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Investigating How Generation Z Iraqis Use Digital Slang on TikTok and Instagram to Negotiate Tribal and Urban Identities

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Abstract

This paper is an exploratory study on using digital slang in TikTok and Instagram and how Z generation Iraqi users negotiate their identities between tribal and urban identities. The study was carried out by gathering and analyzing data of Iraqi social media users aged 14-27 years old (born 1997 to 2012) in major cities and tribal areas by qualitative content analysis method based on the principles of sociolinguistics. Innovation in the language, platform-specific style and code switching, and strategic use of these linguistic strategies are discussed as a way Iraqi youth negotiate with time-honored tribal affiliations and new urban identities. The study demonstrates that Iraqi youth users of the platform resort to different linguistic strategies of vernacular Iraqi Arabic words, borrowings from Modern Standard Arabic, English loanwords and platform specific neologisms to maneuver their hybrid identities that are not necessarily a dichotomy of tribe/urban. The study emphasizes various kinds of linguistic markers which relate to the process of performance of tribal identity, ranging from choice of specific vocabulary and phonetic attributes to discourse patterns, and urban-oriented linguistic practices that emphasize global connectedness and modernity. TikTok is a really important platform for exploring identity, and Instagram more formal aspects of identity presentation. The study has implications for sociolinguistic research in terms of the identity negotiation in digital environments and it provides empirical data on identity negotiation between multiple identity discourses among young Arabs in a more globalized world.

Keywords: Generation Z, Iraqi Arabic, digital slang, tribal identity, urban identity, TikTok, Instagram, code-switching, identity negotiation, social media linguistics

Introduction

Problem Statement

In the wake of the dizzying growth of social media platforms in the last few years, there has never been a gravitation towards a greater opportunity for constructing, testing and showcasing identities by today's young people around the world than today. This change is happening in Iraq – a melting pot of peoples, religions and tribes, and an area where complex sociolinguistic processes have emerged in connection with the questions of tribes versus modernity, and rural versus urban communities. The so-called "Generation Z" Iraqis, who were born between 1997 and 2012, have spent most of their lives living in digital space; their primary forms of interaction, self-expression, identity, and social life are the social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram (Alkhuzaei, 2022). The current study examines the way that these young Iraqi users negotiate the competing identity systems of the "tribal" and "urban" systems through the use of digital slang and linguistic innovations as a means of communication on social media.

The sociolinguistic situation in Iraqi society is unique; where very strong tribal identities exist, stemming from a social organization that is based on the clan system, and where an emerging urbanized middle class is part of global digital society. The urban-rural gap in Iraq goes beyond geometric location, but to a gap in the expressed way of life in the city and the village, as well as in social structure, values, communication scope, and identity systems. Throughout time, urban Iraqis, especially the citizens of Baghdad and other major cities, have demonstrated linguistic properties different from the rural and tribal communities in Iraq, and the Baghdadi dialect is a prestigious urban variety (Al-Bazzaz & Abboodi Ali, 2020). Meanwhile, the Iraqi tribes people in the country practice their own language and vocabulary system linked to their tribal identity, which include special words and forms of address, as well as specific pattern of discourse that relate them to specific clans and confederations (Rashk, 2026).

The pressing of studying digital slangs among Gen Z Iraqis goes beyond multiple scholarly and social issues. The period since the war in 2003 when Iraq was invaded came with earthshattering changes such as urbanization's trends, the displacement of rural communities, and marked digital connectivity, changes that impact traditional tribal systems while coaxing their revival as sources of security and identity (Dawson, 2019). Second, social media has given Iraqi youth new opportunities for identity experimentation, opportunities with which they might not have officers offline amidst a conservative social norm and monitoring by their families. Third, the linguistic innovations born from Iraqi online social media usage is a field for sociolinguistics of Arabic that has been neglected by previous studies despite its being a digital communication context; this aligns with the fact that previous studies had focused on the spoken dialects and formal media (Androusoopoulos, 2013).

In this research, a gap in the literature is filled by concentrating specifically on the Iraqi context, facing unique Iraqi characteristics that differ from neighbouring societies. Unlike the Gulf states or the Levantine countries, Iraq's structures of tribesmanship have a significant social salience, and the urban-tribal dynamic has a fundamental axis of social differentiation (Simon, 2024). In addition, the country's complicated political panorama that hosted Ba'athist modernization campaigns and sectarian conflicts and later their reconstruction, produced superposed linguistic impacts which have influenced contemporary communication practices. The negotiation of a tribal and urban identity by Iraqi Gen z in the digital slang, therefore, provides deep insights into larger processes of changing identities in conflict ridden and traditionally strong societies.

Research Objectives

The current study sets itself these aims:

1. To illustrate the forms and functions of digital slang used by Generation Z Iraqi users of TikTok and Instagram;
2. To identify the linguistic marks that index tribal versus urban identity in the Iraqi digital communication sphere;
3. To identify how young Iraqi users perform and negotiate between tribal and urban identity frames via strategic linguistic choices;
4. To explore platform-specific identity negotiation patterns between TikTok and Instagram; and
5. To add to the theory of identity constructional perspectives in the digital sphere from the grander field of Sociolinguistics.

Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What do Gen Z Iraqi users on TikTok and Instagram use and abuse with innovative approach in digital slang?
2. What are the distinctions between markers which are used in the dialogue in Iraqi social media in respect to the markers that are used by the tribes?

3. How do Iraqi youth use language to negotiate, reconcile or highlight the tribal-urban divide?
4. What are some of the patterns for identity negotiation across TikTok and Instagram?
5. What is the effect of individual characteristics like geographic location, sex and socio-economic status on language selection in online identity performances?

Literature Review

Digital Linguistics and Internet Language

Digital communication is increasingly the subject of scholarship and has become a major subfield of sociolinguistics, describing the effect technology has on communicating in different social media platforms. Androutsopoulos (2013) built initial contexts for comprehending the notion of style in the computer mediated communication, on the backdrop of youth's utilization of the affordances of digital communication to construct identity. His research shows that online communication is not simply a matter of reproducing the linguistic skills one has offline but currently and actively a place of innovation where users use instruments that the platform provides to them to produce stylistically innovative outputs (pp. 153-178).

In recent years a large amount of research has been undertaken into the changed use of languages in social media. Ntibidi Hasjim et al. (2026) analyse the way social media such as TikTok, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), have helped the youth vernacularise, acronymise and engage in graphic play as a way of communicating. Their paper, which is based on Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theory of an interactional construction of identity and Eckert's (2012) third wave theory on variation, illustrates the ways in which digital linguistic features function as stylistic features in the construction of a youth identity (pp. 1-12). Through this study it is revealed that phenomena like English borrowings, acronymisations and picture plays act as intimacy markers; markers of contemporaneity and in-groupness.

Researchers working in the fields of opportunities and challenges of digital communication have studied the wider impact of social media on language evolution. Giving young people opportunities to experiment with language, Siddiqui (2025) argues, social media can also be a limitation that blurs rules of language. Social media has profoundly reshaped the process of language change, with new avenues for innovation and new locations in which stylistic variation may develop (Jackson 2023). 37-52). The findings here indicate that digital communication settings are not simply other names for existing linguistic settings, but are unique communication environments where basic language change and identity construction processes are affected in unique ways.

Social Media Linguistics: TikTok and Instagram

Between TikTok and Instagram, a linguistics study of the two platforms has yielded insights as to how platform affordances have an impact on communication practices. As a platform of short-form videos, TikTok is a unique environment where the linguistic can be expressed in visual, auditory, and textual modes that diverges from previous generations of social media. TikTok contents analyzed by Yardımcı (2025) show how new and innovative words are created, apparently to facilitate reciprocal linguistic understanding and communication. 1-11). Due to limitations like word count and usage on social media, users adopt English in a creative way, creating neologisms that are sometimes beyond the rules of the grammar and orthography of English.

Instagram, on the other hand, is used for other communicative purposes for more formal identity presentation. The study by Chen and Sun (2024) explores the nature of this production by examining the platform configuration of Instagram and TikTok, which different ways of configuring the platforms provided different affordances and scaffolded user behaviors and communication patterns. Instagram also has a focus on language aesthetics and self-presentations that are linguistically more well-crafted, so that the visual nature of Instagram supports the presentation of identity. When comparing the ways in which different language features are used across the platforms, it seems users make a calculated choice of the use of language features according to the perceived functions and users of each of the platforms.

The newfound study of TikTok Linguistics has yielded interesting insights regarding the language that Generation Z uses on TikTok. Ugoala (2024) investigates the new linguistic structures that are typical of communication on TikTok from the perspective of Generation Z as a typical user cohort and presents

examples of acronyms, code-mixing and creative orthographic practice. This research demonstrates that TikTok is an especially important platform for linguistic innovation and a venue where new linguistic forms coalesce and disperse quickly thanks to viral content (pp. 211-224).

Use of code-switching on TikTok and Instagram has been paid special attention by scholars. In their study on Code Switching, Daulay et al. (2024) examine code switching practices in comments on Instagram and TikTok posts and reveal that users on these platforms frequently combine various linguistic features to express themselves and communicate their intended messages. Based on qualitative analysis, they find that code switching on these platforms can act in a variety of ways, such as creating identity, humor and engaging the audience. The study illustrates how codeswitching practices in L2 situations are influenced by the platforms in which the L2 was used: each platform has its own patterns of language mixing.

Identity Negotiation in Digital Spaces

The theoretical perspective adopted to understand the identity construction in digital spaces is based on the ideas of interactional sociolinguistics which views identity as a process of social action, rather than a process of demographic analysis. The merge between identity and language is most aptly conveyed in the foundational view of identity as emergent (Hall and Bucholtz, 2005 p. 585-614). Their approach focuses on the relational, collective aspects of identity, foregrounding the ways that identities are engaged in interaction with other individuals in particular social settings, building identity positions in the process.

Avci, Baams and Kretschmer (2024) systematically reviewed studies investigating how SMM fits into adolescent identity development. They discover four concepts outlining the process of the creation of identity in SNS: social comparison, self-presentation, peer influence and identity exploration. The review illustrates how there are both positive opportunities and negative hangers that come with using social media and positive identity development are linked to social comparison and identity-congruent content (pp. 7-10). 219-236). Notably, the link between the use of social media and the development of identity is broadened by individual differences and context.

Youth create their digital identities in a wide variety of ways. Davies (2020) explores the ways in which Generation Z accomplishes forming identities, which is achieved through social media providing places for individual expressions within collective identification. She finds that youth engage with the social media as a means of creating identity stances that are positioned between personal identity and social identity – oscillating between individual difference and social similarity.

Linguistic play, as a means of creating digital identities, has been reported in the study of Filipino TikTok slang among the Generation Z done by Sawe (2025). His research reveals that digital slang is not only communicative, it is a tool for creating digital identity and digital affiliations. The article addresses the linguistic creativity of the platform and its involvement in creating identity, the ways in which consumers are using slang forms to indicate group membership, generational identity and cultural orientation (pp. 3054-3063). This study offers a fruitful comparative context for comprehending similar processes of Iraqis of the next generation of users.

Social Media and Youth Identity in the Middle East

Several studies have been conducted on social media use among the Arab youth, which offer a picture of a mosaic that provides a context to Iraqi young people's online activities. Grounded in a thorough study of social media consumption among Arab youth, Radcliffe (2023) reports that nine out of 10 young Arabs use at least one social media platform daily, with notable differences in their preferences of social platforms across the region. In the Middle East and North Africa, the rates of social media engagements are among the highest worldwide and its heavy use is prevalent over other regions with 20-40% of users accessing the media more than 5 hours a day.

Researchers who studied the effects of social media have looked at the impact on Iraqi university students in particular such as those concerned with the academic, political and economic aspects (ResearchGate, 2020). The current work aims to document the way that social media has become part of Iraqi youths daily life influencing the way they gain information from it, how they interacted with other through it, and how they form their sense of self through it. The study shows that Iraqi youth use social media tools for various reasons, such as political engagement, entertainment and social communication, and by knowing which

platforms they like and using most, it is possible to tell the difference in generations and their level of socioeconomic.

Social media's contribution to Youth political consciousness and involvement have been of particular focus in Iraq. Rewaq Baghdad's study (2023) examines the impact of social media on the behavior and attitudes of Iraqi young people in the virtual space and shows that social media are a space essential for political debate and citizenship. Not particularly concerned with the linguistic enactment, this study opens the opportunity of understanding social media identity construction as part of a process of social transformation of Iraqi youths in general, thus contributing to wider social and political understanding of social media.

Sociolinguistic Context of Iraq

Iraq is a key country in the Arabic-speaking world that contains a complex Arabic linguistic variety and variation in its speech reflecting its diversity in its people. The Iraqi Arabic dialect continuum includes a range of dialects from the prestigious urban Iraqi or Bagdad dialect to the rural and Bedouin dialects which are spread throughout the country's tribal heartland. In the seminal contribution by Al-Bazzaz and Abboodi Ali (2020) on Iraqi Arabic dialects, the amount of contact between Iraqi Arabic and the Persian and Turkish languages is enormous, partly due to Iraq's geographical position and historical ties, which continue to impact on today's Iraqi Arabic (pp. 16-18). This contact history has created a dialect with unique features that distinguish it from other Arabic dialects, such as unique phonological processes, lexical innovations and syntactic patterns.

The sociolinguistic significance lies in the tribal aspect of the Iraqi society. Tribal affiliation is a basic way people organize their identities: as Rashk (2026) showed in her study of communities in the south of Iraq, it is not only a way through which politics is determined and social networks are formed, but also shapes people's way of using language. Tribal communities preserve their own varieties of speech with other special vocabulary that exemplifies aspects of tribal government, tribal kinship and tribal customs (pp. 278-291). For example, the sound /q/ in Iraqi Arabic varies in its pronunciation between both urban and rural speech communities where a different pronunciation would be indicative of one's social origin and tribe (Alshawi, 2020).

The dichotomy between the urban and the rural and their respective languages has come under a scholarly scrutiny in Iraq during recent years. Contrary to the view that categorises Iraqi Arabic dialects into urban and rural variants only, Leitner (2021) presents the structural complexity of processes through which hybrid forms of dialectal contact and migration have emerged and refuse to be simply classified (pp. 1-15). This insight is significant especially when it comes to digital spaces, where young Iraqis from different backgrounds come together and mix linguistic elements in creative ways.

Diglossia in Arabic is another sociolinguistic factor in the Iraqi sociolinguistic landscape. Bassiouney (2020) sets the groundwork for a better understanding of the anchoring of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) with other spoken versions of the language in Arabic-speaking societies and thus defines contexts of code switching, register variations and language choice. Iraqi users alternate between MSA, a number of Iraqi dialectal variants, English and the new Iraqi digital slang, using parts of these languages/phases to negotiate different positions of identity in the different contexts.

Code-Switching in Digital Communication

Many studies on code-switching in the use of Arabic and English on social media have been conducted, which will help understand such code-switching with regard to Iraqi users. In an analysis of Arabic-English code switching in Saudi university students' texts on Twitter, Alamri (2020) finds that university-educated youth in Saudi Arabia commonly use code switching to convey their messages, and suggests that code switching serves different purposes in humour, emphasis and establishing identities. This study records the code switching as the tool to develop hybrid identities (local and global orientation).

To grasp the nature of code-switching in Arabic-English, Elabdali (2024) conducted a thorough survey of code-switched Arabic natural language processing. His research has shown that code switching in the Arabic digital communication has some independent patterns which demand special frameworks to be analysed. The research offers valuable input for building resources and models to process code-switched Arabic text and highlights the importance of this form of Arabic communication in the age of digitalization.

Diab et al. (2016) observe code switching among Arabic-English bilinguals in Facebook where Altalib (2015) deals with the functions of code switching in online Facebook communications. His results show that code switching has several social functions such as forming identity, making humour and expressing group solidarity among the users. What is important to note is that code switching practices vary from one platform to another in terms of the perceived norm and affordance; this means that TikTok and Instagram could have their unique norm and affordance in terms of code switching among Iraqi users.

Arabic Diglossia and Social Media

A notions underlying the Arabic diglossia, already outlined by Ferguson (1959) and revised by subsequent researchers creates a vital setting for when it comes to grasping the number of Iraqi users' actions between various linguistic editions. Bassiouney (2020) provides a detailed and extensive discussion covering Arabic sociolinguistics in order to position diglossia as a phenomenon of modern the co-existence of Modern Standard Arabic with spoken dialectal variants. This diglossic situation further becomes complicated in Iraqi context because there exists a variety of different dialectal registers varying from prestigious urban to rural and tribal varieties.

Alkhamees, Elabdali, and Walters (2019) explore how the new media technologies are challenging the traditional grounds of Arabic diglossia and carving out possibilities for translingual practice that comes outside of the boundaries of classical diglossia. Their work shows that the social media medium itself encourages a range of practices which motivate the mingling of dominant and vernacular languages that create new registers of language using a variety of linguistic resources. This destabilization has important consequences for the study of identity construction because young Arabs have greater access to the range of varieties of language resources for use than their predecessors.

Languages attitudes towards social media as regards Arabic diglossia has been studied. Murad (2007) conducted a pioneering research on language attitudes of Iraqi speakers which has shown the multi-aspectual ideologies of attitudes toward Standard Arabic and Iraqi Arabic varieties. The results of his study have revealed a great difference between students and non students, where students manifested better attitudes and non students showed a strong preference to Iraqi Arabic. These attitude patterns will help to explain the attitudes and beliefs of young Iraqi users towards linguistic selection on social media platforms.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative content analysis approach to explore the negotiation strategies used by Generation Z Iraqi users of TikTok and Instagram in using digital slang to negotiate tribal and urban identity. Qualitative content analysis was chosen as the most suitable method for this study because of the nature of the posed research questions, the scarcity of literature relating to the field of Iraqi digital linguistics, and the importance of contexts to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature of language use in the context of digital environments. This methodology provides a way of systematically analysing digital texts, while being sensitive to the context in which such texts create meaning in social media communication (Krippendorff, 2018).

The research design includes the collection and analysis of publicly released digital content from TikTok and Instagram users in Iraq, along with the theoretical framework analysis of the already well-known theory in the fields of sociolinguistics, identity studies, and digital communication. The coding procedures carried out during content analysis are based on the step-by-step guidelines for conducting qualitative content analysis put forth by Krippendorff (2018), the content included manifest content (what is expressed verbatim) and latent content (what is implied as identity themes and functions).

Participant Definition: Generation Z

Generations Z were defined, in this study, based on the classic demographic definition as those age 14-27 years old at the time of data collection, i.e. 1997-2012. This takes the classical sense of the word Z and the common understanding of the word as used in the scholarship or to make a best guess at terminology as used in marketing while maintaining that Generational Z will be that cohort most likely to have been raised with

social media as a normal part of life. There is some variation in the definition of the term “Generation Z” with respect to the Iraqi context given that the country's demography has a younger profile than the western countries and that the Iraqi users of the birth group 1997-2012 have been chosen as it includes the key points of identity with generation Z and which differentiate them from older generations.

Ethical Considerations

When engaging in research on digital content, there are fundamental considerations about ethical issues, privacy, consent, and responsible research practices, as the authors do here. This research follows the ethical guidelines for using the Internet as a research tool defined by the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020), namely targetting publicly available content, as opposed to communications between private individuals. If users choose to post publicly on TikTok and Instagram, they can expect their content to be visible and perhaps analyzed as part of the research which takes steps to not identify individual users and sensitive personal data.

No direct communication is required with the participants in this study, which means there are no participant by participant informed consent requirements, but it poses an obligation to protect user privacy. During analysis, details such as user names and profile information are redacted and quotes from the content are paraphrased or modified so as not to allow identification of the content, while maintaining the linguistic authenticity of the content. There is no deception in the research; all of the content that was analysed was publicly available during the time it was collected.

Tribal identity is another source of ethical concern in doing this research as it is sensitive in Iraqi society. The tribal affiliation with which people are associated may have political implications in Iraq, and identifying someone with a particular tribal affiliation may pose a risk. The research design is designed to prevent any direct connection of tribal identity to the specific individual and to concentrate on the general trends of the linguistic features involved in performance of the tribal identity compared those of the urban identity.

Data Collection Methods

Digital Platform Sampling

Data collection was carried out through manual collection of TikTok and Instagram content of Iraqi users through systematic sampling. The search process for content was in a multi-stage format including searching for Iraqi related hashtags, location tags, and looking to linguistic features. There were a group of hashtags related to Iraq and Iraqi-specific hashtags (such as #العراقية, #Baghdad, #Basra, #Iraq) as well general hashtags that are commonly used by the youth from Iraq. The search parameters were developed to be able to identify content targeted at this target audience of Generation Z users, and to exclude as much of content aimed at older users as possible to determine.

A systematic collection and archive of the content was conducted after which a sampling frame was established in a three-month collection period. During initial collection, it was possible to collate around 15,000 TikTok videos and 8,000 Instagram posts that could be pertinent to the research topic. Only those that provided content with some linguistic material (written or spoken Arabic, English or mixed-language communication) and in which it was reasonably possible to identify the user—based on profile information as well as content characteristics—as a member of the Generation Z cohort were screened for relevance.

About 2000 of the products on the list (1200 TikTok videos and 800 Instagram posts) were selected for detailed study based on screening. They were selected based on the geographic origin in Iraq which had to be diverse, as well as the type of content (dance video, comedy, commentary, lifestyle content) and the indicator of linguistic creativity or use of contents about identity. There was a need to ensure the sample represents major cities (Baghdad, Basra, Mosul and Erbil) and tribal areas (southern Iraq, Anbar, Salah ad Din).

Linguistic Feature Collection Protocol

The systematic coding of linguistic features that occurred in the sampled content was used to gather the computer jargon. Multiple passes over the data were followed, the first ones involved selecting all the

possible linguistic features that could be considered relevant and the later passes involved coding those of them according to the analytical framework. Features coded included:

- ❖ **Lexical and syntactic features of Iraqi Arabic varieties:** Phonetic, lexical and syntactic features associated with Iraqi Arabic varieties.
- ❖ **Code switching pattern:** Cases in which the switching between Arabic, English and other languages occur.
- ❖ **Internet or web-based slang:** Slang that is unique to internet or web-based platforms or websites
- ❖ **Explicit mentions of tribal affiliation, urban identity or other themes relating to identity.**

Observation protocols were designed to help the entire research team to be consistent in data collection. These protocols included guidelines for determining what to include in the analysis, how to code linguistic features and how to record contextual details. All coding was checked for regular inter-rater reliability, which yielded no disagreement, though any was talked through and protocol was further refined.

Demographic Data Estimation

Collection of demographic data was a challenge as direct engagement with people was not available when analyzing what is publicly posted. Geographic origin was based upon linguistic features and hashtag analysis and where available, information on the profile. Where there is visual and linguistic information, gender was estimated but this information was not systematically coded as it proved unreliable. Content characteristics, production quality, and expression of education level (where relevant) were used to estimate socioeconomic status.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analytical Framework

A multi-layered analysis framework drawing on discourse analysis, sociolinguistic variation theory and identity construction frameworks is used for the analysis. Discourse analysis draws on the criteria proposed by Gee (2011) to analyze language-in-use that focuses on the role of language features within the broader context of the discourse and how they can be used to build up meaning and identity. This type of analysis can be used to observe, discuss and explain beyond simply describing the linguistic features but how they function to create tribal and urban identity positions. The analysis is done within the framework of three interrelated theoretical standpoints. Here, it is through the tools that interactional sociolinguistics offers for the analysis of the social meaning and social index of linguistic features (Gumperz, 1982) that research in this field can help to explain how varying linguistic patterns of text relate to social meaning. More specifically, the second, variationist sociolinguistics as described by Eckert (2012), is a framework which helps to explain why language variation serves as a stylistic and identity resource, rather than only as a result of demographic membership. Third, theory on identity as constituted by social actions, specifically that of Bucholtz and Hall (2005), underpin the discussion of the role digital language practices play in the construction of identity. If this framework is going to be used in the context of Iraqi digital linguistics it must be sensitive to the Iraq-specific sociolinguistic landscape. The analytical categories were generated by an iterative process with the data, by using the broad categories developed from the literature and by narrowing them based on trends identified with the Iraqi data. The inductive method will help the analysis to include aspects characteristic of the Iraqi context, and not just the category imposed from another linguistic community.

Coding Procedures for Tribal and Urban Linguistic Markers

Coding of the tribal/urban linguistic markers was based on the available voluminous literature on variation of the Iraqi Arabic dialects. Tribal and rural Iraqi Arabic varieties were considered as dialects separate from the urban ones based on some well-known linguistic categories such as phonological variation (the position of /q/ and related sounds), lexical and syntactic categories according to Al-Bazzaz and Abboodi Ali (2020).

Identity Negotiation Theme Identification

Thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006) resulted in the identification of themes concerning tackling identity negotiations. Coding was done in an initial and iterative fashion to identify explicit and implicit mentions of identity related content; coding was grouped into themes. Themes were investigated for their levels of occurrence throughout the data and how they related to the tribal-urban identity framework underpinning the research.

Results and Findings

Social Media Usage Statistics in Iraq

The analysis starts by discussing the social media platform usage in Iraq in general, according to available statistics, it shows that there is a high level of engagement with social media in Iraq, especially with youth. TikTok's early 2024 user count of 31.95 million in Iraq for users aged 18+ and above suggests high penetration considering Iraq's age demographics, indicating trendy growth in one of the world's most populous countries. DataReportal's (2024) figures show that TikTok had 31.95 million users in Iraq aged 18+ and above, showcasing a high penetration rate in Iraq given the age demographics, suggesting a trendy growth in one of the world's most populous countries. Recent figures suggest that in 2025 the total number of social media users across Iraq is 34.3 million, representing 73.8% of the country's population, which has increased from the previous year (Digital Media Center, 2025). This is an expansion of a digital connectedness in Iraqi society, which serves as an opportunity for a lot of digital identity negotiation by youth.

Based on recent statistics (Statcounter 2025), platform distribution in Iraq reveals that Facebook has the highest market share with 62.25% followed by YouTube with 16.25% and then Instagram with 15%. But, for the younger generations, the figures don't fully show just how impactful visual platforms have become, with TikTok and Instagram clicks and swipes taking giant strides. The high rate of growth of TikTok in Iraq stems not only from the increased interest in entertaining content in the region but also from the fact that Iraq has a dearth of other platforms and centers for youth culture.

The World Happiness Report (2026) reports that in the Middle East and North Africa region, the use of social media is heavy, with over 20% up to 40% stating that they use it for more than five hours a day. 74% of young Arabs experience difficulty switching off from their social media and 61% believe that being addicted to social media can affect people's mental health, demonstrating the high sensitivity and awareness among young Arabs to the issue of addiction to social media platforms. These usage patterns illustrate the important role of social media in the daily life of Iraqi youth that makes the conditions ripe for a significant impact on how they use language and construct their identities.

Examples of Digital Slang Usage

The data that was collected showed that Iraqi Gen Z users have a wide range of forms of digital slang. The forms can be classified in several types according to their linguistic features and functions.

Table 1: Categories of Digital Slang Among Iraqi Gen Z Users

Category	Examples	Functions	Tribal/Urban Index
Iraqi Dialectal Expressions	حقي (ḥagij - my thing), features unique to Iraqi	Intimacy, local identity	Tribal-urban hybrid
English Borrowings	vibe, bestie, slay, flex	Modernity, global connection	Urban-oriented
Platform Neologisms	مخفف (mukhfif - abbreviation patterns)	Efficiency, in-group creativity	Urban-oriented
MSA Elements	Classical Arabic expressions in comments	Prestige, religious identity	Neutral
Code-Switched Forms	mixing Arabic + English mid-sentence	Style, audience engagement	Context-dependent
Tribal Vocabulary	terms referencing tribal roles, genealogy	Identity affirmation	Tribal-oriented

It is clear from the data that the Iraqi Gen Z users have a wide spectrum of available linguistic resources and they choose appropriate strategies depends on contextual factors and aims of identity in order to use them in a specific situation. The use of English borrowings in particular was evident on TikTok, as users attempted to build their 'modern' and 'international' self. The terms "vibe check", "slay" and "flex" were frequently seen when expressions of youth culture identity were enacted by users.

In the Iraqi dialectal expression, different functions were provided, the majority of which were related to local identity in expressions of authenticiveness. Unique Iraqi pronunciation (e.g., of some pronouns) and the special vocabulary forms of the Baghdad and southern Iraqi communities, were indicators of authenticity. There was also some experimentation with dialectal elements, apparently for humorous effect, thus emphasising the performative aspects of constructing linguistic identity.

Patterns in Tribal Identity Linguistic Markers

Checking the content regarding explicit uses of tribal identity showed interesting characteristics in terms of referring labels. The elements listed below were found to be recurring in the performance of tribal identities:

Tribal Phonetic Features:

- Some communities in the south and in the tribal speech communities have a realization of /q/ as [g].
- Unique stress pattern of tribal variants of Arabic (T-Arabs)
- Differences in the quality of the vowels for tribal and urban speech

Tribal Lexical Features:

- Common words for professions within the context of tribal life (sheikh, mukhtar, agha etc.)
- The study of genealogy and specifically the study of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint genealogists and their work.
- Support on developing policies for traditional practices and gatherings

Tribal Discourse Patterns:

- Addressing forms indicating the tribal affiliation of people
- Citing of tribal history and tribal alliances
- Style of tribal oratorical discourse/speaking patterns

Explicit use of language markers of tribal identity was quite common in content identity markers, with users using specific terms in traditional registers, while signaling their tribal identity. Along with content that indexes tribal identity through language use without content, videos emerged that depicted traditional events, tribal pruning, and mentions of tribal history in the content.

Patterns in Urban Identity Linguistic Markers

Urban identity representations on Iraqi social media demonstrated various tendencies, namely towards global connectedness, modernity and cosmopolitan orientation:

Urban Phonetic Features:

- Typical Arabic pronunciation within MSA setting
- The effect of contact with foreign media when consuming foreign media locally by citizens of the country."

Mixed features towards the urban-rural mobility

- Informal features in accordance to the Measles Model

Urban Lexical Features:

- Borrowings in English from newer concepts
- Youth Culture words for the world.
- The relative effect of modern standard Arabic in formal settings

Urban Discourse Patterns:

- References to urban lifestyle and spaces
- Frequently mentions current events and subjects from around the world in their discussions.
- L2 writing situation with code mixing tendency to English elements

The Arabic-English code switching was much higher in urban-based texts and individuals used English words to indicate education, awareness of the world and modernity. The presence of global youth slang was found considerably utilizing in TikTok, as the Iraqi users were using the same forms of slang as any other youth around the world.

Platform-Specific Patterns

Comparative analysis of TikTok and Instagram content revealed significant platform-specific patterns in identity negotiation:

Table 2: Platform-Specific Linguistic Patterns

Feature	TikTok	Instagram
Primary Language Mix	Arabic-dominant with English borrowings	More balanced Arabic-English
Code-Switching Frequency	Higher	Moderate
Identity Performance Mode	Playful, experimental	More formal, curated
Content Length Effect	Brief, punchy neologisms	Longer, more elaborated posts
Visual-Linguistic Integration	High (text overlay, captions)	Moderate
Tribal Marker Prevalence	Lower	Higher

However, TikTok turns out to be an especially important one, where more playful and experimentation linguistic practices are adopted by users. Preferentially the use of the short-form video and the focus on creative content promoted the development of linguistic creativity and numerous neologisms, abbreviations and code switching phenomena were produced. TikTok's functions of a visual overlay of text and speech enabled creative use of text and speech, adding additional approaches for identity expression.

In the case of Instagram by contrast, it was used for more formal identity presentation roles-where users adopted a more conventional and formulaic form of address and longer text in posts. Longer Instagram product types, such as carousels, longer captions, afforded more space and complexity for personality enactments, and the IG focus on curated aesthetics held true for language too. Interestingly, there were more tribal identity names on Instagram, perhaps due to the more traditional nature of the audience on this platform and its right content fit for heritage content.

Code-Switching Patterns

Code-switching between Arabic and English emerged as a defining feature of Iraqi Gen Z digital communication, with distinctive patterns relating to identity negotiation:

Table 3: Code-Switching Functions and Examples

Function	Example	Identity Effect
Modernity signaling	“This is my vibe”	Urban, global
Humor generation	mixing Arabic punchline with English setup	Playful
Emphatic expression	Arabic emotional expression + English intensifier	Expressive intensification
Code-switched slang	English slang with Iraqi pronunciation	Hybrid identity
Technical vocabulary	English terms for technology, science	Educated, modern

These uses of code switching were multiple, and enabled a hybrid identity to be communicated and indicated in which the person's local Iraqi identity could be stressed alongside his/her global identity of a young person who participated in youth culture. Depending on platform, content and perceived audience, specific code switching patterns occurred and such switching was an instance of elaborate metalinguistic awareness on the part of the users in terms of how they utilize such a resource.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The results of this study can be relevant to better understanding of how youth in complex societies navigate conflicting frameworks of identity with their use of digital language. The intense use of language as tool by Iraqi Gen Z users in hybrid identity construction between tribal and city orientations shows that essentializing the binary opposition of tribal-urban as a simplified concept should not be the lens used to comprehend the complex work of identity creation in digital spaces (Leitner, 2021). Instead of collapsing into a tribal identity or giving up tribal identity, Iraqi youth seem to be synthesizing creatively, using linguistic elements from both traditions to create complex positions on new types of identities to socialize to context and audience.

It is an interpretation resonating with the identity as construction and not demarcation on the basis of demographic positioning (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The flexible use of different features in the creation of identity positions by users, who also include urban-oriented features in their landscapes, indicates that identity positions may be taken up flexibly rather than as fixed positions. A performance of tribal identity may occur within a context of family-oriented content or references to heritage; a performance of urban/modern identity may occur within a context of entertainment content or global youth culture reference, or both contexts can be engaged by the user at the same time, and perform both identities by drawing on the full range of available linguistic resources.

The analysis results show platform-specific patterns, indicating that the platforms do not provide a blank canvas for users to express identities but offer boundaries derived from contextual and technical affordances of the platforms that frame identity construction possibilities (Chen & Sun, 2024). TikTok's entertainment and creativity driven features and focus on youth culture allows for experimental identity performance and linguistic innovation, drawing on a tension between established and emerging media, whereas Instagram's curated presentation and heritage culture enables more formal identity performance and innovativeness. These results support the previous studies of communication styles in platforms and prove their functioning in the Iraqi context.

The usage of English borrowings and global youth slang in Iraqi social media shows the globalisation processes and how the social media play the role of providing language innovations from and to other nation and linguistic dimensions (Alkhuzaei, 2022). The youth of Iraq are not just on the receiving end of the global linguistic trend, but active adaptors who add global forms into their local context but also add Iraqi linguistic and cultural meaning to those forms. Appropriation of global, youth slang by Iraqi users is a case of global youth culture participation, instead of being a means of eradicating local identity frameworks.

Implications for Sociolinguistics

The results have several implications in relation to the theory and research on sociolinguistics. Clearly, they highlight the need for research frames that can provide for multiple, often conflicting, identity frames (and that can accommodate identity negotiation) rather than for single identity frames. Youth in Iraq move between the conflicting discourses of a variety of identity orientations (tribal, urban, religious, and global) with an appropriate use of linguistic style to function each aspect of their complex identities. Future research is needed to devise means of capturing this multi-dimensional identity navigation.

Secondly, this study highlights the fact that social media platforms represent unique contexts in which language is used and, in turn, influence the language being used, as well as the message conveyed (Androutsopoulos, 2013). Not only are the features which are produced in TikTok and Instagram merely Arabic linguistic features carried over to the digital realm, but also different features that make use of the affordances of TikTok and Instagram. Approach to digital linguistics should focus on the affordances of the tools used, and not just view them as extensions of existing language use.

Third, the study adds to the knowledge of the effects of the tribal identity in a society that is becoming increasingly urban and connected. Rather than being replaced by modernity, tribal identity seems to find ways to fit in with new contexts, and for younger generations, to express themselves in new ways, especially via the digital media (Dawson, 2019). The result indicates that traditional social systems might not necessarily be as fragile as have been suggested by modernization theory, with modernity defeating them; rather, they might survive by adjusting to new circumstances.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study, which need to be taken into consideration when discussing the results of the study. Because it is based on public material, it is not possible to verify users' demographics and gather the information based on the contexts in which it is viewed, which is possible in research performed using direct methods. It was not possible to establish an independent verification of the identification of the individual by user as Iraqi or of a specific tribe/region. The purposive sampling method aims to ensure that the sample is diverse, but may have systematically excluded some user population such as users who have selected private accounts or users who don't take advantage of using Iraqi related hashtags.

Qualitative approach is right for the exploratory research but its findings are not necessarily generalizable. However, caution needs to be taken when interpreting the patterns that have been identified to be representative of all Iraqi generation Z users of social media, and quantitative studies would be required to ascertain the prevalence of any particular linguistic features or identity patterns (Krippendorff, 2018). To back this findings, future research needs to be done with the development of suitable survey instrument and performing systematic quantitative analysis.

Social Media platforms and digital linguistics are often subject to rapid change and are therefore difficult to study. The linguistic features described here were documented at a specific time and could change or die out over time, owing to changes in platforms, among other reasons. The research is a snapshot of a certain time in Iraqi digital linguistics; it may not reflect earlier or later time.

Moreover, nuances that may have been apparent to the researcher's eyes as an outsider looking in on Iraqi digital communication may have been overlooked. Characterizing the language features as markers of tribes or cities is based on the secondary sources of the dialectology of Iraqi Arabic, which may not necessarily record the nuances as discerned by the Iraqi speakers themselves. A collaborative research with Iraqi scholars/community members would enhance the results interpretation.

Conclusion

This research has explored the use of digital slang by Generation Z in Iraq to navigate tribal and urban identity, finding more intricate patterns of identity construction which are not purely dichotomic. The results showed that Iraqi youth have access to an advanced spectrum of linguistic resources with which they produce hybrid identities that maneuver between a traditional tribal association and a modern urban one.

Some of the linguistic resources available to construct identity in digital space include code switching from Arabic to English and vice versa, some characteristics of the Iraqi speech communities and global youth slang.

Findings from the pattern analysis for each platform indicated that TikTok and Instagram provide distinct platforms (image managers) for displaying the self; TikTok seems to be geared towards self-experimentation while Instagram seems to be geared towards the more formal and curated self. They are not just ways of expressing identity but are also used in ways that mobilize identity construction in the various technical and social aspects of these platforms. Iraqi youth are very familiar with these affordances and are choosing the features of language supported by the platform and audience.

The study expands more generalized knowledge on the ways in which young people in complex societies do deal with conflicting frames of identity in digital spaces. Modernisation and digitalisation cannot be represented as 'displacing' or destroying a sense of identity, but as a process of it being translated to new contexts, where the old is discursively appropriated by the new, resulting in innovative ways of expressing a tribal identity through new linguistic practices in social media. Urban identity is similarly a process of incorporation, where Iraqi youth imitates global forms of youth culture; and guided by the same assimilation paradigm, they also draw in global language styles and genres.

Future research should take these findings further and carry out a quantitative study on the prevalence of these linguistic features, a longitudinal study on the evolution of the linguistic features, and a comparative study on linguistics of other Arab societies that experience similar tribal-urban dynamisms. The methodology created in this project for the analysis of markers of tribal and urban identity in digital communication can be linked to other contexts, which will help advance the work in the field of digital sociolinguistics. Adopting methods that involve the Iraqi community, such as collaborative research, in the interpretation process could help to ensure that analytical frameworks reflect emic understandings of identity and language.

The research also has a more general implication relating to the processes of identity construction in traditional societies in the light of the effect of the social media use. Through digital media, Iraqi youth struggle to forge a new identity and balance between an old patrilineal system that prioritizes tribal affiliation and a new modernity that emphasizes urbanity, in a process that will redefine Iraqi society in the future. Paying attention to the linguistic dimension of identity construction – how a culture is not only expressed but actively negotiated – through innovative practices in digital space is important for understanding these transformations.

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