

CODE SWITCHING IN DIGITAL DISCOURSE: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF BILINGUAL PRACTICES AMONG PAKISTANI SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated code-switching practices among Pakistani social media users and examined the patterns, motivations, and functions of language alternation in digital communication. The study aimed to identify the most common types of code-switching used online, explore the factors that motivated bilingual users to switch languages, and examine the role of code-switching in identity construction. A quantitative research design was employed, and data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The sample consisted of 46 bilingual university students from Pakistan. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. The findings revealed that code-switching was a frequent and normalized practice among participants. Urdu-English code-switching emerged as the dominant pattern, with intra-sentential switching being the most common type. Participants reported switching languages for clarity, convenience, self-expression, and lexical support. The results further indicated that code-switching played an important role in identity construction. English was associated with confidence, education, and modernity, whereas Urdu was linked with cultural identity and emotional expression. The study concluded that code-switching functions as a meaningful communicative strategy rather than a linguistic deficiency. The findings contribute to the understanding of digital sociolinguistics and provide insights into multilingual communication in online environments. The study also highlights the importance of recognizing bilingual practices in educational and digital contexts.

Keywords: code-switching, digital discourse, social media, bilingualism, identity construction, multilingual communication

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has transformed communication practices around the world. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X have enabled users to interact instantly across linguistic and geographical boundaries. In multilingual societies, these platforms have created spaces where speakers frequently alternate between languages during communication. Code-switching refers to the use

of two or more languages within a conversation, sentence, or discourse. In Pakistan, Urdu and English are commonly used in education, media, and daily communication. As a result, bilingual speakers often combine these languages in online interactions. The increasing use of social media has made code-switching more visible and has raised questions about its communicative functions and social significance.

Recent studies have suggested that digital communication encourages flexible language use and identity expression. However, limited research has examined how Pakistani university students employ code-switching in everyday online communication. This study addressed that gap by investigating bilingual language practices in digital discourse. Although code-switching has been widely studied in spoken interaction and educational settings, its role in digital communication remains insufficiently explored in Pakistan. Existing studies have paid limited attention to the motivations, patterns, and functions of code-switching among ordinary social media users. Therefore, there is a need to investigate how bilingual individuals use code-switching in online communication and what social meanings are attached to this practice.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined code-switching in multilingual contexts, limited research has focused specifically on university students' digital communication practices in Pakistan. Furthermore, few studies have investigated the relationship between code-switching, online communication, and identity construction using questionnaire-based data. The present study addressed this gap. Finally, there is a need for more research that incorporates theoretical frameworks systematically while analyzing naturally occurring digital data from students' interactions. This study addresses these gaps by examining both the types and functions of code-switching in digital communication, with a particular focus on university students' online discourse, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of multilingual practices in contemporary digital environments.

Research Objectives

The study aimed to:

1. Examine the prevalence and patterns of code-switching in digital communication among Pakistani social media users.
2. Identify and analyze the different types of code-switching employed in online interactions, with particular reference to Urdu-English bilingual communication.

3. Explore the communicative functions of code-switching in online interactions, including its role in facilitating meaning, expression, and interpersonal communication.

4. Assess the relationship between code-switching practices and identity construction among bilingual users in digital environment.

Literature Review

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed multilingual communication practices. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and X provide users with interactive spaces where language use is fluid, dynamic, and often hybrid in nature. In such environments, code-switching has become a common linguistic practice among multilingual speakers who alternate between languages to achieve communicative effectiveness, express identity, and manage social relationships. Existing studies have primarily examined the types of language switching in online communication, their functions, and their relationship with identity construction, particularly in multilingual societies such as Pakistan. Poplack (1980) classified code-switching into three major types: inter-sentential switching, intra-sentential switching, and tag switching. These categories remain widely used in studies of bilingual communication.

Code-Switching in Digital Communication

The development of digital technologies has created new environments for multilingual interaction. Researchers have argued that social media platforms encourage flexible language practices because communication is informal, interactive, and audience-oriented. Recent studies have shown that code-switching is common in online messaging, social networking sites, and digital communities.

Motivations for Code-Switching

Previous research has identified several motivations for code-switching, including lexical need, emphasis, audience accommodation, and communicative efficiency. In digital communication, users often switch languages to express emotions, increase clarity, or convey ideas

more effectively. The availability of multiple linguistic resources allows speakers to select the language that best suits a particular context.

Code-Switching and Identity Construction

Language plays an important role in the construction of social identity. Studies have shown that bilingual speakers use code-switching to express cultural affiliation, group membership, and personal identity. In online environments, language choice becomes a visible marker of identity and social positioning.

Code-Switching in Pakistan

Pakistan is a multilingual country where Urdu and English coexist alongside numerous regional languages. Research has demonstrated that bilingual speakers frequently switch between Urdu and English in educational, professional, and social settings. Recent digital communication studies have suggested that code-switching has

become increasingly common among young social media users.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative descriptive research design. This approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to examine patterns and attitudes related to code-switching among social media users.

Population and Sample

The sample consisted of 46 respondents, with a noticeable gender imbalance: 36 females (78.3%) and 10 males (21.7%). While this limits gender generalization, it reflects broader trends in online survey participation, where female respondents often demonstrate higher engagement in self-report studies related to language and communication practices

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of Participants (N = 46)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	36	78.3
	Male	10	21.7
Age Group	18-20	9	19.6
	21-23	25	54.3
	24-26	4	8.7
	Above 26	8	17.4
Academic Level	Undergraduate	24	52.2
	Graduate	15	32.6
	Other	7	15.2

The age distribution shows that the majority of participants belonged to the 21-23 age group, representing more than half of the sample. This age group typically corresponds to university students or early young adults who are highly active on social media platforms for academic, social, and personal communication purposes.

The analysis indicates that WhatsApp and Instagram are the most frequently used platforms among participants, followed by Snapchat and TikTok. These platforms are central to everyday communication among young users and provide informal environments where multilingual interaction is common.

Table 2. Social Media Platform Use (Multiple Responses Allowed)

Platform	Count	% of Sample
WhatsApp	34	73.9
Instagram	30	65.2
Snapchat	12	26.1
TikTok	12	26.1
Facebook	5	10.9
Other	3	6.5

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online through social media platforms and personal networks. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and participated voluntarily. After data collection, incomplete responses were removed, and only valid responses were included in the analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to identify major trends and patterns. The results were presented through tables and interpreted in relation to the research objectives and existing literature.

Results and Discussion

The study included 46 participants. Female respondents constituted the majority of the sample, while most participants belonged to the age group of 21-23 years. More than half were undergraduate students.

Frequency of Code-Switching

The findings revealed that code-switching was a common practice among participants. More than four-fifths of respondents reported frequently mixing Urdu and English during online communication. Participants also indicated that they switched languages more frequently online than in face-to-face interaction. These findings support previous sociolinguistic research suggesting that digital communication promotes linguistic flexibility and multilingual expression.

Motivations for Code-Switching

The results indicated that lexical need was one of the most important motivations for code-switching. Participants frequently switched languages when they could not find an appropriate word in one language. Many respondents also reported that code-switching occurred naturally and unconsciously during communication. In addition, participants used code-switching to improve clarity, enhance communication efficiency, and make conversations more expressive.

Table 3. Likert-scale response summary (N=46)

Statement	Agree / SA	Neutral	Disagree / SD
I often mix two or more languages while chatting online	84.8%	13.0%	2.2%
I switch languages more on social media than face-to-face	82.6%	13.0%	4.3%
I mix Urdu and English within the same sentence	82.6%	15.2%	2.2%
I switch languages naturally without thinking much about it	67.4%	19.6%	13.0%
I switch languages when I cannot find the right word	78.3%	15.2%	6.5%
I switch to English because it feels more modern	67.4%	17.4%	15.2%

I enjoy communicating in more than one language online	82.6%	10.9%	6.5%
Mixing languages shows different sides of my personality	80.4%	13.0%	6.5%
Using English online makes me feel more confident	84.8%	10.9%	4.3%
Using my native language expresses my cultural identity	84.8%	10.9%	4.3%

Code-Switching and Identity

The findings demonstrated a strong relationship between language choice and identity construction. Most participants associated English with confidence, education, and modernity. At the same time, Urdu was strongly connected with cultural identity, emotional expression, and social belonging. These results suggest that bilingual speakers use different languages to express different aspects of their identities. Rather than competing with one another, Urdu and English functioned as complementary linguistic resources.

Discussion

Overall, the findings of this study present a coherent picture of code-switching as a pervasive, multifunctional, and identity-laden practice among Pakistani social media users. The frequent use of Urdu-English language mixing reflects the multilingual nature of contemporary online interactions and supports sociolinguistic perspectives that view language choice as a dynamic and context-dependent process. The findings indicate that code-switching serves multiple functions, including communicative efficiency, lexical compensation, social positioning, and identity expression. Participants use language alternation not only to facilitate communication but also to construct and negotiate their identities within digital spaces. The study further revealed a strong relationship between code-switching and identity construction. A significant proportion of participants (84.8%) agreed that using English online makes them feel more confident, while an equal percentage (84.8%) reported that using their native language helps them express their cultural identity. The study further reveals that digital platforms provide an environment in which linguistic boundaries become increasingly flexible. The

informal nature of online communication encourages experimentation with language and allows bilingual speakers to integrate multiple linguistic resources in ways that may be less common in face-to-face interactions. Consequently, code-switching emerges as both a communicative strategy and a symbolic practice through which individuals express modernity, confidence, cultural belonging, and social identity. These findings highlight the importance of examining digital communication as a unique sociolinguistic context where language and identity are continuously negotiated through multilingual practices.

Conclusion

This study investigated code-switching practices among Pakistani social media users. The findings revealed that code-switching was a highly frequent feature of online communication and that intra-sentential switching was the most common pattern. Participants switched languages for lexical support, communicative efficiency, and self-expression. The study further demonstrated that code-switching played an important role in identity construction. English was associated with confidence and modernity, whereas Urdu reflected cultural identity and emotional connection. The findings support the view that code-switching is a strategic communicative resource rather than a linguistic deficiency.

Recommendations

1. Educational institutions should recognize code-switching as a natural aspect of bilingual communication.
2. Language teachers should incorporate awareness of multilingual practices into classroom instruction.

3. Future studies should include larger samples from multiple universities.
4. Researchers should investigate code-switching across different social media platforms.
5. Mixed-method studies should be conducted to gain deeper insights into digital language practices.

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