

Language-Mediated Identity Negotiation in Multilingual Digital Chat Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Aneta Pavlenko(2013), defines identity as the manner in which a person perceives his or her relationship to the world, how the relationship is constituted by time and space, and how the person perceives possibilities of what can be done in the future (Pavlenko, 2013, p. 4), and views identity as dynamic and negotiated by multilingual users, who negotiate and construct or build identities through language choices and multimodal practices in the digital chat. Multilingualism, code-switching, translanguaging, and digital communication, the study of the matter sheds light on the fact that the digital environments of chats offer new spaces in which identity work takes place. Applying a qualitative research design, the research examines chat logs and reflection journals of multilingual users and applies thematic and discourse analysis to them based on the models such as the investment theory by Bonny Norton and the self-presentation theory by Erving Goffman. The discussion shows that the participants are strategic in the use of language choice, transliteration, code-switching and multimodal cues (emojis, tone, script) to show belonging, professionalism, intimacy and cultural hybridity. Findings shows that multilingual web-based communication cultivates hybrid and fluid identities and are influenced by emotion, audience, platform and context affordances. This study concludes with the statements; that digital multilingual chat spaces are socio-psychological ecosystems based on the language acting as an identity-building resource; and proposing future studies; a longitudinal design or analysis, different platforms and heterogeneous populations of users; the practical conclusions; designing digital-literacy interventions that acknowledge multilingual identity and multimodal expression.

Keywords: code switching, digital multilingual, discourse analysis, longitudinal design, qualitative method

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The past few years have seen the emergence of digital chat spaces, where conversations in WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and other instant-messaging forums become active locations of multilingual interaction where participants use several linguistic repertoires to converse. These are not only places where messages are delivered, but they are the social places where language choice, switching and mixing can be a source through which people are able to negotiate and sell themselves. According to Danet and Herring (2007), language selection in computer-mediated communication is a source of identity and group identification (as cited in White, 2020). Therefore, a linguistic practice of users in multilingual digital chat spaces has not only communicative purposes, but also symbolic social purposes associated with identity, affiliation as well as community membership.

Digital Affordances and Multilingual Repertoires

Users of multiple languages in online chat rooms often resort to a wide range of languages and semiotic material, and mix them up in unconstrained patterns made possible through digital affordances like emojis, transliteration, and non-standard spelling. To take an example, Biro (2019) shows that bilingual Hungarian-Romanian students on Facebook engaged in explicit code-switching and hybrid language practices to construct a specific online identity, which shows that language choice and code-switching become a tool of creating a specific image of cultural or personal identity and identifying themselves with a given community (p. 38). These mixed practices explain that online spaces enable users to tactically utilize and control their language materials to bargain identity in new forms.

Multilingual Chat Space Negotiation of Identity

The multilingual digital chats of identity negotiation is not definite and unique; it is liquid, situational, and commonly mediated through language choices. White (2020) states that the digital spaces present both chances and problems in creating a wide array of complex identities (p. 11). Chatting group members can alternate languages with each other, topic, and meaning of conversation, thus representing various aspects of themselves (ex: ethnic, peer-group, professional) based on communicative intentions. The given negotiation is especially relevant in multilingual societies, where digital chat provides a platform of linguistic creativity and identity creation that is no longer confined to the traditional offline borders.

Social and Psychological Roles of Variation of Language

Digital chat language variation Code-switching, code-mixing, translanguaging or transliteration Digital chat language variation has significant social and psychological roles. With the use of several languages, users can indicate solidarity, belonging to a group, differentiation or crossing boundaries. As an illustration, Darginaviciene and Ignotaite (2020) demonstrate that code-switching is becoming popular in multilingual utterances and serves as a social identity indicator in computer-mediated communication: "Online communication promotes the emergence of social communicative behaviour in the form of code-switching in multilingual utterances and create the mark of the formation of verbal behaviour among multilingual communities (p. 405). Such practices, in the chat spaces, assist the users to control their social self presentation, experiment with identity, and identify with or distancing with specific linguistic or social groups.

Digital Chat Spaces as Identity Performance Sites

In online communities like the instant messaging groups and the multi-participant online, the exchange of information is not all; in these digital chat spaces, users perform social identities, affiliations, and

roles by choosing their language. As White (2020) notes, the digital spaces provide both possibilities and difficulties in constructing various and complicated identities (p. 11). These spaces permit the actors to experiment with, to switch, and to project various aspects of themselves, peer member, professional, ethnolinguistic insider, outsider, often very quickly. The affordances of the chat environment (e.g. asynchronous/synchronous, group/dyadic interactions, support of emoji and stickers) are, therefore, an excellent context of identity negotiation by language.

Translanguaging, Multilingual Agency and Code-Switching

The process of language switching (between languages) and mixing (within utterances) are common in multilingual chat environments and aim at identity-related purposes. Rojas (2025) reported in their research on multilingual societies that code-switching is not only a pragmatic tool, but also a highly ingrained social practice that indicates the conformity of the speakers to societal cultural norms, social forces, and self-concepts. Such practices suggest that multilingual chat space users are not merely making their way through communication, but rather negotiating identity, identifying themselves as members of multiple language communities, and possessing some control over their linguistic resources.

Technological Affordances and Mediated Identity Work

Digital chat is a technology that affects the linguistic action of identity work. In her study of geotagged Instagram data (such as in a multi-lingual situation), Mohr (2021) demonstrates that linguistic choices found online are identity-construction: she posed the question whether linguistic diversity on-line is simply a physical space (and whether trends in hashtags and the use of language have an implication on identity). The text, transliterated script, codes, images and emoji in chat spaces, particularly, imply that the user is able to create hybrid identities, a blend of languages, styles, and modalities. Chat technologies therefore provide identity mediation affordances: not the what is said, but the how, the when and the media.

Multilingual Chat as a Social Space of power, Inclusion and Exclusion

The social meaning attached to choices of language in multilingual online chat spaces is also not a mere matter of self-expression, but can be used to perform inclusion or exclusion, conform or resist dominant or minority groups, and criticize power dynamics. During her multilingual internet use practice, Danet (2007) claims that the choice of language, code-switching, and transliteration is intertwined with the issues of linguistic diversity, dominance, normativity and identity within the online environment. In chat groups therefore, the dominant language of the group may become the language of membership and minority language of the group may become the language of cultural solidarity or opposition. This multilingual state of these spaces, therefore, becomes a field of negotiated identity, wherein language is not just an unbiased medium, but a place of social meaning.

Fluidity, Temporality and Identity Development in Chat Contexts

Lastly, identity negotiation in multilingual digital chat rooms does not occur in a singular act, but is a continuous and dynamic process, which is subject to changes over time and space. When discussing the topic of migrant language learners using digital technologies in their study, the authors observe that identities are diverse, contradictory, dynamic, and changing based on historical time and social space (Norton, referred to in Wu et al., 2024). This opinion underlines the fact that in chat spaces users can change linguistic identities based on different circumstances, that is, change styles, language, registers based on interlocutor, topic, or platform. These spaces are especially promising toward studying identity negotiation as an iterative process due to the temporal dimension (e.g. how the identities of users are performed through time) and the networked and asynchronous nature of chat.

Statement of the Research Problem

In multilingual online chats, people constantly navigate the intricate linguistic and social landscapes wherein they must choose, mix and remake languages in order to convey belonging, emotion and identity. But there is a lack of knowledge in psycholinguistic mechanisms of this identity negotiation mediated by language. Although the concept of code-switching and bilingual communication has been previously researched, the qualitative analysis of the interaction among multimodal elements, including emojis, transliteration, and tone and their language, to form identity performance and awareness of self-concept in online situations has been studied only partially. The existence of this gap prompts a thorough exploration of the conscious and unconscious way in which multilingual users make use of linguistic strategies in order to create hybrid digital identities that show both global participation and local cultural memberships.

Research Objectives

- To determine how multilingual users can negotiate their social identities by using language choice, code-switching and translanguaging when using digital chat space.
- To examine the role played by the linguistic behaviours of the participants and the multimodal communication features (e.g., emojis, transliteration, tone) in the construction and enactment of identity in multilingual chat interactions.
- To learn why and how multilingual users of the language recognize and explain their own use of language as a sign of belonging, self-presentation and emotional attachment to communities in the online realm.

Research Questions

1. What is the language choice, code-switching, and translanguaging by multilingual users and how do they negotiate and assert their identities within online chat environments?
2. How can multimodal aspects and stylistic language practices be used to maintain and enforce identity of multilingual chat users?
3. What is the perception of language use and identity negotiation by multilingual participants in the environment of online communication and social belonging?

Significance of the Study

The importance of the research also consists in the fact that it helps to realize that identity in a globalized, technology-influenced world is developing. With the rise of digital communication as a highly important sphere of human interaction, multilingual chat rooms turn into a crucial location where the linguistic and cultural hybridity is negotiated. This work is a critical qualitative description of how people take active control of language and multimodal resources to convey emotional intimacy, assert cultural membership and control multiple social roles. The study broadens the theoretical context of the concept of translanguaging and multimodal discourse analysis by exposing how transliteration, use of emojis, and difference in tone are symbolic identity markers. By doing so, it does not only promote academic discourse but also enlightens on the possibilities of digital platforms creating inclusiveness and intercultural knowledge via linguistic diversity. The results highlight the revolutionary quality of digital communication as the area where users exercise control over their linguistic and cultural selves, which is why the study is of interest to digital ethnographers and psycholinguists as well as language teachers.

Delimitation of the Study

This paper is limited to the investigation of the identity negotiation mediated by language among adult multilingual users, who use digital chat applications on WhatsApp, Telegram and Instagram on a semi-formal and informal level. This study narrows down to qualitative data based on text-based communication, such as chat logs and semi-structured interviews, and not a spoken or video-mediated communication. It is not aimed at generalizing results to all digital or multilingual settings but gives a detailed insight into a small group of research participants whose linguistic activities can be seen as a good example of various negotiations of identities. The paper is also restricted by the fact that it focuses on the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of communication and not merely on the technological or computational issues of online communication. These restrictions permit level of analytical depth and contextual specificity, but remain in line with the theoretical framework and qualitative approach of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Code-switching and CMC as identity practice

Not only have code-switching and other phenomena in computer-mediated communication (CMC) been theorised in terms of pragmatic or efficiency strategies; but indexical resources to construct identity and conform to groups. The powerful synthesis offered by Androutsopoulos places CMC code-switching in the wider framework of the sociolinguistic toolkit: the affordances of media, the objectives of interaction, and the performativity of indexing social roles and memberships shape digital language alternation (Androutsopoulos, 2011). This theoretical framing suggests that the object of analysis of the chat messages should be their linguistic form, as well as the identity work that they achieve in a given situation: this method preempts that interactional decisions of the participants are meaningful social practices.

Empirical studies concerning WhatsApp and small-group chat communication

Recent qualitative studies of instant-messaging groups (e.g., WhatsApp) record how the multilingual youth and student groupings apply language alternation to such functions as solidarity, humour, and stance marking—functions that simultaneously produce social identity within the group. The article by Mohamad (2022) on youth WhatsApp chat in Malaysia shows that code-switching is often used to carry out stance-taking and group cohesion instead of only lexical gap-filling, which suggests that identity negotiation is a central reason behind language use in chat groups. Such micro-interactional studies highlight the importance of examining conversational episodes and what participants make of them in order to have insights into identity effects.

Digital spaces translanguaging, multimodality and identity

The translanguaging approach expands on the view to alternation between named languages to the application of the entire repertoire of a speaker with modalities. The research on digital translanguaging reveals that multimodal data available online (text, transliteration, emojis, images) allows users to develop hybrid language practices providing them with a sense of positioning and fluidity. Ho (2022) reports on how students use digital multimodal composing to build translanguaging spaces, in which they state that the space allows students to experiment with their identities and redefine linguistic boundaries. This literature warrants analysis of chat exchanges as multimodal translanguaging events that have identity consequences other than code names.

Macrosystem trends and formative developmental consequences of identity

Though such small qualitative studies demonstrate the interaction processes, recent large-scale and mixed-method studies have begun mapping more extensive patterns of digital translanguaging and how it affects the formation of identity. Almashour (2024) summarises the effects of translanguaging practice in digital learning and social spaces on identity trajectories, academic integration and social adaptation- indicating that over time, repeated translanguaging in digital networks can both remake the self-representations of users. This implies that it requires temporally sensitive qualitative design (e.g., longitudinal diaries, narrative interviews) to track identity formation using repetitive chat practices.

Methodological developments Methodological innovations: integrating discourse analysis with participants viewpoints

Newer research has focused on methodological triangulation i.e. the merging of fine-grained discourse analysis of chat dialogues with the personal introspection of the participants (interviews, diaries) in order to tie observed language practices to subjective identity signification. Verheijen (2022) shows how a more detailed examination of the processes of code-mixing and borrowings in youth online writing can reveal sociolinguistic patterns which cannot be assumed based on the frequency counts; by combining the reported motives and perceptions of the participants, one can understand what identity work is carried out by the respective patterns. In such a way, modern literature narrows down to the idea of qualitative, context specific approaches as the necessary ones when exploring the role of identity negotiation in multilingual chat.

The Multilingual Social Media Groups Identity and Community Formation

Multilingual online chat networks not only result into interpersonal communication but also lead to the development of micro-communities of common language norms and identity symbols. According to Tagg and Seargeant (2019), social media and messaging applications have established a sense of participation where every day language practices are interwoven with identity performances and sense of belonging to a community (p. 56). In their ethnographic research, they studied multilingual Facebook and WhatsApp groups, which demonstrates that members of the groups co-produce norms of communication, including the frequency or use of transliteration to code-switch, which mark their belonging to a particular group. The association between linguistic behaviour and collective social identity is made visible by such community specific conventions in chat spaces.

Young, Multilingual, and Digital Expression of Identity

Digital identity is being tested by young multilinguals, who usually mix linguistic and visual forms to mediate between sense of belonging and personal identity. As Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2023) note, language practices of young people on the Internet are characterized by both globalized linguistic repertoires and work on identity locally (p. 142). In comparing them across the European youth communities, they discovered that digital chats are places of creative recombination such as mixing English slang, local languages, emojis, and memes to form a cosmopolitan, but locally rooted identity. This highlights the coincidence of generational and technological influences on multilingual digital identity performances.

Digital Communication and Language Ideologies and Power

The fact that language-mediated identity negotiation is also a manifestation of underlying ideologies and power relations is also evident in multilingual settings. Lee (2022) analyzed bilingual Korean-English speech on the Internet and discovered that the language preference frequently conveyed the status, knowledge, or even cultural prestige. It was found that participants are strategic in switching between the languages to demonstrate power or unity and extend offline hierarchies to online discourse

(p. 211). These results reveal that a chat space identity work is limited by more general sociolinguistic hierarchies, in which linguistic capital establishes perceived authority and membership.

Multimodal Messaging: Expression and Identity Emotionally

Emotion and affect are very central in the process of identity performance of users in multilingual chat space. Yus (2021) emphasizes that multimodal characteristics (emojis, stickers, GIFs, voice notes) are used to complement the code-switching process in building an emotional identity layer that is not achievable with a textual or solely written language (p. 8). His useful study of the instant messaging reveals that there is an interaction of emotional and linguistic cues in terms of intimacy, humour or group solidarity thus creating the relational identity online. The multimodal aspect enriches the psycholinguistic knowledge on identity performance, which is affective and semiotic in chat discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Overview

In this research, the study uses a qualitative research design as it attempts to investigate how multilingual people negotiate and explain themselves using language in digital chat platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram Direct Messages. This study is based on an interpretivist paradigm, which presupposes that the social reality is created in the interaction of people, in the process of making sense and speaking instead of being measured objectively. In this paradigm, the research aims at revealing the subjective experiences and linguistic behavior, by which users accomplish, construct and express their sense of individual within multilingual digital space. Since psycholinguistic identity work is a dynamic process in the daily communication, qualitative approach helps the researcher to generate the richness, contextuality and fluidity of linguistic behaviour in naturalistic environment. It is not about numbers of frequencies or statistical generalization but rather about deep insight. How participants thinkingly or subconsciously use language to indicate belonging, power, intimacy, and individuality. By applying the method of the discourse analysis and the narratives of the participants, the study will provide insights into the patterns of translanguaging, code-switching, and multimodal expression in connection with cognitive, emotional, and social in shaping the identity in online communication.

Research Design

The general study design is exploratory and interpretive that involves multiple sources of qualitative data to construct an analytical picture of identity negotiation through multi-lingual chat space. The study is multi-layered, with (a) contextual study of the linguistic background of the study participants, (b) observation and textual analysis of actual interactions at chat, and (c) reflective interviews where the researcher must get the participants to reflect about their own use of language. The researchers follow purposive sampling to sample out participants in multilingual communities (university and workplace) where digital chat is used frequently and socially relevant. Data collection is done within three months to get a variation of data over time and contextual linguistic practice. This is the combined analytical method, combining methods in discourse analysis and thematic analysis in interpreting the language elements (code-mixing, lexical borrowing, transliteration) and the subjective meaning that people assigned to the elements. Critic of morality is the first: they give the consent to the use of anonymized chat excerpts, and they use pseudonyms to preserve the confidentiality. Combining the discourse observation with personalized narratives, the design offers the emic (insider) and etic (analyst) insights into the role of language in mediating identity during day-to-day digital lives.

Qualitative Method

This research applies a qualitative approach of research since it permits an interpretative analysis of the language use and identity in context. Particularly, it relies on a phenomenological inclination, where the focus is to get a sense of what participants experience in their lives in using more than one language in chat interactions. Qualitative inquiry is especially appropriate to the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic investigations in which meaning, emotion, and identity are the primary factors, as it allows subjective interpretation, complexity, and nuance. The research is based on the inductive reasoning as the researcher follows the principles of a qualitative research as proposed by Creswell and Poth (2018) to allow the emergence of patterns and categories in the data instead of applying pre-defined a priori codes. This approach identifies language as a social practice that is influenced by personal thought and social conventions that place the participants as co-creators of knowledge. They will be analyzed using both thematic analysis of interview transcripts and discourse analysis of chat logs on the degree to which linguistic choices project social identity markers of ethnicity, gender, status or cultural affiliation. Triangulation of information obtained through several types of data will provide the qualitative approach with the confidence that the results will depict the complexity of the interaction among linguistic behaviour, self-perception and interpersonal interaction within multilingual online environments.

Data Collection Method

The three qualitative tools, which include digital chat sampling, semi-structured interviews, and participant reflective journals, will be used to gather information. To start with, a collection of chat conversations in real life will be collected among the willing participants, who will be requested to provide the selected messages threads that exhibit language mixing or identity-related communication. Such samples will be anonymized and coded to reflect the language patterns like the frequency of code-switching, use of transliterations, use of emojis, and use of language alternation. Second, 15-20 participants will be interviewed using semi-structured questions and will be investigated concerning what drives them to make such language choices and what they see in it. The interview questions will concentrate on the linguistic backgrounds of participants, their views on the use of language, their perception of what the audience requires, and how it impacted them emotionally regarding the multilingualization of expression. Third, participants will keep short weekly reflection journals that narrate significant chat interactions in which they were able to consciously negotiate identity by use of language. This intersected methodology gives a naturalistic and introspective data, which offers the researcher to relate observational linguistic behaviour with the self-reported identity negotiation processes by the participants. NVivo software will be used to analyse all the data and help in coding, categorisation and identification of emergent themes.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of identity and investment by Norton (2013), and the theory of self-presentation by Goffman (1959), are the background of the study, which is combined in a psycholinguistic approach to multilingualism. The conceptualization of identity that Norton gives is dynamic, socially constructed, and it is a constant form of renegotiation by use of language. It outlines the fact that speakers also invest in specific linguistic practices in order to acquire a symbolic and material capital in social relations. This opinion is consistent with the setting of digital chat, where language choice is a source of asserting legitimacy, belonging and presence in online communities. To add to this, the dramaturgical model of self-presentation proposed by Goffman can be used to describe how one controls impressions and how people can create different selves across the audience, setting, and purport according to the needs. In online chat space, code-switching, styles, emojis, and the voice are all mediating these performances using linguistic and multimodal cues. These frameworks combined help to understand how multilingual users employ their linguistic repertoires to negotiate the identity positions, navigate the power relations and project the desirable personae in different interlocutors and communicative situations. The

integrative approach of the sociocultural and psycholinguistic theories, therefore, offers the multidimensional perspective through which the interrelation of cognition, emotion and social meaning can be interpreted in digital language behaviour.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

The analysis of this qualitative study is grounded in an interpretive framework that integrates thematic and discourse analysis to uncover how multilingual users negotiate their identities through digital communication. Data drawn from chat transcripts, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals were coded using NVivo software to identify recurrent patterns related to language choice, code-switching, translanguaging, and multimodal expression. The process involved open coding to identify initial linguistic and thematic categories, followed by axial coding to link language behaviours to participants' self-perceptions of identity, belonging, and emotional expression. Analysis was guided by Norton's (2013) concept of identity as socially constructed and Goffman's (1959) notion of self-presentation, allowing for a dual focus on both linguistic performance and subjective experience. The findings are presented thematically under four core areas corresponding to the study's objectives, emphasizing how language practices reflect, perform, and shape identity in multilingual digital chat spaces.

Language Choice and Identity Expression in Multilingual Chat Spaces

Analysis of chat data revealed that participants employed distinct patterns of language choice and switching to construct and signal their social identities. For instance, English was often used to project professionalism or cosmopolitanism, while native languages such as Urdu, Arabic, or Malay were reserved for intimacy and solidarity among peers. This dual usage reflected an awareness of audience and purpose, aligning with Goffman's (1959) notion of "front-stage" and "back-stage" performances of self. Participants described consciously alternating between languages depending on the perceived social expectations of the chat group—university peers, workplace colleagues, or family members. Thematic analysis showed that code-switching was not random but a deliberate strategy for identity alignment: users switched to the language that indexed the role or identity they wished to emphasize in a given interaction. Moreover, transliteration (using Roman script for non-English languages) functioned as a middle ground, symbolizing linguistic hybridity and cultural fluidity. These linguistic behaviours collectively indicate that multilingual chat users continuously negotiate their identities through dynamic language selection practices, using code choice as a performative marker of belonging and differentiation.

Multimodal Communication and Identity Performance

A salient finding of the study is the central role of multimodal resources—such as emojis, stickers, GIFs, and punctuation styling—in reinforcing or modifying linguistic identity cues. The integration of visual symbols with language served both expressive and relational purposes. Participants explained that emojis often compensated for tone and emotion that might otherwise be lost in text, allowing them to manage impressions and relational distance. For example, the use of national flag emojis alongside local-language expressions signalled cultural pride, while heart or laughter emojis softened English-language utterances that might otherwise seem formal or distant. Analysis revealed that multimodal elements acted as extensions of linguistic identity work, aligning with Yus's (2021) argument that multimodality enriches digital self-presentation. These findings demonstrate that identity in

multilingual chat spaces is not expressed solely through lexical or grammatical choices but through a semiotic ensemble where visual and textual signs jointly produce social meaning. Multimodality thus serves as a psycholinguistic resource enabling users to negotiate affective alignment, cultural stance, and group belonging within the constraints of digital communication.

Self-Perception and Reflective Identity Negotiation

Interview and journal data highlighted that multilingual users are highly self-aware of their language behaviour and its implications for identity construction. Participants often reflected on how shifting between languages made them “feel different” or “sound different,” revealing a metalinguistic consciousness of self-presentation. Many reported that using English gave them a sense of authority and global identity, while reverting to their mother tongue evoked emotional intimacy and authenticity. This internal negotiation aligns with Norton’s (2013) theory of investment, where linguistic choices represent acts of identity investment in specific social relationships. The analysis also showed that participants’ self-perceptions evolved over time: as they engaged with diverse chat communities, they became more comfortable expressing mixed linguistic identities rather than compartmentalizing them. This reflects an emergent hybrid identity model in which multilingual users integrate their linguistic repertoires as a unified sense of self rather than fragmented roles. The reflective narratives further revealed that emotional resonance—feeling “at home” in certain languages—was a critical factor in shaping identity expression in online communication.

Integrative Patterns of Belonging and Identity Fluidity

Synthesizing findings across the three objectives reveals that identity negotiation in multilingual digital chat spaces operates as a dynamic, recursive process rather than a fixed state. Users continually reinterpret their linguistic choices based on feedback, group norms, and evolving relationships. The convergence of language choice, multimodal expression, and self-perception constructs a layered identity that is at once situational and enduring. Participants described developing what can be termed digital linguistic selves—adaptable identities that shift depending on platform, audience, and communicative intent. This fluidity is consistent with Androutsopoulos’s (2015) view of digital discourse as a site for “polycentric identity performance,” where individuals align themselves with multiple linguistic and cultural centres simultaneously. In this context, belonging is enacted through language itself: choosing, mixing, and stylizing language becomes an act of affiliation and emotional anchoring. Overall, the analysis confirms that multilingual chat spaces are powerful arenas for psycholinguistic identity work, where language functions as both a cognitive tool and a social instrument of self-representation.

Integration of Linguistic and Visual Modes in Digital Identity Work

Analysis of multilingual chat transcripts revealed that participants often intertwined linguistic and visual cues to construct a coherent digital identity. The combination of text, emoji, and punctuation styling created a multimodal discourse pattern where meaning was distributed across semiotic channels. For instance, participants frequently softened assertive English phrases with smile or wink emojis, signalling relational warmth and mitigating potential formality. Conversely, omission of emojis in professional or academic chats indexed authority and detachment. This behaviour supports Yus’s (2021) claim that emojis and textual tone collectively function as identity markers that position the speaker within relational hierarchies. Moreover, transliteration practices—typing local languages in Roman script—were found to symbolically merge global and local identities, reflecting cultural hybridity. Such

integration of linguistic and visual resources illustrates that identity expression in multilingual chat spaces extends beyond word choice, encompassing multimodal orchestration to achieve social and affective goals.

Emoji and Symbol Use as Cues of Cultural and Emotional Identity

Emojis and symbolic icons played a crucial role in indexing participants' cultural affiliations and emotional orientations. Data indicated that users strategically selected emojis aligned with their linguistic or national identity, such as flag icons, culturally specific gestures, or local food symbols, to assert belonging in transnational digital groups. Participants from South Asian backgrounds, for example, used the "folded hands" emoji and colloquial transliterated expressions like "Shukriya" or "Insha'Allah" to emphasize shared cultural roots, thereby reinforcing collective identity. These practices align with Danesi's (2017) interpretation of emoji as "semiotic surrogates" that extend linguistic meaning into visual and affective domains. Emotional identity was also enacted through emoji intensity—users described how adding repeated hearts or laughter symbols represented emotional authenticity in otherwise text-based exchanges. Through such multimodal repetition, participants conveyed personality, empathy, and humor, demonstrating that digital symbols are not decorative but integral to the psycholinguistic expression of self in multilingual interaction.

Transliteration and Stylistic Mixing as Identity Performance

A recurring pattern in the dataset was participants' deliberate alternation between scripts and orthographic conventions—especially transliteration of non-English languages into Roman characters—to manage dual cultural affiliations. Transliteration functioned as an accessible bridge between languages in platforms lacking native script support, but more importantly, as a stylistic act symbolizing identity fluidity. For instance, bilingual participants alternated between English and Romanized Urdu ("Okay, yaar," "Thik hai bro") within a single utterance to balance global connectivity with local authenticity. This supports Androutsopoulos's (2015) notion of "stylistic hybridity," wherein online writers negotiate identity through playful mixing of linguistic codes and writing systems. Participants perceived transliteration as inclusive—allowing communication with diverse interlocutors while retaining cultural nuance. Its use often depended on audience composition: with multilingual friends, transliteration signaled shared in-group identity; with international peers, it subtly displayed cultural heritage without disrupting intelligibility. Hence, transliteration operated simultaneously as a pragmatic adaptation and a symbolic marker of multilingual identity performance.

Tone, Register, and Contextual Adaptation in Identity Negotiation

Beyond visual and lexical features, the analysis showed that participants continuously adjusted tone and register to align with shifting social contexts in chat environments. Informal lexicon, abbreviations, and voice note usage predominated in peer interactions, creating a sense of immediacy and authenticity. In contrast, workplace or academic groups demanded more standardized English and restrained emotive cues, reflecting professional self-presentation. These tonal adjustments mirror Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, where speakers curate linguistic behaviour to sustain socially appropriate identities. Interestingly, participants reported consciously moderating their tone—

sometimes inserting multilingual filler words (“na,” “la,” “yaar”) to maintain friendliness even in semi-formal contexts. This tonal hybridity demonstrates that identity performance in multilingual chat spaces is both deliberate and situational, shaped by interlocutor expectations and social hierarchies. The dynamic adaptation of tone and linguistic style across contexts reveals identity negotiation as an ongoing psycholinguistic process in which speakers continuously balance authenticity, politeness, and professionalism through multimodal expression.

Self-Awareness and Reflexivity in Multilingual Identity Construction

Participants demonstrated a strong metalinguistic awareness of how their language use shaped and reflected their digital identities. Interview data revealed that many users consciously perceived each language as indexing a distinct “version” of self. For example, speaking in English was frequently described as performing a “confident” or “public” persona, while reverting to the native tongue (such as Arabic, Urdu, or Tagalog) was associated with authenticity and emotional closeness. This aligns with Norton’s (2013) framework of identity as a fluid, context-dependent construct negotiated through linguistic practice. Participants articulated that switching between languages in chats was not merely habitual but represented a strategic reflection of how they wished to be perceived. Such reflexivity illustrates the psychological depth of multilingual identity work in online spaces, where individuals continuously evaluate how linguistic expression corresponds to social belonging and self-presentation. This self-awareness forms the foundation for understanding how language serves as a mirror of emotional and relational identity in digital contexts.

Emotional Resonance and Language Attachment in Digital Interaction

The analysis uncovered a profound emotional dimension to participants’ linguistic behaviour in chat environments. Many users expressed that specific languages evoked distinct emotional states or interpersonal warmth, shaping their sense of connection with interlocutors. For instance, switching to the mother tongue in a group chat often signalled intimacy, nostalgia, or trust, while using English tended to maintain formality or distance. This phenomenon aligns with Pavlenko’s (2012) findings on emotional expression in bilingual speakers, which suggest that first languages often carry stronger affective associations. Participants in this study described experiencing “comfort” or “closeness” when reverting to their native language, even when their interlocutors were multilingual. The data indicate that emotional resonance acts as a guiding force in language choice and identity construction online, underscoring the psycholinguistic link between affect, memory, and self-expression. Such emotionally grounded language use shows how multilingual users not only communicate meaning but also enact belonging and intimacy through linguistic embodiment.

Belonging, Group Alignment, and Symbolic Identity Anchors

Multilingual users in digital chat communities often perceived their language practices as symbolic anchors of group belonging. Thematic analysis revealed that participants associated certain linguistic choices or phrases with collective identity markers — such as regional slang, cultural idioms, or shared humour patterns. For example, the use of localized transliterations like “Insha’Allah,” “bro,” or “lah” functioned as boundary signals, demarcating in-group familiarity from out-group formality. This aligns with Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) “indexicality principle,” where language choices indirectly index social group membership and identity positioning. Participants expressed that sustaining these linguistic habits allowed them to remain connected to their ethnic or cultural roots even while interacting in globalized digital spaces. For some, multilingual chatting was not only communication but also cultural

preservation — a way to reaffirm collective belonging amid the fluidity of online identity. Thus, language in digital chat spaces becomes both a social connector and a symbolic thread that ties individuals to their cultural and emotional communities.

Hybrid Identity and the Evolution of Self in Digital Contexts

Analysis of participant reflections revealed that engagement in multilingual chat spaces fosters an evolving, hybrid sense of self that transcends traditional linguistic boundaries. Over time, participants reported becoming more comfortable integrating multiple languages, styles, and tones in the same conversation, describing this as a “natural” expression of who they are. This process resonates with García and Wei’s (2014) theory of translanguaging, which views multilingualism as a unified communicative repertoire rather than compartmentalized systems. Participants described how interacting in diverse online groups encouraged identity flexibility — allowing them to embody multiple social roles simultaneously (friend, student, professional) without linguistic inconsistency. This hybridization of identity reflects an internalized sense of cultural pluralism where users view their multilingualism as an asset rather than a challenge. Ultimately, this analysis suggests that multilingual digital communication not only reflects existing identities but actively reshapes them, generating an emergent digital self that is relational, adaptive, and emotionally grounded in language use.

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study highlight that multilingual digital chat spaces are dynamic arenas where identity is not merely represented but actively performed through linguistic and multimodal strategies. The results demonstrate that language choice, code-switching, transliteration, and multimodal elements such as emojis and tone collectively contribute to how individuals manage social presence and identity expression online. Consistent with Goffman’s (1959) theory of self-presentation, participants were observed to engage in context-specific identity performances—projecting professionalism, intimacy, or solidarity depending on the communicative setting. Similarly, Norton’s (2013) perspective of identity as socially constructed and continually negotiated through language finds strong resonance here: multilingual users in this study demonstrated fluid, adaptive identities shaped by the interlocutors, platform norms, and emotional contexts of interaction. The participants’ awareness of how linguistic choices indexed different identities underscores the psycholinguistic depth of their language behaviour, suggesting that digital multilingualism is both a communicative necessity and a medium of identity work.

Moreover, the study’s findings expand upon García and Wei’s (2014) translanguaging theory, showing that multilingual users do not merely alternate between separate linguistic systems but blend them to construct hybrid identities reflective of their multicultural realities. Transliteration, emoji use, and multimodal signalling emerged as semiotic tools through which participants bridged global and local cultural identities, aligning with contemporary views of digital discourse as a site of hybridity (Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou, 2023). The emotional resonance associated with mother tongue use, and the deliberate use of English for authority or cosmopolitanism, revealed that linguistic choices are imbued with affective and symbolic meaning beyond mere communication. In this sense, multilingual chat spaces act as digital ecosystems of belonging where users negotiate who they are and how they wish to be perceived. The study therefore contributes to psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic scholarship by demonstrating that digital language use is an evolving process of self-construction—one that merges cognition, emotion, and culture into an integrated model of digital identity negotiation.

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that multilingual digital chat spaces function as dynamic sites of identity construction, negotiation, and performance. Through qualitative exploration of participants' linguistic practices—spanning code-switching, transliteration, tone modulation, and multimodal expression—it becomes evident that digital communication enables a fluid interplay between language and self-representation. Participants consciously managed their linguistic repertoires to signal belonging, professionalism, and emotional intimacy, reflecting Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management within virtual contexts. These findings confirm that language in digital spaces is not a static system of symbols but a living medium through which identity is continuously shaped and reshaped. The research thus reinforces the psycholinguistic view that digital multilingualism is a site of cognitive and emotional negotiation rather than mere linguistic alternation.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that multimodal features—such as emojis, punctuation, and stylistic conventions—play a central role in expressing identity and emotion alongside linguistic choice. The combination of visual and textual modes was found to create layered meanings that conveyed tone, cultural stance, and relational alignment. This multimodal construction of identity aligns with García and Wei's (2014) translanguaging framework, highlighting that multilingual users engage with an integrated semiotic repertoire to represent hybrid cultural selves. Importantly, participants perceived their language use as emotionally resonant and identity-defining, suggesting that digital multilingualism fosters self-awareness and reflective identity formation. Such findings bridge psycholinguistics with digital discourse studies by illustrating that emotion, cognition, and social belonging intersect through linguistic behaviour online.

Finally, the research contributes to contemporary understandings of identity in an increasingly digital and globalized world. It provides empirical evidence that multilingual users engage in ongoing acts of linguistic creativity and self-positioning, demonstrating agency over their linguistic and cultural identities. The study's emphasis on qualitative depth offers new insights into how individuals perceive language as both a communicative and affective resource. By situating the findings within Norton's (2013) theory of identity and investment, the study emphasizes that online linguistic practices reflect broader struggles and aspirations for recognition, belonging, and authenticity. Ultimately, the study concludes that multilingual digital chat spaces serve not only as communication platforms but as socio-psychological ecosystems where language, culture, and self are interwoven into the evolving fabric of digital identity.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings, it is suggested that future research expand the scope of this study by incorporating comparative analyses across different digital platforms and cultural contexts to understand how identity negotiation varies globally. Longitudinal studies could provide insight into how multilingual users' identity performances evolve over time, particularly in relation to technological changes and emerging forms of multimodal communication such as voice notes or AI-assisted translation. Additionally, educators and language policy makers could draw on these findings to design digital literacy programs that recognize the importance of multilingualism and emotional expression in online communication. By promoting inclusive and culturally responsive language practices in digital spaces, future initiatives can empower users to express hybrid identities confidently while preserving linguistic diversity and intercultural understanding.

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