PRESERVING REGIONAL LANGUAGES AS THE DIGITAL IDENTITY OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

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Keywords:	**Abstrak**
Regional Language, Young Generation, Digital Identity, Social Media, Local Pride.	*The phenomenon of declining use of regional languages among the younger generation, especially Gen Z and Gen Alpha, raises serious concerns about the sustainability of the nation's linguistic identity. This study aims to analyze the causes of the decline in the use of regional languages, examine the role of social media as a new space for the expression of digital identity, and formulate creative strategies to package regional languages to remain relevant in the digital era. The main problem examined is the "digital paradox", where technology is often accused of being a culture killer, but on the other hand has revitalization potential through Personal Branding. Using a qualitative method with a library research approach, this study found that the preservation of regional languages in the digital era no longer relies on curriculum coercion, but on Local Pride. Social media has succeeded in shifting the stigma of regional languages from "old-fashioned" to aesthetic digital assets that have selling points (niche markets). It is concluded that regional languages now function as "identity algorithms" that distinguish content creators in the midst of globalization, with new preservation mechanisms through code switching and creative content such as memes and short videos.*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known as an archipelago with extraordinary linguistic richness. However, this richness now faces a real existential threat. The declining use of regional languages among the younger generation, particularly Generation Z (born 1997-2012) and Generation Alpha (born 2013-onwards), has reached a crisis point. In many regions,

mother tongues are increasingly marginalized from everyday conversation and considered "kampungan" (village-based), outdated, or irrelevant to a modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle.

This crisis is exacerbated by the dominance of foreign languages and hybrid slang. The onslaught of global popular culture, such as the Korean wave (Hallyu) and the dominance of English as the internet language, has made the younger generation more fluent in foreign terms than in their native tongue. The phenomenon of "Bahasa Jaksel," a mixture of Indonesian and English that dominates social media feeds, further reinforces the perception that mixing foreign languages is a sign of modernity, while using regional languages is a sign of backwardness.

However, amid this pessimism, a "Digital Paradox" has emerged. The digital world and the internet, often accused of being agents of cultural imperialism and the cause of the demise of local wisdom, actually hold enormous potential as a preservation tool. Social media poses not only a threat but also a "new frontier" for revitalizing regional languages.

In this dynamic context, it's important to understand that responding to modernization doesn't necessarily mean abandoning tradition. As Patriasya, Ridwan, et al. (2025) noted, "maintaining tradition while responding to modernization" is key to cultural sustainability in contemporary learning dynamics (Patriasya et al., 2025). Regional languages should be positioned not as the antithesis of progress, but as character-strengthening elements that adapt to technology.

Several previous studies have highlighted the issue of preserving regional languages, but the majority remain fixated on formal and institutional approaches. For example, research by Rumonin, Tutuarima, and Patmawati (2025), focused on the challenges of consistent language use in indigenous communities (Rumonin et al., 2025). Meanwhile, research by Lestari, Setyanto, and Mahanani (2025) and Diu et al. (2022) discussed the use of gadgets and early childhood education in the context of families and schools (Lestari et al., 2025). Luturmas et al. (2022) also emphasized the role of traditional institutions and churches.

The literature gap is evident in the lack of studies discussing regional language preservation through personal branding or the organic (non-formal) formation of digital identities on social media. Most research still positions regional languages as "teaching materials" in the curriculum, rather than as relaxed and entertaining "lifestyle content."

This research aims to: (1) Explain how regional languages can be repackaged into cool, aesthetic, and modern digital content; and (2) Analyze the role of social media as a "new space" for the younger generation to speak regional languages not only as a means of communication, but as a proud digital identity marker.

LITERATURE REVIEW
1. Sociolinguistics and the Phenomenon of Language Shift

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is not merely a means of communication, but also a symbol of social and cultural identity. The phenomenon of language shift occurs when a community of speakers begins to abandon their mother tongue in favor of another language perceived to have higher social prestige. Bourdieu (1991) explained the concept of a "linguistic market," where standard or foreign languages often have a higher symbolic exchange value than regional languages (Bourdieu, 1991). This causes the younger generation to experience linguistic

insecurity, feeling embarrassed or afraid of being labeled "kampung" if they use their regional language in public spaces.

Previous research confirms this trend. Diu, Rahmat, and Duludu (2022) found that young children in Gorontalo lack regional language skills due to lack of exposure in their family and school environments (Diu et al., 2022). In line with this, Luturmas, Berlianty, and Balik (2022) noted that the Tanimbar regional language is threatened with extinction due to minimal intergenerational transmission within the domestic sphere (Luturmas et al., 2022). Both studies emphasize that without intervention, regional languages will be eroded by the dominance of national and global languages.

2. Digital Identity and Personal Branding for Generation Z

The digital era is changing the way individuals construct their identities. For Generation Z and Alpha, cyberspace is a second reality where they construct their "Digital Identity." Suryani (2023) defines digital identity as a curated self-representation through digital footprints, social media interactions, and shared content (Suryani, 2024). In this context, regional languages transform in function. While in the real world, regional languages are functional communication tools, in cyberspace they become personal branding tools. The use of unique regional languages (such as a thick accent or distinctive vocabulary) serves as a differentiator or distinguisher, making a content creator stand out amidst the uniformity of global content. Hidayat notes that digital youth strategically use regional languages to demonstrate authenticity and attract an audience with whom they feel emotionally connected (Hidayat et al., 2024).

3. Social Media as a Space for Cultural Revitalization

Social media is often accused of being an agent of cultural homogenization, but it also has a paradoxical function as an agent of revitalization. Through features such as short videos (TikTok/Reels), captions, and memes, regional languages are repackaged into popular cultural products. Patriasya, Ridwan, et al. (2025) emphasize that in responding to modernization, traditions should not be abandoned, but rather revitalized to be relevant to contemporary dynamics (Patriasya et al., 2025). In this context, social media provides a democratic platform where regional languages no longer require formal institutional legitimacy to be "cool." Digital creativity enables glocalization, where local elements (regional languages) combine with global formats (digital platforms), creating new, hybrid trends.

4. Participatory Culture and Glocalization

The rise of regional language content on social media can be explained through the lens of Henry Jenkins' theory of Participatory Culture. Jenkins defines participatory culture as one in which individuals act not only as passive consumers but also as content producers (prosumers) who actively contribute to the creation and dissemination of meaning (Jenkins, 2009). In this context, the younger generation feels they have the agency to redefine how their regional languages are represented. They do not wait for traditional institutions or schools to preserve their languages, but instead take the initiative themselves through digital content creation.

Furthermore, this phenomenon also reflects Roland Robertson's concept of Glocalization, which is the adaptation of global products to local characteristics. Social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram are global products with universal features, yet their content is highly local (Robertson, 1992). The younger generation is making creative adaptations by injecting local values (regional languages) into global formats (short videos, memes), creating a unique and relevant cultural hybridity both globally

and locally.

5. Previous Research Gaps (State of the Art)

Although the issue of regional language preservation has been widely studied, there is a shift in focus that deserves attention. Research by Rumonin, Tutuarima, and Patmawati (2025) focused on strengthening the civic culture of indigenous communities through conventional language preservation (Rumonin et al., 2025). Meanwhile, Lestari, Setyanto, and Mahanani (2025) began exploring the use of gadgets as a preservation medium, but this work was still limited to the context of early childhood education and parenting.

The novelty of this research lies in its approach, which views regional languages as lifestyle assets and digital commodities for adolescents, not simply as teaching materials. Unlike previous studies that positioned regional languages in a passive position (something to be preserved), this research positions regional languages in an active position (something that becomes a trend and lifestyle) through the Local Pride mechanism on social media.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative method with a library research approach. This method was chosen because the study aims to develop a new conceptual framework for language preservation in the digital age by synthesizing various theories of sociolinguistics, digital culture, and mass communication.

Data sources in this study are divided into two categories:

1. Primary Data: Articles from reputable national and international scientific journals discussing sociolinguistics (language in society), digital culture, and youth behavior. The literature focused on publications from the last 5-10 years to ensure data relevance.

2. Secondary Data: Credible news and articles covering the trending phenomenon of regional language-based content creators. This includes observations of creators who have gone viral due to their unique regional accents (e.g., creators of the Javanese "medok" accent, Malay pantun, or Sundanese comedy content).

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis. The researcher examined the phenomenon of ongoing digital trends, reduced them to behavioral patterns, and then connected them to cultural identity theory and digital identity theory. This analysis aims to find out how the social media "algorithm" mechanism works in promoting or marginalizing regional languages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Shifting Perspectives: From Stigma to Aesthetics

One of the biggest psychological barriers to preserving regional languages is stigma. In the pre-digital era, regional languages were often associated with rural identity, backwardness, and low socioeconomic status. Bourdieu (1991), in his theory of the linguistic market, stated that standard languages often have a higher exchange value than local dialects (Bourdieu, 1991). This causes the younger generation to feel embarrassed (linguistic insecurity) about using their mother tongue in public spaces.

However, the digital era has brought significant changes. There has been a shift from "stigma" to "aesthetics." In the digital age, regional languages are valued as unique, authentic, and have market value in specific markets (niche markets). Social

media, which values authenticity, provides a platform for previously marginalized local expressions. Regional languages are now seen as possessing a "feeling" that standard Indonesian cannot represent, making them valuable digital assets for content creators to build strong characters.

B. Regional Languages as Identity "Algorithms"

In a social media ecosystem crowded with uniform content, differentiation is key. Suryani's research shows that the digital identities of young people in the era of globalization are fluid but require a distinguishing anchor. Regional languages now function as these "Identity Algorithms" (Suryani, 2024).

1. Locality-Based Virality: Many young content creators achieve popularity (go viral) because they consistently use regional languages. Examples include the rise of comedy content with a straightforward East Javanese accent, content that vents in Sundanese, or humorous Malay pantun.
2. Content Differentiation: The use of regional languages serves as a strong differentiator amidst the uniformity of global content. While millions of people create content in English or Indonesian, creators who creatively use regional languages are more memorable and build strong engagement with audiences who feel emotionally connected (proximity).

C. The Economic Value of Regional Languages: Commodification in the Creator Economy

The shift in perception of regional languages is not only occurring in the symbolic realm, but also in the economic realm. In today's Creator Economy ecosystem, uniqueness is currency. Regional languages with distinctive accents (such as Ngapak Banyumasan, Mendayu Melayu, or more specifically, Batak) have transformed into monetizable personal branding assets (Khamis et al., 2017).

Content creators who consistently use regional languages often achieve higher engagement rates because audiences feel a greater emotional connection and trust compared to creators who use a general/national style. This high level of interaction attracts brands for endorsement partnerships. As a result, regional languages are no longer seen as career barriers but as effective marketing strategies.

This phenomenon demonstrates that language preservation can go hand in hand with economic motives. When the younger generation sees that fluency in a regional language can bring financial benefits and popularity, their motivation to learn and use that language will increase dramatically. This aligns with the view of Ridwan et al., who emphasized that revitalizing traditions in the contemporary era must be able to address the challenges of the times, including economic and professional challenges (Patriasya et al., 2025). This integration of economic and cultural motives is a far more powerful driver of sustainability than mere moral appeals.

D. New Style Preservation Mechanisms

While conventional preservation relies on textbooks and official speeches, new style preservation in the digital age uses much more fluid, populist, and participatory mechanisms.

1. Micro-Content Format: Preservation is no longer through thick books, but through Instagram captions, short TikTok videos (Shorts/Reels), memes, and podcasts. This format aligns with the short but intense attention span of the younger generation.
2. Code Switching as a Lifestyle: Hidayat found that the use of regional languages

among digital youth often involves the process of code switching (Hidayat et al., 2024). The younger generation flexibly mixes Indonesian, English, and regional languages in one breath. For example: "Honestly, I'm really annoyed, but life must go on." Although often criticized by language purists, this practice actually makes regional languages feel more relevant, less rigid, and more adaptable to modern topics. This proves that regional languages are living, evolving organisms, not museum artifacts.

E. Platform Characteristics: TikTok and Instagram in Framing Language

Further analysis shows that the characteristics of platform algorithms influence how regional languages are spoken. Crystal Abidin, in her study of influencer culture, noted that each platform has its own "vernacular," or slang (Abidin, 2016).

1. TikTok and "Raw" Authenticity: TikTok's For You Page (FYP)-based algorithm tends to prioritize content that is entertaining, raw, and spontaneous. On this platform, the use of rough, thick, or blunt regional language is highly valued because it is considered honest and uncontrived. The short video format allows regional slang terms to spread virally within hours across the archipelago, transcending the geographical boundaries of their native speakers.

2. Instagram and Curated Aesthetics: Conversely, on Instagram, which prioritizes visuals and aesthetics, regional languages often appear in more poetic forms (such as aesthetically pleasing Javanese/Sundanese script quotes) or as captions that complement cultural visuals. Here, regional languages are "aestheticized" to construct a cultured and elegant self-image.

This difference demonstrates that the younger generation possesses high digital literacy; they are able to discern which regional language registers are appropriate for a particular platform. This adaptability is what keeps regional languages alive across various modern communication channels.

F. Challenge: Risk of Commodification

Behind these significant opportunities lies a challenge that cannot be ignored: the risk of cultural commodification. When regional languages are merely used as the subject of jokes for views and likes, aspects of grammar, politeness, and philosophical meaning are often overlooked. There is a tendency for language quality to decline, with the younger generation only knowing rude or humorous vocabulary but stumbling when it comes to using regional languages in formal contexts or to show respect for elders. This challenge demands digital literacy, which also encompasses cultural literacy.

Besides commodification, another emerging challenge is the disparity between regional language learning in schools (formal) and practice on social media (informal). Zein (2020) highlights that language policies in education in Indonesia are often still fixated on rigid grammatical standards, which can leave students feeling bored and alienated (Zein, 2020). Meanwhile, on social media, regional languages are celebrated with joy and freedom.

This disparity risks creating a double perception: regional languages are considered "cool" on TikTok, but "boring" in the classroom. If educational curricula do not quickly adapt to integrate digital cultural products (such as analyzing regional-language vlogs as teaching materials), schools will lose their relevance as agents of cultural preservation. A pedagogical bridge is needed to connect these two worlds.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted, it can be concluded that the preservation of regional languages in the digital era has undergone a fundamental transformation. Successful preservation no longer relies on a coercive approach through formal curricula, but rather on local pride, or pride in one's identity. Social media has successfully transformed regional languages from a "lesson burden" to a trendy, creative, and proud "digital lifestyle." Regional languages have transformed into digital identities that distinguish Indonesia's younger generation on the global stage.

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