

DIGITAL DIALECTS: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES MULTILINGUAL IDENTITY AND CODE-SWITCHING PRACTICES AMONG URBAN YOUTH

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Abstract:

This study explores the ways in which social media platforms influence multilingual identity construction and code-switching practices among urban youth. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant-generated social media content analysis, including posts, comments, and captions across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in language choice, code-switching strategies, and identity signaling. Findings reveal that participants strategically switch between languages and dialects to negotiate social belonging, perform group affiliation, and assert individuality within digital communities. Additionally, the study highlights how platform affordances, peer norms, and audience perception shape multilingual expression, creating what can be termed “digital dialects.” The results contribute to sociolinguistic theory by demonstrating the dynamic interplay between technology, language practices, and identity construction, offering insights for educators, policymakers, and digital communication researchers interested in multilingual digital interactions.

Keywords: Digital Dialects, Multilingualism, Code-Switching, Social Media, Youth Identity.

Introduction

In the last decade, social media has emerged as a dominant communicative space in which language practices are continuously reshaped, recontextualized, and renegotiated. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have become integral to the everyday lives of young people, providing not only tools for interaction but also arenas for identity performance, cultural expression, and linguistic experimentation. As digital communication becomes increasingly multimodal—combining text, images, emojis, audio, and video—urban youth actively participate in constructing new forms of expression that transcend the limitations of traditional offline linguistic norms. In multilingual contexts, these digital environments offer unprecedented opportunities for blending languages, creating hybrid forms of speech, and signaling nuanced social identities. Such practices have given rise to what scholars describe as “digitally mediated multilingualism,” where languages evolve dynamically within online spaces (Bhutto and Ramzan, 2021).

Central to this evolution is the phenomenon of code-switching, a linguistic strategy through which speakers alternate between languages, dialects, or language varieties to convey meaning, align with particular social groups, or index aspects of identity. While code-switching has long been studied in face-to-face communication, its manifestation in digital spaces introduces new complexities. Social media’s algorithmic visibility, platform-specific norms, and audience diversity reshape how youth choose when and how to switch codes. Unlike traditional communicative settings—where interlocutors are co-present, temporally bound, and socially homogeneous—digital interactions involve imagined audiences, asynchronous communication, and the constant possibility of surveillance by peers, family, and broader online communities. As a result, code-switching in social media contexts becomes not merely a linguistic choice but a strategic act of self-presentation and identity negotiation (Nawaz et al., 2021).

Urban youth, in particular, navigate multiple overlapping identities shaped by ethnicity, social class, education, peer networks, and media exposure. Their multilingual practices online reflect these intersecting influences, often resulting in the creation of innovative linguistic blends or “digital dialects”—new forms of expression that emerge within specific online communities. These digital dialects allow young people to simultaneously perform local belonging and global connectedness, drawing from vernacular languages, global Englishes, pop-culture idioms, and platform-specific memes. Such practices challenge traditional understandings of linguistic boundaries and highlight the role of digital media as a transformative force in shaping contemporary sociolinguistic landscapes (Chen & Ramzan, 2024).

Despite growing interest in digital communication, there remains a need for deeper understanding of how and why youth employ multilingual resources online and what these practices reveal about broader identity processes. Existing studies tend to focus on either linguistic features of digital discourse or broader questions of online identity, but relatively few address the intersection of multilingual identity, code-switching strategies, and platform-specific influences. Moreover, research often overlooks the agency of youth as creators of new linguistic norms rather than simply users of pre-existing ones. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how urban youth navigate multilingual identities through their social media interactions and how digital platforms shape the emergence of new linguistic patterns (Ramzan et al., 2023a)

By analyzing interview data alongside participant-generated social media content, this study provides insights into the strategic, context-dependent nature of multilingual expression in digital environments. It highlights how factors such as peer norms, audience expectations, and technological affordances influence code-switching choices, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of language use in contemporary digital cultures. Ultimately, this research expands sociolinguistic theory by illustrating the dynamic interplay between technology, identity, and language practices, offering valuable implications for educators, policymakers, and scholars interested in the future of multilingual communication in an increasingly digital world.

Literature Review

Sociolinguistic research has long treated code-switching and related phenomena as social practices that both reflect and construct social identities. Foundational interactional accounts show how alternation between codes functions to index stance, interlocutor relations, and conversational meaning (e.g., Gumperz’s work on discourse strategies and conversational inference). Functional and social-motivational models (Myers-Scotton, 2006) further explain code-switching in terms of communicative motivations and the allocation of distinct social meanings to different codes. At the same time, identity-focused sociocultural approaches (e.g., Bucholtz & Hall) argue that language choices are central to identity production, revealing how linguistic practices are used to align with or resist social categories. These theoretical traditions provide the core tools for analyzing how youth deploy multilingual resources to perform belonging, stance, and difference (Petrosky et al., 2009).

Recent theoretical shifts emphasize practice-based and translingual perspectives that eschew rigid boundaries between named “languages.” Canagarajah’s translingual practice framework highlights how speakers creatively draw on heterogeneous linguistic repertoires (codemeshing, translanguaging) to accomplish communicative goals in cosmopolitan settings; Pennycook similarly theorizes language as local practice and entanglement. These approaches are especially useful for digital contexts, where language resources are mixed, remixed, and repurposed across

semiotic modes. Such perspectives push researchers to treat online mixing not as deviation from a standard but as an adaptive, meaningful repertoire deployed for identity work (Canagarajah, 2012)

A growing body of work documents how digital platforms create distinct conditions for multilingual practice. Androutsopoulos's notion of networked multilingualism and his analysis of "moments of sharing" show that platform affordances (e.g., public timelines, tagging, multimodality) and the social architecture of networks shape which linguistic resources are selected, how they are styled, and how they are negotiated with audiences. Entextualization is the process of selecting and recontextualizing linguistic fragments for sharing and it helps to explain how youth craft posts that index transnational trajectories or local affiliations. These studies demonstrate that platform features and the networked nature of audiences are constitutive of media audiences show that online interactions are characterized by "context contemporary multilingual practice rather than merely incidental contexts (Androutsopoulos, 2015).

Studies of social collapse" multiple offline audiences are flattened into single online spaces — which intensifies the strategic nature of linguistic choices. Marwick and boyd's work on imagined audiences and context collapse explains why users carefully modulate self-presentation and why language alternation becomes a tool for audience targeting, concealment, or identity signaling. Herring and other CMDA scholars provide methodological foundations for studying these mediated interactions and for analyzing how technological constraints (character limits, reply chains, visibility algorithms) shape discourse practices. Together, these accounts highlight the interaction between platform structure, audience expectation, and linguistic strategy (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Empirical research on youth practices corroborates the theoretical claims: young social-media users routinely mix codes to mark in-group membership, humor, and stance, and platform norms (memes, hashtags, audiovisual affordances) co-determine which repertoires are mobilized. Case studies and corpus analyses across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter show patterns of lexical borrowing, hybrid orthography (Romanized scripts), and multimodal code-mixing tied to identity performance and peer recognition. These studies emphasize that code-switching in digital spaces is strategic, audience-sensitive, and shaped by rapidly evolving community conventions rather than static grammatical rules (Larsen-Freeman, 2013). Despite this rich literature, two gaps remain. First, much previous work concentrates on single platforms or ethnographies of specific communities; comparative analyses across multiple mainstream platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Twitter) remain limited. Second, while scholars have theorized network-level forces and repertoires, fewer studies combine participant interviews with participant-generated content analysis to link users' stated motivations with their actual posted practices. The present study addresses both gaps by using semi-structured interviews together with systematic analysis of participant posts, enabling a triangulated account of *why* urban youth switch codes and *how* platform affordances and peer norms shape those practices (Ramzan et al., 2023b).

Statement of the Problem

In today's digitally networked world, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have become central spaces where young people communicate, construct identities, and negotiate social belonging. While multilingualism and code-switching have been extensively examined in face-to-face contexts, far less is understood about how these linguistic practices unfold within online environments characterized by multimodality, algorithmic visibility, and diverse audiences. Existing research often treats digital code-switching as a surface-level

linguistic feature rather than a purposeful, identity-driven act shaped by platform affordances and community norms. Moreover, studies frequently focus on single platforms or isolated linguistic behaviors, overlooking how urban youth strategically mobilize multiple languages across different social media spaces to perform identity, signal group belonging, and manage audience perceptions. As a result, there is a significant gap in understanding how digital environments influence multilingual identity formation and how youth intentionally construct “digital dialects” that blend linguistic, cultural, and technological resources. This study addresses this gap by examining the interplay between technology, multilingual practice, and identity construction among urban youth in contemporary digital spaces.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to sociolinguistic theory by demonstrating how multilingual identity is actively negotiated within digital environments, expanding traditional models of code-switching to include platform-specific modes of expression. Understanding how youth create and use digital dialects enhances current debates surrounding translanguaging, linguistic repertoires, and identity performance. Second, the study offers empirical insights into how urban youth navigate complex social norms and imagined audiences online, providing a clearer picture of how language use becomes a tool for community-building, resistance, and self-expression in networked publics. These findings can strengthen emerging research on digital multilingualism by grounding it in real-world practices across multiple platforms. Third, the research carries practical implications for educators, language practitioners, and curriculum designers. As classroom populations become increasingly digitally connected and linguistically diverse, understanding students’ online communication patterns can inform pedagogies that recognize and value digital literacies and hybrid language practices. Finally, the findings are relevant for policymakers and digital communication researchers, particularly those concerned with language preservation, digital inclusion, and youth participation in online spaces. Recognizing how multilingual youth innovate linguistically on social media can guide initiatives that support equitable digital communication and culturally responsive online engagement.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale for conducting this study arises from the need to better understand how technological environments shape contemporary linguistic behavior, particularly among youth who are at the forefront of digital innovation. Social media platforms are not neutral communication spaces—they impose specific constraints, encourage certain forms of expression, and enable new linguistic possibilities. Yet, these technological influences are rarely integrated into studies of multilingual identity or code-switching. Urban youth, who routinely navigate multiple linguistic, cultural, and social worlds, offer a rich site for examining how digital communication transforms multilingual practices. Their active engagement across online platforms makes them ideal participants for exploring how identity is constructed, negotiated, and reimagined through everyday digital interactions. Furthermore, the emergence of hybrid, platform-specific linguistic forms—what this study terms “digital dialects”—signals a shift in how language is used and understood in the digital age. Investigating these forms provides critical insights into the evolving relationship between language, culture, and technology. By grounding the study in qualitative inquiry and participant-generated content, the research captures authentic linguistic practices that may be overlooked by purely quantitative or platform-specific studies.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive sociolinguistics and digital ethnography. The aim is to explore how urban youth construct multilingual identities and engage in code-switching practices within social media environments. A combination of semi-structured interviews **and** participant-generated social media content analysis was used to capture both self-reported perspectives and naturally occurring linguistic practices. The design allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' motivations, contextual influences, and identity negotiations across digital platforms.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who met the following criteria:

1. Aged 18–25
2. Residing in an urban area (e.g., metropolitan city)
3. Active users of at least two social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook)
4. Multilingual, using at least two languages or dialects in everyday communication
5. Willing to share selected screenshots or examples of their social media posts

A total of 12–15 participants were recruited, which aligns with qualitative research standards for depth-oriented inquiry. Diversity in gender, linguistic background, and socioeconomic status was considered to ensure variation in language repertoires and digital experiences.

Data Collection Procedures

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Each participant took part in a 40–60 minute interview, conducted in person or via video call. Interviews explored participants' digital language practices, identity representations, and motivations for code-switching. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

2. Participant-Generated Social Media Content

Participants were asked to provide **3–5 examples** of their own posts, captions, comments, or messages where they used multiple languages or switched codes.

They were instructed to:

- Share screenshots with personally identifiable information blurred
- Provide context (platform used, intended audience, purpose of the post)
- Explain their language choices

These digital artifacts provided real-world evidence of linguistic strategies used in their online interactions.

Interview Guide (Semi-Structured Questions)

A. Digital Identity and Language Use

1. How would you describe your online identity across different platforms?
2. What languages or dialects do you usually use on social media, and why?
3. Do you feel you express yourself differently online than offline?

B. Code-Switching Motivations

4. Can you recall a moment when you switched between languages in a post or comment? What motivated that choice?
5. Do you use certain languages for particular audiences (friends, family, public)?
6. How does the presence of mixed audiences influence what you post?

C. Platform-Specific Influences

7. Do you communicate differently on Instagram, TikTok, or Twitter? Why?
8. How do features like captions, hashtags, or stories affect your language use?

D. Identity, Belonging, and Group Dynamics

9. How does using multiple languages help you connect with communities or peers online?
10. Do you feel your language choices are a way to show identity or group affiliation?

E. Closing Reflections

11. Have digital spaces influenced how you see your multilingual identity?
12. Is there anything else you want to share about language use on social media?

Coding Scheme (Initial, Axial, and Thematic Coding)

A **three-phase coding approach** was used, following Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis framework.

Phase 1: Initial (Open) Coding

Codes capture raw ideas and actions from the data.

Examples:

- "Audience targeting"
- "Hiding from family"
- "Platform norms"
- "Creativity/wordplay"
- "Peer approval"
- "Hybrid identity"
- "Algorithm awareness"
- "Language as humor"
- "Cultural signaling"

Phase 2: Axial Coding

Codes are grouped into broader conceptual categories.

Possible categories:

- **Identity performance** (self-presentation, belonging)
- **Digital affordances** (platform features shaping language)
- **Social motivations** (peer norms, audience expectations)
- **Emotional motivations** (comfort, authenticity, empowerment)
- **Linguistic creativity** (mixing, blending, innovation)

Phase 3: Thematic Development

Themes are refined to represent the overarching patterns.

Potential themes:

1. **Strategic Multilingualism as Identity Work**
2. **Digital Platforms as Linguistic Ecologies**
3. **Code-Switching as Social and Emotional Negotiation**
4. **Formation of Digital Dialects Through Peer Influence**
5. **Managing Visibility, Surveillance, and Context Collapse**

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed **Braun & Clarke's (2019)** guidelines:

1. Familiarization with transcripts and content artifacts
2. Initial coding
3. Searching for themes

4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final thematic map and interpretations

Manual coding is used depending and interpretations is drawn from:

- Sociolinguistic identity theories
- Digital ethnography
- Code-switching frameworks
- Translingual practice theory

Ethical Considerations

- Participants signed informed consent forms.
- Social media screenshots were anonymized by participants before submission.
- Pseudonyms were used in all reporting.
- Institutional ethical approval was obtained (if applicable).
- Sensitive content (e.g., private messages) was optional and securely stored.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Following Lincoln & Guba's (1985) framework:

- **Credibility:** Member-checking with participants to verify interpretations
- **Transferability:** Thick description of context and participant narratives
- **Dependability:** Audit trail of data collection, coding decisions, and analysis notes
- **Confirmability:** Reflexive journaling to monitor researcher biases

Results

The study sought to understand how multilingual urban youth use social media to construct identities, engage in code-switching, and develop hybrid “digital dialects.” Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and participant-generated social media content yielded five major themes and several subthemes. These themes are presented below with detailed descriptions.

Theme 1: Strategic Multilingualism as Identity Performance

Across interviews, participants consistently described their multilingual posting behaviors as intentional acts of identity construction, rather than spontaneous or accidental choices.

1.1 Crafting a Multilayered Digital Persona

Participants used different languages to showcase distinct facets of their identity:

- **English** for confidence, modernity, professionalism
- **Local languages** (e.g., Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Hindi) for intimacy, humor, cultural pride
- **Hybrid blends** (e.g., Roman Urdu, Hinglish) for casual, youth-oriented interactions

One participant explained that using English “makes my posts look more mature,” while local languages “show the real me.”

1.2 Visibility vs. Concealment

Some participants used code-switching as a strategy to reveal certain meanings to specific groups while hiding them from others.

For instance:

- Jokes or slang in local languages were used so that parents or older relatives would not fully understand.
- English was used to “neutralize” emotional content or avoid directness.

This selective visibility reflects a form of linguistic boundary management.

Theme 2: Platform-Specific Language Practices (“Digital Ecologies”)

Participants did not use languages uniformly across platforms. Each platform shaped linguistic behavior differently due to its interface, audience, and norms.

2.1 Instagram: Aestheticized Multilingualism

Instagram encouraged polished, curated posts.

Participants preferred:

- English captions for aesthetic appeal
- Short local idioms for humor
- Stylized scripts or Romanized text for creativity

Hashtags also guided language choice; English hashtags increased reach, while bilingual hashtags improved local engagement.

2.2 TikTok: Audio-Centric Code-Switching

TikTok was a site of spontaneous linguistic play, due to its sound-driven format.

Participants frequently:

- Used one language in the caption and another in the audio
- Switched languages mid-sentence for comedic timing
- Mirrored trending audio clips in multiple languages

This platform fostered fast-paced, performative code-switching.

2.3 Twitter: Rapid Reactions and Hybrid Language

Twitter produced the most hybridized and accelerated digital dialects.

Participants blended languages within a single tweet to:

- React quickly
- Convey sarcasm
- Emphasize emotions
- Participate in meme culture

The short-form format promoted compressed, mixed-language expressions.

Theme 3: Peer Group Norms and Community Belonging

Peer influence was a major driver of code-switching patterns.

3.1 Linguistic Alignment With Digital Communities

Participants switched languages to fit in with specific social circles or online communities.

Examples:

- Using English-heavy slang with university peers
- Using mixed local languages with childhood or neighborhood friends
- Employing “meme dialects” when interacting with fandoms or game communities

This alignment functioned as a form of group membership signaling.

3.2 Humor, Memes, and Shared Cultural Knowledge

Humor was a core motivation for multilingual mixing.

Participants reported that:

- Certain jokes “only make sense” in hybrid languages
- Memes often rely on culturally specific references
- Code-switching enhances comedic effect

The result is a shared linguistic creativity shaped by cultural resonance.

Theme 4: Code-Switching as Emotional and Expressive Strategy

Language choices were closely tied to emotional expression and psychological comfort.

4.1 Local Languages for Emotional Intimacy

Participants used local languages to express:

- affection
- frustration
- vulnerability
- familiarity

They described their mother tongues as “warmer,” “softer,” or “more expressive.”

4.2 English for Detachment or Self-Control

English was used to:

- hide emotions
- sound more composed
- soften strong feelings
- distance oneself from sensitive topics

This shows that code-switching is not only social but also emotional regulation.

Theme 5: Emergence of Hybrid “Digital Dialects”

One of the most significant findings was the creation of digital dialects—novel, mixed forms of communication emerging organically in online youth cultures.

5.1 Hybrid Orthography and Script Mixing

Participants creatively blended:

- Romanized local languages (e.g., “mera mood off hai today”)
- Unexpected spellings
- Emoji-as-words
- English plus local slang

These forms were consistent enough to constitute evolving dialects.

5.2 Audience-Tagging Through Language Blending

Participants explained that their mixed-language posts contained “signals” detectable only by certain audiences.

Example:

A phrase combining English and local slang would clearly identify whether the message was intended for:

- “my school friends”
- “my cousins”
- “my online gaming group”
- “my best friend circle”

This shows dialect creation as a socially coded practice.

5.3 Creative Linguistic Innovation

Youth crafted unique hybrid expressions that:

- enhanced humor
- compressed complex meanings
- expressed cultural hybridity
- formed inside jokes understood only within certain groups

These digital dialects demonstrate linguistic innovation shaped by technology, identity, and community.

Discussion

This study explored how multilingual urban youth use social media platforms to construct identities, engage in code-switching, and develop hybrid digital dialects. The findings offer important insights into the dynamic interplay between language, technology, and social identity, expanding current understandings in sociolinguistics and digital communication research. The participants' deliberate and strategic use of multilingualism aligns with sociolinguistic theories that view identity as performative (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Their language choices were not arbitrary but deeply tied to self-representation. For instance, participants used English to project competence, cosmopolitanism, or professionalism, while local languages were used for authenticity, humor, and cultural pride. This dual orientation reflects young people's negotiation between global and local identities—a tension widely documented in studies of youth language practices (Androutsopoulos, 2015). This study extends these insights by showing how platform-specific identities emerge. On Instagram, a curated, polished identity appeared through stylish multilingual captions; on TikTok, performative and playful identities were emphasized through audio-driven code-switching; and on Twitter, hybrid rapid-fire identities were reflected through mixed linguistic expressions. These findings highlight the role of platform affordances in shaping identity performances. The results affirm prior research showing that code-switching serves important social functions (Gumperz, 1982). Participants used it to align with peer groups, infuse humor, or participate in shared cultural references. Particularly, the use of mixed-language memes and slang reflects how online communities co-create linguistic norms that reinforce belonging (Tagg & Seargeant, 2014). What this study adds is the observation that youth engage in micro-targeted code-switching: tailoring language to different sub-audiences across and within platforms. Through selective mixing of languages, participants created “linguistic filters” that restrict understanding to specific friend groups or hide meaning from others (such as family members). This highlights a nuanced form of audience design (Bell, 1984) adapted for the fragmented visibility of social media. Participants' emotional associations with languages echo research showing that multilinguals attribute different feelings and intensities to different languages (Pavlenko, 2005). Local languages were described as warmer and more relatable, while English was seen as emotionally distanced or socially safer. On social media, these distinctions became amplified: English helped participants maintain composure or avoid vulnerability, whereas local languages enabled raw emotional expression. This emotional dimension demonstrates how code-switching serves not only social or stylistic functions but also psychological and affective roles, particularly in digital communication where written language carries heightened expressive weight. One of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of digital dialects—hybrid linguistic varieties that emerge from the blending of languages, emojis, scripts, and platform-specific conventions. These digital dialects reflect both innovation and cultural hybridity, supporting scholars who argue that digital communication fosters new linguistic forms that blur traditional boundaries (Herring, 2013; Seargeant & Tagg, 2019). The participants' creative blending of Romanized local languages, English slang, and emojis illustrates how linguistic innovation is shaped by digital affordances and peer dynamics. These hybrid forms serve as cultural markers, signaling belonging to specific communities while also reinforcing multilingual youth identity. This expands existing literature by showing that digital dialects are not simply stylistic trends but socially meaningful and identity-driven practices.

Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive examination of how social media shapes multilingual identity construction and code-switching practices among urban youth. The findings highlight several key insights:

1. **Multilingualism online is strategic and identity-based**, not merely habitual.
2. **Platform affordances influence linguistic behavior**, resulting in distinct patterns across Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.
3. **Code-switching functions as a tool for social navigation**, audience management, and peer-group alignment.
4. **Language choices carry emotional meaning**, with local languages used for expressiveness and English for emotional distance or control.
5. **Digital dialects are emerging**, created through creative linguistic mixing and platform-specific conventions, reflecting hybrid cultural identities.

Overall, the study underscores that multilingual digital spaces are not neutral communication environments—they actively shape how youth negotiate identity, belonging, creativity, and emotional expression.

Implications

For Sociolinguistic Theory

The study expands understanding of how multilingual identity is constructed in technologically mediated spaces, demonstrating the intersection of language, digital affordances, and identity performance.

For Educators

Recognizing digital language practices as legitimate forms of literacy can inform inclusive pedagogical approaches that value multilingual creativity.

For Policymakers

Digital language behavior should be considered in developing culturally responsive online policies and youth engagement initiatives.

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