingual communities such as Pakistan, where Urdu and English, and other local languages are used, the digital form of communication has enhanced linguistic hybridity. Code-switching, code-mixing and transliteration are commonly practiced by users and the result of such practices is a hybrid form, e.g., Roman Urdu. Such practices do not only represent efficiency in communication, but also, underlying social meanings, which refer to identity, power, and belonging.

Digital sociolinguistics is an emerging discipline that considers language practices in the online space and the ways they are mediated between the social processes at large. Blommaert (2010) says that globalization and digitalization have eventually resulted in the creation of polycentric linguistic norms, meaning that there is a variety of standards present. Under these

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CJSSR
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circumstances, language is a malleable tool which men employ strategically so that they can place themselves in social ranks.

This paper set out to discuss the social media language use by students in Pakistani universities and how the practice can be used to formulate identities. Combining theoretical insights with empirical evidence, the study gives a detailed insight into digital language use in a modern sociolinguistic environment.

1. Problem Statement

Although social media is widely used by the Pakistani youth, there is a paucity of empirical research exploring how the digital language practices construct identity, and how the practices reveal language ideologies. The growing usage of hybrid forms like Roman Urdu and code-switching provokes the significant questions of linguistic norms, authenticity and social positioning.

The current research has mostly been descriptive of the language mixing but not in-depth evaluation as to how linguistic practices and identity are related. This paper will fill this gap by offering a theory-based analysis of online interaction between students in a university.

Additionally, the process of a swift normalization of hybrid modes of digital language use among university students is an issue to worry over due to the nature of the boundaries between formal and informal language use. Since the students use code-switching and Roman Urdu more and more in their daily communication, the question arises about how it affects academic writing and linguistic competence, as well as conventional language norms. Although other scholars consider such practices as innovative and adaptive, others claim that it can cause the decline in traditional literacy standards. Nevertheless, it lacks empirically verifiable evidence in the Pakistani context whether the changes are evidence of linguistic decline or evolution. Thus, the systematic study is required to comprehend how the digital language practices do not only affect identity construction but also affect sociolinguistic trends in general and educational outcomes in particular.

2. Research Questions

1. What is the nature and frequency of code-switching and Roman Urdu in online communication?
2. Which are the prevalent linguistic characteristics of social media interaction in Pakistani university students?
3. How does language use help in construction of identity?

3. Research Objectives

1. To examine linguistic attributes in communication in the social media among university students.
2. To explore the code-switching patterns, Roman Urdu, and multimodal components.
3. To investigate how language use helps in identity construction.

4. Significance of the Study

This paper is also relevant to the area of digital sociolinguistics as it presents empirical results of a South Asian situation. It provides information about the change of language and its hybridization and construction of identity in the digital realm. The results have implications on the educational field, policymakers, and researchers in the field of language use, digital literacy, and sociolinguistic processes.

Moreover, the given study has some valuable pedagogical outcomes as it points out the disjunction between the digital language practices of the students and their academic language expectations. Since university students are increasingly getting involved in hybrid language practices, including code-switching and Roman Urdu, the teacher should rethink the

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conventional methods of teaching a language, which tend to value strict rules over communicative competence. Through an awareness of the ways students are using language so convincingly in the online environment, teachers can formulate more accommodating and context-sensitive instructional methods that close the gap existing between academic and colloquial language usage. This can eventually lead to better language awareness and skills in communication both in the educational and professional field.

Besides, the research is also relevant to the current debates concerning the standardization of language and linguistic change within the context of globalization. It offers empiric data to demonstrate that digital language is not inferior or lower, rather, it is a developing and a valid method of communication. With the analysis of the global factors (e.g. English) and the local language identities (e.g. Urdu), the study is quite insightful to the policymakers and linguists interested in language planning, maintenance, and novelty in multilingual countries such as Pakistan.

5. Literature Review

The digital communication has dramatically changed language practices that have created new forms of interaction which are informal, hybrid and multimedia. According to scholars like David Crystal (2011) this is the move towards Internet linguistics whereby users are inventive in manipulating language with abbreviations, non-standard spelling and flexible grammatic structures. Such characteristics are particularly evident in social media settings, where speed, accessibility, and the involvement of the audience influence the forms of communication.

Likewise, Carmen Lee (2017) notes that digital communication is multimodal in nature and involves combining textual and visual and symbolic materials including emojis, images, and hashtags. This multimodality broadens the process of meaning-making and breaks the established linguistic limits, where the users would be able to depict emotions, attitudes, and identities in a more active and dynamic way.

Regarding online communication, Susan Herring (2004) proposed the Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) framework used to analyze linguistic and interactional aspects of the digital communication. CMDA emphasizes the influences of online communication through the audience, platform affordances, and purpose of communicative interaction and is especially helpful when examining social media language.

In addition, Androutsopoulos (2015) believes that social media allows the user to get involved in linguistic stylization, in which language is tactically employed to shape and enact identities. This especially applies to the multilingual setting, where people use different linguistic repertoires to negotiate social identity and differentiation.

The Pakistani context has been recorded in earlier researches in which the use of code-switching between Urdu and English has been reported to be widespread and the use of Roman Urdu in online communication has become more popular. The trends are indicative of more general sociolinguistic trends under the impact of globalization, education, and the youth culture. Nonetheless, majority of the current literature is descriptive in nature and not well theorized to establish the relationship between linguistic practices and identity formation and language ideology. This research fills this gap by presenting a theory-based discussion of the digital language use among Pakistani university students.

7. Theoretical Framework

The work is based on a unified theoretical foundation that fuses the knowledge of digital sociolinguistics, Acts of Identity Theory, Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), and language ideology in explaining how linguistic practices in the digital environment help in identity construction.

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
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To begin with, according to Blommaert (2010), digital sociolinguistics offers a macro-level view of the processes of globalization and digital media redefining the use of languages. Blommaert believes that modern communication exists in the context of polycentric norms, in accordance with which several linguistic norms coexist. Here, Pakistani students are relating to both the global (English) and local (Urdu) language assets, and they are forming hybrid forms, which reflect their location in the global and local social frameworks.

Secondly, the research is based on the theory of Acts of Identity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985) which holds that people employ language as an instrument of identity projection and negotiation. This theory states that all linguistic decisions are conscious or subconscious actions of speakers which allow them to identify with specific social groups. This can be seen in the digital communication through the tactical use of code-switching, Roman Urdu and the use of stylistic variation to enact identities like modern, educated, or rooted in culture.

Thirdly, the methodological and analytical tools contributing to studying the online interaction are Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (Herring, 2004). CMDA pays attention to the structural properties of language (syntax and vocabulary) and to interactional processes (audience design and turn-taking) that will allow analyzing the digital discourse in a comprehensive manner.

Lastly, one can interpret language ideology (Woolard, 1998) as a construct that is used to comprehend the beliefs and attitudes which influence the use of the language. English is widely equated with prestige, education and upward mobility whereas Urdu is equated to cultural identity and expression of emotions in a Pakistani setting. These ideologies affect the selection and mix of languages by the students in digital communication.

The combination of these theoretical lenses offers a solid approach to studying how language becomes a tool of identity creation in a social media setting, which enables this research to evolve into a more profound descriptive analysis and a more theoretically-based interpretation of the digital linguistic practices.

8. Research Methodology

8.1 Research Design

The present study employs a qualitative research design, supplemented by limited quantitative components, to investigate digital language practices and processes of identity construction among Pakistani university students. A qualitative orientation is warranted because it enables detailed examination of naturally occurring linguistic behaviour and the social meanings participants attach to language use in online settings. The study is descriptive and exploratory in nature, with attention directed to everyday communication on social media platforms rather than to controlled or experimental conditions. To provide modest empirical grounding and to strengthen the credibility of the analysis, basic quantitative indicators are included, such as frequency counts of selected linguistic features (e.g., code-switching, Roman Urdu, and emoji use). The research is situated within an interpretive framework, with the aim of clarifying how language operates as a resource for identity construction in digital environments.

Research Methods

Data collection relied on digital text sampling and semi-structured interviews. The corpus comprises 200 social media posts and chat excerpts drawn from commonly used platforms, including WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook; materials include private messages, captions, and comment threads. In addition, 20 university students were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling to participate in interviews. Interviews were conducted bilingually (Urdu and English) to support participant comfort and to facilitate more elaborated responses. Data were analysed through thematic analysis, informed by principles of Computer-Mediated

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CJSSR
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Discourse Analysis (CMDA), with analytic attention given to code-switching, Roman Urdu, abbreviations, and multimodal resources. Ethical safeguards were observed across the study, including informed consent procedures, protection of participant anonymity, and the omission of sensitive content.

8.2 Data Collection

Data for the present study were obtained through digital text sampling and semi-structured interviews, with the aim of developing a detailed account of language practices among Pakistani university students in online settings. The dataset comprised 500 social media posts and chat excerpts collected from commonly used platforms, namely WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. Collection targeted naturally occurring exchanges, including private messages, group discussions, captions, and comment threads. Purposive sampling was used to identify active social media users across a range of academic disciplines, and 20 university students (undergraduate and postgraduate) were additionally recruited via convenience sampling to participate in interviews.

To complement the textual corpus, bilingual (Urdu–English) semi-structured interviews of approximately 10-15 minutes were conducted to elicit participants' reflections on code-switching, the use of Roman Urdu, language preferences, and the relationship between language choices and identity expression. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Ethical safeguards were observed by anonymizing participants through pseudonyms and omitting sensitive material. The resulting data were then systematically organized and coded by platform and interaction type, alongside salient linguistic features (e.g., code-switching, multimodality, and non-standard forms), in order to support fine-grained analysis.

9. **Data Analysis.**

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the linguistic practices evident in Pakistani university students' social media interactions. Findings are organized thematically in relation to the research questions and interpreted through an integrated framework drawing on digital sociolinguistics, Acts of Identity Theory (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985), Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (Herring, 2004), and language ideology (Woolard, 1998). The analysis draws on a corpus of 500 social media posts and 20 semi-structured interviews collected from WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook.

Dominant Linguistic Features of Social Media Communication

The data suggest that students' digital communication is characterized by informal style, hybridized forms, and multimodal meaning-making, features widely documented in digitally mediated sociolinguistic contexts. A notable proportion of the posts (approximately 72%) included non-standard forms, such as abbreviations (e.g., "u" for you; "btw" for by the way), phonetic spellings ("kya kr rha ho"), and the reduction or omission of grammatical markers.

From a CMDA perspective, these tendencies can be related to platform affordances and interactional norms, including rapid production, constraints linked to message length, and expectations of immediacy. Accordingly, language use in these spaces reflects not only speakers' linguistic knowledge but also conventions and constraints specific to particular platforms. WhatsApp interactions, for instance, were typically more conversational and informal, whereas Instagram captions more frequently involved stylized and curated linguistic choices.

Multimodality also emerged as a prominent feature: participants regularly combined text with emojis, GIFs, and images. Emojis such as 😂, ❤️, and 😭 were employed to index affect, replace lexical material, or calibrate interpretation, aligning with digital sociolinguistic

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

accounts that treat meaning as distributed across multiple semiotic resources rather than confined to alphabetic text.

These patterns are better understood as functional rather than incidental. They operate as resources for signaling identity. Consistent with Acts of Identity Theory, users select linguistic forms that position them in relation to particular groups, stances, or social expectations. Informal digital styles may index youth affiliation, familiarity with platform norms, and in-group membership, while more formal registers in other contexts can mark professional or academic positioning.

8.2 Code-Switching and the Use of Roman Urdu

A key finding is the high frequency of code-switching between Urdu and English, alongside the widespread use of Roman Urdu. Approximately 85% of posts displayed some degree of code-switching, indicating that bilingual repertoires are central to digital interaction in this cohort.

Switching occurred both within and across sentences. Illustrative examples include:

"Kal assignment submit karna hai, so I need to finish it today."

"Yeh lecture bohat boring tha, literally couldn't focus."

From the perspective of **digital sociolinguistics,** such mixed practices reflect the elasticity of repertoires within a globalized and platformed media ecology. English is often associated with education, modernity, and translocal connectivity, whereas Urdu more readily indexes cultural affiliation and local belonging. Their combination enables users to move across social meanings and alignments within a single interaction. Roman Urdu merits focused discussion. Interviewees reported preferring it because it is faster to type, aligns with common devices and interfaces, and is widely legible in online exchanges. One participant remarked:

"Typing Urdu in Urdu script takes too much time, so we just use Roman Urdu because everyone understands it."

In **CMDA** terms, Roman Urdu may be understood as an accommodation to technological conditions, where users adapt linguistic form to available tools. At the same time, the practice also carries sociolinguistic significance that exceeds considerations of efficiency.

In line with Acts of Identity Theory, Roman Urdu can be read as part of an identity performance associated with contemporary Pakistani youth culture, where local affiliation is articulated through semiotic practices shaped by global digital environments. It may index both innovation and a pragmatically oriented approach to online communication.

Language ideology further organizes these patterns. Participants frequently described English as "prestigious," linking it to intelligence and success, while framing Urdu as more "emotional" or "informal." Such beliefs help structure when and how different codes are selected; English was often preferred in academic or professional contexts, whereas Urdu was commonly used in personal interaction or affectively marked exchanges.

8.3 Language and Identity Construction in Digital Spaces

The findings indicate that social media language functions as a major resource for identity construction. Students mobilize available linguistic and semiotic resources to present themselves in ways aligned with the identities they seek to claim in specific contexts.

Within an **Acts of Identity framework,** linguistic choices can be treated as strategic alignments with particular social meanings. For example:

English in Instagram captions may index modernity, sophistication, or a global orientation.

Urdu or Roman Urdu in private chats may index cultural authenticity and interpersonal intimacy. Alternation between Urdu and English may index a hybrid positioning that brings local and translocal dimensions into the same interaction.

Participants also reported adjusting language in relation to audience. One participant stated:

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
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"On LinkedIn, I only use proper English, but on WhatsApp with friends, it's mostly Urdu or mixed."

This observation aligns with CMDA's emphasis on audience design, whereby language is tailored to perceived norms and expectations within different communicative settings. Social media platforms constitute layered interactional environments that enable users to enact different identity positions for distinct audiences.

In addition, stylistic resources such as hashtags (#universitylife, #blessed), emojis, and aesthetically oriented phrasing contribute to self-presentation. Rather than functioning as mere embellishment, these features are more appropriately treated as semiotic resources that support stance-taking and social positioning.

From a digital sociolinguistic perspective, identity is not assumed to be fixed; instead, it is understood as emergent, negotiated, and shaped through repeated interaction over time. Social media provides a setting in which users can experiment with such performances while receiving relatively immediate feedback.

8.4 Language Ideologies in Digital Communication

The analysis also suggests that linguistic behavior is shaped by language ideologies, visible in participants' evaluations of particular languages and the social meanings they attribute to them. A salient ideology concerns English as a marker of prestige, education, and upward mobility. Many participants reported feeling more confident or "professional" when using English, particularly in public-facing or formal contexts. This aligns with broader language hierarchies in Pakistan, where English is often linked to socioeconomic advantage and access to institutional opportunities.

Urdu, by contrast, was more often associated with cultural belonging, affective expression, and national identity. Participants described Urdu as comfortable and authentic for informal exchange, although some also judged it less suitable for professional communication, reflecting an ideologically structured hierarchy between codes.

Roman Urdu adds complexity to this ideological field. Although it is widely used in everyday online interaction, it is sometimes evaluated as "non-standard" or "incorrect," particularly by older speakers. Despite these evaluations, younger users continue to adopt Roman Urdu as both a practical and expressive option.

In Woolard's terms, such ideologies are not neutral descriptions of language. They are historically and socially produced and shape what is treated as appropriate, legitimate, or valued language use. The coexistence of multiple, at times competing, ideologies yields a complex normative environment in which users continually manage expectations.

8.5 Integration of Theory and Findings

Considering the theoretical perspectives in combination helps clarify the patterns observed. Digital sociolinguistics situates these practices within an ecology shaped by globalization and platform-mediated communication. Acts of Identity Theory explains how individuals draw on linguistic resources to construct and renegotiate identity. CMDA supports attention to interactional organization and formal properties of digital discourse, while language ideology highlights the belief systems that condition evaluation and code choice.

Together, these approaches suggest that digital communication is not reducible to instrumental concerns. It is a social and symbolic practice in which language is a key resource for managing relationships, navigating social meanings, and performing identity in mediated contexts.

8.6 Summary of Key Findings

In summary, the analysis suggests that:

Digital communication is characterized by informality, hybrid language practices, and multimodality.

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

Code-switching and Roman Urdu are pervasive in online interaction.
Language use is central to identity work and self-presentation. Language ideologies shape both the distribution of codes and about their appropriateness.
Overall, these findings highlight the complexity and dynamism of Pakistani university students' digital sociolinguistic practices and underscore the value of theory-informed analysis for understanding language use in online environments.

Conclusion

To sum up, the paper has shown that online communication between Pakistani university students is a multi-level and socially significant language practice that goes much deeper than the process of passing information. The combination of digital sociolinguistics, Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), Acts of Identity Theory, and language ideology models shows that language speech on social media serves as an effective tool of identity formation and social statusing. The results emphasize that code-switching, Roman Urdu, and multimodal are not arbitrary or functional options, but strategic choices that help students to negotiate a variety of identities, such as modern, educated, culturally grounded, and digitally engaged ones. English is often used to signify prestige, professionalism, and world membership, whereas Urdu is used as a signifier of emotional expression, cultural identity, and intimacy between individuals.Roman Urdu, on the one hand, occurs as a signifier of technological adjustment, and the development of a specific youthful digital identity. Besides, the paper highlights the importance of language ideologies in creating these practices to show how ingrained beliefs about language make the communication patterns in the online world that deep-rooted. The research is relevant to a more detailed explanation of the intersection of language, identity, and technology in modern Pakistan by putting such findings into the context of larger processes of globalization and linguistic hybridity. Finally, the paper does not only contribute to the sphere of research of digital sociolinguistics but also implies the necessity of rethinking the concept of language norms and the importance of acknowledging digital linguistic practices as legitimate, dynamic and socially situated forms of communication.

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Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

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