

Translanguaging and Code-Switching as Identity Construction for Generation Z on Instagram: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Abstract

Instagram has evolved beyond a simple photo-sharing platform. For Generation Z in Indonesia, it functions as a key space where users actively shape their social identity and manage how they are perceived online. This research investigates the phenomenon of translanguaging and code-switching in Instagram captions, framing it not merely as a bilingual habit but as a strategic communication tool that individuals deliberately use for self-presentation in digital contexts. Employing a qualitative document analysis method, this study examines ten captions taken from verified Indonesian public figures and influencers. The analysis draws on Poplack's grammatical framework for identifying types of code-switching and Holmes' sociolinguistic theory to interpret the social motives behind the practice. The findings reveal that intra-sentential switching is the most dominant pattern, accounting for 70% of all occurrences. This involves inserting English words or phrases into Indonesian sentence structures. The study identifies that this linguistic practice helps construct three primary digital personas: a Modern identity at 40%, a Global identity at 30%, and a Personal Branding image at 30%. While much of the existing literature has focused on spoken code-switching in face-to-face

interactions, this research narrows the gap by examining code-switching in curated written discourse, specifically on Instagram captions. Although such texts are edited and asynchronous, they reveal deliberate identity positioning that contributes to the construction of the three digital personas identified in this study. This complements studies of spontaneous spoken interaction by showing how users strategically craft their bilingual persona for public audiences. The study concludes that for Generation Z, mixing Indonesian and English serves as a crucial form of social capital to navigate contemporary youth culture, which is heavily influenced by global trends and online status. These insights advance the understanding of bilingual practices and digital identity performance among Indonesian Generation Z.

Keywords: *Code-switching, Identity Construction, Generation Z, Translanguaging Sociolinguistics*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has completely changed the way we talk to one another. For Generation Z "digital natives" who have grown up with a world of information at their fingertips, platforms like Instagram are much more than just apps; they are virtual stages where they carefully craft and perform who they are. As Anderson and Jiang (2018) point out, teenagers today are so deeply connected to their devices that social media has become the primary setting for their daily language and social interactions. In these digital spaces, language has shifted away from being something rigid or formal; instead, it has become fluid, creative, and highly personal. At its heart, digital identity is built through the words we choose. We are constantly negotiating the boundaries of "self" through a mix of text and visuals, allowing us to project different versions of ourselves depending on who is watching. Seargeant and Tagg (2022) argue that interacting on social media isn't just about trading information; it is deeply tied to how people signal where they belong. Instagram, with its heavy focus on "vibes" and visual aesthetics, provides a unique playground for this kind of linguistic innovation (Daulay et al., 2024). One of the most striking examples of this is the constant jumping between Indonesian and English. While many scholars look at these shifts through a technical lens (Holmes, 2013), this study sees them as active social strategies. Whether it is about hitting a

specific emotional note or maintaining a "trendy" status, these language choices help users climb the global digital ladder (Puspita & Ardianto, 2024). While we know a lot about how students switch languages in a classroom, there is still a gap in understanding how it works for Generation Z in the fast-moving world of Instagram. This study steps into that gap, exploring how these linguistic shifts help build a digital sense of self.

Generation Z has grown up in a digitally connected world where multilingual communication is common across social media, online gaming, education, and daily interactions. As a result, translanguaging and code-switching have become important linguistic practices that allow Generation Z individuals to express their identities, social affiliations, and cultural backgrounds. Translanguaging refers to the flexible use of multiple linguistic resources within communication, while code-switching involves alternating between two or more languages in conversation. These practices are not merely communication strategies; they also function as identity markers that reflect how young people position themselves within global and local communities (García & Wei, 2014). For many Generation Z speakers, mixing languages demonstrates creativity, modernity, and membership in specific social groups.

In educational contexts, translanguaging enables Generation Z learners to negotiate meaning and maintain connections between their home languages and academic languages. Students often combine English with local languages in classroom discussions, online forums, and collaborative tasks. This linguistic flexibility helps learners feel more confident and included because they can express complex ideas without abandoning their cultural identities. According to Canagarajah (2011), translanguaging practices create spaces where multilingual speakers can construct hybrid identities that integrate both global and local experiences. Consequently, language use among Generation Z reflects not only communicative competence but also emotional and cultural attachment. The

overlap between language and digital technology has become a fascinating area for research. Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) argue that digital life has given rise to entirely new ways of communicating, where being creative and hybrid is often valued more than following traditional rules. For Indonesian youth, Instagram creates a unique pressure: the need to look "global" and complex while still staying true to their cultural roots (Barton & Lee, 2013).

This tension is exactly where code-switching becomes most visible and useful. By looking at these choices through a qualitative lens, this study contributes to the idea that digital communication is a vital, real-world site for understanding modern language (Androutsopoulos, 2013). In the simplest terms, Gumperz (1982) defines code-switching as mixing two different grammatical systems within a single conversation. Far from being a sign of "broken" language or poor grammar, modern researchers see it as a mark of high linguistic flexibility and intelligence. To understand how these switches are built, this study follows the categories refined by Poplack (1980): *First*, Inter-sentential switching: Making the switch right at the edge of a sentence. *Second*, Intra-sentential switching: Shifting languages right in the middle of a sentence, showing how deeply two languages can be integrated (Riparip, 2024), and *Third*, Tag-switching: Dropping in short phrases like "literally" or "you know" as social markers to signal a certain vibe (Puspita & Ardianto, 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Sample

This study employs a qualitative methodology centered on document analysis. This approach is chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth interpretation of textual data within its natural digital context (Miles et al., 2014). The study focuses on 10 Instagram captions from 10 verified Generation Z users. The selection criteria include: (1) individuals born between 1997–2012 (Dimock, 2019), (2) verified "blue-check" status to ensure a

high level of identity curation, and (3) a consistent pattern of bilingual (Indonesian-English) posting.

Data Acquisition

Data collection is conducted through purposive sampling of Instagram posts, specifically targeting captions and comment threads. The researcher utilizes screen-capture technology to preserve the context of the interaction, including emojis and formatting, which may influence meaning. These captures are then transcribed and organized into a classification sheet to facilitate the identification of code-switching types.

The choice of purposive sampling is consistent with established qualitative research traditions, particularly in linguistic ethnography, where depth of insight is prioritized over statistical representativeness (Creswell, 2014). The rationale for selecting verified accounts is grounded in the assumption that users who have attained public recognition are more likely to engage in deliberate, audience-oriented linguistic choices, making their captions particularly rich sites for identity analysis. This methodological choice echoes the approach taken by Zappavigna (2012), who argued that social media posts from high-visibility users offer a concentrated lens through which broader communicative norms can be observed. Furthermore, the integration of emojis and visual context into the transcription process reflects a growing consensus in digital discourse studies that meaning in social media communication is multimodal rather than purely verbal (Kress, 2010). The analytical framework thus treats each Instagram caption as a multimodal text in which linguistic and visual elements jointly contribute to identity construction.

Analytical Procedures and Trustworthiness

The analysis follows the qualitative framework of description, classification, and interpretation (Gay, 2012). First, instances of language switching are identified and classified into structural types (Tag, Inter, or Intra). Second, a thematic analysis is applied to map these instances to three primary dimensions of identity: *First*,

Modern Identity: Reflecting fluid social roles and contemporary lifestyle. *Second*, **Global Identity:** Signalling participation in international youth culture, and *Third*, **Personal Branding:** Using language strategically for self-promotion and social capital.

To ensure systematic classification, each caption was assigned to a single category based on its dominant communicative function. If a caption contained elements of multiple identities, it was coded according to the primary purpose of the code-switch in that context, guided by Holmes' (2013) framework on social motives. This procedure prevented arbitrary classification and ensured consistency across the 10 captions analyzed.

To strengthen the validity of the findings, the study utilizes theoretical triangulation by cross-referencing linguistic data with multiple sociolinguistic theories. Additionally, by examining a diverse range of 10 verified accounts (including the primary influencers and their commenters), the study seeks to ensure that the identified patterns are representative of broader Generation Z digital behavior.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Result

The result is divided into two parts: the dominant types of code-switching used by Generation Z, based on Poplack (1980), and the identity construction patterns analyzed through thematic analysis. The analytical procedures followed by Gay et al. (2012), were reading, classifying, describing, and interpreting. After identifying the dominant type of CS, the next step is analyzing the identity construction of Generation Z using Holmes (2013), García & Wei (2014), and Canagarajah (2011).

The dominant types of Code-Switching used by Generation Z on Instagram

Poplack (1980) divides code-switching into three types: tag-switching, inter-sentential switching, and intra-sentential switching. Each type was calculated into a percentage based on the formula below:

Formula:

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{Frequency of CS type}}{\text{Total Data}} \times 100\%$$

Table 1. The dominant types of Code-Switching

Type of CS	Frequency	Percentage %
Inter-sentential switching	2	20%
Intra-sentential switching	7	70%
Tag-switching	1	10%
TOTAL	10	100%

Based on the data analysis of 10 Instagram captions from Generation Z, three types of code-switching proposed by Poplack (1980) were identified. As shown in Table 1, intra-sentential switching is the most frequently used type, accounting for 70% of the total occurrences, followed by tag-switching with 10% and inter-sentential switching with 20%. This finding indicates that Generation Z users on Instagram predominantly insert English words or phrases within a single Indonesian sentence. According to (Poplack, 1980) intra-sentential switching often occurs in informal contexts where speakers have high bilingual competence. The prevalence of this type suggests that Generation Z utilizes code-switching as a strategy to construct a modern and bilingual identity in digital communication.

Identity Construction of Generation Z

Drawing on Holmes' (2013) assertion that code-switching functions to construct identity, this study operationalizes identity construction into three

patterns: Modern, Global, and Personal Branding. Each pattern was calculated into a percentage based on the formula below:

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{Frequency of Identity Construction}}{\text{Total Data}} \times 100\%$$

Table 2. Identity Construction of Generation Z

Identity Constructed	Frequency	Percentage %
Modern	4	40%
Global	3	30%
Personal Branding	3	30%
TOTAL	10	100%

Based on the data presented in Table 2, it can be concluded that Modern identity was the most dominant type of identity construction found in Indonesian Generation Z's Instagram captions, accounting for 40% (4 out of 10 data). This was followed by Global identity and Personal Branding, each comprising 30% (3 out of 10 data).

Table of Data Generation Z

No	Data	User
1	"sudah lama tidak selfieeeeeeeee"	User 1
2	"suam aku yang lucu inifilmnya lagi tayang di bioskop guys! Ayo nonton suam ngelawak sama kembarannya"	User 2
3	"pertama kali apip ikut fashion show, u did great! So proud of you sayang!"	User 3
4	"hellow hellow lama ga post setelah KOMA rilis hihi"	User 4
5	"lebaran day 2"	User 5
6	"caption slide terakhir"	User 6
7	"kompilasi orang orang di doa abis sholatku, love you, selamat lebaran"	User 7
8	"healthy & clear skin tuh selalu bikin mood jadi lebih happy"	User 8

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------------------|---------|
| 9 | <i>“maciy sayangku cantik banget loveu”</i> | User 9 |
| 10 | <i>“lika liku tournament padel weekend iniii”</i> | User 10 |

This section interprets each datum by dialoguing with Poplack’s (1980) structural typology of code-switching and Holmes’ (2013) framework of identity construction. The analysis demonstrates that Generation Z’s code-switching on Instagram operates as Curated Bilingualism a strategic fusion of local and global linguistic resources for digital self-branding.

Construction of Modern Identity (4 Data, 40%)

The prevalence of Modern Identity reflects Generation Z’s use of intra-sentential switching to index digital literacy and modernity, a practice requiring high bilingual competence (Poplack, 1980). The findings indicate that Modern identity and Global identity account for 70% of the observed personas, suggesting that many Generation Z users employ code-switching to construct an online image aligned with global youth culture.

This practice helps users gain social visibility and fit into digital trends on Instagram.

However, the pressure to maintain a "modern" or "global" persona may create a gap between authentic self-expression and curated self-presentation. For some users, mixing Indonesian and English reflects genuine bilingual use. For others, it functions more as a strategy to appear up-to-date and socially relevant, which can reduce the perceived authenticity of their online persona. Thus, while code-switching supports identity construction, it also shows how digital environments encourage users to balance being themselves with meeting audience expectations.

1. Datum 1: “sudah lama tidak selfieeeeeee” (User 1)

The insertion of the English noun “selfie” exemplifies **intra-sentential switching**, where a single lexical item from English is embedded within an Indonesian syntactic frame. Poplack (1980) posits that this type of switching is

grammatically complex because it demands adherence to the syntactic rules of both languages. User 1 demonstrates such competence by maintaining Indonesian sentence structure while incorporating “selfie” as a direct object. Beyond grammar, Holmes (2013) argues that speakers use code-switching to symbolize various aspects of their social identity. Here, “selfie” functions as an emblematic term (Androutsopoulos, 2013) tied to Instagram’s visual culture. Its use constructs a **Modern Identity** by signaling the user’s participation in global, tech-mediated self-presentation practices. The elongated “eeeeee” further stylizes the switch, performing the casual, affective orthography typical of Generation Z digital discourse.

2. Datum 4: “hellow hellow lama ga post setelah KOMA rilis hihi” (User 4)

This datum features multiple **intra-sentential switching**: “hellow,” “post,” and “rilis.” The hybrid form “rilis” [from release] illustrates what Poplack (1980) calls a “nonce borrowing,” integrated phonologically into Indonesian. Holmes (2013) argues that such linguistic choices index group membership and shared knowledge. The terms “post” and “rilis” position the user within a digital creator community, thus constructing a **Modern Identity** rooted in content production. The playful “hellow hellow” and “hihi” mitigate the promotional tone, aligning with Generation Z’s preference for ironic, self-aware communication (Androutsopoulos, 2013).

3. Datum 6: “caption slide *terakhir*” (User 6)

The terms “caption” and “slide” represent **intra-sentential switching** (Poplack, 1980) using Instagram’s technical lexicon. While Poplack (1980) focuses on syntactic constraints, Holmes (2013) emphasizes social meaning: using specialized jargon allows speakers to claim expertise or insider status. By deploying these terms, User 6 constructs a **Modern Identity** that claims digital literacy and fluency in platform-specific discourse.

4. Datum 8: “healthy & clear skin *tuh selalu bikin mood jadi lebih happy*” (User 8)

The switches “healthy & clear skin,” “mood,” and “happy” are **intra-sentential switching** (Poplack, 1980) of international beauty and wellness discourse. Holmes (2013) claims that code-switching reflects aspirational identity. The user borrows English terminology not due to lexical gaps, but to align with global consumer culture and aesthetic standards. This constructs a **Modern Identity** that is cosmopolitan, health-conscious, and commercially aware.

Construction of Global Identity (3 Data, 30%)

Global Identity is performed through switches that index international orientation, primarily via inter-sentential switching (Poplack, 1980). This type of switching often signals a shift to a more formal, authoritative, or globally recognized discourse (Holmes, 2013).

5. Datum 3: "*pertama kali apip* ikut fashion show, u did great! So proud of you *sayang!*" (User 3)

This datum demonstrates **inter-sentential switching** (Poplack, 1980), where a complete clause shifts to English. Poplack (1980) notes that inter-sentential switches often mark topic shifts or discourse functions. Holmes (2013) argues that English is frequently adopted as the language of status and modernity. The choice to praise in English constructs a **Global Identity** by associating the user with international fashion discourse and projecting cosmopolitan affect.

6. Datum 7: "*kompilasi orang orang di doa abis sholatku*, love you, *selamat lebaran*" (User 7)

The **inter-sentential switching** “love you” (Poplack, 1980) inserted into a religious context illustrates identity negotiation. Holmes (2013) states that speakers use code-switching to negotiate between traditional and modern values. By expressing affection through English, the user modernizes a traditional religious post, constructing a **Global Identity**.

7. **Datum 10:** "*lika liku* tournament padel weekend *iniii*" (User 10)

The **intra-sentential switching** "tournament padel weekend" refers to an internationalized sport. Padel is a globally recognized hobby often associated with upper-middle-class lifestyles. Following (Holmes (2013) the use of English for niche activities constructs a **Global identity** by indexing the user's participation in an internationalized leisure culture.

Construction of Personal Branding (3 Data, 30%)

Personal Branding emerges through strategic code-switching and stylized hybrids aimed at audience engagement (Androutsopoulos, 2013). According to Holmes (2013), speakers use code-switching to project a desired persona and manage social relationships. In digital spaces, this translates to crafting a persona that is relatable, authentic, and engaging to followers. The data show that code-switching in Personal Branding captions functions more as a strategic choice than a random bilingual habit. If it were only about bilingual communication, we would expect English and Indonesian to be mixed consistently across all types of posts.

However, the captions categorized under Personal Branding use English terms like "loveu," "late night," and "selfie" in ways that highlight a modern, relatable, and socially connected image. These terms are commonly used in online youth culture to signal familiarity with global trends and to attract engagement.

In contrast, captions focused on daily activities or personal reflections use less English and more Indonesian. This pattern suggests that users intentionally switch to English when the goal is self-promotion and audience connection, indicating that code-switching here acts as a tool for building social presence rather than just reflecting language ability.

8. **Datum 2:** "*suam aku yang lucu ini filmnya lagi tayang di bioskop guys! Ayo nonton suam ngelawak sama kembarannya*" (User 2)

The **tag-switching** "guys" exemplifies tag-switching (Poplack, 1980), which Poplack identifies as the least grammatically integrated form. Holmes (2013)

argues that such switches are addressee-oriented and function as tools for self-presentation. "Guys" is an inclusive, informal address term from global internet English. Its use constructs a **Personal Branding** that is approachable and community-oriented.

9. Datum 5: "lebaran *day 2*" (User 5)

The phrase "lebaran *day 2*" is an **intra-sentential switching** (Poplack, 1980) blending the culturally specific term "lebaran" with the English temporal marking "*day 2*". Holmes (2013) notes that code-switching enables speakers to express multiple identities simultaneously. This constructs **Personal Branding** by creating a globalized persona culturally rooted yet narrating life through a globally intelligible format, appealing to both local and diasporic audiences.

10. Datum 9: "*macy sayangku cantik banget* loveu" (User 9)

The **intra-sententialswitching** "*macy*" and "loveu" are internet slang. These informal, youthful expressions are characteristic of Generation Z digital communication. Based on (Holmes, 2013) such linguistic choices construct **Personal Branding** by marking in-group membership and creating an intimate, playful persona for social media branding.

In summary, the analysis shows that Generation Z users on Instagram mostly use intra-sentential switching blending languages within a sentence to shape their identity, whether it's modern, global, or personal branding. This fits with Poplack's (1980) idea that fluent bilinguals often mix languages in a way that feels natural, and Holmes' (2013) view that language mixing is a tool for expressing who we are. It's like they're curating a mix of local and global vibes to create a unique digital persona (Androutsopoulos, 2013). In short, Generation Z's code-switching is a clever way to be themselves, modern, connected, and distinct in the digital world

Discussion

Poplack's (1980) grammatical framework, Holmes's (2013) sociolinguistic theory, and García & Wei's (2014) translanguaging framework work together by

addressing three complementary levels of analysis. Poplack (1980) provides the structural lens. Her distinction between Tag, Inter-sentential, and Intra-sentential switching allows this study to classify the formal patterns of code-switching found in the captions. This answers the how: how English and Indonesian are structurally combined in the text. Holmes (2013) provides the social lens. Her framework explains the social motivations behind those choices, such as signaling group membership, expressing solidarity, or constructing identity. This answers the why: why Generation Z users choose to switch codes in specific contexts like Personal Branding. García & Wei (2014) extend this analysis by framing code-switching as translanguaging, a dynamic practice where multilingual speakers draw on their full linguistic repertoire without being constrained by named language boundaries. For Generation Z on Instagram, translanguaging functions not only as a communication strategy but also as a way to construct hybrid identities. This aligns with Canagarajah (2011), who argues that translanguaging creates spaces where multilingual speakers integrate both global and local experiences into a cohesive sense of self.

By using all three frameworks, the analysis avoids a purely formal or purely social explanation. Poplack ensures the classification is linguistically accurate, Holmes connects those patterns to immediate social functions, and García & Wei with Canagarajah situate those functions within broader identity construction. Together, they show that structural choices in code-switching are not random, but tied to social practices such as personal branding, audience engagement, and the negotiation of hybrid identities in digital spaces. The findings indicate that Generation Z's code-switching on Instagram reflects more than stylistic preference. It represents a translanguaging practice through which users manage belonging, authenticity, and global orientation simultaneously. This supports the view that digital platforms enable fluid identity construction beyond traditional bilingual boundaries.

Limitation and Future Research.

This study is limited by its small sample of 10 Instagram captions from verified Generation Z users, which restricts statistical generalization to the broader Indonesian Generation Z population. Because these users are public figures who face greater pressure to maintain a consistent public brand, their motivations for code-switching may differ from non-celebrity users who code-switch more habitually or for in-group signaling. The findings should therefore be understood as insights into identity construction among influential Generation Z users rather than as representative of all Generation Z users in Indonesia. This study also focuses only on textual code-switching and does not include multimodal elements such as images, emojis, and comments that contribute to meaning-making on Instagram. However, the purpose of this qualitative study is analytical rather than statistical generalization. The purposive selection of verified accounts allows for an in-depth analysis of how identity curation and bilingual posting are performed by influential users. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample, including non-verified accounts and a multimodal approach, would help test whether these patterns apply more broadly and clarify the role of public brand pressure in shaping code-switching practices.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that for Indonesian Generation Z, code-switching on Instagram is a calculated linguistic choice rather than a random habit. The data shows that intra-sentential switching (70%) is the go-to strategy, largely because it allows for the seamless integration of English "lifestyle" terms into Indonesian thoughts. By doing this, users successfully project a Modern identity (40%) that feels both tech-literate and globally connected. Ultimately, code-switching acts as a vital tool for translanguaging and building personal brands. Rather than treating English and Indonesian as separate systems, Generation Z uses their full linguistic repertoire to negotiate hybrid identities in a competitive digital landscape (García

& Wei, 2014; Canagarajah, 2011). Future studies should look at how these patterns change on other platforms like TikTok or X (formerly Twitter) to see if these "Global" identities remain consistent. From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings carry implications for English language education in Indonesia.

The high frequency of intra-sentential switching demonstrates that Generation Z already possesses substantial passive bilingual competence, which educators can leverage rather than suppress. Canagarajah (2013) advocates for pedagogies that treat students' multilingual repertoires as resources rather than deficits, and the patterns identified here suggest that Instagram-literate Generation Z users are already practicing a form of spontaneous translanguaging that could be harnessed in communicative language teaching. Additionally, from a sociolinguistic planning perspective, the prestige accorded to English-inflected Indonesian in digital spaces raises important questions about language policy and the long-term vitality of Bahasa Indonesia as a monolingual medium of national identity (Alwasilah, 2013).

This study does not find evidence that code-switching weakens Bahasa Indonesia as a national identity. Instead, the data show that Generation Z uses English selectively for specific functions like personal branding and global connection, while still framing the overall discourse in Indonesian. This aligns with Alwasilah (2013), who argues that Bahasa Indonesia remains stable as a monolingual medium of national identity despite lexical borrowing and mixing in digital spaces. The risk of language shift is low when English is used as a complementary resource rather than a replacement for Indonesian in everyday communication. However, continuous monitoring is needed, especially if intra-sentential switching becomes dominant in formal domains like education and government.

Future research should employ larger corpora and mixed-methods designs, incorporating user interviews to capture the speakers' own metalinguistic

awareness of their code-switching choices. This would deepen understanding of the intentionality behind the translanguaging practices identified in the current study.

AI Declaration

The authors declare that Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used only as assistive instruments during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, Gemini (Large Language Model by Google) was used to support language clarity and improve academic formatting. The AI tool did not generate, fabricate, or manipulate research data, analysis, interpretations, or references. All AI-generated outputs were carefully reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript. This use of AI complies with the Publication Ethics and Malpractice Statement of the **Journal of Pragmatics Research (JoPR)**.

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