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DIGITAL LANGUAGE INNOVATION: AN ANALYSIS OF AGE BASED DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

The online interaction has turned out to be a major locus of linguistic difference in the digital era, and there has been renewed discussion regarding the applicability of conventional generational model to language change. This paper explores the role of digital communication in language innovation among the different age categories in Pakistan, specifically among younger and older digital adults. The research interprets the discourse of social media use among a purposively chosen group of sixty Pakistani social media users, half of whom are younger adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty, and the other half are older adults between the ages of forty and above, using a descriptive comparative mixed methods design. The data is a collection of English and Urdu English messages posted on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Quantitative analysis analyzes how often and how frequently linguistic innovations, such as abbreviations, acronyms, slang, emojis, and informal syntactic structures, take place. Qualitative analysis examines the functioning of these features within particular social situations, and the resultant identification of their meanings, positioning of identity, and latent language ideologies. The discussion is based on Labovian sociolinguistics, language ideology theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the intersection of age and identity with power in digital communication. The results indicate that there is a well-defined generation gap in online language use. The use of innovative linguistic forms is much more pronounced among younger users, who use them to establish the position, develop social relationships, and execute digital identities. By comparison, older users express more interest in standardised language, which indicates a more serious interest in clarity, correctness and formality. These trends not only confirm Labov in his explanation of youth-initiated linguistic evolution but also reveal people of different generations with opposite attitudes to the use of language in online contexts. In general, the analysis reveals that digital interaction reconfigures familiar patterns of linguistic transformation and becomes one of the primary arenas where age based identity bargaining takes place. Longitudinal analysis, more representative demographic, and more detailed scrutiny of the emergent multimodal platforms should be included in future studies.

Keywords: *Online Interaction, Language Innovation, Generational Differences, Social Media Discourse, Digital Identities, Critical Discourse Analysis*

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1.Introduction

Language is a dynamic process that changes with time according to the social, cultural, educational and technological factors (Abdulla, 2023). Language, instead of being fixed, is constantly evolving to indicate societal changes and the modes of interaction (Crystal, 1992). Change in language happens between generations and in every community. New forms of speaking and writing are commonly introduced by younger speakers and become gradually integrated into the mainstream of use, whereas the older generations contribute to the formation and regulation of these changes. As this process shows, the change in language is a universal phenomenon that works within any society, not depending on historical or geographical context (Abdulla, 2023).

Interpersonal communication patterns have also evolved. In the past, communication occurred either face to face or by way of a written message. However, with the advent of digital media, the manner in which individuals communicate and share information has changed significantly (Duck and McMahan, 2009). Social media, blogs and online forums have created instant and interactive communicative channels where users can experiment with language, develop new expressions and modify existing forms in novel ways (Ashraf, 2025). The spread of linguistic innovations in these digital spaces is fast, which makes language change processes faster than they could be in the past. Consequently, technological mediation is transforming traditional courses of language development (Ashraf, 2025).

Communication technologies are supposed to facilitate social connection, but different age groups use them differently. The younger generation, commonly referred to as digital natives since they have been surrounded by digital technologies since the early years, are more likely to embrace new platforms and ways of communicating. They prefer instant messaging, online chats, and apps like Instagram, WhatsApp, and Snapchat to

interact with each other and create content on a daily basis. Conversely, older people, also known as digital immigrants, were also exposed to digital technologies later in life and may take longer to cope with new platforms. They tend to purposefully utilize more established platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn, especially in professional or socially organized communication (Kesharwani, 2020; Wang et al., 2019). The digital immigrants are not averse to technology, but their usage behavior, preferences, and perceptions towards digital communications vary compared to younger generations (Kesharwani, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to explore age related change in language of digital innovations by analyzing the adaptation of various generational cohorts in online situations. In particular, it investigates whether younger generations exhibit unique linguistic patterns such as the use of new lexical units, informal grammatical forms, and code mixing and whether older generations retain more standardised and traditional language patterns. This analysis will evaluate whether the traditional sociolinguistic frameworks on gradual and intergenerational language change are still relevant in the digital era, or whether digitally mediated communication has offered new forms of dynamics that question the traditional perspectives on linguistic change.

2.Literature review

Researchers from the past decade have established that digital platforms serve as a powerful tool for lexical innovation in English, fundamentally altering the mechanisms by which new words are coined, adapted, and shared across different generations. Analysis of different social media datasets reveals that online platforms offer a unique setting for lexical diffusion, often condensing historical language change timelines into observable, short-term cycles (Grieve, 2019; Maybaum, 2022). For instance, new terms erupt and spread not only over different countries but also in trends that can be tracked in real time often propelled through social networks by influential users in classic patterns of adoption (Tarrade et al., 2024). These findings confirm that digital interaction is far rather than a modern medium. It is an active accelerant and leveraging visibility to reshape our lexicon at an unprecedented pace.

Global research shows the English language is in a state of exhilarating expansion, intensified by processes like clipping, borrowing, and semantic shift (Ibrahim, 2024). Younger generations like Gen Z, are prominent agents of these variations, using slang, abbreviations, and emojis.

Comparative studies consistently show that these users innovate at a markedly higher frequency, than older generations who tend to adhere to more conventional lexical

forms (Dijkstra et al., 2021; Gimenes et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the viral life of a new word may depend less on the age of its users and more on their social reach, revealing that network centrality can rival generation as a force for linguistic spread (Tarrade et al., 2024).

International narrative finds a rich and distinctive parallel in Pakistan, where digital communication vibrates with sociolinguistic energy. Pakistani users' digital communication shows widespread context-specific slang, English-Urdu code mixing, and creative borrowing (Anwar, 2024; Jahan, 2021). Local influencers and different celebrities often act as linguistic pioneers who cascade through youth networks (Sajid & Hussain, 2023). Pakistani students adopt symbolic practices and neologisms, and they anchor them in bilingual frameworks and local identity (Science Impact, 2023). Older, digital immigrant users in Pakistan often exhibit a more conservative online lexicon, adopting only the most entrenched digital shorthand while maintaining traditional language structures (Rashid, 2018).

Researchers comparing older and younger users of digital media reveal that Gen Z demonstrates higher familiarity with emerging internet slang, while older users may adopt some popular digital expressions. Researchers believe that digital language is evolving into its own unique registers, influenced by youth and social media norms, instead of traditional language rules. It led to concerns about intergenerational communication and mutual understanding (Marzona, 2025).

In the Pakistani context, where English is frequently mixed with local languages and Urdu influences digital lexical innovation. Studies reveal that young Pakistanis often mix Urdu words, idioms, and cultural references into their English online communication, using language as a way to express their identity, culture, and connect with others (Anwar et al., 2024).

The existing research landscape is methodological constraints. Pakistani research often relies on narrow convenience-based samples frequently university-based students which limits the broader applicability of results (Anwar, 2024; Science Impact, 2023).

Focusing solely on Facebook or Twitter may overlook significant linguistic activity or miss the bulk of the action happening on WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram, where people from all walks of life are actively shaping language. Even the most comprehensive studies struggle to capture the full picture, as Twitter trends don't always reflect real-world demographic patterns. A major difficulty in research is telling apart temporary online trends from lasting changes in language. It is very hard to know if a new word or phrase is a fad or the future without looking at the long term (Grieve, 2019; Jahan, 2021). For instance, Age is linked to many other factors like digital literacy, educational

background, and socioeconomic status, so it's hard to figure out what is a generational difference (Tarrade et al.,2024).These limitations converge to reveal a pronounced research gap. Prior work confirms that digital media changes how we use language, but we don't know enough about how different age groups in Pakistan are driving this change. The study explores how people of different ages use English and Urdu in their online communication or interactions. This study would elucidate how different age groups in Pakistan produce, interpret, and sustain English lexical innovations.

2.1. Research Objectives

1. 1.To identify and compare the lexical choices used by young adults and older adults on different social media platforms.
2. 2.To explore the generational attitudes toward the use of digital lexical innovations and the use of standard versus non-standard digital language in social media communication.

2.2. Research Questions

1. 1.What types of digital lexical innovations are used by young adults and older adults on social media?
2. 2.How do younger and older users perceive digital lexical innovations and the use of standard and non-standard digital language in online contexts?

3.Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive–comparative research design to investigate age-based differences in digital language innovation on social media platforms. This design enabled a systematic comparison between young adults (digital natives) and older adults (digital immigrants) in their use of lexical innovations such as abbreviations, slang, acronyms, and emojis.

A mixed-methods approach was employed to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the data.

Quantitative analysis was used to measure the frequency and types of lexical innovations.

Qualitative analysis was conducted to explore patterns, contexts, and social meanings associated with these innovations in online communication.

3.1. Research Approach

The study followed a descriptive and analytical approach. Descriptive methods were used to identify and categorize lexical innovations, while analytical comparisons were made to highlight age-based differences. The integration of quantitative and qualitative analyses provided a deeper understanding of how digital language is used and interpreted by different generations.

3.2. Population and Sample

The target population comprised Pakistani social media users who actively communicate in English or English–Urdu mixed discourse. Participants were divided into two age-based groups:

- Group A – Young Adults (Digital Natives): 18–30 years
- Group B – Older Adults (Digital Immigrants): 40 years and above

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants were active users of social media platforms and capable of providing relevant linguistic data. The sample consisted of 60 participants, with 30 individuals in each group, to maintain balance and enhance the reliability of the findings.

3.3. Data Sources

Data were collected from participants' online communication across the following social media platforms:

- WhatsApp chats
- Instagram posts and comments
- Facebook posts and comments
- Twitter posts and tweets

These platforms were selected because they are widely used by both age groups and offer rich linguistic material suitable for analyzing digital language innovations.

3.4. Data Collection Tools

3.4.1. Digital Text Corpus

A digital text corpus was compiled from participants' online communication. The corpus included posts, messages, and comments containing lexical innovations, with particular focus on features such as abbreviations (e.g., LOL, BRB), slang, acronyms, emojis, and informal grammatical structures.

3.4.2. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Participants' personal identifiers were anonymized to ensure confidentiality and privacy. All collected data were used solely for academic research purposes, and no harm—physical, psychological, or social—was caused to any participant during the study.

4.Data Analysis

Digital communication is not just about sharing words, but about putting identities out there in real-time. This study examines how different generations in Pakistan are shaping, pushing back against, and redefining language in digital platforms. By comparing how different generations innovate with words, how age and ideology interplay to create unique digital vibes, it shows that language change is a dynamic, socially-constructed process.

The work combines numbers and narrative to examine how different age groups in Pakistan innovate with digital language. By using theories from sociolinguistics (Labov), language ideology, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to unfold what these language patterns give a message about identity, tech use, and power dynamics between the old and young generations in digital platforms.

4.1. Quantitative analysis

The digital communication in Pakistan shows intergenerational language gaps. The analysis of different social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter) reveals that users aged 18 to 30 are considerably more likely to use slang, abbreviations (e.g. "BRB" and "LOL" etc), acronyms (e.g., "BTW," and "TBH" etc), and emojis in their digital communications.

5.Lexical category	**Young group (18-30)**	**Older group (40+..)**
Slang	15	3
Abbreviations	10	5
Acronyms	12	2
Emojis	8	2
Informal grammar	15	2
Total	60	14

Table -1

The quantitative analysis clearly reveals the significant differences between young age groups(18-30) and older age groups (40+..) in their adoption of new digital

expressions. Younger users tend to show higher frequencies of slang, abbreviations, acronyms, and emoji usage ahead in all areas. (Table 1)

Young adults are the language trend setters. Table 1 indicates that young adults are significantly more advanced in using slang (by 5 times) and acronyms (by 6 times) compared to older adults. Older adults tend to maintain traditional language norms and values. This supports Labov's theory that young people initiate language change, and it subsequently spreads.

Digital platforms have their own lexical innovation styles

Platforms	**Feature**	**Younger group (%)**	**Older group (%)**
WhatsApp	Slang	30%	10%
	Emojis	40 %	15%
Instagram	Slang	25%	8%
Twitter	Acronyms	20%	2%
Facebook	Slang	20%	12%

Table – 2

The results in Table 2 show that every category of digital innovation is more significantly employed by the young groups.

The digital world in Pakistan is experiencing a cohort gap in language. Young adults are the primary pioneers of a new, informal digital lexicon, eagerly integrating text shortcuts like "TBH", "IDK", and deploying emojis as multifaceted tools, sarcasm, humor, and expression. For instance, older groups navigate similar platforms with more measured and traditional linguistic norms, often selecting for straightforward communication. This isn't just a minor thing but it is a clear shift that the very grammar of digital communication is being rewritten by the younger adults, while elders preserve the traditional language style.

4.2.Qualitative analysis

Digital language isn't just about words but it is a social signal. The data reveals a clear generational difference in how people craft their online communication.

Younger users incline toward emojis, informal terms, and playful language blends (like saying "scene on hai ", "assignment done", and "chill scene"). For younger adults, these choices are less about linguistic norms and more about persona, sharing humor, and constructing relations. Older adults often employ formal, prescriptive language, often avoiding trendy acronyms, emojis, and slang. A post like "Assalamualaikum, wishing everyone an amazing week" shows a priority on precision and linguistic value.

These examples show that digital interaction is a purposeful engagement, framing digital arenas as domains of age cohort dialogue where linguistic innovation for social bonding conflicts with the maintenance of traditional standards.

4.3.Framework based analysis

From a quantitative sociolinguistic perspective, age serves as an essential social factor conditioning patterned language variation (Labov, 2001). The findings reveal that young adults (18–30) make a higher frequency of unconventional digital features, such as slang and acronyms, reflecting generational differentiation and youth-driven linguistic evolution. Comparatively older users primarily maintain standardized forms, thereby functioning as maintainers of traditional language standards.

From a critical discourse analytical lens, communicative patterns expose underlying beliefs and social hierarchies (Fairclough, 1995). Younger users tend to perceive informal and blended digital language as creative and situationally suitable, while older users tend to equate standard linguistic norms with accuracy, conventionalization, and formal norms. Within Pakistan's bilingual environment, language ideology theory helps explain the widespread adoption of English–Urdu code-mixing and Romanized Urdu among younger speakers, who employ these practices to assert social identity and signal global connectedness. In contrast, older users typically uphold linguistic distinctions. Collectively, these frameworks suggest that digital lexical innovation functions as an arena of social negotiation and social identity development, rather than as evidence of communicative degradation.

Findings align neatly into Labovian theory, which explains the age difference in digital language use. The conflict between younger users' innovative, playful language and older adults' conventional norms reflects differing language ideologies. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals power interaction at play, where youth are challenging traditional language norms, while older users enforce them. It's a dynamic that seen before – like "Ok boomer" vs guardians of propriety, where younger generation drive change and older generation maintain traditional norms.

4.4. Theoretical discussion

The digital linguistic conventions observed among Pakistani users indicate key sociocultural dynamics of language change. First, youth adoption of slang and emojis fuses global internet standards emphasizing speed and creativity (Crystal, 2011).In the local context, using such innovations as indicators of modernity and in-group bonding.

Second, these practices fit with identity construction theory, where slang denotes peer-group differentiation. Older group frequent resistance reinforces its role as a social barrier, showing language change as a youth-driven process that may disseminate or remain generational.

Third, platform-particular use and technological availability mold expression. Youth deploy more innovation on visual or fast-flow platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter), whereas older users lean toward standard communication on platforms like Facebook, highlighting a digital native–immigrant divide in linguistic comfort and incorporation.

Finally, bilingual code-switching between English and Urdu or Punjabi represents a post-colonial sociolinguistic landscape (Androutsopoulos et al.), allowing youth to construct blended identities that negotiate global and local identity. A practice largely resisted by older, more situationally conventional speakers.

5. Findings

Collectively, the findings highlight that digital language innovation is a socially driven phenomenon, yet one distinctly divided along age group lines. In this dynamic, young proponents emerge as the primary agents of linguistic change, actively pioneering and popularizing new forms. Conversely, older adults more frequently adopt the function of linguistic stabilizers, maintaining traditional norms. This interplay occurs within digital platforms whose very frameworks and ecologies promote implicit belief systems, thereby shaping user behavior. Ultimately, these practices of language use are not merely about communication; they show deeper societal struggles over influence, group identity, and cultural credibility.

6.Conclusion

This study explored the digital language innovation through an age-based comparative lens, emphasizing on Pakistani social media users on various social media platforms. The findings clearly indicate that age is a significant sociolinguistic factor determining patterns of digital language use. Younger adults (18–30) emerge as the primary contributors, actively adopting and disseminating slang, abbreviations, acronyms, emojis, informal grammar, and bilingual code-mixing. Older adults (40+), on the other hand, largely maintain standardized and traditional linguistic norms, engaging selectively with digital language innovations.

The quantitative evidence demonstrates a significant generational gap in the frequency and type of lexical innovations, while qualitative analysis shows that these

variations are based on contrasting language ideologies and communication preferences. For younger users, digital language serves as a tool for identity construction, peer connections, and enabling expressive innovation. For older users, linguistic practices reflect the importance of clarity, grammatical accuracy, and formality.

The findings align strongly with Labovian sociolinguistic theory, which suggests that language change is primarily youth-led, with older speakers serving as stabilizers of linguistic norms. However, the digital platforms intensify this process by amplifying the visibility and circulation of emerging forms. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, online platforms serve as sites of ideological negotiation, where younger users challenging the traditional linguistic authority and older users reinforcing the standard norms. In Pakistan's bilingual setting, English–Urdu code-mixing and Romanized Urdu play a key role in youth identity formation, highlighting the negotiation of local and global linguistic practices.

Overall, the study concludes that online language changes in Pakistan are socially shaped, age-conditioned phenomenon formed by platform ecology, identity performance, and language ideology. These innovations do not reflect linguistic decline; rather, they represent adaptive and context-sensitive language practices addressing to the communicative demands of the digital age.

6.1. Further Recommendations

While this study offers valuable insights into generational differences in language use, future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to distinguish temporary digital trends from stable language change. Including intermediate age groups and participants from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds would provide a more nuanced understanding of how age interacts with digital literacy and technological accessibility.

Future studies should also explore emerging multimodal platforms, including TikTok and YouTube, where meaning is co-created through visual, textual and auditory modes. Additionally, incorporating attitudinal surveys or interviews would help capture users' perspectives of digital linguistic innovation and standard language practices. Comparative cross-cultural research could further contextualize Pakistani digital linguistic practices within broader global patterns of linguistic evolution.

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