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Translanguaging, Digital Identity, and Multilingual Meaning-Making among Pakistani University Students on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms have become central sites where young Pakistanis negotiate language, identity, and belonging. Drawing on translanguaging theory and the notion of polymedia, this study examined how university students at The Islamia University of Bahawalpur (IUB) deploy their multilingual repertoires on social media and how these practices relate to the construction of digital identity. A convergent mixed-methods design was used with 60 students (34 female, 26 male) aged 18–29 years. Data were collected through a 24-item Translanguaging and Digital Identity Questionnaire (TDIQ), a corpus of 600 consented social media posts (10 per participant) drawn from WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X, and semi-structured interviews with 12 participants. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, independent-samples *t* tests, and one-way ANOVA; corpus posts were coded for script and communicative function; and interviews were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Results showed that 70.3% of posts contained at least one translanguaging instance and that Roman Urdu–English mixing was the dominant pattern (46.3%). Participants reported a high frequency of translanguaging (M = 3.79) and strong agreement with its communicative functions (M = 3.88). Translanguaging frequency correlated strongly with digital identity performance (r = .76, p < .001). Female students reported significantly more frequent translanguaging than male students, while no differences emerged across first-language groups. Five qualitative themes positioned Roman Urdu as the "home script" of the digital self, Saraiki as a resource of intimacy and regional pride, and English as an aspirational register used for audience design. The study argues that translanguaging should be recognized as a legitimate meaning-making resource in Pakistani higher education rather than as evidence of linguistic deficiency.

Introduction

The spread of smartphones and inexpensive mobile data has turned social media into one of the most important communicative spaces in the lives of young people in Pakistan. According to the most recent DataReportal estimates, Pakistan had about 79.9 million social media user identities in October 2025, equal to roughly 31.2% of the population (Kemp, 2025). University students form one of the most active groups within this population. They use WhatsApp to coordinate classes, Instagram and TikTok to share personal moments, Facebook to join community and departmental pages, and X to follow public debates. Each of these spaces invites a different audience and a different style of writing, and each becomes a place where students decide, often within seconds, which words, scripts, and symbols will best carry their meaning.

Pakistan offers a particularly rich setting for observing these decisions. English and Urdu share official functions, while regional languages such as Punjabi, Saraiki, Sindhi, and Pashto remain the languages of home and community for most citizens (Ashraf et al., 2021). Language in Pakistan is also tied to social hierarchy: English is associated with power, mobility, and elite schooling, and Urdu with national unity, while regional languages are often treated as informal or less prestigious (Ashraf, 2023; Manan & David, 2021). On social media, however, students are not bound by the formal rules of the classroom or the office. They routinely write Urdu in the Roman alphabet, attach English hashtags to Urdu captions, insert Saraiki or Punjabi expressions for humor or intimacy, and complete their messages with emojis, stickers, and voice notes. Earlier work treated such mixing as "code-switching" between two separate systems. Translanguaging theory, in contrast, views it as the natural use of a single, integrated repertoire through which multilingual people make meaning (Li & García, 2022).

Although translanguaging has attracted wide attention in classroom research in South Asia (Sah & Kubota, 2022), relatively few studies have examined how Pakistani university students translanguage in their everyday digital lives, and even fewer have connected these practices to the way students present themselves online. Most available Pakistani studies were carried out in large cities such as Lahore or in northern regions, and they rarely include Saraiki-speaking students from southern Punjab (Ahmad et al., 2023; Hussain & Khan, 2021). This gap matters because the way young people mix languages online is not only a linguistic habit; it is also a way of saying who they are, which communities they belong to, and which futures they imagine for themselves (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

The present study addresses this gap by examining the translanguaging practices of 60 students at The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, a public university located in a Saraiki- and Punjabi-speaking region. By combining a questionnaire, a corpus of authentic posts, and in-depth interviews, the study aims to offer a fuller picture of how multilingual meaning-making and digital identity are connected in a Pakistani higher-education context.

Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify the patterns of translanguaging that Pakistani university students use across social media platforms.
2. To examine the communicative functions that translanguaging serves in students' online interaction.
3. To investigate the relationship between translanguaging practices and the construction of digital identity.
4. To determine whether translanguaging practices and perceptions differ by gender and first language.

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** What patterns of script and language combination characterize students' social media posts?
- **RQ2:** What communicative functions does translanguaging perform in students' online communication?
- **RQ3:** How are translanguaging practices related to students' digital identity performance and language attitudes?
- **RQ4:** Do translanguaging practices and perceptions vary significantly by gender and first language?

Literature Review

Translanguaging as a Theory of Language Practice

Translanguaging refers to the dynamic process through which multilingual speakers draw on their full linguistic and semiotic repertoire to make meaning, without being restricted by the boundaries of named languages. Li and García (2022) argue that a bilingual person does not possess a "first" and a "second" language as two separate systems, but one repertoire whose features are socially labeled as belonging to different languages. This view has important consequences. It shifts attention from what speakers lack in a particular standard language to what they can do with all of their resources. Li (2022) further describes translanguaging as a political stance, since it challenges the monolingual ideologies that continue to shape English language education in postcolonial contexts. García et al. (2021) extend this argument by showing how language education has often judged racialized and minoritized bilinguals against monolingual norms, and they call for approaches that start from the actual practices of multilingual communities. Cenoz and Gorter (2020) distinguish between spontaneous translanguaging, which occurs naturally in everyday communication, and pedagogical translanguaging, which teachers plan deliberately to support learning. The social media practices examined in the present study belong mainly to the first category, although, as discussed later, they have clear implications for the second. Recent work has also linked translanguaging to inclusion and social justice,

arguing that recognizing learners' full repertoires can transform relations between teachers and students (Li, 2024; Tai & Li, 2021).

Digital Translanguaging and Polymedia

Digital platforms expand the range of resources available for translanguaging. In addition to words from different languages, users combine scripts, emojis, images, hashtags, voice notes, and video. Androutsopoulos (2021) uses the term *polymedia* to describe environments in which people move between several platforms and choose among them according to the relationship, the topic, and the audience. Within such environments, the choice of medium is itself meaningful. Tagg and Lyons (2021a) show that individuals' repertoires "move" as they exploit the technical affordances of mobile messaging, and in a related study they demonstrate how a person's polymedia repertoire changes across the course of a single day (Tagg & Lyons, 2021b). Their book-length ethnography introduces the idea of "resourcefulness" to explain how ordinary users creatively adapt technology to their communicative needs (Tagg & Lyons, 2022). Other studies have examined specific platforms and populations. Zhao and Flewitt (2020) found that young children in Chinese immigrant families combined scripts, images, and voice messages on WeChat to communicate with distant relatives, and that these practices supported heritage-language learning. Ho and Tai (2021) analyzed online English-teaching videos and identified both interactional and performative translanguaging spaces created by teachers and viewers. Lexander (2021) showed how family relationships are maintained through multilingual choices across digital media, while Stæhr and Nørreby (2021) demonstrated that even the choice between writing and speaking a message carries social meaning. Lee and Chau (2021) found that academics negotiate professional personas across polymedia environments, which suggests that digital language choices are closely connected to identity work.

Language, Identity, and Investment Online

Identity is understood in this study as fluid, multiple, and constructed through social interaction rather than fixed in advance. Darvin and Norton (2023) explain that learners invest in particular language practices when those practices offer access to symbolic and material resources they value. Social media sharpens this process because users must constantly imagine and manage their audiences. A single post may be read by classmates, relatives, teachers, and strangers, and the writer's choice of English, Urdu, or a regional language can signal education, modernity, piety, regional belonging, or solidarity with friends. Translanguaging also carries emotional significance. Dovchin (2021) found that Mongolian immigrant women in Australia used translanguaging outside the classroom as an emotionally safe space for expressing negative feelings. Dryden et al. (2021) similarly showed that translanguaging can reduce foreign-language anxiety among migrant learners. Hopkyns and Dovchin (2024) reported that teachers themselves experience pride, comfort, shame, and guilt in relation to translanguaging, depending on the language ideologies of their institutions. These findings suggest that online translanguaging may serve not only communicative purposes but also affective and identity-related ones.

The Pakistani Multilingual Context

Pakistan is home to more than 70 languages, but educational and institutional domains are dominated by English and Urdu. Ashraf et al. (2021) found a persistent gap between national language-in-education policy and the multilingual realities of classrooms, where teachers often use regional languages informally despite official policies. Using a Bourdieusian framework, Ashraf (2023) showed that Urdu and English occupy ambivalent positions: both are valued as forms of capital, yet both can also marginalize speakers of regional languages. Manan and David (2021) argued that Pakistani educators need critical multilingual language awareness in order to challenge folk beliefs that mixing languages damages learning. At the level of South Asia more broadly, Sah and Kubota (2022) observed that translanguaging is a long-standing norm in English-medium classrooms but is often used as a coping strategy rather than as a planned pedagogy. They warned that treating elite bilingualism in English and a national language as translanguaging may hide the continuing exclusion of regional and minority languages. Sah (2022) likewise showed that English-medium instruction in Nepal, India, and Pakistan is ideologically tied to economic aspiration and can reproduce social inequality. Only a small number of studies have examined digital translanguaging among Pakistani students. Ahmad et al. (2023) analyzed the social media practices of postgraduate students at the University of Education, Lahore, during the COVID-19 period and found extensive mixing of English, Urdu, and local languages. Hussain and Khan (2021) surveyed 324 students and teachers from Gilgit-Baltistan and reported that regional languages were used only occasionally alongside Urdu and English in university settings. Neither study focused on southern Punjab, and neither connected online practices systematically to identity construction.

Research Gap

The literature reviewed above shows that translanguaging is now well theorized, that digital environments greatly expand its resources, and that language choice online is closely linked to identity and emotion. However, three gaps remain. First, Pakistani research has rarely included Saraiki-speaking students or universities in southern Punjab. Second, most studies rely on a single

data source, either questionnaires or text samples, which limits the ability to compare perception with practice. Third, the relationship between translanguaging frequency and digital identity has seldom been measured quantitatively. The present study addresses these gaps through a mixed-methods design at IUB.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on two complementary frameworks. Translanguaging theory (Li, 2022; Li & García, 2022) provides the lens for understanding students' language mixing as the use of one integrated repertoire rather than as alternation between separate codes. The polymedia perspective (Androutsopoulos, 2021; Tagg & Lyons, 2021b) adds attention to the platform, the audience, and the mode through which a message is produced. Identity is approached through the concept of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2023), which explains why students choose particular language resources to align themselves with valued communities. Together, these frameworks guided the design of the questionnaire, the coding of the corpus, and the interpretation of interview data.

Methodology

Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was adopted (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Quantitative data from the questionnaire and corpus counts were collected alongside qualitative data from interviews and post content. The two strands were analyzed separately and then merged during interpretation to identify points of convergence and divergence.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, one of the largest public universities in Punjab. Bahawalpur lies in the Saraiki-speaking belt of southern Punjab, and the university also enrolls large numbers of Punjabi- and Urdu-speaking students. English is the main medium of instruction, Urdu is the common lingua franca on campus, and regional languages are widely used in informal interaction.

Participants

The sample consisted of 60 students selected through stratified purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be enrolled in a BS, M.Phil, or PhD program at IUB, (b) be aged 18 years or above, (c) hold at least two active social media accounts, and (d) use social media daily. Stratification ensured representation of both genders, different programs, and different academic disciplines. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29 years (M = 22.4, SD = 2.6). All participants used WhatsApp, and most also used Instagram and Facebook. Table 1 presents the full demographic profile.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 60)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	34	56.7
Male	26	43.3
Age group (years)		
18–21	22	36.7
22–25	28	46.7
26–29	10	16.7
Program of study		
BS	38	63.3
M.Phil	16	26.7
PhD	6	10.0
Discipline		

Languages and humanities	24	40.0
Social sciences	14	23.3
Natural sciences	12	20.0
Management and IT	10	16.7
First language		
Saraiki	26	43.3
Punjabi	18	30.0
Urdu	12	20.0
Other (Pashto, Sindhi)	4	6.7
Daily social media use		
Less than 2 hours	9	15.0
2–4 hours	27	45.0
More than 4 hours	24	40.0
Platforms used[a]		
WhatsApp	60	100.0
Instagram	44	73.3
Facebook	38	63.3
TikTok	29	48.3
X (formerly Twitter)	14	23.3

Note. [a] Participants could select more than one platform; percentages therefore do not total 100.

Instruments

Translanguaging and Digital Identity Questionnaire (TDIQ)

The TDIQ was developed by the researchers on the basis of the literature reviewed above. It contained a demographic section and 24 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The items were grouped into four subscales of six items each: (a) frequency of translanguaging practices, (b) communicative functions of translanguaging, (c) digital identity performance, and (d) attitudes toward translanguaging. Content validity was established through review by three experts in applied linguistics, and the instrument was piloted with 10 students who were not part of the main sample. Minor wording changes were made after the pilot.

Social Media Post Corpus

Each participant voluntarily shared screenshots of 10 recent posts, captions, comments, or group messages that they had written themselves, producing a corpus of 600 posts. Participants were asked to select posts from the preceding three months and were free to omit anything they considered private. The corpus included 180 WhatsApp messages or status updates, 150 Instagram captions or comments, 120 Facebook posts or comments, 90 TikTok captions or comments, and 60 posts on X. Names, profile pictures, and other identifying details were removed before analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Twelve participants (six female and six male) were selected from the questionnaire sample for semi-structured interviews, with attention to variation in first language, program, and platform use. The interview guide asked participants to explain their own posts, describe how they choose languages for different audiences, and reflect on what their online language says about them.

Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes, were conducted in the language preferred by each participant (mostly a mix of Urdu, English, and Saraiki), were audio-recorded with permission, and were transcribed and translated into English.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place over eight weeks during the spring semester. The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms after participants gave informed consent. Corpus screenshots were submitted through a secure university email account, and interviews were held in a quiet room on campus or through video calls. The three data sets were linked through participant codes (P1–P60) so that each person's survey responses, posts, and interview accounts could be compared.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Departmental Research Ethics Committee of The Islamia University of Bahawalpur. Participants received an information sheet explaining the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Only posts selected and shared by participants were analyzed, all identifying information was removed, and data were stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed in SPSS (Version 27). Internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's alpha. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each item and subscale, Pearson correlations were used to examine relationships among the subscales, an independent-samples *t* test compared female and male students, and a one-way ANOVA compared first-language groups. The significance level was set at $p < .05$, and effect sizes were reported as Cohen's *d* and eta squared (η^2). Each corpus post was coded for script and language combination and for the communicative functions of every translanguaging instance. The function categories were developed from the literature and refined inductively during an initial coding round. Two researchers independently coded 20% of the corpus (120 posts), yielding substantial agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = .84$); disagreements were resolved through discussion, after which the remaining posts were coded by the first author. Interview transcripts were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022), which involved familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting.

Results

Patterns of Script and Language Combination (RQ1)

Of the 600 posts, 422 (70.3%) contained at least one instance of translanguaging, defined as the combination of features from two or more named languages, scripts, or semiotic modes within a single post. Table 2 shows the distribution of posts by their dominant script and language combination. Roman Urdu mixed with English was by far the most common pattern, accounting for nearly half of the corpus. English-only posts formed the second largest category and were concentrated on Instagram and X, whereas posts in Urdu Nastaliq script appeared mainly in religious greetings, poetry, and Facebook posts addressed to family members.

Table 2: **Distribution of Corpus Posts by Dominant Script and Language Combination (N = 600)**

Script and language combination	n	%
Roman Urdu + English	278	46.3
English only	105	17.5
Roman Urdu only	77	12.8
Urdu Nastaliq script (with or without English)	58	9.7
Saraiki or Punjabi (Roman script) mixed with Urdu/English	49	8.2
Emoji-, image-, or sticker-dominant multimodal posts	33	5.5
Total	**600**	**100.0**

Note. Categories reflect the dominant pattern of each post. Emojis and hashtags also occurred within posts in other categories.

Communicative Functions of Translanguaging (RQ2)

The 422 translanguaging posts contained 1,046 coded translanguaging instances, as several posts served more than one function. Table 3 presents the distribution of functions. Affective expression was the most frequent function, followed by humor and playfulness and by relational solidarity. Religious and cultural formulas such as "InshaAllah," "MashaAllah," and "Alhamdulillah", written in Roman or Arabic script, accounted for 14.5% of instances. Academic or informational uses, in which English terms were embedded in Urdu sentences to share class notices, deadlines, or technical vocabulary, made up 13.5%.

Table 3: **Communicative Functions of Translanguaging Instances in the Corpus**

Function	Illustrative example (translated)	n	%
Affective expression	"Aaj ka paper was a disaster, dil toot gaya" (Today's paper was a disaster, my heart broke)	248	23.7
Humor and playfulness	Saraiki proverb attached to an English meme caption	214	20.5
Relational solidarity	"Bhai, tension na lo, we got this" (Brother, don't worry, we got this)	186	17.8
Religious and cultural marking	"Result aa gaya, Alhamdulillah" (The result is out, praise be to God)	152	14.5
Academic and information sharing	"Assignment ki deadline extend ho gayi hai, submit by Friday"	141	13.5
Identity stance and positioning	English hashtag #SaraikiPride with a Saraiki caption	105	10.0
Total		**1,046**	**100.0**

Note. Percentages are calculated from the total number of coded instances. Examples are anonymized and lightly paraphrased.

Questionnaire Results

All four TDIQ subscales showed acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values between .74 and .76, and the full 24-item scale showed excellent reliability (α = .92). As Table 4 indicates, mean scores were above the scale midpoint of 3.00 for every subscale. Students most strongly agreed with statements about the communicative functions of translanguaging, followed closely by statements about how often they translanguage. Attitudes toward translanguaging were positive but more moderate, suggesting that students use mixed language freely online while still holding some reservations about its legitimacy in formal contexts.

Table 4: **Reliability and Descriptive Statistics of TDIQ Subscales (N = 60)**

Subscale	Items	α	*M*	*SD*
Frequency of translanguaging practices	6	.76	3.79	0.61
Communicative functions of translanguaging	6	.75	3.88	0.62
Digital identity performance	6	.74	3.65	0.60
Attitudes toward translanguaging	6	.74	3.40	0.65
Full scale	24	.92		

Note. Items were rated on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

At the item level, the highest mean was recorded for the use of religious expressions in posts (M = 4.08, SD = 0.87), followed by the statement that mixing languages online reflects who participants really are (M = 3.97, SD = 0.96) and the use of Saraiki or Punjabi words with close friends (M = 3.95, SD = 0.79). The lowest means were recorded for the belief that translanguaging does not harm English proficiency (M = 3.32, SD = 0.98) and for the view that mixing languages is a legitimate form of communication (M = 3.32, SD = 0.93).

Relationship between Translanguaging and Digital Identity (RQ3)

Pearson correlations were computed among the four subscales (Table 5). All correlations were positive, strong, and significant at $p < .001$. Frequency of translanguaging was strongly related to digital identity performance ($r = .76$), indicating that students who translanguage more often also see their online language as more closely tied to how they present themselves. The strongest relationship was found between communicative functions and attitudes ($r = .79$), suggesting that students who recognize the practical value of translanguaging are also more likely to regard it as legitimate.

Table 5: **Pearson Correlations among TDIQ Subscales (N = 60)**

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Frequency of translanguaging	-			
2. Communicative functions	.69***	-		
3. Digital identity performance	.76***	.77***	-	
4. Attitudes toward translanguaging	.66***	.79***	.75***	-

Note. *** p < .001 (two-tailed).

Differences by Gender and First Language (RQ4)

An independent-samples t test showed that female students ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.56$) reported significantly more frequent translanguaging than male students ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.63$), $t(58) = 2.01$, $p = .049$, $d = 0.52$, a medium effect. No significant gender differences were found for communicative functions, digital identity performance, or attitudes (Table 6).

Table 6: **Gender Differences in TDIQ Subscales**

Subscale	Female (n = 34) M (SD)	Male (n = 26) M (SD)	$t(58)$	p	d
Frequency of translanguaging	3.93 (0.56)	3.62 (0.63)	2.01	.049	0.52
Communicative functions	3.88 (0.66)	3.88 (0.58)	−0.01	.989	0.00
Digital identity performance	3.70 (0.64)	3.59 (0.55)	0.71	.480	0.19
Attitudes toward translanguaging	3.42 (0.65)	3.38 (0.66)	0.25	.800	0.07

Note. d = Cohen's d.

A one-way ANOVA compared the four first-language groups. As Table 7 shows, no significant differences were found on any subscale, and all effect sizes were small ($\eta^2 \leq .031$). This suggests that translanguaging on social media is a shared practice among IUB students regardless of whether their home language is Saraiki, Punjabi, Urdu, or another language. The "Other" group was small ($n = 4$), so its means should be interpreted with caution.

Table 7: **One-Way ANOVA of TDIQ Subscales by First Language**

Subscale	Saraiki (n = 26)	Punjabi (n = 18)	Urdu (n = 12)	Other (n = 4)	$F(3, 56)$	p	η^2
Frequency	3.81 (0.55)	3.73 (0.63)	3.86 (0.71)	3.71 (0.77)	0.14	.935	.007
Functions	3.90 (0.59)	3.76 (0.58)	4.00 (0.76)	4.00 (0.68)	0.42	.738	.022
Digital identity	3.69 (0.58)	3.50 (0.49)	3.78 (0.75)	3.71 (0.77)	0.60	.615	.031
Attitudes	3.41 (0.71)	3.27 (0.46)	3.57 (0.71)	3.46 (0.92)	0.52	.673	.027

Note. Values for each group are M (SD).

Qualitative Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis of the 12 interviews produced five themes, summarized in Table 8. The themes help to explain the quantitative patterns by showing how students themselves understand their language choices.

Table 8: **Themes Generated from Interview Data (n = 12)**

Theme	Description	Participants
1. Roman Urdu as the "home script" of the digital self	Roman Urdu is felt to be the most natural, fast, and authentic way of writing online.	12
2. Saraiki as intimacy and regional pride	Regional language signals closeness and belonging but is used cautiously in public posts.	9
3. English as an aspirational and academic register	English marks education, professionalism, and global connection.	11
4. Religious and cultural formulas as identity anchors	Faith-based expressions provide a stable marker of moral and cultural identity.	10
5. Audience design across platforms	Language choices shift with the platform and the imagined audience.	12

Note. Participants = number of interviewees whose accounts contributed to each theme.

Theme 1: Roman Urdu as the "Home Script" of the Digital Self

All interviewees described Roman Urdu as the default way of writing on social media. They explained that typing in Nastaliq script on a phone keyboard was slow, while writing pure English felt formal or "like an exam." Roman Urdu, by contrast, allowed them to write the way they speak. One female M.Phil student said that when she writes in Roman Urdu "it feels like me talking, not me performing" (P14). Several participants noted that Roman Urdu also made it easy to slip English words into a sentence without any sense of switching.

Theme 2: Saraiki as Intimacy and Regional Pride

Saraiki-speaking participants reported using their mother tongue mainly in private WhatsApp chats, in family groups, and in jokes shared with close friends. They described Saraiki as warm, funny, and "ours." At the same time, several admitted that they avoided Saraiki in public Instagram captions because they feared appearing "rural" or "less educated." A male BS student explained that he used Saraiki words "with friends who will get the joke, not with everyone" (P37). Others, however, deliberately used Saraiki hashtags as a statement of regional pride, especially during cultural events.

Theme 3: English as an Aspirational and Academic Register

English was associated with education, careers, and global audiences. Participants used English in LinkedIn-style posts, in captions on achievements, and in academic WhatsApp groups. One PhD student remarked that English "makes the post look serious" (P52), while a BS student said she chose English captions on Instagram because her followers included students from other provinces and abroad. Participants also described English as a way of signaling that they belonged to the university community.

Theme 4: Religious and Cultural Formulas as Identity Anchors

Expressions such as "InshaAllah," "MashaAllah," and "JazakAllah" appeared across all platforms and in posts written in every script. Interviewees described these expressions as automatic and as part of who they are rather than as a deliberate choice. Even in otherwise English posts, a religious formula was said to keep the message "grounded" (P08). This helps to explain why the item on religious expressions received the highest mean score in the questionnaire.

Theme 5: Audience Design across Platforms

All participants described changing their language according to the platform and the people likely to read a post. WhatsApp family groups attracted more Urdu and regional words, Instagram more English and hashtags, and TikTok more playful mixing and sound-based humor. Several female participants explained that they paid particular attention to how different audiences, including relatives and teachers, might interpret their posts, and that they mixed languages to strike a balance between being

friendly and being respectable. This account offers a possible explanation for the higher translanguaging frequency reported by female students.

Discussion

This study examined how university students in southern Punjab translanguage on social media and how these practices relate to digital identity. Overall, the findings confirm that translanguaging is not an occasional feature of students' online writing but its normal condition: seven out of ten posts combined resources from more than one language, script, or mode. This result is consistent with the observation by Ahmad et al. (2023) that Pakistani postgraduate students mix English, Urdu, and local languages extensively online, and it supports the view that bilingual users draw on one integrated repertoire rather than on separate languages (Li & García, 2022). The dominance of Roman Urdu mixed with English (RQ1) deserves particular attention. Roman Urdu occupies a space between the two official languages: it uses the Latin alphabet associated with English while carrying the grammar and vocabulary of Urdu. Students described it as the script that best represents their spoken voice. This finding illustrates the point made by Tagg and Lyons (2022) that users creatively adapt technology to suit their needs, since Roman Urdu is in large part a product of keyboard design and speed. It also challenges the assumption that digital writing in Pakistan is a simple choice between English and Urdu.

With regard to functions (RQ2), the prominence of affective expression and humor echoes Dovchin's (2021) finding that translanguaging provides an emotionally safe space for expressing feelings that may be difficult to voice in a single standard language. The frequent use of religious formulas points to a culturally specific dimension of translanguaging in Pakistan, where faith-based expressions function as markers of moral identity across languages and scripts. The academic function shows that students also use translanguaging to organize their studies, which aligns with Cenoz and Gorter's (2020) argument that spontaneous translanguaging can provide a foundation for pedagogical translanguaging. The strong correlation between translanguaging frequency and digital identity performance (RQ3) supports the claim that language choice online is a form of identity work. Students who translanguage more often also feel that their online language expresses who they are, presents them as educated and modern, and allows them to belong to local and global communities at the same time. In terms of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2023), students appear to invest in English for academic and professional capital, in Urdu for national and everyday belonging, and in Saraiki or Punjabi for intimacy and regional loyalty. Translanguaging allows them to hold these investments together rather than choose among them.

At the same time, students' attitudes toward translanguaging were noticeably lower than their reported practice. Many still doubted whether mixing languages was legitimate or whether it might weaken their English. This tension reflects the ambivalent status of Urdu and English described by Ashraf (2023) and the persistence of monolingual folk beliefs identified by Manan and David (2021). It also reflects the reluctance of some Saraiki speakers to use their mother tongue in public posts, which supports Sah and Kubota's (2022) warning that translanguaging can coexist with, and sometimes conceal, the marginalization of regional languages. Regarding group differences (RQ4), female students reported more frequent translanguaging than male students. Interview accounts suggest that this may be related to careful audience management, since women described balancing friendliness with respectability for mixed audiences that include relatives and teachers. This interpretation is tentative and requires further investigation with larger samples. The absence of differences across first-language groups indicates that translanguaging is a shared campus practice, which is consistent with the polymedia perspective that practices are shaped as much by platforms and audiences as by individual linguistic background (Androutsopoulos, 2021).

Implications

The findings have several implications. For university teachers, students' online practices show that they already possess rich multilingual and multimodal skills. Teachers can draw on these skills by allowing students to brainstorm in Urdu or regional languages, to compare Roman Urdu and English versions of a text, or to analyze their own posts as a basis for discussing register and audience. Such activities are in line with the principles of pedagogical translanguaging (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020) and with calls for more inclusive language education (Li, 2024). For curriculum designers, the study suggests a need to include digital literacy and critical language awareness in English and communication courses, so that students can reflect on how their language choices position them online. For policy makers, the visible but cautious use of Saraiki indicates that regional languages remain socially valuable to young people, and that university language policies could recognize this value more explicitly. Finally, for researchers, the study demonstrates the advantage of combining survey, corpus, and interview data in order to capture both perception and practice.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample of 60 students from a single university limits the generalizability of the findings, and the "Other" first-language group was very small. Second, participants selected the posts they shared, which

may have led them to exclude very private or controversial material. Third, the questionnaire relied on self-report and was developed for this study; further validation through confirmatory factor analysis with larger samples is recommended. Fourth, the high correlations among subscales suggest some conceptual overlap that future studies should examine. Future research could compare universities across regions, follow students' online practices over time, examine voice notes and video content in greater detail, and test classroom interventions that build on students' digital translanguaging.

Conclusion

This study has shown that translanguaging is a central and meaningful feature of how students at The Islamia University of Bahawalpur communicate on social media. Students combine Roman Urdu, English, Urdu script, Saraiki, Punjabi, religious formulas, and visual resources to express emotion, create humor, build solidarity, share academic information, and present themselves to different audiences. Translanguaging frequency was strongly linked to digital identity performance, and female students reported translanguaging more often than male students. Yet students' attitudes remained more cautious than their practice, reflecting the continuing influence of monolingual ideologies and the uneven status of regional languages. Recognising translanguaging as a legitimate resource rather than as a sign of deficiency would allow Pakistani higher education to build on the multilingual creativity that students already display in their everyday digital lives.

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