



The Language of Pakistani TikTok Stars: Discourse Analysis of Youth Identity and Digital Fame

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ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>The aim of this research is to analyze the linguistic and discursive activities of Pakistani TikTok influencers to gain insights into how the youth construct and negotiate the concepts of identity and digital celebrity vis-a-vis social media. Using discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, the study investigates a purposive sample of TikTok videos, captions, and comments from 18 to 30 year-old popular content creators. Emphasis was placed on the participants' language use, code-switching from Urdu to English and other local vernaculars, laughter, gender expression, and branding. The outcomes of the study suggest that the identities of youths undergo continuous transformation through the intricate interplay of local cultural elements and global digital phenomena, where language serves as one of the instruments to construct solicited authenticity, relatability, and social capital. Another finding illustrated in the study is that digital fame is profoundly associated with an individual's class, aesthetic preferences, and visibility through algorithms. Discussing Pakistani TikTok stars in the context of contemporary youth culture and media convergence allows us to better understand the discourse of Pakistanis in context of the growing digital discourse studies and study how language, identity, and technology interact in South Asia.</i>
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Introduction

Emerging TikTok trends mark a drastic change in the media world, as youth can now gain visibility and have limitless opportunities to express themselves with the help of self-broadcasting, identity construction, and social interaction. TikTok serves as a platform that harnesses the creative potential of self-promotion to social commentary. Content creation from Pakistan is especially

interesting, as a huge chunk of young people below thirty (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017) are using it. The action through the app allows users to interact, and take part as creators using language, gesture, music, visual mediums, and many more. This TikTok content helps build fame as-users shaped digital personas.

Content creators on TikTok use specific vocabularies, which helps them strengthen social ties while gaining a sense of belongingness to youth culture. These terms encompass slang, humor, regional expressions, and code switching that appeals to both local and global audiences. Research has shown that digital platforms both reflect and construct the sociolinguistic reality (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Tagg et al., 2017). Social media in a multilingual country like Pakistan where many English, Urdu, Punjabi, and Sindhi are used interchangeably provided a platform to showcase identity and culture, portraying a whole different aspiring face of youth identity (Mahboob & Talaat, 2008).

Lower-middle class and working context refers to the socio economic status of many Pakistani tiktok stars. These rise to internet fame entails not simply popularity, but symbolic capital based on societal access to media, hierarchy of language, and class (Bourdieu, 1991; Banaji, 2018). Furthermore, the visibility and performative nature of social media when checked through the lens of TikTok, alters traditional conceptions of celebrity in allowing youngsters to bypass intermediaries and connect with the audience in an unfiltered, humorous, and emotionally laden manner (Abidin, 2016).

Within South Asia, and particularly Pakistan, the scholarly discourse surrounding TikTok is almost nonexistent despite its widespread usage. The Pakistani social media studies focusing on informal Twitter activism Zia & Syedah, 2021, political discourse Ali, 2020, and online female participation Ijaz & Mumtaz, 2020, largely dominate the field. However, the discursive and linguistic considerations of its youth in respect of identity and fame through TikTok remain unexplored. This research utilizes this gap by studying how popular Pakistani TikTok stars utilize loosely defined concepts of language and discourse to perform and construct identity, negotiate societal standards, and navigate through digitally enabled visibility.

This study expands the intersection of language, youth culture, and media technologies in modern Pakistan as it seeks to reinterpret and analyze discourses around youth in Pakistan through the lens of sociolinguistics. It also analyzes how young people negotiate digital society and enact power, normativity, and identity using mundane talk.

Rationale of the Study

TikTok has become one of the most engaging cultural phenomena among the youth that allows them to construct and express their identities through short videos. In Pakistan, where young people below 30 years of age constitute a large percentage of the population, TikTok functions as a platform for entertainment, economic mobility, fame, social validation, and self-expression. The language used by Pakistani TikTok influencers captures the intricate realities of aspiring to social classes, code switching, and performing gender along with the glocalization cultures.

As of now, the sociolinguistic analysis of youth in Pakistan and south-Asian digital cultures still lacks attention, which brings us to the analysis of the constituent parts of identity and the construction of TikTok celebrity. The current study proposes to investigate language use among Pakistani TikTok celebrities and their fans, analyzing various degrees of fan engagement as a manifestation of shifting loyalty in fandom as a social movement.

The widely spread availability of smartphones and other tech gadgets coupled with the spike in the use of its social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the exposure of contemporary youth to the different aspects of culture in the modern world.

Problem Statement

As a social media application, TikTok has become hugely popular amongst youth in Pakistan as a platform where they can showcase their creativity, socialize, and market themselves. However, the linguistic practices and discursive strategies of TikTok stars who belong to different socio-economic and regional demographics are not well captured in available scholarly literature. Literature is available on political discourse or activism on Twitter and Facebook, yet there is no focused study on how young people use language on TikTok as a medium to construct and negotiate language, identity, authenticity, and fame. This contradiction demonstrates the insufficient understanding of social media's influence on contemporary Pakistani culture and youth sociolinguistics. There is, thus, an urgent need to analyze the language of TikTok influencers to understand how discourse shapes youth identity, class, and social capital in the digital age.

Research Queries

1. In what ways do Pakistani TikTok stars use language to construct and perform youth identity in their videos?
2. What is the impact of code-switching, slang, and vernacular language use in the online persona relatability of TikTok influencers in Pakistan?
3. How is digital fame constructed in discourse through the language used to describe interactions (comments, captions, dialogues) on Pakistani TikTok accounts?

Literature Review

1. Digital Platforms and Youth Identities

The fusion of digital technology with the sociological and media studies lenses in regard to young people has emerged as an important focus of study as youth identity integrates with the media. Platforms like TikTok function as participatory culture spaces where young users create identities, assert social roles, and engage in cultural production (Buckingham, 2008; boyd, 2014). Multimodal practices which include issues of culture, language, performance, visuals, and sound allow youth to culturally obey, resist, affirm, or navigate dominant socio-cultural and linguistic structures. In the domain of youth cultures, Leppänen et al. (2014) speak of hybridity and playful discursive strategies that enable users to forge potentially ironic, aspirational, or transgressive identities as hallmark features of digital culture.

Banaji (2018) notes that social media has emerged as an important source of visibility and symbolic capital for marginalized youth in South Asia. In the context of Pakistan, TikTok provides an unprecedented space out of which young people can contest and challenge entrenched upper class urban, middle class rural, and sophisticated language/class divisions (Iqbal & Zia, 2021). These formations of identity are multilayered in nature and therefore complex as they are deeply situated in local sociocultural frameworks and global digital influences.

2. Digital Spaces Discourse and Fame

Fame or celebrity status as defined by social media shifts to what Abidin (2016) terms "microcelebrity." In this phenomenon, self-branding, affective labor, and self-promotion are

methods used to garner followers. Words, as expressed in their performative aspects, play a primary role since they constitute both communication and positioning and identity negotiation with a given audience (Marwick, 2013). Influencers rely on storytelling and have a firm grasp of humor and emotions to achieve relatability and to influence (Page, 2012).

As for TikTok, its algorithm promotes content that is engaging, localized, and emotionally charged. This changes how creators craft their linguistic and behavioral identities. Viral content on TikTok often features a blend of linguistic playfulness and visual creativity, dominantly highlighting the discourse towards fame and virality in the digital space (Zhang, 2020). Pakistani TikTok stars systematically employ regional vernacular, memes, and humor which enable them to resonate with their audience and increase their popularity (Ali & Sadaf, 2022).

3. Code Switching And Linguistic Practices In South Asia

Like any other country, social media in Pakistan exists within a unique language ecology where Urdu is spoken alongside English and other regional languages. Thus, code-switching, a sociolinguistic hallmark of Pakistani youth, is executed not merely as a functional practice but as an expression of style and identity (Mahboob and Talaat, 2008). On TikTok, for example, diaspora creators commonly switch between using English and Urdu (Urglish), or mix in dialects of Punjabi, Sindhi, or Pashto for broader audience engagement or expression of cultural specificity (Rehman & Jabeen, 2022).

Such intertwining of various forms of a language or multiple languages is what Androutsopoulos (2015) refers to as “networked multilingualism.” This term encapsulates the increasing fluidity of ethnic and local reference languages in expression of digital discourse. In this defining context, language transcends the purpose of communication, and transforms into an action that conveys identity, affiliation groups, or cultural capital for identification. The integration of Urdu and English alongside blending different dialects alongside inclusion regional slang constructs a rich discourse that expresses the multifaceted reality of youth identity.

4. The Gendered and Classed Dimensions of TikTok Discourse

As with other social media platforms, TikTok fame in Pakistan is culture-bound within discourses of gender, class, and respectability. Ijaz and Mumtaz (2020) have noted how female TikTok users face greater scrutiny regarding their appearance and manner of expression than men. This shows women are marginalized on the digital platform. Furthermore, many viral male creators on the platform come from the working class. Their use of humor and satire alongside relatable storytelling subverts existing media hierarchies that prefer elite accents and urban aesthetics. These trends may be understood as digital acts of resistance or self-assertion (Shah & Riaz, 2021).

With regard to language, such choices become intertwined with issues of class, morality, and politics. As Bourdieu (1991) notes, linguistic capital is not equally distributed, some forms of speech are accentuated, whereas others are marginalized. Pakistani TikTok stars operate within these constraints, and strategically within the boundaries of social mobility and the preservation of authenticity. Their speech embodies aspiration and authenticity. Such strategically crafted speech is part of a digital persona that impacts audience perception.

5. Discourse Analysis in TikTok Studies

Discourse analysis offers an interdisciplinary method for understanding the interplay of language, identity, and power. Gee (2011) considers that discourse analysis opens pathways for appreciating the sociolinguistic framing of identities via language within social action. In TikTok studies, this perspective has been used in the analysis of hashtags (Zulli & Zulli, 2020), kinesics (Savic, 2022),

and narration (Vásquez, 2021). Nonetheless, there has been a gap looking at the discourse of TikTok creators across non-Western regions, especially in Pakistan where the socio-economic environment influences the availability of technology, literacy, and language use.

This research responds to that gap by adopting a discourse-analytic framework to multimodal forms of text in Pakistani TikTok videos, including audio, captions, hashtags, and comments, to analyze how young people construct an identity and seek social acceptance. Thus, this work advances understanding of digital discourse in South Asian contexts and adds to the discourse on social media culture in the region.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative discourse analysis to explore the language practices of Pakistani TikTok stars in relation to youth identity construction and digital stardom. Primary data were sourced from a purposive sample of 30 viral TikTok videos posted by Pakistani influencers from 2022 to 2024, ensuring diversity in gender, region, and social class. The videos were transcribed for subsequent analysis through multimodal discourse analysis, emphasizing various communicative dimensions, including: language (code-switching, slang, and humor), non-verbal communication (tone, facial expression, gesture), and written discourse (captions, hashtags, and comments). Data from comments and public profiles of followers helped to construct context relevant to social audience engagement and the creators' social standing. Coding and organization of data into themes were done using NVivo, which aided with the visualized patterning of discourse indicative of identity performance and strategies for claiming celebrity status.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the works of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) and combines Goffman's (1959) Theory of Self-Presentation with Discourse and Identity Framework by Gee (2011). Multimodal Discourse Analysis enables the study of how different semiotic resources such as language, visuals, performances, and sounds come together to form meaning on TikTok. With regard to TikTok, Goffman's theory offers understanding on the management of impression and construction of identities through repeated performance and audience engagement. Gee's approach takes care of how "Discourses" (with capitalization) are deployed to perform identity and social roles. All these theories balance one another and provide foundation to examine how performative and linguistic practices shift the identity of young people and their aspiration to be famous in the context of social media in Pakistan.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Using NVivo for data analysis, a number of TikTok videos and the comment sections of selected Pakistani influencers produced homogeneous themes. These themes showcased three predominant patterns of discourse: (1) Strategic Code-Switching and Identities Assertion, (2) Fame Through Humor and Relatability, and (3) Performative Authenticity alongside Youthful Defiance.

1. Strategic Code-Switching and Identity Assertion

A number of stars on TikTok frequently switch between speaking in Urdu, English, and other vernaculars (Punjabi, Pashto) within a breath or two. The code-switching was systematic rather than free. As an example, one of the female influencers used blended pert with English slang which signified, "Bhai, I'm literally done with this drama, okay?" illustrating the signification of socio-ethnic mobility. She was marking herself as a particular type of urban youth. This multilingualism echoes what Gee (2011) refer to as 'Discourses' which show membership to

specific groups. It indicates that crossing boundaries of dialect is a resource for Pakistani youth to assert their globalized identity while simultaneously signaling a rooted local identity.

2. Humor and Relatability as Fame Catalysts

Another strategy of discourse that was noted was the use of laughter combined with self-deprecation, imitation, or even mimicking everyday desi life (i.e., overprotective mothers, exam stress, or love failures). Their stories were offered with exaggerated expression and catchy audio, and many young viewers responded with slang words in addition to emojis. Expressions such as “same yaar,” “relatable AF,” as well as praise such as “this is my life in a video!” were common. The employment of colloquial language with eye-catching dramatics adds to the shared digital culture of youth across the globe. This idea supports Goffman (1959) was “performances,” where digitally famous people, or creators, deliberately put themselves into the public domain to attract validation and emotional engagement, crowded with hopes of elevating their digital fame.

3. Performative Authenticity and Youthful Resistance

Some TikTokers attempted to portray themselves as “real” by exhibiting vulnerabilities like mental health issues and academic pressure, or resisting gender and class stereotypes. A male TikTok venting about his frustration with being educated yet jobless received a lot of supportive empathic comments. Such acts of digital storytelling challenge the typical narratives about youth promoted in mainstream media. They correlate with the postmodern concept of authenticity as performance, where being “relatable” and “vulnerable” plays a role in the acclaim economy. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) claim, “discourse in several modes of canonically distinct media serves not only a speculative sociopolitical purpose, but serves, in these settings, as a medium of youth resistance and social commentary”.

The Pakistani TikTok stars try to ‘perform’ their identities as emerging influencers that are still aspirational yet deeply entrenched in their sociocultural surroundings through the lens of language, tone, visuals, and stories. This suggests that there is greater fame attached to being relatable as opposed to celebrity-like aesthetics. Using a socio-cultural lens, these TikTok stars transform the aesthetics of influence, reframing the narrative of youth in Pakistan’s digital ecosystem into one that they as young users shape.

Discussion

The study conducted regarding language practices of Pakistani TikTok influencers shows that social media platforms provide important opportunities for young people to construct and negotiate their identities in a way that helps them attain fame. From my data, I identified three main findings: the sociolinguistic strategies of multilingual code-switching, enactment of humor and everyday authenticity, and the performance of resistance through digital storytelling.

As expected, most TikTok stars engaged in crossing or code-switching between multiple languages, a trait I observed in my study. Their use of a combination of Urdu, English, and regional languages demonstrates the existence of a youth identity that is global yet local. TikTok stars’ switching of languages to Urdu, English, and local dialects is a marker of cosmopolitanism—sociability and social mobility—along with deep rootedness to culture. This supports the argument in Canagarajah (2006) about “translingual practice,” where speakers are viewed as active agents who maneuver language to achieve identity tension within a multilingual setting. The bilingual and multilingual blending captures the strategic essence intended for building an identity image which is favorable to different audiences.

Secondly, humor, parody, and relatability were vital to the content that sent influencers to the heights of fame. The evidence indicated that comedic sketches depicting the hardships of middle-class Pakistani youth, such as academic stress, romantic mishaps, and generational conflicts, received not only shares but also positive feedback from followers. Such narratives enable creators to cultivate parasocial interactions with their audiences, meaning that followers tend to feel some connection to the influencer. The portrayal of mundane life struggles, albeit in an exaggerated yet authentic voice, helps build solidarity and social closeness, which are pivotal for success within platform economies (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Thirdly, the study found that a number of TikTok stars employed performative authenticity and soft resistance by deviating from established gender, success, and self-expression norms. Both male and female influencers took to the platform to address sensitive issues like unemployment, mental health, and personal vulnerabilities—discussions that Pakistani mainstream media does not entertain. Such narratives serve as a form of counter resistance to dominating discourses that silence youth. Applying Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, these narratives can be framed as performances that are both scripted and unscripted, illustrating identity construction under the assumption of an audience residing in a digital space.

As a whole, the results illustrate that TikTok acts as a platform for the Pakistani teenagers as they try and construct their identity, language, and self-image to be seen and impact others. Locally available technologies integrated with the TV and internet provided a unique space that fame could be earned not just through traditional means of glitz and showbiz, but also through clever and expressive use of language, social relevance, and self-branding. This work adds to the emerging scholarship in South Asia that considers the role of digital media platforms as important sites of youth culture, identity, and oppositional discourse.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Pakistani TikTok influencers wield language in the performance of identity construction and the achievement of fame digitally with respect to their youth. A discourse analysis of the text from these influencers' videos was conducted. It was discovered that influencers employ humor, performative authenticity, and code-switching as the most critical and social and interactional techniques. Through multilingual storytelling and culturally relevant frameworks, TikTok creators navigate identities that simultaneously grapple with local contexts and global possibilities. In addition, the performances they project in the digital space often serve to subvert dominant narratives about Pakistanis youth, articulating concerns around class mobility, gender, and societal expectations. Examination of the discourse of these influencers reveals, through the reliance on social media platforms, the youth in Pakistan experience a growing construction and adoption of new cultures and identities resulting from the fast-changing technologies.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Cross-platform Analysis: Future studies might carry out a comparative discourse analysis of Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and SnackVideo to examine how identity expression and language use change across platforms.
2. Gender and Identity Politics: Further research may address the intersectional aspects of digital stardom focusing on how male and female influencers engage with sociocultural tension and risk in Pakistan.

3. Analysis of Audience Reception: This study concentrated on the influencer narrative, but further research should consider integrating audience commentary and engagement to analyze how followers appreciate or contest the identity frameworks of TikTok celebrities.
4. Longitudinal Studies: A longitudinal strategy could examine TikTok's vocabulary, themes, and influencer characterization over time to understand how youth identity and celebrity shifts with the state of social media, politics, and other sociocultural factors.
5. Intersectional Analysis: Analysts could investigate how other region-based, ethnic, religious, and class identities frame Pakistani youth identity within TikTok discourse to provide contextual multi-dimensional layers of identity construction among youth in Pakistan.

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