



Bahasa Medan in Digital Interaction: A Sociolinguistic Study of TikTok Youth Culture

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Abstract. This study investigates how Bahasa Medan, a distinctive regional dialect from North Sumatra, is used, transformed, and sustained within the digital environment of TikTok. Drawing on Hymes' (1972) theory of the speech community and supported by sociolinguistic frameworks from Gumperz (1982), Holmes (2013), Bell (1984), and Bucholtz and Hall (2005), the research explores how Medanese youth employ their dialect across multimodal forms of communication—spoken performances, textual captions, and interactive comment exchanges. Using qualitative descriptive methods, the study examines content from selected TikTok creators who integrate Bahasa Medan into their videos to express humor, identity, and solidarity. The findings reveal that TikTok functions as a digital speech community where dialectal expressions such as *palak*, *sor*, *baserak*, *slek*, *berondok*, and *merajok* serve as linguistic markers of belonging and cultural pride. Furthermore, users exhibit strategic code-switching among Bahasa Medan, standard Indonesian, and English to balance local authenticity with global participation. These interactions demonstrate how linguistic creativity, humor, and social engagement enable regional dialects to thrive in transnational digital spaces. The research ultimately shows that Bahasa Medan on TikTok is not merely a form of entertainment but a dynamic expression of identity, cultural continuity, and community in the era of globalized media.

Keywords: Bahasa Medan; Local Culture; Sociolinguistics; Speech Community; TikTok Discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a medium of communication; it is a central tool through which communities express belonging, negotiate identity, and sustain cultural continuity. In sociolinguistics, the concept of the speech community emphasizes that groups of speakers are bound not only by shared linguistic forms but also by the social norms and values that shape their communicative practices (Gumperz, 1968; Hymes, 1972). Traditionally, speech communities were studied within face-to-face, geographically bounded contexts—villages, neighborhoods, or classrooms. Yet in the digital age, the boundaries of these communities extend into virtual spaces, where interaction is no longer constrained by geography but by networks of shared interest, identity, and cultural practice.

The emergence of platforms like TikTok demonstrates this shift clearly. As one of the most influential short-video platforms, TikTok functions not only as an entertainment medium but also as a linguistic laboratory where youth experiment with creativity, performance, and identity. Through its multimodal format—combining speech, captions, visuals, and gestures—TikTok allows linguistic resources to be displayed, circulated, and reinterpreted in ways that reshape traditional notions of community and interaction. Within this space, youth form new

digital speech communities, connected less by physical proximity and more by shared practices of communication and cultural expression. Medan, the capital city of North Sumatra, presents a particularly rich site for such inquiry. Known for its multiethnic composition and distinctive Bahasa Medan dialect, the city has long been recognized for linguistic practices that differ from standard Indonesian. Bahasa Medan carries unique phonological and lexical features, including semantic shifts.

In face-to-face communication, such forms mark local identity, foster solidarity, and signal belonging to the Medanese community. But when transplanted into TikTok, these dialectal features are reframed within the dynamics of virality, audience orientation, and globalized youth culture. How Medan youth employ their dialect online, and how this affects perceptions of identity and community, raises important sociolinguistic questions. Recent studies about how people use language on digital platforms have mostly looked at slang, mixing languages, and how standard Indonesian is changed or adapted creatively (Sulistiyarini & Prasetyo, 2024; Kusyairi et al., 2024; Dewani et al., 2024). Even though some research has mentioned the use of regional dialects in online chatting, these topics are usually not discussed in depth and are more about describing what is happening rather than explaining why it matters for building communities (Napitu & Damanik, 2025; Setya et al., 2022). Most of the work focuses on the form of language variation—like new words or types of slang—but doesn't look much at the social reasons behind these changes within a group of speakers. For example, Fauzan and Wahyudi (2025) studied language changes in TikTok ads and how they could be useful for teaching. Their research gives helpful ideas for education, but it mainly focuses on how to use these changes in teaching, not on how dialects, identity, and community interact on the platform.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies on language in digital platforms have largely emphasized the rise of slang, code-switching, or the creative modification of standard Indonesian (Sulistiyarini & Prasetyo, 2024; Kusyairi et al., 2024; Dewani et al., 2024). While some works have acknowledged the presence of regional dialects in online spaces, these references often remain peripheral and descriptive, without deeper theoretical grounding in how such practices construct communities (Napitu & Damanik, 2025; Setya et al., 2022). Moreover, existing research tends to foreground language variation in terms of form—cataloguing lexical changes or categorizing slang—while paying less attention to the social processes that make such practices meaningful within a speech community. Another study by Fauzan and Wahyudi

(2025), which examines language variation in TikTok advertising and its use as teaching material. While offering useful pedagogical insights, it focuses on instructional aspects rather than the sociolinguistic dynamics of dialect, identity, and community formation on the platform.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the role of Bahasa Medan in shaping digital speech communities on TikTok. The central problem lies in understanding how Medan youth adapt and recontextualize their dialect when engaging in digital interaction. Specifically, this research seeks to explore how Bahasa Medan is manifested in TikTok videos, captions, and comment interactions; what social and cultural factors motivate its use in digital content; how users navigate between dialect, standard Indonesian, and global English in their online communication. These questions are critical for understanding not only the survival and transformation of regional dialects but also the broader reconfiguration of community and identity in digital communication. Unlike previous studies that approach dialect use on social media as isolated instances of variation, this study conceptualizes Bahasa Medan youth on TikTok as a digital speech community. Within this community, the use of dialect is not incidental but central to processes of identity performance, boundary marking, and group solidarity. By drawing on the 1972 Hymes's speech community theory and combining it with digital ethnography, the study situates dialect use within the complex interplay of norms, practices, and community membership that define both offline and online identities. Therefore, this research contributes to the understanding of how regional dialects adapt and evolve in the digital era, offering insights into the resilience of local identities in the face of globalized media. It also advances sociolinguistic theory by extending the concept of speech community to online environments, showing how digital platforms like TikTok provide new arenas where linguistic norms are created and shared.

3. METHOD

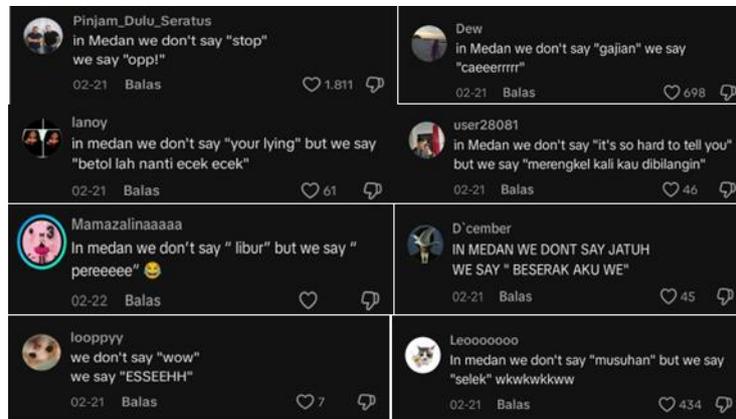
This study adopts a qualitative descriptive method grounded in sociolinguistic analysis to explore how Bahasa Medan is used and varied by young people on TikTok. The focus is not only on the language itself but also on its meaning, function, and role in building identity and community online. Data were collected through content analysis of TikTok videos who actively incorporate Bahasa Medan in their posts. A purposive sampling technique was used to select videos, captions, and comments that reflect diverse communicative contexts, including casual conversations, comedic sketches, storytelling, and collaborative content (e.g., duets and

stitches). Then, the overall data were screenshotted and displayed in the findings & results section.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Here are the displayed datas from the TikTok content videos.

@ Riztegh_ <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSUBSGqpo/>



Picture 1. Here are the displayed datas from the TikTok content videos.

Based on the picture above, there are some the data as follows:

- Op : Berhenti
- Ecek-ecek : Bercanda
- Pere : Libur
- Esseh : Wow
- Caer : Gajian
- Merengkel : Susah dibilangin
- Beserak : Jatuh
- Slek : Musuhan

@ soufberry <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSUBAAq9X/>



Picture 2. Datas from the TikTok content videos.

Based on the picture above, there are some the data as follows:

- Merajok : Ngambek

Kementelan : Genit
Pajak : Pasar
Pasar : Jalan Raya
Kereta : Motor
Raon-raon : Jalan-jalan
Becewek/Becowok : Pacaran
Enceng : Udahan/selesai
Encop : Punya/ tandai
Asen : Hak milik
Pipet : Sedotan
Selop : Sandal
Sudako : Angkot
Hekter : Stepler

@ onmedan.id <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSUBA2K4N/>

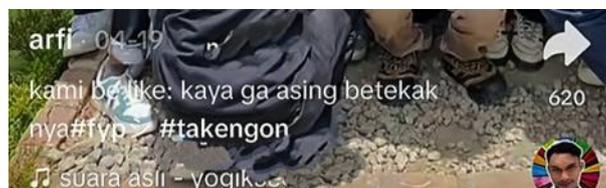


Picture 3. Datas from the TikTok content videos.

Based on the picture, there is one the data as follow:

Kreak : Sok jago; anggar jago

@ rcbbbb <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSUBAEqMy/>

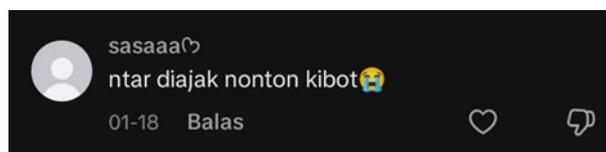


Picture 4. Datas from the TikTok content videos.

Based on the picture, there is one the data as follow:

Betekak : Berdebat

@ alipjackson <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSUBA7JWE/>



Picture 5. Datas from the TikTok content videos.

Based on the picture, there is one the data as follow:

Kibot : Organ musik (The term is typically used in the context of social gatherings or festive events such as parties.)

@Chua.aaaa <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSUBAoHof/>



Picture 6. Datas from the TikTok content videos.

Based on the picture, there is one the data as follow:

Tengok : Lihat

@ Christobing_ <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSUJekXPP/>

Based on the linked video, these are some data as follows:

Angek : Iri

Berondok : Sembunyi

Cak : Coba

Bombon : Permen

Cakap : Ngomong/Bicara

@ raishazhramnda <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSUJdessb/>

These are some data as follows:

Kongsi : berbagi

Campak : Lempar

Paok : Bodoh

Bereng : Sinis

Tabok : Tampar

Begado : Berantem

Palak : Emosi

Sor : Suka

@mhdazriell_ <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSD9Np4cc/>



Picture 7. Datas from the TikTok content videos.

Based on the video above, there's one data as follows:

Mop : Gertak/Menggertak

Digital Communication

Based on data collected from several TikTok creators such as **@riztegh_**, **@soufberry**, **@onmedan.id**, **@rcbbbb**, and **@alipjackson**, the use of Bahasa Medan appears across three primary dimensions of digital communication.

Video performances (spoken discourse):

TikTok users from Medan frequently incorporate their regional dialect in spontaneous dialogues, comedy sketches, or monologues. Utterances such as “*palak kali aku*” (I am really annoyed) and “*berondoklah kau*” (go hide yourself) showcase distinctive phonological and pragmatic traits—namely strong intonation, rapid rhythm, and assertive expression—which reflect the communicative style typical of Medanese interaction. The prosodic intensity and direct style convey humour, irritation, and camaraderie, showing how regional speech patterns are recontextualized for entertainment. Through these performative speech acts, users express both humor and regional identity.

Captions (textual discourse):

In their video descriptions, creators often employ Bahasa Medan to intensify emotional tone or amplify humorous effects. Examples like “*Angek kali kau*” or “*Cak ko liat!*” not only enhance audience engagement but also mark the speaker's cultural background in a digital setting.

Comment exchanges (interactive discourse):

In comment threads, viewers especially those from Medan frequently reply using the same dialect, for instance “*Paok kali kau!*” or “*Nampak kali logatmu orang Medan.*” This reciprocal use of local language illustrates the emergence of a digital speech community, where dialect functions as a marker of solidarity and social belonging within online interactions.

This phenomenon aligns with *speech community theory* (Hymes, 1972; Labov, 1972), emphasizing how shared linguistic norms and communicative values unite individuals. TikTok thus becomes a new medium in which Bahasa Medan thrives as part of a multimodal, participatory linguistic ecosystem.

Social & Cultural Motives in Dialect Use

The study identifies several social and cultural motivations driving the persistence of Bahasa Medan on TikTok:

Local identity and authenticity:

Creators employ the dialect not merely for communication but as an emblem of authenticity and regional pride. Using Bahasa Medan reaffirms their cultural distinctiveness within a national digital space dominated by standard Indonesian and global English—a form of linguistic assertion that reinforces ethnic identity. Through consistent dialectal use, they enact what Bucholtz & Hall (2005) describe as “identity as performance” — continually negotiated through practice rather than fixed traits. On TikTok, authenticity is performed through accent, word choice, and visual cues that mark one as “*anak Medan*”. This reinforces local pride and a sense of rootedness while navigating global trends, showing that digital youth communities can preserve local identity even within transnational spaces.

Community solidarity:

Shared dialect fosters emotional and social bonding among users who share similar cultural backgrounds. It serves as a symbolic bridge of camaraderie, particularly in comment interactions, where humor and mutual understanding strengthen the sense of belonging. Digital interaction thus extends the Medanese speech community beyond geography — from local neighborhoods to algorithmic spaces.

Entertainment and humor:

Bahasa Medan’s directness and expressive tone make it an ideal medium for humor. The expressive and energetic nature of Bahasa Medan contributes to the comedic appeal of TikTok videos. Its distinctive intonation and directness make content more engaging and relatable, encouraging virality and digital participation.

Cultural representation:

By integrating local dialects into their digital performances, Medanese creators unintentionally promote regional culture — including local expressions, humor, and social norms — to both national and international audiences. TikTok, therefore, operates as a platform for cultural preservation and reinvention in the digital age. These findings correspond with Holmes’ (2013) argument that linguistic variation is shaped by social factors such as solidarity, identity, and group affiliation. The Medanese dialect on TikTok exemplifies how language functions as a vehicle of social meaning within digitally mediated communication.

The Findings above indicate that TikTok users from Medan frequently engage in code-switching among Bahasa Medan, standard Indonesian, and English, reflecting their multilingual competence and contextual awareness.

- a. Bahasa Medan is used to assert local identity and convey intimacy.
→ Example: “*Cak lah dulu, kawan.*”
- b. Standard Indonesian is employed to reach a broader, national audience or clarify the message.
→ Example: “*Video ini cuma buat lucu-lucuan ya, guys.*”
- c. English appears in trendy or globally-oriented expressions to signify modernity and digital fluency.
→ Example: “*No hate, just for fun!*”

Such linguistic fluidity demonstrates a dynamic repertoire, allowing users to shift codes according to communicative goals and audience expectations. Rather than random mixing, code-switching here acts as a strategic tool of identity performance, balancing local authenticity with global participation. This observation reflects *Gumperz's (1982) theory of linguistic repertoire and identity negotiation*, which posits that speakers strategically employ multiple language varieties to construct and project social identities. TikTok provides an ideal environment for such identity play, blending local dialects with transnational digital discourse. Overall, the analysis reveals that:

- a. Bahasa Medan functions as a medium of identity, creativity, and cultural expression on TikTok.
- b. Users strategically employ linguistic variation to balance local pride with global participation.
- c. Through humor, code-switching, and multimodal expression, regional dialects remain resilient and adaptive within globalized digital communication.

In essence, Bahasa Medan is not diminishing in the digital age—it is evolving, sustaining its role as a symbol of community, humor, and belonging in Indonesia's expanding online culture. Additionally, the TikTok platform makes it easier for new speech communities based on regional dialects to emerge. Using Bahasa Medan, hashtags, duet chains, and viral challenges enable users to co-create a common in-group language style. Similar results have been shown in other contexts, where communities are able to index locale through TikTok "dialect challenges"; through stylized online practice, dialect traits are enregistered as markers of regional identity.

The Authenticity in Youth Repertoires

The sound, meme, and video affordances offered by TikTok significantly foster language inventiveness among young Indonesians. Extensive linguistic play is revealed by our study, including inventive code-switching, original acronyms, and amusing repurposing of Bahasa Medan idioms. These behaviors align with the known factors that contribute to online slang, such as meme culture, phonetic play, and regional dialects. Young users create memorable, shareable utterances by fusing internet memes with dialectal terminology in Indonesia's "fertile ground" for digital slang. This illustrates a flexible, multimodal repertoire: for instance, a word in Bahasa Medan might be used in a meme caption or dance trend, adding regional flair to widely shared viral formats. Within the theory, this kind of inventiveness is consistent with the notion that young people actively reorganize the language resources at their disposal to express their individuality and group affiliation. Additionally, it emphasizes the idea of performance: as youthful artists purposefully stylize their speech for impact, each TikTok tape turns into a fun, purposeful enactment of identity (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). All things considered, the creative usage of Bahasa Medan on TikTok is a prime example of how digital youth develop a distinct sociolinguistic style through play and remix, adding to a constantly changing digital lexicon.

There is a noticeable conflict between participating in global digital culture and preserving local originality. On the one hand, speaking in the Medanese dialect gives one a sense of legitimacy and rootedness. However, in order to reach a wider audience, our users often modify their content to conform to wider TikTok trends (e.g., utilizing popular sounds, hashtags, or English loanwords). This delicate balancing act reflects broader trends seen in Southeast Asia: TikTok encourages "global cultural exchange" while facilitating "local cultural preservation," forcing users to strike a balance between tradition and fashion.

In reality, Medan creators adhere to the platform's algorithmic criteria while maintaining their regional authenticity. The sociolinguistic idea of authenticity is reflected in this interaction: identity is constantly created through practice rather than being fixed. For a diverse audience, creators adjust their language, sometimes emphasizing dialectal content to assert authenticity and other times blending it with global or national components to increase visibility. Because it maintains a unique local character while engaging with global youth culture, Bahasa Medan TikTok content exemplifies a glocal strategy.

Essentially, TikTok's Bahasa Medan is more than just an odd language phenomena; it offers insight into how Indonesian youth use new media to express their identities, sense of community, and inventiveness. These observations support the idea that online practices are as

much about self-presentation and meaning-making as they are about communication, which is consistent with digital ethnography and performance-based theories of language.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The findings from the TikTok data reveal that Bahasa Medan has become an expressive and dynamic form of digital communication among young users. Through video performances, captions, and interactive comment exchanges, Medanese creators have transformed their regional dialect into a living representation of identity, humour, and belonging. The lexical items collected across various creators—such as *“palak,” “berondok,” “merengkel,” “sor,”* and *“paok”*—not only illustrate distinct local vocabulary but also highlight how these words function as markers of cultural intimacy within online discourse. The analysis shows that TikTok serves as a new sociolinguistic arena where language operates beyond geography, allowing users to build digital speech communities (Hymes, 1972) bound by shared norms and values rather than physical proximity.

From a social and cultural perspective, several motivations underlie the persistence of Bahasa Medan in online spaces. First, the use of dialect reflects a conscious act of authenticity and local pride. Medanese youth employ their dialect as a form of self-presentation that distinguishes them from the dominance of standard Indonesian and English on social media. Second, the data reveal a strong sense of solidarity within the community. Frequent exchanges in the comment sections—such as joking insults or shared dialectal humour—function as social signals of belonging, in line with Holmes’ (2013) argument that variation often performs solidarity and group affiliation. Third, humour emerges as a driving force behind the popularity of dialect use, as Bahasa Medan’s expressive rhythm and direct style make content more engaging and entertaining. Finally, cultural representation naturally occurs as creators introduce local speech patterns and values to a wider audience, both preserving and promoting regional culture through digital media.

The study also demonstrates how linguistic creativity extends through code-switching practices. TikTok users fluidly shift between Bahasa Medan, standard Indonesian, and English, balancing local identity with global visibility. Such flexibility aligns with Gumperz’s (1982) theory of linguistic repertoire, which views language choice as a resource for identity negotiation. Bahasa Medan marks intimacy and locality, Indonesian maintains accessibility, and English indexes modernity and trend participation—together forming a local strategy. Audience reception further supports these observations. Local viewers often respond with pride and emotional connection, perceiving dialectal expression as a symbol of representation.

While creators remain rooted in regional expression, they also adjust their content to fit TikTok's globalized norms by using popular sounds, hashtags, and English captions. This reflects what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) describe as *identity as performance*—a fluid process of continual negotiation between self-presentation and audience expectation. Rather than diminishing local culture, this adaptation demonstrates linguistic resilience: Bahasa Medan continues to evolve as it interacts with wider digital and cultural forces.

Future research on Bahasa Medan in digital settings could explore other social media platforms like Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts to see how dialectal expressions differ across various online spaces. Studies that follow changes over time could also look at how language trends develop, especially in response to evolving online cultures and how algorithms shape content. Adding numbers-based approaches, such as analyzing audience data or mapping out communication networks, might give a clearer picture of how digital speech communities are created, maintained, and keep people involved. Comparing Bahasa Medan with other regional dialects in Indonesia would also be useful, helping to better understand how digital media affects language variety and cultural identity throughout the country.

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