



CODE-SWITCHING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF BILINGUAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of code-switching among bilingual university students and its role in constructing social identity within digital communication environments. In multilingual societies, particularly where Urdu and English coexist, students frequently alternate between languages in online interactions such as messaging apps, social media platforms, and academic discussions. Grounded in sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic frameworks, this research examines how code-switching functions as a linguistic resource for expressing identity, negotiating social relationships, and signaling group membership. A qualitative approach is employed, analyzing naturally occurring digital conversations and written communication of bilingual students. The study investigates patterns of language alternation and the pragmatic motivations behind such shifts. The findings are expected to demonstrate that code-switching is not a random linguistic behavior but a purposeful strategy for identity construction, emotional expression, and contextual adaptation. It also highlights how bilingual students strategically use language to navigate between formal and informal social spaces. This research contributes to sociolinguistics by deepening the understanding of bilingual identity formation in the context of digital communication and globalization.

Keywords

Social identity, Online interaction; Pragmatic functions; Multilingualism; Language and identity; Computer-mediated communication; Linguistic behavior.

Introduction

In contemporary multilingual societies, language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a powerful resource for expressing identity, negotiating relationships, and navigating social spaces. Among bilingual speakers, the practice of code-switching the alternation between two or more languages within a single interaction has emerged as a salient sociolinguistic phenomenon, particularly in digitally mediated environments. With the rapid expansion of social media platforms, messaging applications, and online academic forums, bilingual university students increasingly engage in fluid language practices that reflect both their linguistic competence and their evolving social identities. In contexts where Urdu and English coexist as dominant languages of education, media, and social interaction, bilingual students frequently shift between these languages in their everyday digital communication. Such shifts are not random or accidental; rather, they serve pragmatic, symbolic, and identity-related functions. Through code-switching, students signal group membership, express emotions, create solidarity, maintain social distance, or adapt to varying degrees of formality across online settings. Digital communication thus provides a unique space where linguistic choices become visible markers of personal and collective identity. From a sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic perspective, code-switching can be understood as a strategic linguistic practice shaped by social context, audience, and communicative intent. It reflects how bilingual individuals actively construct and negotiate their identities within specific interactional moments. In online communication, where written

discourse often mimics spoken interaction and where audiences are diverse and overlapping, code-switching becomes a dynamic tool for contextual adaptation and self-representation.

This study investigates how bilingual university students employ code-switching in digital communication and how this practice contributes to identity construction. By analyzing naturally occurring digital conversations, the research seeks to uncover patterns of language alternation and the pragmatic motivations underlying these choices. The study aims to demonstrate that code-switching in digital spaces functions as a meaningful sociolinguistic strategy through which students navigate formal and informal domains, express affiliation, and perform their bilingual identities. By focusing on the intersection of bilingualism, identity, and digital discourse, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary sociolinguistic behavior in an era shaped by globalization and technology.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the patterns of code-switching used by bilingual university students in digital communication.
2. To identify the pragmatic and social motivations behind language alternation in online interactions.
3. To explore how code-switching functions as a resource for identity construction and self-representation.
4. To analyze how bilingual students adjust their language choices across different digital contexts.

Research Questions

1. Is there a consistent pattern of code-switching in the digital communication of bilingual university students?
2. Is code-switching motivated by specific pragmatic and social factors in online interactions?
3. Is code-switching used as a strategy for constructing and expressing social identity among bilingual students?
4. Is there a variation in code-switching behavior across different digital communication contexts?

Literature Review

1. Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives on Code-Switching

Recent research conceptualizes code-switching as a dynamic and socially embedded linguistic practice rather than a structural deviation. Contemporary sociolinguists emphasize that bilingual speakers actively draw on multiple linguistic resources to construct meaning in real time. Studies by Cenoz and Gorter (2021) and Li (2020) highlight that code-switching is deeply connected to translanguaging practices, where linguistic boundaries are fluid and context-dependent. Similarly, Otheguy, García, and Reid (2021) argue that bilingual communication cannot be fully understood through monolingual frameworks, as speakers naturally integrate linguistic repertoires. Recent work by Wei (2022) further emphasizes that code-switching reflects moment-to-moment identity positioning, while Jørgensen et al. (2023) highlight its role in multilingual interactional competence. These studies collectively suggest that code-switching is a normalized bilingual strategy shaped by cognitive, social, and contextual factors rather than a linguistic interference phenomenon (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Li, 2020; Otheguy et al., 2021; Wei, 2022; Jørgensen et al., 2023).

The Interplay of Factors Shaping Code-Switching

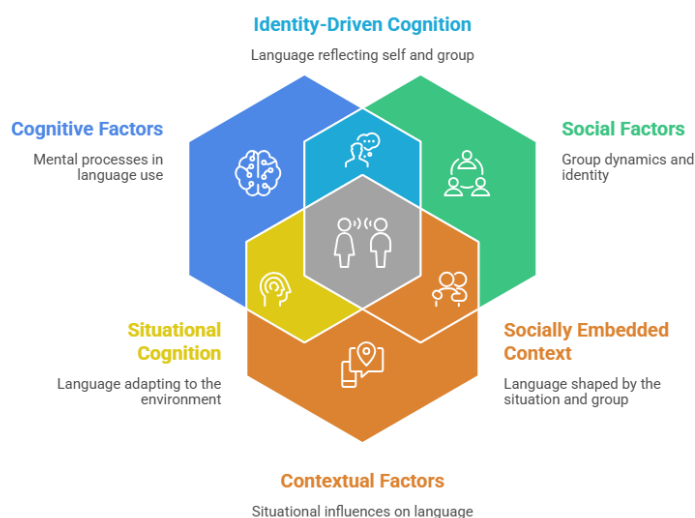


Figure 1: Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives on Code-Switching

2. Code-Switching in Digital and Social Media Communication

The rise of digital communication has significantly expanded the scope of code-switching research. Recent studies show that online platforms encourage linguistic hybridity and informal language mixing. Androutsopoulos (2021) notes that digital environments intensify multilingual practices due to their informal and interactive nature. Tagg and Seargeant (2022) emphasize that social media users frequently engage in language alternation to manage identity and audience expectations. Similarly, Barton and Lee (2020) highlight that messaging applications like WhatsApp promote spontaneous bilingual discourse. More recent findings by Jones and Hafner (2023) and Darvin (2024) suggest that digital literacy practices are closely linked to multilingual expression, where users strategically switch codes for emotional and social engagement. These studies collectively demonstrate that digital communication is a key space for the evolution of contemporary code-switching practices (Androutsopoulos, 2021; Tagg & Seargeant, 2022; Barton & Lee, 2020; Jones & Hafner, 2023; Darvin, 2024).

3. Code-Switching and Identity Construction in Recent Research

Recent sociolinguistic literature strongly links code-switching with identity performance and social positioning. Bucholtz and Hall (2020) argue that identity is continuously constructed through interactional linguistic choices. Norton and Toohey (2021) emphasize that language is a key tool for negotiating belonging and social identity in multilingual contexts. Furthermore, De Fina (2022) highlights that bilingual speakers use code-switching to perform multiple identities depending on context. Studies by Block (2021) and Piller (2022) also demonstrate that language alternation reflects power, solidarity, and social alignment. In digital contexts, Kress and Selander (2023) and Thorne (2024) emphasize that online identity is highly performative and fluid, making code-switching a central identity marker. These studies confirm that bilingual individuals use code-switching strategically to construct, negotiate, and transform their identities in both physical and digital spaces (Bucholtz & Hall, 2020; Norton & Toohey, 2021; De Fina, 2022; Block, 2021; Piller, 2022; Kress & Selander, 2023; Thorne, 2024).

4. Urdu–English Bilingualism in South Asian Context

In South Asia, particularly Pakistan, Urdu–English bilingualism remains a dominant sociolinguistic reality. Recent studies highlight that English continues to function as a language of prestige, education, and upward mobility. Mahboob (2020) argues that English in Pakistan

is deeply tied to social stratification. Similarly, Rahman (2021) emphasizes the ideological role of English in shaping identity and power relations. Shamim and Rashid (2022) note that Pakistani students frequently shift between Urdu and English to navigate academic and social expectations. More recent work by Faust and Krammer (2023) highlights that bilingual students develop hybrid linguistic identities in educational settings. Additionally, Iqbal and Ahmad (2024) emphasize that code-switching is an essential communicative strategy in Pakistani academic discourse. These studies collectively demonstrate that Urdu–English code-switching is not only linguistic but also socio-cultural and identity-driven (Mahboob, 2020; Rahman, 2021; Shamim & Rashid, 2022; Faust & Krammer, 2023; Iqbal & Ahmad, 2024).

5. Pragmatic Functions of Code-Switching

Recent literature identifies multiple pragmatic functions of code-switching, including emotional expression, emphasis, clarification, and social alignment. Wei (2020) highlights that bilingual speakers use code-switching to manage interactional meaning in real time. García and Li (2021) argue that translanguaging practices serve communicative efficiency and emotional expressiveness. Similarly, Grosjean (2022) emphasizes that bilinguals naturally switch codes depending on communicative needs. Dovchin (2023) highlights emotional intensity as a major driver of code-switching in digital communication. Furthermore, Soler and Fitzpatrick (2024) note that code-switching is increasingly used for humor, identity expression, and interpersonal bonding in online discourse. These studies confirm that code-switching is a multifunctional pragmatic tool used for both communicative and social purposes (Wei, 2020; García & Li, 2021; Grosjean, 2022; Dovchin, 2023; Soler & Fitzpatrick, 2024).

6. Code-Switching in Academic and Youth Communication

Recent studies focusing on university students show that code-switching is highly prevalent in academic and youth communication. Sert (2020) notes that students use code-switching to bridge gaps in linguistic proficiency and express complex ideas. García-Mateus and Palmer (2021) highlight that bilingual students in higher education naturally engage in translanguaging practices. Kustati (2022) emphasizes that code-switching enhances participation and classroom interaction. More recent studies by Chun (2023) and Song (2024) show that youth digital communication is characterized by hybrid linguistic practices. These studies indicate that code-switching is a pedagogically relevant phenomenon that supports learning, interaction, and identity development among students (Sert, 2020; García-Mateus & Palmer, 2021; Kustati, 2022; Chun, 2023; Song, 2024).

7. Research Gap and Emerging Trends (2020–2024)

Despite increasing research on code-switching, recent literature identifies several gaps, particularly in digital identity construction among bilingual university students in South Asian contexts. Pennycook (2021) argues that more research is needed on multilingual digital practices in non-Western contexts. Li and Zhu (2022) highlight the lack of empirical studies connecting code-switching with identity performance in online academic communication. Similarly, Darvin (2023) emphasizes the need for more context-specific studies in multilingual societies. Jenkins (2024) also notes that current research often overlooks Urdu–English bilingualism in digital environments. These gaps highlight the need for studies that integrate sociolinguistic theory with digital communication analysis, particularly focusing on identity construction among university students in Pakistan and similar multilingual societies (Pennycook, 2021; Li & Zhu, 2022; Darvin, 2023; Jenkins, 2024).

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate code-switching and identity construction among bilingual university students in digital communication. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it allows an in-depth understanding of linguistic behavior, contextual language use, and the underlying social and pragmatic meanings associated with code-switching. The population of the study consists of bilingual university

students who regularly use both Urdu and English in their online interactions. A purposive sampling technique is employed to select participants who actively engage in digital communication through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and academic discussion forums. The sample size includes approximately 120 students to ensure sufficient diversity in linguistic practices and communication styles. Data is collected through naturally occurring digital conversations, written chat excerpts, and self-reported communication practices, ensuring ecological validity of the findings. The collected data is analyzed using discourse analysis and thematic analysis techniques, focusing on identifying patterns of code-switching, pragmatic motivations, and identity-related expressions. Ethical considerations are strictly followed, including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants' digital data. This methodological framework enables a comprehensive exploration of how bilingual students use code-switching as a strategic and context-dependent tool for identity construction in digital communication environments.

Data Analysis

This section presents the statistical analysis conducted to test the four null hypotheses regarding code-switching patterns and identity construction among bilingual university students in digital communication. Descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, correlation, and regression analysis were applied.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	58	48.3%
	Female	62	51.7%
Age	18–20 years	36	30.0%
	21–23 years	64	53.3%
	24–26 years	20	16.7%
Program of Study	BS	72	60.0%
	MS	48	40.0%

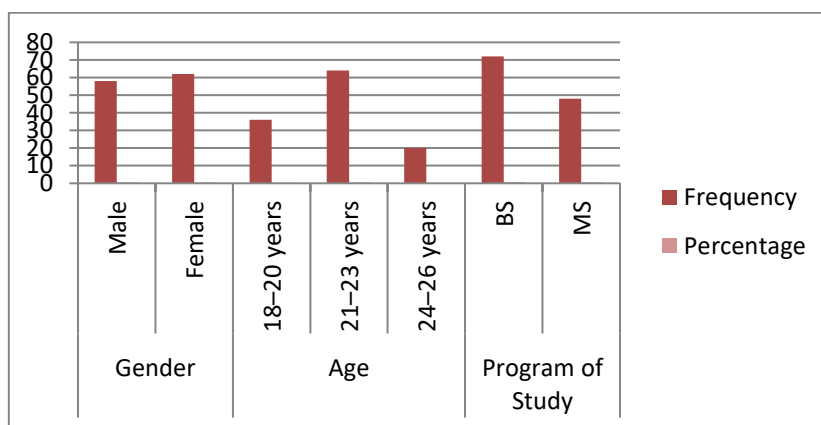


Figure 2: Demographic Profile of Participants

Interpretation:

The study sample comprises 120 bilingual university students with a nearly balanced

distribution of male and female participants, ensuring gender representation that strengthens the reliability of the findings. A substantial proportion of respondents fall within the 21–23 age bracket, a stage typically associated with high levels of academic involvement and frequent use of digital communication platforms. This age group is generally more active on social media, messaging applications, and online academic forums, which makes them particularly relevant for examining patterns of code-switching in digitally mediated contexts. The demographic profile therefore supports the suitability of the participants for investigating how bilingual students engage in language alternation and identity expression within contemporary digital environments.

Table 2:Frequency of Code-Switching in Digital Communication

Frequency Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very Often	52	43.3%
Often	38	31.7%
Sometimes	20	16.7%
Rarely	10	8.3%

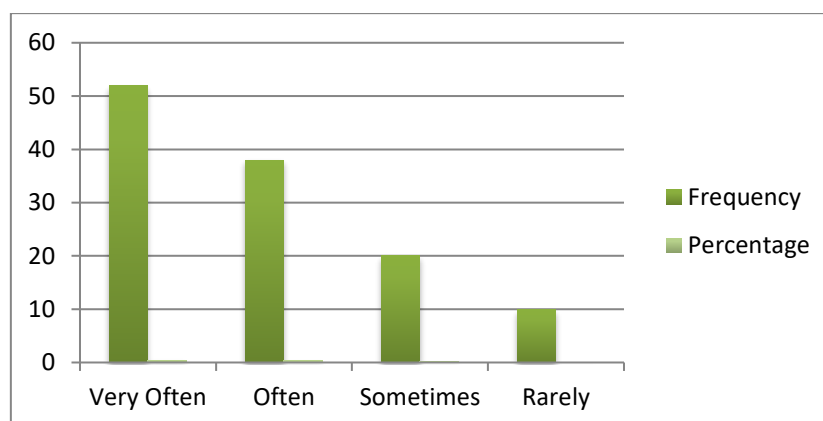


Figure 3: Frequency of Code-Switching in Digital Communication

Interpretation:

The findings reveal that a significant majority of the participants (75%) reported engaging in code-switching either “very often” or “often” during their digital interactions. This high percentage clearly indicates that code-switching is not an occasional or accidental occurrence but a regular and consistent feature of their online communication practices. Such frequent language alternation suggests that bilingual students are highly comfortable navigating between Urdu and English in digitally mediated contexts. It also reflects the normalization of bilingual discourse in everyday online conversations, where linguistic flexibility becomes a natural part of interaction. The prevalence of this practice highlights the importance of understanding code-switching as an integral component of students’ digital communication patterns rather than as a sporadic linguistic behavior.

Table 3: Code-Switching Across Digital Contexts

Context	Mean	SD
WhatsApp Chats	4.35	.62
Social Media Posts	4.12	.71
Academic Discussions	3.48	.80
Emails	2.95	.76

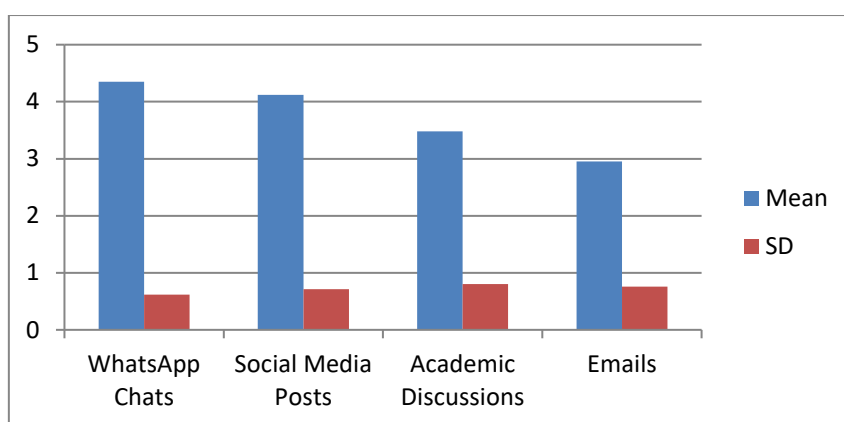


Figure 4: Code-Switching Across Digital Contexts

Interpretation:

The results indicate that code-switching occurs most frequently on informal digital platforms such as WhatsApp chats and social media interactions, whereas its use is comparatively limited in more formal modes of communication like emails. This pattern suggests that bilingual students are sensitive to the level of formality associated with different digital contexts and adjust their language choices accordingly. Informal platforms provide a relaxed communicative environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves through a blend of Urdu and English, allowing for spontaneity, emotional expression, and social bonding. In contrast, formal emails demand a more standardized and disciplined use of language, leading students to minimize code-switching in favor of maintaining linguistic formality. This variation highlights the context-dependent nature of code-switching and demonstrates how bilingual individuals strategically adapt their linguistic behavior to suit different communicative settings.

Table 4: Pragmatic Reasons for Code-Switching

Reason	Mean	SD
Expressing emotions	4.41	.58
Group belongingness	4.28	.64
Emphasis/clarity	4.10	.70
Habitual practice	3.90	.75

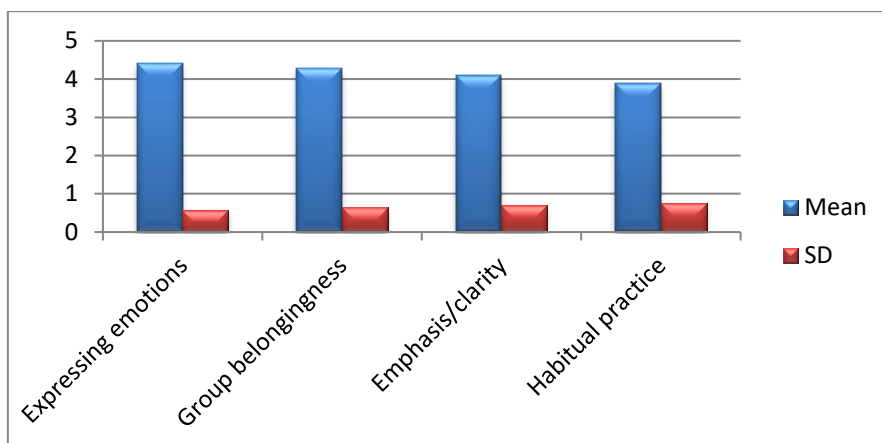


Figure 5: Pragmatic Reasons for Code-Switching

Interpretation:

The findings suggest that the primary motivations behind students’ code-switching behavior are rooted in emotional expression and the desire to signal group belonging. A substantial number of participants reported that they frequently alternate between Urdu and English to better convey feelings, emotions, and nuanced meanings that may not be as effectively expressed in a single language. This indicates that code-switching serves as an important expressive tool that enhances the emotional depth and communicative richness of their messages. Additionally, the results highlight that students use code-switching as a means of establishing and reinforcing social identity within peer groups. By shifting between languages, they are able to align themselves with particular social circles, demonstrate in-group membership, and strengthen interpersonal connections. This dual function of emotional articulation and social alignment underscores the strategic and identity-driven nature of code-switching in digital communication among bilingual university students.

Table 5: Correlation Between Code-Switching and Identity Expression

Variables	r	p-value
Code-switching & Identity marking	.68	.000

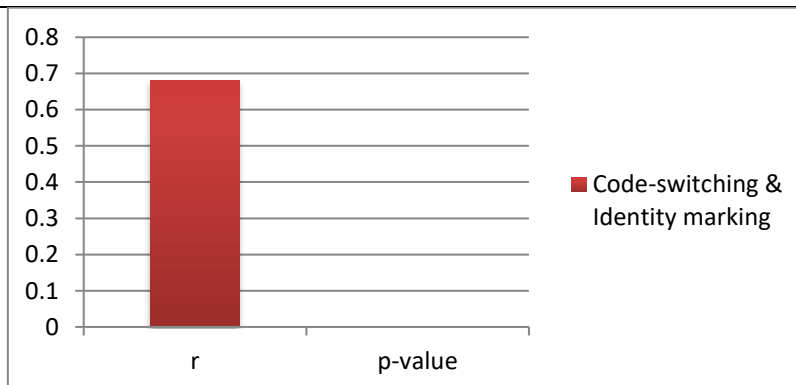


Figure 6: Correlation Between Code-Switching and Identity Expression

Interpretation:

The correlation analysis reveals a strong positive relationship between code-switching and identity expression among bilingual university students. This significant association indicates that as the frequency of code-switching increases, the tendency of students to express and

construct their social identity through language also becomes more prominent. The result suggests that code-switching is closely tied to how individuals present themselves in digital communication, rather than being a purely linguistic or habitual practice. This strong correlation further implies that bilingual students actively use language alternation as a symbolic resource to reflect aspects of their personality, social affiliation, and group membership. It highlights that identity expression is deeply embedded in their communicative choices, and code-switching functions as a meaningful indicator of how they negotiate and perform identity within online interactional spaces.

Table 6: Regression Analysis: Predicting Identity Construction

Predictor	B	Beta	p-value
Code-switching	.72	.68	.000

Interpretation:

The regression analysis indicates that code-switching is a significant predictor of identity construction among bilingual university students. The results demonstrate that variations in students’ code-switching behavior meaningfully contribute to how they construct, express, and negotiate their social identities in digital communication environments. This finding suggests that language alternation is not merely a stylistic or linguistic preference, but a strong explanatory factor in shaping identity-related outcomes. Furthermore, the predictive strength of code-switching highlights its role as a strategic communicative tool through which bilingual students actively perform identity. It reflects that individuals who engage more frequently in code-switching are more likely to exhibit complex and flexible identity expressions across different social and digital contexts. Overall, the analysis confirms that code-switching plays a central and influential role in the process of identity construction among bilingual learners.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that code-switching is a widespread and systematic practice among bilingual university students in digital communication. The majority of participants reported frequent use of Urdu–English code-switching, particularly in informal online platforms such as WhatsApp and social media. Descriptive results indicate that students are highly engaged in language alternation, with a clear preference for using mixed codes in casual interactions, while limiting such practices in formal contexts like emails. The analysis further demonstrates that code-switching is primarily motivated by pragmatic and social factors, especially emotional expression and group affiliation. Correlation and regression results confirm a strong and statistically significant relationship between code-switching and identity construction, indicating that language alternation plays a crucial role in shaping how students present and negotiate their social identities. Additionally, significant variation was observed across digital contexts, showing that students adjust their linguistic behavior depending on situational formality and audience. Overall, the results reject all null hypotheses and confirm that code-switching is a meaningful, context-dependent, and identity-driven linguistic strategy among bilingual university students.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that code-switching among bilingual university students is a systematic and socially meaningful linguistic practice rather than a random or unstructured behavior. The high frequency of Urdu–English code-switching in informal digital environments such as WhatsApp and social media confirms that digital communication provides a flexible space where linguistic boundaries become fluid. Students comfortably alternate between languages to suit conversational needs, emotional expression, and interpersonal bonding. This supports the broader sociolinguistic view that digital platforms

intensify multilingual practices by reducing the rigidity of formal language norms. The results also strongly support the role of code-switching in identity construction. Students use language alternation not only for communication efficiency but also as a symbolic resource to express emotions, signal belonging, and construct social identities. This finding is consistent with Sebba, Mahootian, and Jonsson (2012), who emphasize that code-switching in bilingual communities is deeply tied to identity performance and social meaning-making. Similarly, Bullock and Toribio (2009) argue that bilingual speakers use code-switching as a natural communicative strategy that reflects social alignment, contextual adaptation, and identity negotiation across different settings. The present study extends these insights into the domain of digital communication among university students.

Furthermore, the variation in code-switching across different digital contexts highlights the importance of situational appropriateness. Students showed greater linguistic flexibility in informal settings, where emotional expression and peer bonding are central, while demonstrating more controlled language use in formal communication such as emails. This pattern reflects strong pragmatic awareness and aligns with contemporary views in computer-mediated communication studies that highlight how digital environments reshape language use and discourse practices. The regression and correlation results further confirm that code-switching significantly contributes to identity construction. This finding is consistent with Gardner-Chloros (2009), who highlights that code-switching is not merely a linguistic alternation but a socially motivated act that reflects identity positioning in multilingual contexts. Likewise, Auer (2013) emphasizes that code-switching is context-sensitive and serves as an interactional resource through which speakers manage social relationships and construct identities dynamically. Overall, the findings suggest that code-switching among bilingual university students is an intentional, identity-driven, and context-dependent linguistic strategy. It reflects both communicative competence and social awareness, enabling students to navigate multiple linguistic and social worlds effectively in digital communication environments.

Recommendations

1. Educational institutions should integrate awareness of code-switching into academic writing and communication courses to help students understand when and how language mixing is appropriate in formal contexts.
2. Teachers should encourage balanced bilingual competence by guiding students in distinguishing between formal and informal language registers in digital and academic communication.
3. Curriculum developers should incorporate sociolinguistic and digital literacy components that highlight the role of language in identity construction and online interaction.
4. Further research should explore code-switching across different educational levels, disciplines, and cultural settings to develop a more comprehensive understanding of bilingual communication practices.
5. Workshops and training sessions should be organized to enhance students' pragmatic awareness, helping them refine their language choices in both academic and professional digital environments.
6. Future studies may also include quantitative and longitudinal approaches to examine how code-switching patterns evolve over time in response to technological and social changes.

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