

STRATEGIES FOR PRESERVING REGIONAL LANGUAGES THROUGH THE YOUNG DIGITAL GENERATION: CREATIVE ECOSYSTEM APPROACH

Ahmad Dimiyati Ridwan¹, Javi Putra Hernawinata²,
Rita Rosmaya³, Fitri Amalia⁴, Ai Nurlatipah⁵, Rofah Musyarofah⁶
Indonesian University of Education, Indonesia¹,
Sunan Gunung Djati State Islamic University, Bandung, Indonesia^{2,3,4,5,6}
Email: ahmaddimiyati16@upi.edu¹, javiputra123@gmail.com²,
ritarosmaya3@gmail.com³, fitriamalia1000@gmail.com⁴,
aainurlatipah@gmail.com⁵, jendelailmurofah@gmail.com⁶

Abstrak

Keywords:
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Amidst the hegemony of foreign languages and global pop culture, regional languages in Indonesia are experiencing significant speaker erosion among Generation Z. This article aims to formulate regional language maintenance strategies that are adaptive to the digital ecosystem. Unlike conservative approaches that emphasize linguistic purism, this study offers a pragmatic-creative approach. The study uses a qualitative method with library research, analyzing the phenomenon of locality-based content creators and digital sociolinguistic literature. The results identify three main strategies for regional language maintenance: (1) Content Gamification, transforming language learning into interactive challenges on social media; (2) Positive Commodification, turning local dialects into economic value-added in Personal Branding; and (3) Media Transposition, transforming oral traditions into modern digital formats (podcasts/vlogs). It is concluded that regional language maintenance can no longer be done top-down (school curriculum), but must grow bottom-up through the empowerment of digital communities that make regional languages a profitable and relevant creative asset.

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INTRODUCTION

The existence of regional languages in Indonesia is at a critical crossroads. Younger generations, particularly Gen Z (born 1997-2012) and Gen Alpha (born 2013-onwards), are increasingly distancing themselves from their mother tongues. This phenomenon is driven by the sociological perception that regional languages represent an "old-fashioned" or "rural" past, while foreign languages (English, Korean) or

Jakarta slang ("Bahasa Jaksel") represent a modern and cosmopolitan future. As a result, a language shift is occurring, with private family spaces, once the last bastion of regional languages, now being invaded by national and foreign languages.

However, blaming digital technology as the sole cause of language death is reductionist. A "Digital Paradox" exists: technology, which facilitates the homogenization of global culture, simultaneously provides the cheapest and fastest tool for revitalizing local cultures. The primary problem is not the technology itself, but the strategies for utilizing it. So far, language maintenance strategies have tended to be formalistic, rigid, and based on school curriculum, which is often boring for students.

There is a strategic gap in connecting regional languages with the digital lifestyle. The younger generation needs a stronger reason than simply a "moral obligation" to use regional languages. They need social and economic incentives. In this context, a new strategy is needed that views regional languages as creative modalities in the Creator Economy era.

As emphasized by Patriasya, Ridwan, et al. (2025), in facing contemporary dynamics, traditions should not be frozen in a glass museum case, but rather "nurtured by responding to modernization" (Patriasya et al., 2025). This means that language preservation strategies must be flexible, adaptive, and integrated into the daily lives of the younger generation.

This article aims to: (1) Dissect the creative strategies employed by new "cultural agents" (content creators) in popularizing regional languages; and (2) Formulate a model for a language preservation strategy that integrates cultural values education with digital market mechanisms (virality and engagement).

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Language Maintenance Theory

Language maintenance is a conscious effort to keep a language in use by its speaking community amidst pressure from other dominant languages. Fishman (1991) emphasized the importance of intergenerational transmission as key to language vitality (Fishman, 1991). However, in the digital age, this transmission occurs not only vertically (parent to child) but also horizontally (peer-to-peer) through social media. Maintenance strategies have now shifted from the domestic sphere to the public-virtual sphere.

2. Digital Ethnolinguistic Vitality

The concept of language preservation in the 21st century cannot be separated from technological infrastructure. Kornai (2013) introduced the concept of "Digital Language Death," which states that a language is considered functionally dead if it lacks a significant online presence, even if it is still spoken orally. Languages that lack a digital footprint (content, applications, online discussions) will be abandoned by the younger generation who "live" on the internet (Kornai, 2013).

Conversely, Cunliffe (2007) offers the concept of Digital Ethnolinguistic Vitality, where new media can provide "breathing space" for minority languages. The internet enables the formation of geographically dispersed communities of speakers (diasporas) to stay connected. In this context, the retention strategy is not just about "speaking", but about "writing and creating content" so that search engine and social media algorithms recognize the existence of the language (Cunliffe, 2007).

3. Participatory Culture

Henry Jenkins (2009) defines participatory culture as a culture in which barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement are very low (Jenkins, 2009). In the context of regional languages, social media allows anyone to become a "language teacher" or "cultural ambassador" without requiring academic certification. This democratizes the process of cultural preservation, making it no longer the exclusive preserve of a cultural elite, but the preserve of all netizens.

4. Personal Branding and Digital Identity

Language is an integral part of identity. In the era of social media, identity is consciously constructed for personal branding purposes. Suryani stated that the digital identity of the younger generation is hybrid; they want to appear global while still retaining unique local roots (Suryani, 2024). Regional languages are a strong differentiating element in a content creator's self-branding.

5. Previous Research

Previous studies, such as those by Rumonin et al. (2025), focused more on civic culture and the role of traditional institutions (Rumonin et al., 2025). Meanwhile, Lestari et al. (2025) discussed the use of gadgets by young children, but still within the scope of parenting (Lestari et al., 2025). This research fills this gap by focusing on content strategies and virality mechanisms as language maintenance tools for adolescents and young adults.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative method with a library research design. This method was chosen to explore digital sociolinguistic concepts and communication strategies scattered throughout academic literature and new media phenomena.

Data Sources

1. Academic Literature: Recent journals (2020-2025) discussing sociolinguistics, digital culture, and the creative economy.
2. Digital Phenomena: Observations of content patterns from popular regional language creators (case studies of viral content based on Javanese, Sundanese, and Malay).

Data analysis was conducted inductively. Researchers collected data on regional language use practices on social media and then abstracted these data into strategic patterns (such as gamification, commodification, etc.). This analysis was linked to cultural identity theory to assess the long-term effectiveness of these strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategies for preserving regional languages in the digital age can no longer rely on "romanticism of the past." They must be relevant, functional, and profitable. The following is an analysis of emerging new strategies:

A. Paradigm Shift: From "Curriculum Burden" to "Creative Asset"

Previously, regional languages were often perceived as a burden on local content (Mulok) subjects, difficult and boring due to their excessive focus on standard grammar (rigid unggah-ungguh). In the digital age, a paradigm shift has occurred. Regional languages are now seen as Creative Assets. Hidayat found that digital youth use regional languages as an "aesthetic" and "playful" means of expression (Hidayat et al., 2024). Effective preservation strategies must capitalize on this shift: don't teach

complex grammar at the outset, but instead teach the joy of expression using the language.

B. Strategy 1: Content Gamification and Challenges

One of the most effective strategies for attracting Gen Z is gamification. Platforms like TikTok have popularized the Challenge feature.

1. Mechanism: Creators create challenges like "How Javanese/Sundanese Are You?" or "Translate Challenge."
2. Impact: This triggers mass participation. Thousands of young people create response videos (Duets/Stitches) attempting to speak their regional languages. While their pronunciation may not be perfect, this process normalizes the presence of regional languages in the public sphere. This is far more effective than written exams in schools because it is voluntary and fun (edutainment).

C. Strategy 2: Positive Commodification (Language as Economic Value)

The term "commodification" often has a negative connotation (selling culture), but in the context of language preservation, Positive Commodification is necessary.

1. Language as a "Niche Market": Among millions of content creators, having a distinctive style is mandatory. Strong regional accents (such as Ngapak, Minang, or Papuan) become personal branding that distinguishes a creator from others.
2. Creator Economy: When a creator successfully earns endorsements or income for their humorous/unique regional language content, this sends a strong signal to other young audiences: "It turns out regional languages can make money." This pragmatic motivation is crucial for maintaining language vitality in a materialistic society.
3. This aligns with the findings of Patriasya, Ridwan, et al. (2025), who stated that education (and culture) must be able to respond to modernization to remain relevant (Patriasya et al., 2025). If a regional language can provide economic benefits in the modern era, it will survive.

D. The Role of Algorithms and Virtual Communities (Communities of Practice)

The success of language preservation strategies on social media is heavily influenced by how algorithms operate. Blommaert (2010), in his sociolinguistic study of globalization, stated that we now live in an era of superdiversity, where communication patterns are no longer linear (Blommaert, 2010). The interest-graph-based algorithms of TikTok and Instagram Reels enable regional language content to reach non-native speaker audiences.

When regional language content receives high engagement (likes/shares), the algorithm disseminates it more widely as "entertainment" content. This creates passive exposure for a national audience. Furthermore, what is known as an online community of practice is formed. The comments section on viral regional language content often transforms into an informal classroom. Netizens ask each other for the meaning of certain words, correct pronunciation, or share dialect variations from other regions. This participatory interaction in the comments column is a form of collaborative language learning that rarely occurs in formal classrooms (Crystal, 2011).

E. Strategy 3: Transmediality

The third strategy is to transfer cultural content from old media to new media.

1. From Oral to Digital: Folk tales, pantun, or jokes that were once only heard at guard posts or wayang stages are now being translated into podcasts (such as the Agak Laen Podcast, which has a strong Batak accent) or web series in regional

languages.

2. Code Switching as a Bridge: This strategy uses a language-mixing technique (Indonesian/English + Regional). This is not "language destruction," but rather a "cognitive bridge." For young urbanites who are not fluent in regional languages, this code-mixed content is easier to digest and makes them less intimidated to start learning.

F. Pedagogical Synergy: Integration of Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

Digital strategies implemented informally by content creators need to be adopted into the formal education system for maximum results. Setiawan (2022) criticized the fact that local content learning is often disconnected from students' realities (Vioreza et al., 2022). Therefore, the integration of a Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model is needed, where schoolwork no longer involves memorizing grammar but rather producing creative content.

Students can be assigned to create village tourism vlogs, local culinary reviews, or podcasts of interviews with elders using their local languages. This approach transforms local languages from "objects of memorization" into "tools for creativity." This reinforces the argument of Patriasya, Ridwan, et al. (2025) that religious and cultural education must respond to modernization so that traditional values can be properly internalized by students (Patriasya et al., 2025). By making digital content a learning output, schools provide validation that regional languages are a relevant and modern competency.

G. Implementation Challenges

This digital strategy is not without risks. The biggest challenges are standardization and popularity. Viral content often uses coarse regional languages (ngoko/pasar). There is a risk that the younger generation will only be familiar with this coarse language and forget the refined language (krama). Therefore, digital strategies must be accompanied by cultural literacy. Schools and families act as filters, explaining the context for appropriate language use (politeness), while social media serves as a catalyst.

Furthermore, the biggest challenge comes from language purists who often bully young creators for grammatical errors or code-mixing. Zuckermann (2020), a language revitalization expert, suggests a "hybrid" approach in the early stages of revitalization (Zuckermann, 2020). He asserts that allowing a language to metamorphose (mix) is better than letting it die for the sake of maintaining purity. The older generation and educators should be more tolerant of the "hodgepodge" language variations used by young people on the internet as a bridge to better language proficiency, rather than stifling it with harsh criticism from the start (Zuckermann, 2020).

H. Social Implications and Sustainability of Regional Language Preservation Strategies

Preserving regional languages through the digital ecosystem not only impacts linguistic aspects but also carries significant social significance for the identity formation of the younger generation. The active presence of regional languages in the digital space serves as a medium for reconstructing cultural identities previously marginalized by the dominance of national and global languages. When regional languages are used in viral creative content, their meaning is repositioned from a symbol of backwardness to a marker of local uniqueness and pride. This condition

aligns with the findings of Erniati and Wijaya (2023), who showed that the desire for regional languages is strongly influenced by the positive attitudes of the younger generation toward them, particularly in the context of identity formation and a sense of belonging to their home communities (Erniati & Wijaya, 2023).

Beyond identity aspects, digital strategies also open up opportunities for the long-term sustainability of regional languages. Unlike preservation approaches that rely on formal policies or school curricula, the digital creator ecosystem operates organically and sustainably. Regional languages will continue to be produced and reproduced as long as they generate attention, interaction, and symbolic value in the digital public sphere. This corroborates the findings of Suharyo and Nurhayati (2020), who revealed a shift in Javanese language use among women on the coast of Rembang due to the increased use of Indonesian in the domestic sphere (Suharyo & Nurhayati, 2020). This shift is characterized by a weakening of the function of Javanese, particularly the krama variety, which culturally embodies values of politeness, social hierarchy, and character education. Given that women hold a strategic position as the primary speakers in the family, their language choices have direct implications for the sustainability of intergenerational language transmission.

In a broader context, digital media also enables the formation of virtual communities of regional language speakers across regions and social backgrounds. Interactions in comment sections, online forums, and social media create informal, participatory learning spaces. The younger generation is not only a consumer of language, but also an active producer, modifying, interpreting, and disseminating regional languages according to the context of their time. This finding aligns with research by Tambunsaribu (2025), which shows that students from other regions are still able to maintain their regional languages through involvement in social communities based on shared linguistic backgrounds (Tambunsaribu, 2025). This confirms that language maintenance is not solely dependent on the family domain but can also occur within the social realm and student community within an urban, multilingual context.

Thus, the sustainability of regional language preservation strategies requires cultural awareness from all actors in the digital ecosystem. Content creators act as cultural mediators, shaping public perception of regional languages. Therefore, a balance between entertainment and cultural responsibility is necessary to prevent regional languages from being reduced to mere humorous commodities without understanding their accompanying social and cultural values. Synergy between families, communities, educators, academics, and content creators is key to ensuring that regional language preservation does not stop at a momentary virality but contributes to sustainable language preservation in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

Preserving regional languages in the digital age requires a strategic shift from a prescriptive approach (regulating) to a participatory approach (inviting). Strategies based on content gamification, positive commodification, and platform transfer have proven more effective in engaging Generation Z than conventional methods. The key to success lies in the ability to shift the perception of regional languages: from mere "heritage of the past" to "modalities of the future" with social (identity) and economic (creativity) value.

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