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THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN SHAPING LANGUAGE, POWER, AND IDENTITY AMONG PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Muhammad Ahmad
BS Computer Science, Department Of Computer Science, University of Okara

ABSTRACT

Digital media has become an influential platform for communication, social interaction, cultural expression, and identity formation among university students in Pakistan. The increasing use of social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and X has transformed the ways young people communicate, express opinions, construct social relationships, and represent themselves in digital environments. This study examines the role of digital media in shaping language practices, power relations, and social identities among Pakistani university students in 2026. Particular attention is given to the use of Urdu, English, Roman Urdu, and regional languages in online communication, including code-switching, code-mixing, linguistic expressions, digital slang, and multimodal communication. The study also investigates how English language proficiency, educational background, gender, social class, and cultural affiliation influence students' digital identities and communication practices. Drawing upon sociolinguistic perspectives, identity construction theory, and digital discourse analysis, the research explores how students use language to establish belonging, demonstrate social status, negotiate authority, and communicate cultural values. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach involving questionnaire-based data collection and qualitative analysis of publicly available digital communication. It aims to demonstrate that digital media does not merely provide technological opportunities for interaction but also creates spaces where language, power, and identity continuously interact. The research contributes to understanding the changing linguistic and sociocultural practices of Pakistani university students and highlights the importance of multilingual inclusion and digital linguistic awareness in contemporary higher education.

KEYWORDS

Digital Media, Language and Power, Social Identity, Pakistani University Students, Social Media, Code-Switching, Digital Discourse, Multilingualism, Roman Urdu, Identity Construction.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed communication patterns and social relationships across the world. Social media platforms have become important spaces where individuals exchange information, express opinions, establish relationships, and construct personal and collective identities. In Pakistan, university students increasingly depend on digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X for academic communication, entertainment, political discussion, and social interaction. These platforms have created new opportunities for linguistic expression, allowing students to communicate through different languages, scripts, images, symbols, emojis, and digital expressions. Consequently, digital communication has become an important area of

sociolinguistic research because it demonstrates how language practices are influenced by technological developments and changing social relationships (Androutsopoulos, 2014).Language is not simply a tool for exchanging information; it is also closely connected with identity, social position, cultural belonging, and power. Individuals use different linguistic choices to represent themselves and establish relationships with particular social groups. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) explain that identity is constructed through social interaction rather than existing as a fixed personal characteristic. This perspective is particularly relevant to digital communication because social media users continuously negotiate their identities through language, expressions, images, and interactions. Pakistani university students frequently move between Urdu, English, Roman Urdu, and regional languages according to their audiences, communication purposes, and social environments. These linguistic choices reflect their educational experiences, cultural backgrounds, and desired social identities.In Pakistani society, English occupies an influential position in education, professional communication, administration, and social mobility. Its use is frequently associated with academic achievement, professional opportunities, and social prestige. Urdu, meanwhile, serves as a major national language and an important symbol of cultural and national identity, while regional languages represent local traditions, community relationships, and cultural belonging. The coexistence of these languages creates a complex linguistic environment in which students make different language choices depending on their social and communicative purposes. Rafi (2017) demonstrates that Urdu-English bilinguals in Pakistani digital communication use code-switching and other linguistic features to express identity, solidarity, gender, and power relations.The increasing popularity of digital platforms has further expanded opportunities for students to negotiate these linguistic relationships. Online communication allows students to combine different languages within a single sentence, use Roman Urdu instead of traditional Urdu script, and introduce English expressions into informal conversations. Such practices are not necessarily random linguistic changes; they can communicate particular social meanings and reflect the identities that users wish to establish. Rizwan (2018), in examining social media discourse and language attitudes in Pakistan, highlights the relationship between linguistic preferences, social identities, and broader language hierarchies. These observations indicate that digital language practices should be examined within their wider social and cultural contexts.Digital media has also changed the relationship between language and social power. Students who demonstrate proficiency in English may receive greater recognition in academic and professional digital environments, while individuals who primarily communicate through Urdu or regional languages may experience different forms of linguistic visibility and social acceptance. This situation raises important questions about linguistic inequality and the relationship between language preferences and social opportunities. The digital environment can reproduce existing social hierarchies, but it can also provide opportunities for individuals to challenge dominant linguistic practices and express identities that may receive limited recognition in traditional institutions.Another important dimension of digital communication is

the representation of gender and cultural identity. Male and female students may use different communication styles, expressions, hashtags, and linguistic strategies to present themselves online. Similarly, students from different geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds may use digital platforms to maintain cultural connections and communicate their experiences. These differences demonstrate that digital identity is influenced by several interconnected factors, including language, gender, education, social class, and cultural background. Shah et al. (2020) provide relevant evidence from a Pakistani university setting, demonstrating how code-switching between English and Pashto contributes to the construction of hybrid identities.In addition, social media has become an important platform for political participation and public discussion among university students. Students use digital platforms to discuss national issues, educational policies, cultural debates, and social inequalities. Their linguistic choices influence how opinions are communicated, how audiences interpret messages, and how particular identities are represented. Rizwan (2019) demonstrates that Pakistani social media discussions concerning patriotism and national identity involve discursive strategies through which individuals establish boundaries between different forms of national belonging. This suggests that digital language is closely connected with ideological positions and broader power relationships.Despite the growing importance of digital communication, the relationship between language, power, and identity among Pakistani university students requires further systematic investigation. Existing research has examined bilingualism, code-switching, language attitudes, and identity construction, but additional attention is needed to understand how these practices interact across multiple social media platforms and student communities. The present research therefore examines digital media as a sociolinguistic environment in which students negotiate linguistic preferences, social recognition, cultural belonging, and individual identities. It seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions about multilingualism, digital communication, and language-based power relations in Pakistan during 2026.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the influence of digital media on language choices and communication practices among Pakistani university students.
2. To investigate how multilingual digital communication contributes to the construction and negotiation of personal, social, and cultural identities.
3. To analyze the relationship between language preferences, social power, educational background, and linguistic inequality in Pakistani students' digital environments.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does digital media influence language choices and communication practices among Pakistani university students?

2. How do Urdu, English, Roman Urdu, and regional languages contribute to the construction of students' digital and cultural identities?
3. How do language preferences and digital communication practices reflect social power, educational differences, and linguistic inequalities among university students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between language and identity has remained an important subject in sociolinguistics, communication studies, and social theory. Language provides individuals with the means to communicate their thoughts, but it also represents their cultural backgrounds, social affiliations, and relationships with other communities. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue that identity emerges through interactional processes and is continuously negotiated through linguistic and social practices. Their theoretical perspective provides an important foundation for understanding digital identity because social media users frequently modify their language and communication styles according to their audiences and social circumstances. In digital environments, identity is represented through written language, images, comments, profile descriptions, emojis, and other communicative resources. These practices demonstrate that identity is not a permanent or isolated characteristic but an evolving social process.Androutsopoulos (2014) examines the relationship between media development and sociolinguistic change, highlighting the importance of mediated communication in contemporary language practices. His work explains that media should not simply be considered an external influence on language; rather, media environments participate in the transformation of linguistic interaction and social meaning. This perspective is particularly significant for Pakistani university students, who increasingly use digital platforms for communication in multilingual environments. Social media encourages linguistic creativity, abbreviations, new expressions, hybrid vocabulary, and alternative writing conventions. Students frequently adapt their language according to the nature of a platform, the expectations of their audiences, and the purposes of communication. Therefore, digital communication should be understood as a dynamic linguistic environment in which traditional language practices interact with technological developments.The relationship between bilingualism and digital identity has also received considerable scholarly attention. Rafi (2017) investigated the digital communication practices of Urdu-English bilingual students at five universities in Lahore, focusing on Facebook interactions among 200 Bachelor of Science students. The study demonstrated that code-switching between Urdu and English can function as an identity marker and communicate solidarity, power, and gender within online communities. It also identified linguistic reduction, neologisms, and paralinguistic features as important characteristics of digital interaction. These findings are particularly relevant to the present research because they provide direct empirical evidence from Pakistani university students. They indicate that language selection in digital environments is connected with social positioning rather than being merely a matter of communication Rizwan

(2018) explored the relationship between social media discourse, identity, and language attitudes in Pakistan. The research examined how preferences for English and Urdu-English hybrid expressions reflect personal and collective identities within the country's linguistic environment. The study highlights the importance of historical, cultural, and social influences in shaping language attitudes. Its findings suggest that language preferences on social media are connected with wider linguistic hierarchies and social distinctions. This perspective is valuable for examining how Pakistani university students associate English with education and professional opportunities while using Urdu and regional languages to express cultural familiarity, community relationships, and national belonging. It also draws attention to the possibility that digital communication may reproduce existing inequalities between socially dominant and less privileged language communities.Shah et al. (2020) examined identity construction through code-switching practices at a university in Pakistan. Their research investigated interactions involving English and Pashto, supported by recorded communication and semi-structured interviews. The findings demonstrated that students and lecturers used multilingual communication practices to express different identity orientations within an academic environment. The researchers identified hybrid identities emerging through the interaction of linguistic resources and multicultural social experiences. This research establishes an important connection between multilingualism and identity formation in Pakistani higher education. It also supports the argument that university students should not be understood as speakers of separate, isolated languages because their everyday communication frequently involves flexible movement between different linguistic resources.

Herring's (2004) contribution to computer-mediated discourse analysis provides another useful methodological and conceptual foundation. Her approach emphasizes the systematic examination of language and interaction in computer-mediated environments. Digital communication can be investigated through vocabulary, sentence structures, interaction patterns, conversational organization, and contextual factors. This approach is particularly relevant to social media research because online communication contains distinctive linguistic features that cannot always be adequately understood through traditional face-to-face communication models. Pakistani university students use comments, captions, hashtags, abbreviations, and emojis to establish meanings and relationships. Examining these features through digital discourse analysis can help researchers understand how linguistic practices represent identity and social positioning.Rizwan (2019) further investigated the construction of national identity through Pakistani social media discussions concerning patriotism and treason. The study demonstrated that online discourse can establish distinctions between different forms of national identification through ideological and discursive strategies. It highlights how language choices and expressions contribute to the representation of national belonging, political attitudes, and collective identities. This research is important because university students frequently participate in online political and cultural discussions where language is used to communicate agreement, disagreement,

solidarity, and opposition. Digital media therefore provides an environment in which individual identities interact with wider national and ideological narratives.Overall, the reviewed literature establishes that digital media has become an important environment for linguistic innovation, multilingual communication, identity negotiation, and the expression of social power. Previous Pakistani studies have provided useful insights into Urdu-English bilingualism, code-switching, language attitudes, and national identity. However, there remains a need for an integrated investigation that considers the relationship between language, power, and identity across different digital platforms and diverse university student populations. The present research addresses this area by bringing together sociolinguistic, identity-based, and digital discourse perspectives to examine the experiences of Pakistani university students in 2026.

METHODOLOGY

The present study proposes a mixed-methods methodological approach to investigate the role of digital media in shaping language, power, and identity among Pakistani university students. This approach combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to develop a broader understanding of students' digital communication practices. Quantitative information will be collected through structured questionnaires designed to examine social media usage, language preferences, communication frequency, and perceptions of linguistic status. Qualitative information will be obtained through semi-structured interviews and the analysis of publicly accessible digital communication materials. The combination of these methods will allow the research to examine both measurable patterns of language use and the social meanings associated with students' linguistic choices. Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analysis approach will provide methodological guidance for examining digital interactions.The proposed target population will consist of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in public and private universities across Pakistan. A proposed sample of 300 students will be selected from universities representing different geographical and educational backgrounds. The sample will include male and female participants from different academic disciplines, socioeconomic backgrounds, and linguistic communities. A stratified sampling approach will help ensure representation from different student groups, while purposive selection will be used for participants invited to qualitative interviews. The questionnaire will contain questions concerning the frequency of social media use, preferred communication languages, code-switching practices, digital self-presentation, and perceptions of language-based social recognition.

Qualitative data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with a proposed subsample of 30 university students. These interviews will investigate students' experiences of using Urdu, English, Roman Urdu, and regional languages across different digital platforms. Participants will be asked how their language choices change according to their audiences, educational environments, social relationships, and communication purposes. Publicly accessible posts,

captions, comments, and other relevant digital materials may also be examined to identify recurring linguistic and identity-related patterns. Ethical procedures will be followed throughout the research, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymization, and the exclusion of private messages or restricted personal information.The collected quantitative information will be analyzed through descriptive and relevant inferential statistical techniques. Qualitative information will be examined through thematic and discourse analysis to identify recurring patterns of identity construction, language preference, social positioning, and linguistic power. The findings from both approaches will be compared to establish areas of agreement and differences between students' reported experiences and their observable digital communication practices. This methodological combination will provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between digital media and sociolinguistic practices in Pakistani higher education.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study will employ a cross-sectional mixed-methods research design, combining descriptive survey research with qualitative digital discourse analysis. The descriptive component will examine the frequency and patterns of digital media use among university students, while the qualitative component will investigate the social meanings associated with their linguistic choices. This design is appropriate because language, power, and identity involve both observable communication patterns and subjective social experiences. A cross-sectional approach will enable the collection of information during a defined research period in 2026, providing an overview of contemporary digital communication practices among the selected student population.The quantitative component will focus on identifying relationships between social media engagement, language preferences, educational background, and perceptions of linguistic status. The qualitative component will investigate how students construct and negotiate their identities through multilingual communication, digital expressions, and online interactions. The research will use the theoretical perspectives of Bucholtz and Hall (2005) to understand identity as an interactional process and Androutsopoulos (2014) to examine the relationship between digital media and sociolinguistic change. Rafi's (2017) investigation of Urdu-English bilingualism will provide additional contextual support for interpreting Pakistani students' digital language practices.The research design will also consider the influence of demographic and sociocultural variables, including gender, academic discipline, university type, first language, and geographical background. These variables will help identify whether students from different educational and linguistic environments demonstrate different patterns of digital communication. The study will not assume that language preference automatically determines an individual's identity or social status. Instead, it will examine how language choices acquire social meanings within particular contexts and how students use different linguistic resources to represent themselves.

DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, means, and cross-tabulations. These techniques will help identify the most frequently used digital platforms and languages among the selected university students. Particular attention will be given to the use of English, Urdu, Roman Urdu, and regional languages in online communication. The analysis will also examine how frequently students combine two or more languages within individual messages and whether their language preferences differ across academic, professional, and informal communication contexts. The statistical findings will provide an overview of the relationship between digital media engagement and students' linguistic practices.

The analysis will further examine the relationship between language preferences and perceived social power. Students' responses concerning English proficiency, educational opportunities, social recognition, and professional communication will be compared to identify possible patterns of linguistic inequality. Particular attention will be given to whether students perceive English as a language associated with academic prestige and professional advancement, while Urdu and regional languages are more closely connected with cultural belonging and informal social interaction. Rizwan (2018) provides an important theoretical and contextual basis for examining these relationships because the research connects language attitudes in Pakistan with personal and collective identity formation.Qualitative data obtained through interviews will be analyzed through thematic analysis. Interview transcripts will be reviewed to identify recurring themes concerning digital identity, multilingual communication, cultural belonging, gender representation, linguistic prestige, and social acceptance. Publicly available digital communication materials will also be examined through discourse analysis to understand how students use language, expressions, hashtags, emojis, and other communicative resources to represent themselves. The analysis will consider the relationship between linguistic choices and the audiences, purposes, and social contexts in which communication takes place. Rafi (2017) and Shah et al. (2020) provide relevant empirical foundations for interpreting code-switching as a resource for identity construction and social positioning.

Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings will be integrated through methodological triangulation. This process will help determine whether students' reported language preferences correspond with the linguistic practices observed in their public digital communication. It will also allow the researcher to identify differences between students' perceptions of language prestige and their actual communication choices. The integrated analysis will provide a broader understanding of how digital environments influence linguistic behaviour, social relationships, and identity negotiation among Pakistani university students. Since this article presents a proposed research framework rather than completed fieldwork, numerical results and statistical

significance will only be reported after the actual data have been collected and analyzed.

FINDINGS

Based on the reviewed literature and the proposed analytical framework, the study is expected to identify multilingual communication as a prominent feature of Pakistani university students' digital interactions. Students are likely to demonstrate flexible language choices involving Urdu, English, Roman Urdu, and regional languages, depending on their audiences and communication purposes. English may appear more frequently in academic and professional discussions, whereas Urdu, Roman Urdu, and regional languages may provide convenient resources for informal communication and cultural expression. Such patterns would be consistent with Rafi's (2017) findings concerning Urdu-English bilingual communication among university students in Lahore.The research is also expected to demonstrate that code-switching and code-mixing function as important resources for constructing digital identities. Students may combine languages to express emotions, establish relationships, communicate humour, demonstrate cultural belonging, and distinguish themselves within particular social groups. The use of Roman Urdu, English expressions, regional vocabulary, and digital slang may reflect the influence of educational experiences, peer relationships, and platform-specific communication practices. These anticipated patterns are supported by the identity-based findings of Shah et al. (2020), who demonstrated that multilingual communication contributes to the development of hybrid identity orientations within Pakistani university settings.

Another anticipated finding concerns the relationship between English language proficiency and perceived social power. Students may associate English with academic achievement, professional recognition, and access to wider social opportunities. At the same time, Urdu and regional languages may remain important for expressing cultural familiarity, local identity, and community belonging. Such differences may indicate that linguistic choices are influenced by existing educational and social hierarchies. Rizwan (2018) provides relevant evidence that language preferences in Pakistani social media environments are connected with wider questions of identity and linguistic inequality.The study may further reveal that gender, educational background, and socioeconomic circumstances influence students' digital communication practices. Different student groups may employ different linguistic styles, expressions, and strategies for presenting their identities online. Political and cultural discussions may also demonstrate how language is used to express ideological positions, establish group affiliations, and negotiate national identity. Rizwan (2019) provides relevant evidence of these relationships through the examination of national identity and political discourse on Pakistani social media. Overall, the expected findings suggest that digital media provides an important environment in which language, power, and identity interact, although the extent and statistical significance of

these relationships must be established through actual fieldwork.

CONCLUSION

The present study examines the role of digital media in shaping language, power, and identity among Pakistani university students in 2026. It considers digital communication as an important sociolinguistic environment in which students express their thoughts, negotiate social relationships, and represent their personal and collective identities. The research highlights the significance of Urdu, English, Roman Urdu, and regional languages in contemporary online communication and recognizes that linguistic choices are influenced by educational experiences, cultural backgrounds, social relationships, and technological developments.The study also emphasizes that language is closely connected with social power and recognition. English may provide students with opportunities for academic and professional communication, while Urdu and regional languages remain important resources for cultural expression and community belonging. These different linguistic roles demonstrate that language preferences cannot be understood independently of Pakistan's broader social and educational structures. Digital media may reproduce existing linguistic hierarchies, but it can also create opportunities for multilingual expression and greater visibility for different cultural communities.Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of identity construction in digital environments. Students use code-switching, code-mixing, Roman Urdu, digital expressions, and multilingual communication to establish relationships and communicate different aspects of their identities. These practices demonstrate that digital identity is flexible and continuously negotiated according to social contexts and communication purposes. The findings of previous research by Rafi (2017), Rizwan (2018), and Shah et al. (2020) provide important support for understanding these processes within the Pakistani context.In conclusion, digital media should be recognized as more than a technological communication tool because it plays an influential role in contemporary language practices, social relationships, and identity formation. Pakistani universities can benefit from promoting multilingual awareness, digital literacy, and respect for linguistic diversity. Educational institutions should encourage students to develop effective academic English skills without undermining the cultural and educational importance of Urdu and regional languages. Such an approach can support more inclusive communication environments and reduce language-based discrimination. The proposed research offers a foundation for understanding the changing relationship between language, power, and identity in Pakistan's increasingly digital society.

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