

Local Language Practices in the Digital Era: A Comparative Study of Threats and Opportunities for Cultural Identity in Sulawesi

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v11i5.2804>

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication has reshaped language practices in multilingual communities by expanding access to wider audiences while intensifying the visibility of dominant languages. In Indonesia, this transformation raises important questions about the sustainability of local languages and their role in cultural identity. This study examines how local languages are used in online communication and compares the threats and opportunities experienced by two culturally significant communities in Sulawesi: the Bugis community in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, and the Wolio/Butonese community in Buton Regency, Southeast Sulawesi. A comparative qualitative design was employed through semi-structured interviews, observation of social media interactions, content analysis of online cultural materials, and field notes involving 30 participants from both regions. The findings show that Indonesian dominates public-facing communication because it offers wider reach, institutional familiarity, and social acceptability, while English appears mainly as a prestige marker associated with education, modernity, and global orientation. Local languages remain stronger in family chats, community groups, and culturally oriented content, where they function as markers of ancestry, politeness, kinship, and belonging. The comparison reveals that Bone shows relatively stronger local language visibility in online cultural content, whereas Buton demonstrates stronger concern about declining intergenerational transmission and limited Wolio content. The study concludes that digital media are ambivalent: they can accelerate language shift, yet they also provide strategic spaces for cultural revitalization through storytelling, documentation, youth content creation, and community-based language promotion.

Keywords: *Digital Communication, Local Language, Cultural Identity, Bugis, Wolio, Bone, Buton, Language Maintenance, Digital Sociolinguistics*

Article History:

Received 19th June, 2026

Accepted 11th July 2026

Published 07th September 2026



INTRODUCTION

The expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed the ways individuals interact, exchange information, and construct social relationships. Social networking sites, instant messaging applications, and user-generated content have created communicative spaces in which language choices are continuously negotiated. In multilingual societies, these spaces often encourage code-switching, code-mixing, abbreviations, emojis, memes, and hybrid forms of expression. Androutsopoulos (2015) argues that digital media have reshaped multilingual communication by facilitating networked forms of language use that move beyond traditional geographical and sociolinguistic boundaries.

Language is widely recognized as a core component of cultural identity because it carries collective histories, values, traditions, and systems of knowledge. Identity is therefore not only inherited but also performed through everyday linguistic practices in both physical and online spaces. Heritage language maintenance strengthens ethnic identity, cultural belonging, and well-

being among multilingual communities (Sari et al., 2024). At the same time, digital communication enables individuals to express local affiliations while participating in national and global conversations (Jones & Hafner, 2021).

The relationship between language and identity becomes more complex in digital environments. Online platforms provide users with opportunities to perform multiple identities through linguistic choices, audience design, and multimodal resources. Digital sociolinguistics shows that online language practices function as mechanisms through which speakers signal belonging, authenticity, social status, and cultural affiliation (Tagg & Seargeant, 2014). Thus, digital communication has become a crucial domain for understanding how local cultures adapt to globalization while maintaining distinctive linguistic characteristics.

Indonesia is an important context for examining these issues because of its extraordinary linguistic diversity. Although hundreds of indigenous languages remain in use, many local languages experience language shift due to modernization, urbanization, migration, schooling, and exposure to national and global languages (Aji et al., 2022). Indonesian has become the dominant language of education, government administration, media, and online communication. English also circulates widely in youth digital culture as a symbol of education, modernity, and global connectivity.

Previous studies have examined digital multilingualism, heritage language maintenance, and the technological marginalization of underrepresented Indonesian languages. However, several gaps remain. First, many studies discuss local languages in Indonesia in a general context (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble, 2021), while comparative qualitative evidence from culturally distinct communities within Sulawesi remains limited. Second, little attention has been given to how local-language users in Bone and Buton experience digital threats and opportunities in everyday social media practices. Third, existing research on Indonesian local languages often emphasizes language decline, whereas the creative use of digital media for identity negotiation, cultural storytelling, and youth-based revitalization remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by comparing Bugis language practices in Bone and Wolio and related Butonese language practices in Buton within contemporary digital environments.

Sulawesi offers a rich setting for this inquiry. Bone Regency in South Sulawesi is historically associated with Bugis civilization, where the Bugis language remains a strong marker of ethnic identity and cultural continuity. Buton Regency in Southeast Sulawesi has a historical connection with the former Buton Sultanate, where Wolio and related Butonese varieties continue to represent local heritage and collective identity. In both contexts, younger generations increasingly communicate through WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, often combining Indonesian, English expressions, internet slang, and local expressions.

This study aims to examine local language practices in digital communication and explore their implications for cultural identity among communities in Bone and Buton. Specifically, it investigates the threats posed by digitalization to local language maintenance, identifies opportunities for revitalization through online media, and compares sociolinguistic experiences across the two communities. The study contributes to discussions on digital sociolinguistics, language maintenance, cultural sustainability, and multilingual communication in contemporary Indonesia. The study is guided by the following research questions: 1) How are local languages used in digital communication among communities in Bone and Buton? 2) What threats does digitalization pose to local language maintenance and cultural identity? 3) What opportunities do digital media provide for preserving and promoting local languages? 4) How do language practices contribute to the construction and negotiation of cultural identity in the digital era? 5) What comparative insights can be drawn from the experiences of Bone and Buton?

Language practices refer to the ways individuals and communities use language in particular social, cultural, and technological contexts. In online interaction, language use is

shaped by platform affordances, audience expectations, social visibility, and identity performance. Digital communication is therefore not simply the transfer of offline language into online spaces; it generates new forms of expression through the combination of written text, images, audio, video, emojis, hashtags, and memes (Crystal, 2001; Danet & Herring, 2007).

Multilingual users often choose languages strategically according to audience, purpose, and platform. Indonesian is frequently selected for public posts because it is widely understood across ethnic groups and has high institutional legitimacy. Local languages tend to appear in intimate, family-based, or community-specific spaces where shared cultural knowledge can be assumed. English is often inserted as lexical borrowing, slang, or stylistic resource to index education, cosmopolitan identity, and global orientation.

Cultural identity is closely linked to language because language carries collective memory, values, social norms, and local knowledge. Local languages function as symbolic markers of ethnic belonging and cultural continuity. When local languages decline, communities may experience weakened intergenerational transmission, reduced familiarity with traditional expressions, and diminished access to culturally embedded meanings.

In indigenous and minority communities, language preservation is not only a linguistic project but also a cultural, educational, and social responsibility. Maintaining a local language can become a form of cultural resilience against homogenizing pressures associated with globalization. In this sense, local language use in digital spaces can be understood as a performance of belonging and a strategy for making cultural identity visible to wider audiences.

The impact of digitalization on local languages is paradoxical. Digital communication may contribute to language shift by promoting dominant languages, internet slang, and globally circulating expressions. Dominant languages often receive greater technological support, higher online visibility, and broader audience reach, while smaller languages have fewer digital resources and less standardized online representation (Joshi et al., 2020). At the same time, digital technologies can facilitate language revitalization through online communities, digital archives, language-learning materials, cultural videos, podcasts, and social media campaigns. Communities can use online media to document vocabulary, share oral histories, teach traditional expressions, and create youth-friendly cultural content. Therefore, digital media should be examined as both a challenge and a potential resource for sustaining local languages in multilingual societies.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative comparative research design to examine language practices and cultural identity in Bone and Buton. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings related to local language use in digital environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moleong, 2018). The comparative design enabled the researchers to identify similarities and differences between the Bugis-speaking community in Bone and the Wolio/Butonese-speaking community in Buton. Comparative qualitative research is particularly useful for exploring how similar social phenomena are shaped by different cultural and sociolinguistic contexts, thereby providing a deeper understanding of patterns of language use across communities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014).

Research Sites

The research was conducted in two culturally significant regions of Sulawesi: Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, and Buton Regency, Southeast Sulawesi. Bone was selected because of its historical significance in Bugis civilization and its strong association with Bugis linguistic

identity. Buton was selected because of its historical connection with the Buton Sultanate and the continued symbolic importance of Wolio and related Butonese varieties in cultural life.

Table 1. Research Sites and Cultural Backgrounds

Research Site	Dominant Local Language	Cultural Background
Bone Regency, South Sulawesi	Bugis	Bugis ethnic and cultural community
Buton Regency, Southeast Sulawesi	Wolio and related Butonese varieties	Butonese cultural sphere and heritage of the Buton Sultanate

Participants

The study involved 30 participants, consisting of 15 participants from Bone and 15 participants from Buton. Participants were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus. The inclusion criteria were: (1) being aged between 18 and 35 years, (2) being active users of digital communication media, (3) belonging to the local cultural community, and (4) being familiar with local language use in family or community communication.

The participants represented varied gender, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Both male and female participants were included in the study. Their educational and occupational backgrounds were diverse, including junior high school graduates, senior high school graduates, university-level participants, and working participants. However, gender, education, and occupation were not used as sampling criteria or comparative variables because the main focus of the study was on digital communication practices, cultural background, and local language familiarity. Therefore, these characteristics were presented as contextual information to clarify the participant profile.

Table 2. Participant Profile and Selection Criteria

Profile Category	Bone	Buton	Total/Description
Number of participants	15 participants	15 participants	30 participants in total
Age range	18–35 years	18–35 years	Young adult digital media users
Gender distribution	Included male and female participants	Included male and female participants	Gender was not used as a sampling criterion or comparative variable
Education/occupation background	Varied educational and occupational backgrounds	Varied educational and occupational backgrounds	Participants came from diverse backgrounds, including junior high school, senior high school, university-level education, and working backgrounds
Digital activity	Active users of WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, or similar platforms	Active users of WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, or similar platforms	Relevant to digital communication practices
Cultural background	Native members of the Bugis cultural community	Native members of the Butonese cultural community	Relevant to local language identity
Local language familiarity	Familiar with Bugis in family or community communication	Familiar with Wolio or related Butonese varieties in family or community communication	Relevant to local language maintenance and cultural identity
Sampling technique	Purposive sampling	Purposive sampling	Participants were selected based on relevance to the research focus

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, observation of social media interactions, digital content analysis, and field notes. Semi-structured interviews explored

participants' perceptions of local language use, language shift, cultural identity, and digital communication. Social media observations focused on language choice in captions, comments, group chats, and culturally oriented posts. Digital content analysis examined local language expressions, cultural narratives, and multilingual forms in online materials. Field notes were used to record contextual information and researcher reflections during data collection.

Table 3. Data Collection Techniques

Technique	Purpose
Semi-structured interviews	To explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward local language use in digital communication
Social media observation	To identify language choices and interaction patterns across digital media
Digital content analysis	To examine local-language expressions, cultural narratives, and online cultural representation
Field notes and documentation	To record contextual information and support interpretation of qualitative findings

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved five stages: data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, comparative interpretation, and cross-regional comparison. In the first stage, the researchers repeatedly read interview transcripts, observation notes, and digital content records. In the second stage, relevant segments were coded based on language choice, language shift, cultural identity, language prestige, audience design, and digital opportunities. In the third stage, related codes were grouped into broader themes. In the fourth stage, each theme was interpreted in relation to the research questions and relevant theoretical concepts. Finally, the findings from Bone and Buton were compared to identify shared patterns and distinctive sociolinguistic experiences.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study used triangulation across interviews, social media observation, digital content analysis, and field notes. Comparative interpretation was applied to examine whether patterns found in one region were also visible in the other. Participants' identities were protected through anonymization. The study respected digital ethics by focusing on publicly observable language practices or interactions shared with consent for research purposes. Interview excerpts were translated and edited only for clarity without changing their meaning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Patterns of Language Use in Digital Communication

The analysis revealed that participants from both Bone and Buton actively engaged in multilingual communication across digital media, including WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. Their language choices varied depending on communicative context, audience, and purpose. Local languages were more frequently used in family conversations and community-based interactions, while Indonesian dominated public-facing communication such as social media captions, educational content, and professional exchanges.

This pattern indicates that language choice in digital communication is closely related to audience design. In public online spaces, participants tended to use Indonesian because it allows them to communicate with wider and more diverse audiences. As the national language and lingua franca, Indonesian is considered more practical, accessible, and socially acceptable across different ethnic and linguistic groups. Therefore, its dominance in digital communication does not necessarily mean that local languages are rejected, but rather that participants adjust their language choices according to audience reach and communicative effectiveness.

English expressions also appeared in online interaction, although they were not used as the main language of communication. Participants commonly used English words or phrases in captions, comments, and informal digital expressions. In this context, English functioned as a symbolic prestige language. Its use was associated with modernity, education, global youth culture, and participation in wider digital trends. Thus, English expressions were often used not only for communication but also for identity performance, especially among younger users who wanted to appear modern, creative, and globally connected.

Table 4. Language Use across Digital Communication Contexts

Communication Context	Bone (Bugis)	Buton (Wolio/Butonese)	Dominant Language
Family chats	Frequent use of Bugis	Frequent use of Wolio	Local language
Community groups	Mixed Bugis-Indonesian	Mixed Wolio-Indonesian	Mixed language
Social media captions	Limited Bugis expressions	Limited Wolio expressions	Indonesian
TikTok content	Occasional cultural content in Bugis	Occasional cultural content in Wolio	Indonesian
Educational content	Rare use of local language	Rare use of local language	Indonesian
Professional communication	Minimal local language	Minimal local language	Indonesian

The dominance of Indonesian can be explained by its function as a lingua franca and its association with formal literacy, education, and institutional communication. Participants reported that Indonesian makes online interaction easier because it is understood by followers from different ethnic and regional backgrounds. English appeared less frequently than Indonesian but functioned symbolically as a prestige language. English words were used to project modernity, educational status, humor, and global orientation, particularly in captions, hashtags, and short video content.

Threats to Local Language Maintenance

Participants identified several challenges affecting local language sustainability in digital environments. The most prominent threats were the dominance of Indonesian, the influence of digital slang, the increasing use of English vocabulary, reduced intergenerational transmission, limited local-language content, and the perception that Indonesian is more modern and practical for online interaction. The dominance of Indonesian can be explained by its function as a national lingua franca and its association with formal literacy, education, and institutional communication. Participants reported that Indonesian made online interaction easier because it was understood by followers from different ethnic and regional backgrounds. This wider audience reach encouraged participants to use Indonesian in public-facing digital communication, such as captions, comments, educational posts, and short video content.

English appeared less frequently than Indonesian but functioned symbolically as a prestige language. English words and expressions were used to project modernity, educational status, humor, and global orientation, particularly in captions, hashtags, and short video content. Meanwhile, digital slang was associated with youth identity and platform culture. These patterns indicate that Bugis and Wolio face reduced visibility in public digital spaces when Indonesian, English expressions, and digital slang are perceived as more practical, modern, and socially acceptable.

Table 5. Major Threats to Local Language Use

Threat	Bone	Buton	Interpretation
Dominance of Indonesian	High	High	Indonesian offers wider audience reach and institutional legitimacy

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Influence of digital slang	High	High	Slang is associated with youth identity and platform culture
Influence of English vocabulary	Moderate	Moderate	English indexes prestige, education, and global orientation
Reduced intergenerational transmission	Moderate	High	Buton participants expressed stronger concern about declining Wolio use among youth
Lack of local-language content	Moderate	High	Buton participants reported fewer visible Wolio-oriented digital materials
Perception of modernity associated with Indonesian	High	High	Local languages are often seen as suitable for family or traditional contexts only

Interview data further revealed that younger users often preferred Indonesian and internet slang because they were perceived as practical, modern, and socially acceptable in online interaction. A participant from Bone stated, “Using Indonesian makes communication easier because everyone understands it.” Similarly, a participant from Buton explained, “Young people rarely post in Wolio because Indonesian reaches more people.” These responses indicate that communicative reach, perceived modernity, and social acceptance play important roles in shaping language choice in digital environments.

The comparative findings show that both communities experienced similar pressure from Indonesian, English expressions, and digital slang. However, this pressure appeared more pronounced in Buton, particularly in relation to reduced intergenerational transmission and limited Wolio-oriented digital content. This suggests that Wolio and related Butonese varieties require stronger digital visibility and community-based revitalization efforts, especially among younger users.

Opportunities for Cultural Revitalization

Despite these challenges, participants recognized opportunities offered by digital media. Online spaces allow users to produce cultural content, share traditional stories, promote local values, document vocabulary and expressions, and build communities centered on local identity. These practices show that digital communication can support language maintenance when local communities actively use it for cultural purposes.

Table 6. Opportunities for Language and Cultural Preservation

Opportunity	Bone	Buton	Comparative Note
Cultural content creation	High	Moderate	Bone showed stronger visibility of Bugis expressions and cultural symbols
Digital storytelling	High	Moderate	Bugis stories appeared more visible in short posts and videos
Online cultural communities	Moderate	Moderate	Both regions have potential for community-based initiatives
Promotion of traditional values	High	High	Both groups value local norms, politeness, and heritage
Digital documentation of language	Moderate	Moderate	Both require more systematic vocabulary and oral-history documentation
Educational content development	Moderate	Moderate	Schools and universities can support local-language digital learning materials

The comparative pattern suggests that Bone currently has relatively stronger cultural content visibility, especially through posts and videos featuring Bugis expressions, traditional values, and cultural symbols. In contrast, participants from Buton showed a strong willingness to preserve Wolio and related Butonese varieties, but they also reported limited online materials and the need for greater participation from young creators, educators, and cultural communities. This comparison indicates that Bone and Buton require different digital preservation strategies:

Bone may focus on strengthening and expanding existing Bugis cultural content, while Buton requires more active efforts to increase the visibility of Wolio-oriented digital materials among younger users.

Local Language and Cultural Identity

Participants consistently associated local language use with ethnic belonging and cultural pride. Bugis and Wolio were not perceived merely as communication tools but also as symbols of ancestry, politeness, kinship, social memory, and cultural continuity. Even participants who rarely used local languages in public posts still regarded them as important identity markers.

Table 7. Perceived Relationship between Language and Cultural Identity

Indicator	Bone	Buton	Meaning
Language as identity marker	Very high	Very high	Both languages symbolize ethnic belonging
Pride in local language	High	High	Participants expressed positive attitudes toward local heritage
Desire to preserve language	High	High	Participants supported preservation through family and online media
Concern about language loss	Moderate	High	Buton participants expressed stronger concern about Wolio transmission
Willingness to teach future generations	High	High	Intergenerational transmission remains a shared value

The findings indicate that local languages continue to function as powerful symbols of collective identity despite the growing influence of digital globalization. Their use in digital spaces allows speakers to express cultural affiliation while remaining connected to broader national and global communication networks. In Bone, Bugis was strongly associated with cultural pride and kinship, while in Buton, Wolio and related Butonese varieties were viewed as important markers of historical heritage and cultural continuity.

Discussions

The findings demonstrate that language practices among the Bone and Buton communities are increasingly shaped by digital communication. Indonesian dominates public online interaction because it offers wider audience reach, shared intelligibility, and institutional legitimacy. This supports audience design theory, which explains that speakers adjust language choices according to the imagined audience and communicative purpose (Tagg & Seargeant, 2014). In public posts, users often avoid local languages because they assume that not all followers will understand them. In contrast, family chats and community groups provide a shared cultural context that enables more frequent use of Bugis and Wolio.

The role of English is different from Indonesian. Indonesian functions mainly as a practical lingua franca, while English functions as a symbolic resource associated with prestige, education, modernity, and global youth culture. From the perspective of symbolic capital, English expressions can index social status and cosmopolitan identity even when they appear only as short words, hashtags, or slang (Bourdieu, 1991). This helps explain why English vocabulary appears in digital communication despite not being the dominant language of everyday interaction. This helps explain why English vocabulary appears in digital communication despite not being the dominant language of everyday interaction.

The persistence of Bugis and Wolio in family conversations, community groups, and culturally oriented interactions shows that local languages continue to perform social and symbolic functions. Rather than disappearing completely, they are increasingly concentrated in domains associated with intimacy, kinship, politeness, and cultural belonging. This finding aligns with Setianingsih & Suhardijanto (2020), who emphasize that family interaction and community

engagement remain important factors supporting intergenerational language transmission. It also supports [Sari et al. \(2024\)](#), who show that heritage language maintenance contributes to identity formation and cultural continuity among younger generations.

The study also confirms the ambivalent role of digital media. Although social media may accelerate the use of Indonesian, English expressions, and internet slang, it also provides spaces for local-language visibility. Participants reported that social media can be used to share traditional stories, cultural values, local expressions, and indigenous knowledge. This supports digital sociolinguistic perspectives that online spaces should not be viewed only as sites of linguistic homogenization but also as environments where linguistic diversity can be reproduced and promoted ([Leppänen et al., 2022](#)).

A key comparative insight is that Bone and Buton face similar pressures but differ in the intensity and form of their responses. Bone participants showed relatively stronger local-language visibility in online cultural content, including Bugis expressions and cultural symbols. Buton participants expressed stronger concern about declining intergenerational transmission and limited Wolio digital content. These differences may reflect variations in linguistic vitality, community support, demographic conditions, and the availability of youth content creators. [Grenoble \(2021\)](#) explains that language maintenance outcomes are strongly influenced by community attitudes, institutional support, and opportunities for language use in everyday life.

The findings further reinforce the relationship between language and cultural identity. Participants described Bugis and Wolio as symbols of ancestry, belonging, social memory, and heritage. This is consistent with [Piller \(2023\)](#) view that language is central to identity construction in multilingual societies. In the digital era, identity is not formed by choosing either local or global affiliation; rather, users negotiate both. Indonesian and English allow participation in broader communicative networks, while Bugis and Wolio provide cultural depth, emotional closeness, and ethnic belonging.

The future vitality of local languages in Sulawesi depends on the ability of communities to integrate language maintenance with digital innovation. Traditional preservation efforts remain important, but they may be insufficient when younger generations increasingly communicate online. Language sustainability strategies should therefore include digital storytelling, community-based content creation, online language-learning resources, and social media campaigns that increase the visibility, usefulness, and prestige of local languages.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that local language practices in Bone and Buton are being reshaped by digital communication, where Indonesian, English, and digital slang increasingly dominate public online interactions because of their practicality and wider accessibility. Despite this trend, Bugis and Wolio remain important in family communication, community interaction, and culturally oriented digital content, demonstrating that local languages continue to carry strong symbolic and cultural value. The comparison reveals that Bone exhibits greater online visibility of Bugis cultural expressions, whereas Buton faces stronger concerns regarding the declining transmission and digital presence of Wolio. These findings indicate that language sustainability depends not only on technological development but also on community participation, cultural identity, and opportunities for youth engagement. Although digitalization may reduce local-language visibility and intergenerational transmission, it also provides valuable opportunities for revitalization through digital storytelling, educational resources, and community-based content creation. Overall, preserving local languages in the digital era requires collaborative efforts among families, educational institutions, communities, and policymakers to ensure that local languages remain relevant, visible, and meaningful for future generations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the participants and local communities in Bone and Buton for sharing their experiences, perspectives, and cultural knowledge, which contributed significantly to this study. The authors also extend their appreciation to the Magister English Education Program, Muhammadiyah University of Kendari, for providing academic support during the preparation of this manuscript. Sachrul Muh Saleh contributed to the conceptualization, data interpretation, writing, and manuscript revision; Iwan Iwan contributed to the conceptualization, data interpretation, and critical review; and Yuliyannah Sain contributed to the literature review, data organization, and final manuscript preparation. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to the preparation or publication of this manuscript. No external funding was received for this study.

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